

More evidence of warnings to Washington of September 11 attacks

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FBI agents in Arizona sent a memo to FBI headquarters more than two months before the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, warning that Middle Eastern students at a local flight school might be planning to hijack airplanes or infiltrate airport security, according to press reports May 4.

Local counterterrorism agents monitored a group of Arab students at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona during the period leading up to the terrorist attacks. None of those being watched had any connection to the attacks or were involved in any terrorist activities. But the memo to Washington is nonetheless significant.

“Phoenix believes that the FBI should accumulate a listing of civil aviation universities/colleges around the country,” the memo said. “FBIHQ should discuss this matter with other elements of the US intelligence community and task the community for any information that supports Phoenix’s suspicions.”

The Arizona agents were apparently more concerned about possible infiltration of airport security procedures, rather than pilot training as such. An official FBI statement issued May 3 said: “None of the people identified by Phoenix are connected to the 9/11 attacks. The Phoenix communication went to the appropriate operational agents and analysts at headquarters, but it did not lead to uncovering the impending attacks.”

FBI headquarters apparently took the suspicions of the agents in Arizona seriously enough that preparations were made to launch a more extensive program to track students from the Middle East at US flight schools. This would hardly have strained the vast resources of the US intelligence apparatus, since the total number of such students is about 600 a year.

It is all the more inexplicable that a month later, when FBI agents in Minneapolis reported the detention of Zaccarias Moussaoui, the French-Moroccan student who wanted to learn how to fly a Boeing 747 without learning how to take off or land, FBI headquarters showed little interest.

Moussaoui remained in the custody of the Immigration and Naturalization Service until after September 11, and FBI officials in Washington rejected requests from Minneapolis for a more intensive investigation, including a search of his computer hard drive.

FBI Director Robert S. Mueller is expected to face questioning about the handling of the Arizona and Minnesota cases when he appears today before the Senate Judiciary Committee, which is holding its annual FBI oversight hearings. This session is separate from the House and Senate intelligence committee hearings on September 11, which have been repeatedly postponed.

Both Republican and Democratic senators said they would raise the issue. Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (Democrat of Vermont) said the reports “only underscore the need for a thorough and constructive congressional investigation of the facts.” Ranking Republican Charles Grassley of Iowa said, “This is one of several incidents that raise more questions about what the FBI knew of terrorist plans before September 11, and about how the FBI handled the information.”

US intelligence agencies have known since at least 1995 that Islamic fundamentalist terrorists had enrolled at flight schools in the US to obtain training that would allow them to hijack commercial jets and fly them into buildings. One such plot, whose target was to be CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, was outlined in the 1996 trial of Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, organizer of the

1993 World Trade Center bombing.

This fact did not prevent Mueller and other officials from declaring that the methods employed on September 11 came as a complete surprise and therefore the attacks could not have been forestalled.



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