

## Interview with Former FBI Agent Ali Soufan

### 'We Did Exactly What Al-Qaida Wanted Us to Do'

**Former FBI agent Ali Soufan successfully interrogated captured Islamist terrorists after 9/11 without resorting to "enhanced" techniques. In a SPIEGEL interview, he revealed how he got jihadists to talk using tea and trucker magazines and explained how 9/11 could have been prevented.**

**SPIEGEL:** How would you describe the state of the United States 10 years after 9/11, four months after the death of Bin Laden? Is this the beginning of the end of the story?

**Soufan:** It is the beginning of a new era. I think today, al-Qaida is definitely, significantly damaged. The al-Qaida that attacked us on 9/11 does not exist anymore. Its central command is very, very weak. In these 10 years, because of mistakes made, the United States' reputation was seriously damaged. But at the same time we have been working to reverse this damage: All secret jails have been closed. The enhanced interrogation techniques have been cancelled. Memos have been declassified, so we put it all out there and we said we face up to what we did. That's very rare in any country around the world.

**SPIEGEL:** You started investigating against Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida years before 9/11. Do you remember when you first heard bin Laden's name?

**Soufan:** The very first time I heard about him was in an Arabic magazine. They did an interview with him in Sudan and I was like: Who is this guy? Then I started reading about him in the papers and became a little bit concerned about the level of his rhetoric. And for a kid who grew up in Lebanon, I understood these kind of rhetorics. I kept following his statements until I joined the FBI in 1997. I mean it wasn't like: Oh my God, we have to pay attention to that guy. It didn't happen overnight. It was a process. But then, with bin Laden's fatwa in February 1998, a new level of interest started. Then I was 100 percent convinced that something was going to happen.

**SPIEGEL:** Your later boss at the FBI, John O' Neill -- who left the service to become head of security at the World Trade Center and who died in the 9/11 attacks -- was also aware of the potential danger of al-Qaida at a very early stage.

**Soufan:** John definitely understood the threat and I never met anyone who knows how to think about and work on a terrorism case in putting it together more than John. I learned a lot from him. I think he was phenomenal. And he saw the threat of bin Laden very early on, he continued fighting the fight. He saw what was coming up, with the East Africa embassy bombing, with the *U.S.S. Cole*. He fought the fight until the day he left and he knew that the big one was coming. Unfortunately nobody paid attention to it.

**SPIEGEL:** As you explain in your book, you are convinced that 9/11 might have been stopped if there had not been the so-called "Chinese wall" between the CIA and the FBI.

**Soufan:** We always worked together. We worked together during the East Africa embassy bombing. We had a great relationship. But suddenly that wall appeared due also to the misunderstanding of new guidelines organizing the relationship of intelligence and law enforcement. Unfortunately that directly contributed to the lack of knowledge about 9/11. We had actionable intelligence we transferred to the CIA but there was no follow-up.

**SPIEGEL:** What kind of information was that?

**Soufan:** We were investigating the *Cole* incident in Yemen. And we had a person who participated in blowing up the ship -- killing 17 sailors, injuring 39 -- tell us he delivered money to a main al-Qaida guy. So people who were involved in the *Cole* incident delivered money to two people who later flew a plane into the Pentagon. People in our government knew that these two people were in the United States, in San Diego. So, when you're doing an investigation and almost a year before you know about people moving

and money and meetings, I think you have to understand that there are some limits to the wall. We had the lead, the CIA knew the identity of the two in San Diego but they did not put them on a no-fly list, they did not communicate their names to the State Department so that their visa would not be renewed.

**SPIEGEL:** Did they ever apologize for that?

**Soufan:** Yes, on Sept. 12, 2001, they told us: "Remember those two guys that delivered the money... Well they actually met two guys who we know and we didn't tell you that before. Sorry." Why didn't they check their computer screens before and say "Holy crap, look what's happening here." For me, this is something beyond incompetence.

**SPIEGEL:** In your book, you also criticize the fact that the US never really understood its enemy al-Qaida.

**Soufan:** I think we definitely underestimated the ideological motivations for these groups: what makes people blow themselves up, the religious signification of al-Qaida. It's not politics. The Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu said a long time ago: "If you know your enemy and know yourself, you will win a hundred times in a hundred battles." Unfortunately with the war on terror we forgot who we are, but also we didn't know our enemy. Look at al-Qaida. On the eve of 9/11, they had about 400 operatives. They led us into a war longer than World War I and World War II. Not because they are such smart people, but because we did not understand our enemy. Instead, we applied waterboarding and enhanced interrogation techniques. We did exactly what al-Qaida wanted us to do. When you do this, what are you proving to the guy? You're proving that everything he thinks about you is right. But if you come with a cup of tea, he doesn't know how to act.

**SPIEGEL:** That was your strategy as an interrogator, to come along with a cup of tea?

**Soufan:** Every interrogation is different. You have to get them out of their comfort zone. Even if conditions are harsh, it can still be a comfort zone. Because you behave like they expect the enemy to behave. You have to confuse them. I interrogated bin Laden's driver, Salim Hamdan, in Guantanamo. Another American before me had promised him that he could make a phone call to his wife. But he never could. When we came, he said to us: "All of you Americans, you are lying." And we found out that indeed they did not fulfill the promise they made. I said to him, "OK, we messed up. Sorry, I apologize." And I gave him the phone.

**SPIEGEL:** Did your method work?

**Soufan:** He couldn't believe it. But after he made the phone call and he heard his wife's voice, he knelt and started crying and thanked God. We took him back, we gave him some water, tea. For about 20 minutes he didn't say a word. And then he started asking me about Yemen and then said: "OK, what do you want to know?"

**SPIEGEL:** At the time you were one of the few agents who could speak fluent Arabic and able to quote the Koran in interrogations.

**Soufan:** Sure, that helped. Many times I used to lay down on the ground next to to him, as if we were taking a nap, but we were talking. We brought fish sandwiches from McDonald's to Hamdan and US truck and car magazines from the local shop in Guantanamo. He read them all.

**SPIEGEL:** Truck magazines instead of waterboarding -- that was your recipe for success?

**Soufan:** You don't need to be tough. Why should you? Anyhow, he is in custody. He knows that you are the boss. You don't have to act like a boss.

**SPIEGEL:** Sounds nice, but what about the intelligence you gained from Hamdan?

**Soufan:** He might have been a key witness in upcoming trials. He knows everyone, being bin Laden's bodyguard, being bin Laden's driver, being the person who always was with bin Laden, the closest to bin Laden. He was driving the car when bin Laden and **Ayman al-Zawahiri** were talking with each other about the fourth plane. He was there when Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (*ed's note: the planner of 9/11*) briefed the leadership of al-Qaida about the 9/11 operation. He told us all that, he was willing to talk. It is another example of where I don't think we played it right.

**SPIEGEL:** You wanted him to be a key witness in the upcoming trials, even perhaps with a plea agreement?

**Soufan:** Yes, but then they suddenly declared him an "enemy combatant" without even coordinating with us. So when you declare him an enemy combatant, you give him a lawyer. So the person who's talking, you give him a lawyer so he can't talk anymore even if he was cooperating.

**SPIEGEL:** Who took that decision?

**Soufan:** The White House, based on Pentagon recommendations, being under a lot of pressure to prosecute people. So they said, let's declare them enemy combatants -- without thinking about the long-term effect of that. Hamdan was a historical witness, he could have been very useful for other cases and trials. Today, he is a free man, he had been sentenced to 5 years, time he already had spent in Guantanamo. He left quickly after the judgment. He is lost for us today.

**SPIEGEL:** You also interrogated another important key terrorist supporter, Abu Zubaydah. President Bush praised his capture in March 2002 in Pakistan as a great victory. The US government mistakenly considered him to be the number three in al-Qaida. Later he would be the first detainee to be subjected to waterboarding. What kind of condition was he in when you saw him for the first time?

**Soufan:** He was in a very bad health condition when we saw him after his capture. He was heavily injured because there had been a shooting, that was a very big concern for us. But one of the things that happened is immediately upon his capture he was cooperating with us and because of his cooperation and because he was giving us some actionable intelligence, Washington said: Death is not an option. So we needed to do everything possible to keep him alive because he had a lot of good information.

**SPIEGEL:** So you were treating his wounds and establishing a real relation with him?

**Soufan:** Yes, and when his condition became really critical so that we got a call that he would die and that we should hurry up with our questions, we took him to a hospital where he underwent surgery. In the hospital, we continued the interrogations. During that time he told us about the last time he spoke with bin Laden, the people who were there, and what he wanted to do in this operation. And he gave us a location. I said: "So, who's in charge of that operation?" He said so and so from bin Laden's gang. And we knew so and so. We had his picture, it was on the 22 "most wanted" terrorists poster.

**SPIEGEL:** So, once again your method was successful?

**Soufan:** In fact, by accident it was. I said to my partner: "Give me the photo of that guy." And he loaded it out of the poster of the 22 most wanted on his Palm Pilot, as we had no FBI photobook with us. We both had the same guy in our mind. Then he gave his Palm to me, you know these old ones, with the small screen. We hit the wrong photo without realising. So, I gave the Palm to Zubaydah asking him if this was the guy we were talking about. And he said: "No." And I really got pissed off, because we had cleaned the guy, we kept him alive, we thought we had something and now he was lying to us. And I said: "Oh yeah, and who is this?" And he looked at me and said: "Don't play games with me, brother. This is Mukhtar. This is the guy who did 9/11." I'd been hearing about this guy Mukhtar, I knew he was important, so I looked at it and it was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. At that time we did not know that KSM, as we called him, was a member of Al-Qaida. So Zubaydah gave us the details of what happened on 9/11. It wasn't waterboarding. It wasn't torture. It was an accident and a lot of luck and a certain kind of relation we had with him.

**SPIEGEL:** President Bush confirmed that the important revelation that KSM had been the chief planner of 9/11 came from Zubaydah but said it was one of the results of the "enhanced interrogation techniques."

**Soufan:** I know that version. Bush presented it as the success of the EITs. It was not. The CIA contractors who later used enhanced interrogation techniques on Zubaydah in a blacksite prison, at a location I cannot reveal to you, were not even on the ground at that time. It was Zubaydah in his hospital bed who told us how Khalid Sheikh Mohammed came up with this idea to him. KSM was trying to find a sponsor for the operation and Zubaydah said to him: "Go talk to Bin Laden. He will sponsor you." He told it to us, not to the CIA.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you know of any really decisive intelligence that was obtained under torture or under the

special interrogation techniques?

**Soufan:** Nothing I can think of. If you tell me that we saved lives because of that, maybe I'll shut my mouth. But most of the people who went to Iraq to fight against us in Iraq, their motivation were the pictures of Abu Ghraib. So, basically, it cost lives. And I just do not believe in these methods. After 183 sessions of waterboarding, 9/11 planner Khalid Sheikh Mohammed still lied about the so-called Kuwaiti, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, the courier who finally led us to bin Laden this May. KSM claimed that he was a low-level guy and not important. We now know this was not true.

**SPIEGEL:** The CIA heavily redacted your new book "[The Black Banners](#)" and blacked out numerous parts, especially those about the enhanced interrogation techniques. Did you expect this kind of reaction?

**Soufan:** As a former FBI agent I had to submit the book to my former agency, which I left in 2006 because I could no longer continue there. I wanted to start something new. I was very surprised by the CIA's reaction. They even blackened it when I said "I" or "me" or "our." They blackened things I said in a public Senate hearing. I mean, it is all public. They redacted things that were already in the public domain. This is absurd, completely absurd. I plan to compel disclosure of the redacted information through legal means now.

**SPIEGEL:** Mr. Soufan, thank you very much for this interview.

*Interview conducted by Britta Sandberg.*

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