

Cantor-Fitzgerald, Port Authority sue Saudis

September 11: The official story and the bottom line

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September 11, 2004, the third anniversary of the terrorist attacks that claimed nearly 3,000 lives, was commemorated in official ceremonies in New York City, Washington and elsewhere. The crowds at the World Trade Center site were significantly reduced from the previous year. Families stayed away in some cases because such public displays provide little comfort, and in others because of hostility to government officials whom they hold responsible for the deaths that day.

In his radio speech marking the anniversary, President Bush once again cast September 11 as the opening salvo in a “struggle of good against evil,” a holy crusade that he insisted the US military is continuing in its brutal counterinsurgency campaign against the people of Iraq.

For his part, Bush’s Democratic challenger John Kerry gave a speech in which he blamed the attacks on an undefined “evil” no less than five times, offering no alternative to the administration’s official story of what happened that day. He likewise paid tribute to the military for working to “defend us from evil at this hour.”

While attributing the bloodiest day in US history since the Civil War to “evil” may work well for the politicians, when it comes to financial interests, it doesn’t wash. In addition to the thousands of innocent lives, billions of dollars in corporate assets were wiped out that day, and somebody has to pay.

Striking a sharply discordant note from the official commemorations, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the government entity that owned the World Trade Center, announced September 11 that it is joining the brokerage house Cantor Fitzgerald in a \$7 billion lawsuit naming the Saudi government as a chief defendant. The bond brokerage lost 658 employees in the attacks, while 84 from the Port Authority died.

The terrorist attacks, according to the suit, “could not have been accomplished without the knowing and intentional financial support lent Al Qaeda and its leaders by a global network of banks, financial institutions, charities, relief organizations, businesses, individual financiers, foreign governments and foreign governmental officials.”

The bipartisan 9/11 commission’s report, released in July, provided a whitewash of Saudi ties to the terrorist attacks. It found “no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded” Al Qaeda. But corporate America is not buying it.

The court papers filed by Cantor Fitzgerald charge that the Saudi monarchy directly and indirectly funded and controlled charity and relief organizations that in turn financed Al Qaeda. The lawsuit further alleges that the Saudi government knowingly employed Al Qaeda operatives, provided them with safe houses and false documents, and assisted them in obtaining weapons and military equipment.

“This uninterrupted financial and material support and substantial assistance enabled the Al Qaeda defendants to plan, orchestrate and carry out the Sept. 11 attacks,” the lawsuit states.

The Port Authority’s announcement on the lawsuit came close on the heels of renewed charges by Florida Senator Bob Graham that the Bush administration orchestrated a cover-up of Saudi involvement in the September 11 attacks.

In a newly released book, *Intelligence Matters*, Graham asserts that “evidence of official Saudi support” for at least some of the hijackers is “incontrovertible.” Graham is the ranking Democrat and former chair of the Senate intelligence committee that carried out a joint congressional investigation into 9/11 with its counterpart in the House of Representatives.

Graham’s charges focus on the extraordinary record of Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, who were identified as hijackers of American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon. Both men were Saudi nationals, as were 13 others of the 19 hijackers.

Both were known to US intelligence as Al Qaeda operatives since 1999. Malaysian intelligence agents, acting at the behest of the CIA, photographed and videotaped them and others during a 2000 meeting of the Islamist terrorist group in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Nonetheless, after the meeting, al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar were allowed to fly to the US using their own passports and visas issued by US consular authorities in Saudi Arabia. While the CIA knew of their presence in the country, it did not inform the Federal Bureau of Investigation, according to the FBI. (The CIA disputes this claim, maintaining that it did alert the FBI.) Nor did the CIA inform immigration authorities. The two were placed on a terrorist watch list only a few weeks before the September 11 attacks. In subsequent testimony, intelligence and security officials claimed they had, by that time, “lost track” of the known Al Qaeda operatives.

After landing in Los Angeles in January 2000, al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar were met by Omar al-Bayoumi, an employee of the Saudi civil aviation authority. US investigators have concluded that al-Bayoumi was a Saudi intelligence agent. Al-Bayoumi invited the pair to move to San Diego, where he found them an apartment, provided them with money and helped enroll them in flight school.

It has been reported that al-Bayoumi served as conduit for thousands of dollars in funding for the future hijackers sent by Princess Haifa, the wife of Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador to the US and a close confidante of the Bush family. Al-Bayoumi’s monthly paycheck as a contractor for Saudi civil aviation—for which he did no discernable work—rose from \$465 to \$3,700 after he began assisting the two Al Qaeda operatives.

Al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar lived openly in the US, one of them even having his name listed in the telephone directory.

Within months, al-Hazmi moved into the home of Abdussattar Shaikh, a retired professor at San Diego State University. Shaikh was on the FBI payroll, charged with monitoring the activities of Islamist groups in the

San Diego area.

White House intercedes for FBI informant

In his book, Senator Graham writes that the FBI concealed from the joint congressional committee the fact that its paid informant, Abdussattar Shaikh, had established a close personal relationship with the two hijackers. (Shaikh is reported to have confirmed that al-Bayoumi was a Saudi intelligence agent). When the committee staff discovered Shaikh's role and the committee issued a subpoena to question him under oath, the FBI and Attorney General John Ashcroft refused to serve the subpoena.

Graham in his book cites a memo that a senior FBI official wrote to him and the Republican co-chair of the intelligence panel, Rep. Porter Goss, a Florida Republican, declaring, "the administration would not sanction a staff interview with the source [Shaikh]. Nor did the administration agree to allow the FBI to serve a subpoena or a notice of deposition on the source."

Graham writes that this was the only time he had ever heard of the FBI refusing to serve a congressional subpoena. He comments: "We were seeing in writing what we had suspected for some time: the White House was directing the cover-up."

Nor was this the only evidence of a cover-up. When the congressional panel released the report on its investigation, 28 pages were classified on the orders of the White House, their contents blacked out. All of the material dealt with the Saudi role in 9/11.

Then there was the extraordinary action taken by the Bush administration in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, allowing chartered planes to ferry some 140 prominent Saudis—including at least a dozen of Osama bin Laden's relatives—to Boston for evacuation to Saudi Arabia. The pick-up flights were organized at a time when all non-military and non-emergency aviation had been grounded by government order. Bin Laden's relatives were allowed to leave the country with little or no questioning by the FBI.

Why the extreme measures taken to deflect any investigation into the Saudi connection to the terrorist attacks?

Many—most prominently Craig Unger in his book *House of Saudi*, *House of Bush* and Michael Moore in his film *Fahrenheit 9/11*—have highlighted the intricate web of political and financial ties that bind the Bush family to Saudi interests. These are undoubtedly real—there is ample evidence that Saudi money underwrote George W. Bush's failed business ventures—and played a significant role in the administration's political calculations.

Others have pointed to the strategic role played by Saudi oil in the US economy. Again, this is clearly a major consideration within US ruling circles, where there is little stomach for a policy that could further destabilize the crisis-ridden Saudi monarchy.

But there is another, and more immediately compelling reason for suppressing any investigation into the Saudi connection. It inevitably raises two questions: Why would Saudi intelligence assist the 9/11 hijackers; and, given its longstanding and intimate ties to the CIA, how could it be that its actions were unknown in Washington?

The nature of the ties between the Saudi and US intelligence establishments merit closer scrutiny. They were solidified in the US-backed war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan, beginning in 1979 and continuing through the 1980s. The US poured billions of dollars in arms and financing into this war, most of it funneled through the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence agency.

The Saudi regime established what amounted to a matching fund for the anti-Soviet guerrillas, many of whom were brought to Afghanistan by

Islamist forces in the Middle East. Osama bin Laden served as the Saudi regime's personal emissary in this cause, helping to organize, train and equip Arab volunteers for the Afghan war.

The movement now known as Al Qaeda was spawned through the interaction of these three intelligence agencies—the CIA, the ISI and the Saudis.

The Saudi connection to Al Qaeda clearly remained intact. As for Pakistan's ISI, immediately after September 11, it was reported by the *Times of India* that its chief, Gen. Mahmud Ahmed, had ordered \$100,000 wired from Dubai to the Florida bank account of hijacker Mohamed Atta. Other reports quoted FBI officials as confirming the Ahmed-Atta connection.

Curiously, the very morning that the hijacked passenger planes were crashing into New York's Twin Towers, Gen. Ahmed was attending a Capitol Hill breakfast meeting hosted by Senator Graham and Rep. Goss. (The Republican congressman and former CIA agent is now the Bush administration's nominee for CIA director.) The general returned to Pakistan on an abortive US-dictated mission to pressure the Taliban government in Afghanistan to extradite Osama bin Laden. He was removed from his post shortly thereafter.

The 9/11 commission, like the congressional panel that Graham co-chaired, chose not to deal with the role played by Gen. Ahmed—as well as other senior members of the Pakistani military—as Al Qaeda patrons.

In his book, Senator Graham himself poses the question of why the congressional committee was denied access to the San Diego FBI informant. "The most obvious answer is that the informant was a big embarrassment," he writes. "Was the informant using the FBI? Was the FBI's informant program so shallow that the Bureau didn't discover that its own informant was personally close to these hijackers?"

He then goes on to suggest in deliberately obscure terms a "far more damning possibility" that could explain the government's intervention: "...perhaps the informant did know something about the plot that would be even more damaging were it revealed, and that this is what the FBI is trying to conceal."

What "damning" information about the 9/11 conspiracy could the informant have known? Graham does not answer his own question. Was it the involvement of the Saudi government? Or was it that elements within the US state apparatus knew of plans for an impending hijacking and allowed them to go forward?

Would not the arrival of two young Saudis, speaking next to no English and enrolling in flight school, have merited a mention to Shaikh's FBI handlers, who reportedly met with him as the future hijackers sat in the next room?

Three years after the attacks, no one has been held accountable for what on its face is the most catastrophic failure of national security and intelligence in US history. The question is: Was it a failure, or was a decision taken to permit a terrorist attack on US soil in order to provide the pretext for implementing plans for wars abroad and repressive policies at home that had been drawn up well in advance of September 11, 2001?

Given the still unexplained refusal of FBI headquarters to heed urgent memos from local offices in Phoenix and Minneapolis about Islamist immigrants taking flight training and direct warnings of the danger of terrorist hijackings, the lack of any serious response from the Bush administration to both external and internal warnings of imminent Al Qaeda attacks on US soil, and the de facto stand-down of US air defense forces on the day of the attack, the least plausible explanation for the Bush administration's sabotage of the 9/11 investigations is one that excludes government complicity in the events of that day.

The Bush administration has dismissed Graham's account of the suppression of any investigation into Saudi ties to 9/11 as "bizarre conspiracy theories."

For his part, Kerry released a pro-forma statement calling for an

independent investigation into Graham's account of a cover-up "to determine if the very agencies charged with investigating the war on terror have been compromised by White House politics."

The real issue is not petty politics, but that the official version of September 11 is itself a lie.

That this is the case is well known within the political establishment in Washington, where Graham's account is far from a revelation. But Kerry and the Democrats will not touch this issue—the foundation of Bush's entire re-election campaign.

In the first place, they support the militarist and repressive policies that have been implemented, with 9/11 serving as the all-purpose pretext. More fundamentally, they fear that the exposure of high-level state complicity in the terrorist attacks would fatally discredit the entire political establishment and fuel social and political upheavals that would threaten American capitalism as a whole.



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