

In Sudan Bombing, 'Evidence' Depends on Who Is Viewing It

By Daniel Pearl

KHARTOUM, Sudan -- Salah Idris, a Sudanese investor, has a few problems: His factory is in ruins, his account with a U.S. bank is frozen, and he has been fingered by U.S. intelligence authorities as a presumed front man for Islamic fundamentalist terrorist Osama bin Laden.

If the last is true -- and Mr. Idris says emphatically that it isn't -- you might think it helps explain why American cruise missiles last Aug. 20 blew up the El Shifa Pharmaceutical Industries Co. plant here, in retaliation for terrorist bombings at U.S. embassies in Africa. In fact, at the time the missiles flew from American warships, U.S. intelligence officials admit they knew little about Mr. Idris, and didn't know he had acquired El Shifa a few months before. Yet, since the bombing, sources old and new have provided them information about Mr. Idris to bolster the case that El Shifa was linked to Osama bin Laden and his alleged chemical-weapons aspirations.

Some U.S. allies and Washington officials still doubt the U.S. hit a legitimate target, and the full truth of El Shifa, wrapped in the divisive politics of antiterrorism, may never be known. The hardest evidence is a scoop of soil, taken near the plant and judged by the U.S. to contain a chemical used to make nerve gas. But other evidence becomes murkier the closer you look.

El Shifa had a tangled past, and Mr. Idris, a fortune-charmed millionaire of the kind the Middle East often produces, was a seemingly rash investor, agreeing to buy the factory in March after only a cursory examination. He can't categorically say that El Shifa was never used to make chemical-weapons ingredients, because he was still doing a thorough study of the factory when the U.S. destroyed it. Some of his Sudan deals put him in business with people who had past contact with Mr. bin Laden or his companies, though Mr. Idris says the links are inconsequential. He says he intended to recapitalize El Shifa to compete in African and Middle East pharmaceutical markets.

The U.S. had reasons to believe Sudan would want chemical weapons. It is fighting a civil war against U.S.-supported rebels, has little money to buy conventional arms and hasn't signed on to a global antichemical-weapons treaty. And because the country has given refuge to terrorists in the past, the U.S. says it had to take seriously reports that Mr. bin Laden and Iraq were helping Sudan make chemical weapons.

U.S. officials say the main argument for making El Shifa a target was and remains a soil sample, obtained in January, which they say was taken "a stone's throw" from El Shifa, by a CIA-trained agent as another agent looked on. The officials say three separate tests on the soil turned up strong "hits" for a substance known as EMPTA, which can easily be turned into deadly VX nerve gas.

Still, other links in the chain of evidence outlined by U.S. officials are weaker than past reports have suggested. The U.S. has repeatedly said the plant was part of a complex run by the Sudanese government's weapons-making arm, the Military Industries Corp. But asked how

investigators knew that, a U.S. intelligence official says they assumed any chemical-weapons plant in Sudan would be run by the government. Also, despite media reports that the U.S. intercepted conversations between the plant and Iraq, a U.S. intelligence official says that what the U.S. actually discovered were records indicating El Shifa officials started paying visits to Iraq last year.

U.S. officials assume the discussions were about chemical weapons because they took place in a pharmaceutical plant overseen by a key figure in Iraq's VX nerve-gas program, Emad Ani. But El Shifa officials say they had routine talks about a manufacturing alliance, and never met that man. And the United Nations weapons inspector who dealt most closely with the Iraqi plant says Mr. Ani actually is a high-ranking manager for the plant's state-owned parent company and has never been directly associated with the factory itself.

Asked about the U.S. strike, Mr. Idris says, "I think it's something done by mistake." But asked about some of the allegations that have dogged him since the bombing, he says, "It's Mubarak."

He means Mubarak Fadl Al Mahdi, a Sudanese opposition figure who has been feuding with Mr. Idris for more than a year over conflicting political allegiances. Mr. Mahdi acknowledges collecting information on the plant after learning in May that Mr. Idris had bought it. And five days after the cruise-missile attack, he issued a communique, released on the letterhead of the National Democratic Alliance, an umbrella dissidents' group, denouncing Mr. Idris as an investor in a Sudanese military project -- a claim U.S. officials would later echo. He also took direct aim at El Shifa, saying it was staffed with "Iraqi scientists and technicians" and contending that most pharmaceutical plants in Sudan aren't "manned by foreign experts."

But Mr. Mahdi denies sharing these concerns with anyone before the bombing and U.S. intelligence officials deny relying on anyone with an ax to grind in fingering El Shifa, and then Mr. Idris. Still, it's no secret that U.S. officials, who have no embassy in Khartoum to use as a listening post, had been seeking information on chemical weapons from dissidents, and that friendly governments such as Egypt also get information from Sudanese opposition members.

Mr. Idris, citing his own ties to Sudanese dissidents, says he is hardly the kind of person that the government here would trust to take part in any sensitive military project. The lawyer he used on the El Shifa deal, for example, calls the incumbent regime a "dictatorship."

That said, Mr. Idris also acknowledges doing business with regime figures, including Abdul Baset Hamza, a former government engineer who says he once oversaw a road-construction project of an Osama bin Laden company during Mr. bin Laden's years of exile in Sudan. Mr. Hamza now builds military factories for Sudan's fundamentalist regime. He says he tried to get Mr. bin Laden to invest in a telephone company and a mortar-shell factory, but the fundamentalist declined to mix funds with the government. But Mr. Hamza later got Mr. Idris to invest in the telephone company, and to hire Mr. Hamza's firm to build a steel mill.

Mr. Idris's Washington lawyers are now trying to convince the Justice Department that he has no ties to Osama bin Laden, and that the government should lift its freeze on Mr. Idris' BankAmerica Corp. account. U.S. intelligence officials, however, aren't making that easy. They have said, in interviews, that they have found evidence that Mr. Idris may have accepted money from a member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a group tied to Mr. bin Laden. Mr. Idris denies that.

Also, his advisers are quizzing former El Shifa workers and trying to line up independent laboratories to test the soil near the El Shifa site. Still, U.S. officials, and some chemical-weapons experts, say it isn't clear that EMPTA would survive the heat of a missile attack. The U.S., partly for that reason, is blocking investigation by the U.N. Security Council. El Shifa officials, meanwhile, say documents supporting their case were lost in the bombing.

Friends say the idea of Mr. Idris's fronting for hard-core fundamentalists is absurd because, though an observant Muslim, he doesn't share the Puritanism of Mr. bin Laden. Mr. Idris, a connoisseur of Sudanese love songs, keeps an Arabian lute ready to strum on the couch in each of his homes in Cairo, Jeddah, Khartoum and London, and friends say he doesn't object if others drink alcohol at his parties. Two associates recall his refusing to put money in collection boxes outside mosques and explaining that he feared the money would buy weapons in Bosnia.

And though his rise from a bank accountant to a millionaire has stirred suspicions here, his friends say there isn't much real mystery. Mr. Idris is a protege and sometimes business partner of two publicity-shy Saudi Arabian tycoons who by conservative estimates could buy Osama bin Laden 20 times over, even if the fundamentalist really has the \$200 million he is reported to have inherited some years ago. One of the tycoons is Sheik Mohammed Hussein Al-Amoudi, a construction magnate with Ethiopian roots who just built a luxury Sheraton hotel in the Ethiopian capital. Another is Sheik Khalid Bin Mahfouz, a banking tycoon with Yemeni roots who is rebuilding Yemen's port at Aden.

Mr. Idris, a 46-year-old tailor's son, hails from a farming town in north Sudan. He moved to Saudi Arabia in 1976 and found work as an accountant at Sheik Khalid's National Commercial Bank. Eventually, he joined Sheik Khalid's circle of close advisers, where he could earn commissions by finding investments for his friends. One deal he signed onto early was Worldspace Corp., a Washington-based enterprise that has raised about \$1 billion -- it won't reveal how -- and is to launch the first of three satellites Wednesday to beam radio programming to Africa and the Middle East.

Mr. Idris also impressed Sheik Khalid by helping get him and his bank disentangled from the Bank of Credit & Commerce International money-laundering scandal, intimates say. Mr. Idris worked behind the scenes, briefing Arab journalists and helping to negotiate a \$442 million settlement with BCCI's liquidators. Mr. Idris lost some of his own money at a London branch of BCCI when the bank collapsed in 1991, but he later hired the former branch manager to help run his London businesses. "He's a good guy," Mr. Idris explains.

Mr. Idris says he does business with people tied to Sudan's ruling National Islamic Front, or NIF, because it's unavoidable. But the main reason for his investments in Sudan now is that when the government falls, "I'm here."

Mr. Idris says he thought about building a pharmaceutical factory for years. But El Shifa was a creation of Bashir Hassan Bashir, an NIF supporter. Using an American designer and a Chinese construction crew, Mr. Bashir says, he built El Shifa in 1993 with the aim of exporting most of its products, something no Sudanese drug plant did.

Sudan now praises El Shifa as a model factory, but it was actually poorly planned, workers say. Mr. Bashir wanted a veterinary-drugs factory, but built it too big, so he added human medicines. That meant expanding the plant further, over an unused road in the back, he says. To get the factory open, he had to offer a 40% stake to a Saudi family. Inexperienced managers bought the wrong sized equipment; Sudanese authorities often rejected pills coming off El Shifa's production lines.

The plant's Sudanese general manager, Osman Salman, says El Shifa fell behind on payments to suppliers, and he even spent a few nights in prison for bouncing checks. So Mr. Salman sent a desperate fax to Mr. Idris asking him to buy El Shifa; he knew he had money and had been buying up a number of Sudanese companies. The two men say they met in Saudi Arabia, where Mr. Salman ran a food company before moving back to Sudan.

U.S. intelligence officials cite a link between Mr. Salman and Mr. bin Laden. Mr. Salman says a bin Laden construction company in 1992 rented his house in Khartoum. But the closest he came to the fundamentalist was standing in the dirt road outside and shouting at Mr. bin Laden's agent because the tenants had ripped out the house's Western-style toilets, he says.

Mr. Idris rushed to Khartoum within a few days of getting Mr. Salman's fax, which had mentioned that a Saudi conglomerate was also talking to El Shifa. Mr. Idris knew the factory's owner was intimate with the NIF, but also knew him as a drug importer who had had some regulatory scrapes with the government. Mr. Idris, having flipped through an El Shifa photo album, took a half-hour tour of the factory, signed an agreement on the spot to pay \$12 million and assume \$18 million of debt -- and then left town, employees say.

The due diligence on the plant fell to his cousin, a pharmacology professor named Idris Babiker Eltayeb. Dr. Eltayeb quickly concluded that one-third of the staff could go, and that a pharmaceuticals specialist should replace Mr. Salman. This summer, Dr. Eltayeb says, a friend told him of dissidents' rumors that El Shifa was a chemical-weapons plant, but Dr. Eltayeb shrugged it off as absurd. How, he asks, could chemicals be made secretly at El Shifa? It was a small factory with no distilling equipment and it was so open to outside perusal that he wanted visits be restricted for hygiene's sake.

The plant's contacts with Iraq were no secret to Mr. Idris's team. In August 1997, Mr. Bashir and a sales executive say they rode into Baghdad with cartons of drug samples and found the Al Rasheed Hotel swamped with rival drug executives, vying for contracts to supply Iraq under a U.N. program. The executives say they went to Iraq's Samarra Drug Industries to try to reach a manufacturing alliance. If Samarra could make certain drugs in Sudan, and El Shifa could make others in Iraq, each would cut costs and get a marketing edge. Dr. Eltayeb says he knew about the proposal, which neither company pursued, because he sat on a Sudanese pharmacy board that briefly reviewed it last year.

El Shifa had won a contract in January under the U.N. deal, to ship \$199,000 worth of "Shifazole" animal-deworming fluid to Iraq. This summer, it still hadn't shipped a single bottle, citing technical difficulties. As proof that the plant was about to make a shipment, however, Dr. Eltayeb points to hundreds of white one-liter bottles labeled Shifazole that now lie atop a pile of rubble at the El Shifa site.

Mr. Idris was in London on Aug. 20 when he learned U.S. cruise missiles had destroyed El Shifa. "I laughed," he says, thinking the missiles surely intended another target. Then he flew off to consult with Sudanese dissident friends in Cairo.

The feud between Mr. Idris and Mr. Mahdi is emblematic of their fractured country. Mr. Idris supports the Muslim-dominated, moderate Democratic Unionist Party, which is vying with the Muslim-dominated, moderate Umma party for future control of Sudan. Each party suspects the other of trying to cut a deal with the ruling regime.

Mubarak Fadl Al Mahdi, interior minister before a 1989 coup, is known as the Umma Party's organizer and fund-raiser. He and Mr. Idris have never met but have a healthy mutual mistrust. Mr. Idris says opposition figures like Mr. Mahdi are the reason Sudanese don't throw out the current government. Mr. Mahdi says the reason is businessmen like Mr. Idris, who he says is "guilty of collaboration" for importing wheat into impoverished Sudan. Supporting certain opposition parties is a way for Mr. Idris to "spread some confusion" about his true goals, he says.

Early last year, with rebels facing a strong Sudanese counterattack along the eastern border, Mr. Mahdi went on an Arabic television show broadcast from London and laid out claims that a cargo company owned by a Saudi businessman from Sudan was shuttling weapons from Iran to Sudan. It was a clear reference to Trans Arabian Air Transport, a company owned by Mr. Idris, who says he discovered his airline had made an unauthorized shipment from Iran. He says it was police equipment, not army weapons, though he won't elaborate.

Still, Mr. Idris was furious that Mr. Mahdi hadn't approached him before going public, and he spurned efforts by two Sudanese journalists in London to arrange a peacemaking meeting.

The night of the El Shifa bombing, Mr. Mahdi, reached at his Cairo home by a Wall Street Journal reporter for reaction, could tick off seemingly incriminating facts about Mr. Idris's

factory. It was connected by a new, paved road to a nearby state military complex, he said. (The trip is two miles, part of that on a busy highway.) Mr. Idris's Saudi patron, Sheik Khalid, was married to the sister of Osama bin Laden, he said. (Even if that's true -- and Saudi sources say it isn't -- Mr. bin Laden and his family seem to be miles apart ideologically; the Defense Department recently hired the family construction company to build new housing for U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia.)

On Aug. 25, Mr. Mahdi distributed a fax saying El Shifa had been built partly over government-confiscated land and, although nominally owned by Mr. Idris, was actually "owned by the NIF." Mr. Idris quickly met with the head of Mr. Mahdi's party in Cairo and threatened a lawsuit. Mr. Mahdi refused to back down.

In interviews, Mr. Mahdi said the ruling NIF was pushing into businesses, and Mr. Idris, "a bank clerk," was building factories all over Sudan. Mr. Mahdi said that Mr. Idris's seven-factory complex, known as Sariah, was part of Sudan's effort to find civilian factories that could be converted to military use. He also asserted that Mr. Idris's steel mill is located near a Military Industrial Corp. center that is "probably making poison gas."

Scoffing at such notions, Mr. Idris invited a reporter to tour the facilities. An inside view of the Sariah complex in southern Khartoum revealed nothing more military than car batteries and ankle-high men's boots. The steel mill, off a desert highway, was guarded by three unarmed youths in T-shirts.

Fellow dissidents find Mr. Mahdi persuasive on many issues, though they say he often makes charges without all the evidence in hand. "I have questioned the credibility of Mubarak," says opposition figure Sharif Harir over cappuccino at the American Cafe, unofficial gossip headquarters for the Sudanese opposition based in neighboring Eritrea. But Mr. Idris' rise was "too quick. On a clerk's salary, he wouldn't have money to invest in factories."

Some American officials are skeptical about the dissidents, too, but they still meet one another frequently in Asmara, the Eritrean capital. At one get-together in April, at the U.S. ambassador's residence, participants recall, a U.S. intelligence officer said the U.S. was concerned about chemical weapons in Sudan and welcomed any information. Dissidents say they gave the U.S. a list of suspected sites, but it didn't include El Shifa.

U.S. intelligence officials say they noticed El Shifa last year because of reports of high security during the construction. Then they detected the El Shifa officials' visit to Samarra. Intelligence officials say they knew El Shifa won an Iraqi contract but questioned why the Sudanese would negotiate through Samarra Drug.

Iraq doesn't exactly inspire trust when it comes to chemical weapons. It is one of the few countries to have used them. There have been unconfirmed reports Iraq farmed out its unconventional weapons to friendly states to avoid detection. And Iraq had been caught making VX gas, using the EMPTA process.

That, say U.S. intelligence officials, is why they decided to test for EMPTA along with other chemicals when they took soil samples from suspected sites in Sudan. El Shifa was the only "hit," U.S. intelligence officials say. The test results came back in the summer, they say, and investigators started planning a second round of soil samples around the site, to pinpoint where the EMPTA was coming from. But then came the Aug. 7 embassy bombings. Authorities quickly decided Mr. bin Laden was behind them, and President Clinton needed a list of retaliation targets, fast.

One-hundred percent confidence is impossible in intelligence work, says one U.S. official. El Shifa, the official says, may have reached the 80% range. But "we are at somewhat of a war" with Osama bin Laden. "It's not going to be a clean thing. It's going to be a messy thing, with messy choices and messy decisions," he adds.