



Pathology Biology Section – 2003

G18 Domestic Homicide or International Terrorism? A St. Louis Murder Crosses the Line

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This presentation will provide forensic investigators insight into the workings of an international terrorist group set up in the U.S., and it will provide some clues to exposing and identifying them.

This case was originally presented as a domestic homicide. The daughter of a Palestinian family in St. Louis, MO, was found stabbed to death in her family's home in November of 1989. Her father said that he had stabbed her to death in self-defense. The teenaged girl supposedly had just come home after her first day at work outside of the family's business in a wild state "on drugs." She allegedly demanded \$5000.00 from her father. When the father refused the request she supposedly grabbed a knife and attacked him with it. He said he somehow grappled with her and stabbed her in self-defense and she fell to the floor of their residence, unconscious. According to the father's story, he then got a better knife and finished his daughter off by stabbing her to death while she lay unconscious on the floor.

The father's story does not coincide with the autopsy findings. In addition the murder had been tape recorded by the FBI because that agency was tracking a terrorist cell at the residence where the killing took place. The FBI released some of the information on those tapes, which indicated that the girl's parents murdered their daughter with premeditation, to the St. Louis, MO, Office of the District Attorney to ensure the arrest of the suspects because it was known that the suspects were prepared to imminently flee the country.

What really happened was that the parents ambushed their daughter. The unwitting girl never attacked anyone. During a heated verbal argument with her father, the mother grabbed the girl from behind and held her while the father stabbed his daughter to death. This was all recorded on audiotape and transcribed into English and the transcripts were read into court during the ensuing murder trial. The parents were both found guilty of first degree murder and they were both sentenced to death. Because of evidence on the audiotapes, at the time of the trial it was thought that the girl's murder was a so-called "honor death" because she had shamed the family by dating a black man and working outside of the family's business.

Subsequently, it was disclosed that the girl's father was being tracked by the U.S. Government because he was a member of the Abu Nidal international terrorist group. The father, Zein Isa, was to go on trial with other Abu Nidal members in the U.S. who were subsequently found guilty of terrorism, but he did not go to the second trial because he was already on death row and he was seriously ill (he died of natural causes a few months later). After the second trial it became known that the female victim, 17-year-old Palestina Isa, was probably murdered not as an "honor death" but more probably because she knew too much about her father's terrorist activity and was likely to disclose this knowledge to others if she were allowed to leave the family and go out on her own.

As a result of the scene investigation of the homicide, together with the autopsy findings and the audiotapes of conversations leading up to the murder and of the murder itself, authorities and a St. Louis, MO, jury were able to come to the conclusion that this was actually a first degree murder punishable by death. In addition, the FBI was also able to establish that Zein Isa was a member of the Abu Nidal terrorist group and that the murder of his daughter may have been a terrorist act committed in the U.S. prior to 911 and prior to the WTC bombing in 1993.

This case required extraordinary good fortune to crack; 6 separate wiretaps recorded the murder so that justice could prevail in court. In the future experts will have to be more vigilant than in the past and will have to develop even better technologies to root out terrorists and protect the public.

Honor Death, Abu Nidal, Terrorism