

# Register

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## Odeh bombing death still a mystery

Reasons, culprits elusive year after Arab spokesman's killing

By Barry Klein  
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This much the FBI will say: A year ago today, terrorists killed Arab spokesman Alex Odeh.

But after initially blaming the Jewish Defense League for the attack, federal agents now refuse to discuss the case, except to say that evidence points to "Jewish extremists."

After a year of investigation, the FBI won't even describe the bomb that ended Odeh's life and destroyed the Santa Ana office of the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, which he helped direct.

All the agency will say is that its investigation remains open.

Meanwhile, aftershocks from the bombing remain.

There is the personal loss: "What do you tell three young girls who are still crying for their daddy?" asked Sami Odeh, Alex's brother.

There is the loss to the community:

"He was one of the few representatives of the Arab community we could speak to," said Rabbi Henri Front, chairman of the Orange County Human Relations Commission.

"He was a unifying force," said Zach Sidawi, a friend of Odeh and a member of the anti-discrimination committee, which was established to combat negative Arab stereotypes.

There is anger over the conduct of the investigation. The leaders of extremist Jewish groups are upset that they are accused of the bombing.

"Not that I lose any sleep over his death, but the FBI has no business blaming us when they have

absolutely no proof," said Mordechai Levy, director of the Jewish Defense Organization, a radical offshoot of the Jewish Defense League.

Odeh's friends are upset over the lack of results.

"The fact that his death is not solved ... tells us the FBI does not care about the Arab-American community in general, and about this peaceful man in particular," said Nadia Bettendorf, a member of the anti-discrimination committee's board of directors.

Even after a year, there is the feeling that such an attack could happen again.

"The Arab community has become more fearful of what it may say," Sidawi said. "They are afraid of what may happen if they speak out as Alex did."

Today marks the one-year anniversary of Odeh's death. The local Arab community, and several civic and religious organizations, are sponsoring a memorial dinner tonight in his honor.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson is a featured speaker. Officials said security will be tight.

Prior to the dinner, officials will announce the establishment of a \$100,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of whoever planted the bomb, said David Habib, director of the committee's Southern California chapter.

"We want to commemorate Alex Odeh, to celebrate him, to give tribute to his work," Bettendorf said. "We should not forget him, or what happened."

Alex Michael Odeh was born 42 years ago in the small village of Jifna in what is now the occupied West Bank. He and his family were exiled after Israel overran his

home in 1967.

He was a naturalized U.S. citizen, a published poet and a part-time instructor of Arabic at Coastline Community College.

But most of his energy went into the anti-discrimination committee, which claims to have about 1,500 members in Southern California, and about 13,000 members nationwide.

Basically, the committee acts as a media watchdog. As West Coast director, Odeh often wrote letters to the editor and articles defending Arab-Americans. He said his job was to counter negative Arab stereotypes.

Odeh's office reportedly received bomb threats frequently. Friends said his mail was routinely put through a metal detector.

It wasn't enough.

Just after 9 a.m. on Oct. 11, 1985, Odeh opened the door to his office on East 17th Street.

In an instant, his world literally exploded.

The bomb knocked the ceiling of his office to the floor. Rubble flew into the street. Odeh's body was mangled, his legs blown off. Seven other people were wounded, none seriously.

Odeh died three hours later. By then, investigators already were combing through the debris.

No one claimed responsibility for the bombing. But some people thought they knew why it happened.

Earlier that week, the Italian cruise liner Achille Lauro had been

# ODEH: Arab community, civic and religious groups sponsoring memorial dinner in his honor



Alex Odeh  
FBI won't describe the bomb.

hijacked by four Palestinian terrorists. An American passenger, confined to a wheelchair, had been shot and thrown over the side.

Twelve hours before his death, Odeh consented to a television interview about the hijacking. On the air, he said "I think the time is right for the American administration as well as the American people to understand the Palestinian side of the story."

He blamed the media for "mistakenly" linking the PLO to the hijacking, and he praised PLO leader Yasser Arafat's role in securing the ship's release.

"It looks like there were some elements, regardless of who they were, who were afraid of logic, afraid of rational discussion," said Muzammil Siddiqi, director of the Islamic Society of Orange County, which is made up largely of Arab-Americans. "They felt it good to crush that voice."

The White House condemned the attack. So did Arafat. It was investigated by Santa Ana police, the anti-terrorist division of the Los Angeles Police Department and the FBI. The FBI quickly took over the investigation.

Agents checked to see whether there were similarities between this bombing and one two months earlier at the committee's New

England headquarters. That one had a timed detonator. The one that killed Odeh was rigged to go off when the door opened.

The FBI also investigated similarities between two bombings at the East Coast homes of men accused of being Nazi war criminals. Those bombs also were rigged to go off when the door opened.

Meanwhile, the Arab-American community was getting angry. They were mad at President Reagan for not personally calling the Odeh family to express regrets as he had to Marilyn Klinghoffer, wife of the man killed on the Achille Lauro. They complained that the U.S. State Department offered \$250,000 in reward money for information about plane hijackings, but no money for information about Odeh's killers.

One month after the attack, the FBI blamed the Jewish Defense League for Odeh's killings and the two bombings on the East Coast. No one, however, has been charged.

Irv Rubin, leader of the 7,000-member JDL, is still angry about

the FBI's actions.

"It's one thing to make an accusation and another to show proof," said Rubin, who said today's memorial dinner is part of the Arab community's attempt to "martyrize" Alex Odeh.

"Prior to his death, Odeh was a very insignificant person. Keep in mind that this was a very professional hit. The JDL in the past has never been accused of doing anything on that level.

"It doesn't make any sense for us to kill him," Rubin said. "It may have been Arabs who did it. There are factions of the PLO who can't stomach Arafat."

Santa Ana detectives said they were surprised by the FBI's accusation, as did other terrorism experts. They said the FBI didn't wait to determine the bomb's "signature," which is the bomb's explosive mix, casing, placement and triggering device. Experts compare those elements to see if devices are planted by the same organization.

Later, the FBI backed off the ac-

cusation. It now attributes the bombings to "Jewish extremists," but names no particular group.

"Although certain evidence leads to suspicion of elements in the JDL," the FBI said in a report, "final attribution ... must await further investigation."

That attribution never has come. And although the investigation still officially continues, some Arab-Americans are skeptical that there ever will be an arrest.

"It shows that the JDL has more power in this country than was believed by many people," Bettendorf said. "... I don't accept that (the FBI) does not have the evidence."

Others, however, are more moderate.

"Some people say that the FBI didn't work hard because an Arab was killed," said Samir Twair, director of the anti-discrimination committee's Southern California chapter, which is based in Los Angeles.

"That does not represent the committee's feelings," he said. "We know they worked at it. We just have to wait."

Some believe Odeh's death united the Arab community in Southern California, and increased the committee's influence.

"It got them together in anger," said Twair, Odeh's successor. "Because of their ethnic background, they felt threatened. There is still that fear. The way the media associates all Arabs with terrorists keeps that fear alive."

Others believe the bombing may actually have improved relations between Jews and Arabs locally.

"A lot of Jewish groups have come out and approached the Arab community to begin a dialogue toward greater understanding," Bettendorf said. "They realize Alex had started that kind of work."

Rabbi Front said Odeh's death has become "a bridge" between the Jewish and Arab communities.

"We've discovered that we share many of the same problems, such as stereotyping ... and how to relate to a country which is so much commandeered by various aspects of Christianity," he said.

"We should remember," he said, "that we are both children of Abraham."