

US

CIA 'ignored warning' on al Qaeda

By Gwen Robinson in Washington

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A former US intelligence agent has alleged that the CIA ignored detailed warnings he passed on in 1998 that a Gulf state was harbouring an al-Qaeda cell led by two known terrorists.

When FBI agents attempted to arrest them, the Gulf state's government provided the men with alias passports, the former agent claims.

The allegation is contained in a controversial new book on US intelligence operations in the Middle East by Robert Baer, a former case officer in the CIA's directorate of operations.

The book, *See No Evil*, is to be published later this month featuring blacked-out sections which obscure passages that the CIA's publications review board claimed were classified.

An excerpt is being published this weekend by the US magazine *Vanity Fair*.

After months of acrimonious negotiation last year with the CIA over passages of the book, Mr Baer added further detail after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US.

Among fresh details are an account of how, after he left the CIA in 1997 and became a consultant in Beirut, Mr Baer was advising a prince in a Gulf royal family.

A military associate of the prince, he said, had last year warned Mr Baer that a "spectacular terrorist operation" was being planned and would take place shortly.

Mr Baer said he also provided him a computer record of "hundreds" of secret al-Qaeda operatives in the Gulf region, many in Saudi Arabia. Mr Baer said that in August 2001, at the military officer's request, he offered the list to the Saudi Arabian government. But an aide to the Saudi defence minister, Prince Sultan, refused to look at the list or to pass them (the names) on.

On the al-Qaeda cell in the Gulf state, which is not named in the book, Mr Baer claims the two men who led the cell, Shawqi Islambuli and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, escaped arrest and settled in Prague.

The information Mr Baer gave to the CIA was not followed up, he said.

In the book, Mr Baer also claims: That in 1996, Osama bin Laden established a strategic alliance with Iran to co-ordinate terrorist attacks against the US. In 1995, the National Security Council intentionally aborted a military coup against Saddam Hussein, partly orchestrated by Mr Baer, who at the time was working to help organise the opposition. In 1991, the CIA intentionally shut down its operations in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia.

Some of Mr Baer's charges, such as the White House's decision to withdraw support from the Iraqi opposition, are in the public realm.

But a former CIA analyst who specialised in the Middle East said on Friday night: "What's new, and potentially explosive, is the detail - this book will definitely put focus on the issue of the CIA and State Department's handling of the Iraqi opposition."