



TALE OF ANTI-REAGAN HIT TEAM WAS 'FRAUD'

AN INTERNATIONALLY publicised accusation that a Libyan-financed hit team tried to enter the United States to assassinate President Reagan in November 1981 is shown to be absurd by a document obtained by the *New Statesman*. The document — a secret, official US list of fourteen so-called Libyan terrorists on a mission to kill Reagan — is in fact a list of prominent members of the Amal, the Lebanese Shi'ite party who most recently helped Reagan negotiate the release of the US hostages in Beirut.

The 'hit team' story was officially confirmed by no less an authority than Reagan himself. Questioned about Libyan assassination squads at a televised press briefing on 7 December 1981, Reagan told the world's press: 'We have the evidence and he (ie, Qaddafi) knows it'. Strenuous denials by Qaddafi were laughed off, and were of no avail in killing the story. US national security advisors then started to plan economic sanctions against Libya.

Reagan's 'evidence' of a hit team on its way to kill him is contained in the message listing fourteen alleged terrorists, which was flashed to US ports and airports on 28 November 1981. In the message, the US Customs Service warns officials to report immediately any attempt to enter the US by 'hit team' members. The telex, from Customs Service Commissioner Edward M Ellis, warned all recipients that the information was 'extremely sensitive'.

In fact, it was extremely silly. Top of the list sent by the US was the name of Nabih Berri, the leader of the Amal party, and the present Lebanese

Minister of Justice. Number two on the list was the religious leader of the Lebanese Shi'ite community, Mohammed Shams-e-din. Further down the list was the present Speaker of the Lebanese parliament, Houssein Housseini (misspelt as Hassan Housseini).

Far from being a group of young Qaddafi-financed zealots, all but one of these alleged assassins were aging Lebanese politicians of the Amal party, whose members bitterly hate Colonel Qaddafi. (The fourteenth was an aging West German.) The Amal party's founder, and Berri's predecessor as leader, Moussa Sadr, disappeared (believed assassinated by Qaddafi) during a visit to Tripoli in 1978, an incident Amal members have not forgotten. Qaddafi has since financed a particularly murderous rival Lebanese Shi'ite sect to the Amal, the Hizbollah.

'Against lawlessness'

By the bloody lights of Lebanese politics, Berri and his party are moderates. Even before joining the government, Berri took a strong stand against terrorism and lawlessness during the protracted Lebanese civil war (as we reported in an NS profile on 28 June 1985). It is wholly inconceivable that Berri, or any of the other named members of Amal would act as freelance international terrorists, least of all at the behest of Libya.

Middle Eastern specialists are astounded that the story could have been given credibility in the US, particularly in as prominent quarters as the Jack Anderson column on the *Washington Post*. In mid-October, soon after the US shot down two Libyan jets in the Gulf of Sidra, Anderson reported that the US

National Security Agency had intercepted a telephone conversation between Qaddafi and President Mengistu of Ethiopia, in which Qaddafi spoke of intending to assassinate Reagan.

About a month later, according to US researchers, a Lebanese drugs dealer sold the US Drugs Enforcement Agency officials the 'hit team' list, in return for immunity and a large sum of money.

The only note of caution on the entire story was sounded by the FBI. Obviously unwilling to directly contradict the President's bold assertions about Qaddafi, FBI director William Webster said a month later that 'if a Libyan "hit squad" entered the United States, the FBI has never confirmed it.' Intelligence sources gave conflicting reports as to how many informers had supplied the information, with numbers ranging from one to ten.

This week we pressed Customs service officials at the US Embassy in London, representatives of the State Department in Washington, and the US Secret Service (responsible for presidential protection) to explain how the administration gave credence to such bunkum. A White House Secret Service official claimed that 'We didn't put any stamp on it, though we were prepared.' No-one would discuss details of the list.

But the senior US Embassy Customs Service official in London demanded 'where the hell did you get that from?' when we asked about the document. He refused to explain the meaning of codes used on the telex message. 'You may be in serious trouble,' he added, 'holding a US Customs Service document'.

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MoD Aldermaston outwitted by Greenham women

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE police have made strenuous, but unsuccessful, attempts to recover from Greenham women copies of a document which describes the security arrangements at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, Aldermaston. The document — the MoD's own Police Orders for the nuclear weapons design centre — gives full details of police operations at the base.

The three women who obtained the document, Lorna Richardson, Lynn Barlow, and Sue Kent, entered Aldermaston completely undetected last Friday morning (9 August). Even after an hour exploring buildings, including those handling radioactive materials, they were only found and arrested after they had chosen to

announce their presence on the base by telephoning the Press Association in London. The three were then charged with criminal damage for having painted huts with slogans, and released.

The MoD Police Orders were removed from the police office in which the three were held. But less than 12 hours later, after the missing document was noticed, one of the women, Lynn Barlow, was re-arrested at Greenham and questioned for 9 hours. She was released after returning to Greenham in order to hand over one photocopy of the document. But other photocopies had already been made.

The leaked Police Orders reveal the existence of an Aldermaston-based 'Special Escort Group' who are responsible for the security and safe delivery of 'SNM' in transit. SNM is Special Nuclear Material, a group of fissile radioactive elements or compounds which are the critical ingredients of all nuclear weapons. Several MoD police Inspectors run this group, which is fully armed and equipped with special vehicles and special HF, VHF and Multi-Channel radio equipment. Their operations are co-ordinated by the 'RA (presumably Royal Artillery) Movements Control'.

Armed police

All MoD police at Aldermaston are armed, except for guards on the main gate used by employees. The same police also guard two little-known but closely-related establishments, Boundary Hall and Blacknest. Blacknest, a nuclear test seismic detection site, is a few miles south of the main Aldermaston research centre.

Male MoD police carry a 9mm Browning, while female police carry a Walther PPK pistol. An Armoured Police Vehicle (APV), whose crew are armed with Sterling sub-machine guns, is also used to patrol Aldermaston at night. In case of 'extreme emergency', the base has a hot line to the Thames Valley police HQ at Kidlington, near Oxford. An armed 'Special Response Group' is also available on the base.

The document also confirms that despite copious 'Photography is forbidden' notices placed around Aldermaston's perimeter, taking photographs of the site from the public road is not against the Official Secrets Act provided that the photographer is not a *bona fide* (or *mala fide*) spy. MoD police are instructed to try and urge photographers voluntarily into police custody, and then to persuade them to hand over film from their camera 'in order to prove that their intent was not prejudicial to the interests of the State'.

The Ministry of Defence says that an investigation has been launched into the loss of the document, but refuses to discuss its contents.