

FBI inspector general's report: more evidence of government complicity in 9/11 attacks

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A report released June 9 by the FBI's Office of the Inspector General raises new questions about the role of the US government in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The internal FBI study provides several important revelations about how US intelligence agencies ignored and even suppressed warnings in the period leading up to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that killed nearly 3,000 people.

Press accounts published within hours of the report's release gave a very distorted picture of the document, which runs to more than 400 pages. No follow-up reports, based on a thorough study of the text, have yet appeared in the mass media.

The initial media commentary invariably voiced the now-standard claim that the FBI and CIA were guilty of a "failure to connect the dots," due to bureaucratic lethargy, individual incompetence, inter-agency rivalries, even poorly performing software systems. This presentation of events is utterly unserious.

The US intelligence apparatus is the most powerful instrument for spying in the world, not a group of Keystone Cops. If it ignored warnings and suppressed information, a legitimate presumption is that it did so willfully. The question must be posed: did one or more agencies or high-level officials provide protection for known Al Qaeda associates who ultimately participated in the hijack-bombings?

Exactly who knew what, and at what level of the government, is not yet clear. But the political benefits of 9/11 for the Bush administration are undeniable. It used the terrorist attacks as a lever to swing American public opinion behind a major shift in policy, both foreign and domestic. Without 9/11, it would have been politically impossible for the government to embark on military interventions in Central Asia and the Middle East and launch an unprecedented attack on civil liberties at home.

The FBI internal report examines the three best-known episodes in which the bureau, which is the lead agency for counterterrorist activities within the United States, missed or ignored important signals of the coming terrorist attacks. Two of the cases involved local FBI agents who voiced suspicions that were disregarded or suppressed by FBI headquarters. In the third case, the CIA deliberately kept the FBI in the dark—with the assistance of certain FBI officials.

The first instance is the electronic memo of July 10, 2001 from Kenneth Williams, an FBI agent in Phoenix, Arizona, noting the number of students with ties to radical Islamic fundamentalists enrolled at local aviation training schools, and suggesting that a nationwide canvass of these schools be carried out to determine if there was a pattern.

The second is the bureau's response to the arrest of Zaccarias Moussaoui, an Islamic fundamentalist who was detained by the Immigration and Naturalization Service after his attempts to obtain training on a Boeing 747 aroused suspicions at a Minneapolis-area flight school. Moussaoui was detained on immigration charges in early August

2001, but FBI headquarters blocked efforts by Minneapolis agents to pursue an investigation that could have identified other Al Qaeda operatives at US flight schools.

The third is the case of Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, believed to have participated in the hijacking of American Airlines Flight 77, which hit the Pentagon on 9/11. Despite being on a CIA watch list because of connections to Al Qaeda, the two lived openly in San Diego, California for a year or more. The CIA only notified the FBI of their presence in the US on August 27, 2001, 20 months after their arrival, and only two weeks before September 11.

The chapter in the inspector general's report on the Phoenix memo (called an Electronic Communication or EC, in FBI jargon), reveals that the document was sent to the attention of six people at FBI headquarters and two more at the New York Division. The recipients included personnel and leadership of both the Usama Bin Laden Unit and the Radical Fundamentalists Unit, the latter comprising a separate group of agents assigned to investigate Islamist militants not directly affiliated to Al Qaeda.

None of the agents who received the EC took any serious action. Several did not even read it. The report attributes the inaction and inattention to the lack of resources committed to anti-terrorist activities in the summer of 2001. For instance, there was only a single research analyst assigned to the FBI's Bin Laden Unit in 2001, and she was transferred to another unit in July 2001.

One agent at a field office who was sent the Phoenix EC replied that it was "no big secret" that Arab men were receiving aviation training in the United States. (Williams's concern, however, was not over "Arab men," but rather individuals affiliated with radical Islamic fundamentalists who publicly justified terrorist attacks on US targets.) The FBI's New York Field Office, which had the lead role in counterterrorism, flatly rejected Williams's proposal for a more in-depth study of the flight school issue.

In passing, the inspector general's report notes that there was already considerable information "contained in FBI files about airplanes and flight schools at the time the Phoenix EC was received at FBI HQ." It mentions four examples, implying that many more could be cited.

One of these examples is the following: "In August 1998, an intelligence agency advised the FBI's New York Division of an alleged plan by unidentified Arabs to fly an explosive laden aircraft from Libya into the World Trade Center."

This previously unreported warning directly contradicts the claims, made repeatedly by Bush administration officials, especially Condoleezza Rice, that "no one could have imagined" hijacked airplanes being used as flying bombs against US targets.

The entire chapter on Moussaoui, 115 pages long, is redacted from the version published last week, at the order of the federal judge who has been

presiding over Moussaoui's terrorism trial. Only a few references to Moussaoui survive in other parts of the report.

A fuller analysis of this episode awaits the release of the redacted chapter, after Moussaoui's sentencing. But the gist of the situation is that local Minneapolis FBI agents asked for permission to conduct further inquiries, including searching Moussaoui's computer, while supervisors at FBI headquarters cited the necessity for a warrant from a special court established under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). The supervisors refused to apply for the FISA warrant, saying the case did not meet the court's criteria.

In one passage, the inspector general's report cites a top FBI lawyer's statement that "he had never seen a supervisory special agent in Headquarters so adamant that a FISA warrant could not be obtained and at the same time a field office so adamant that it could." The report also notes that the Minneapolis field office sought an "expedited FISA," which "normally involved reports of a suspected imminent attack or other imminent danger."

While FBI supervisors were blocking action on Moussaoui, a CIA liaison officer in Minneapolis was reporting his arrest to the CIA. George Tenet, the CIA director, was briefed on the matter.

By the end of August, French intelligence officials had provided the US government with information on Moussaoui's connections to Islamic fundamentalist groups, but the FBI still took no action. Moussaoui, who was being held on immigration violations, was not even transferred from the Immigration and Naturalization Service to FBI custody until after September 11.

By far the most damning material in the FBI inspector general's report relates to Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, two of the 9/11 hijackers who lived in the San Diego area for much of 2000 and 2001. The report details at least five instances during this period when the FBI could have or should have become aware of their presence and purpose.

The two men entered the United States on January 15, 2000, flying from Bangkok, Thailand to Los Angeles International Airport. Mihdhar was a participant at a January 5, 2000 meeting of Al Qaeda operatives in Malaysia, where he and others were photographed by an unnamed intelligence service. These photos were supplied to the CIA.

The US National Security Agency had separately identified Hazmi as an associate of Mihdhar. The two men were tracked by the CIA traveling from Malaysia to Thailand.

CIA cables contemporaneously discussed Mihdhar's travel and the fact that he had a US visa in his Saudi passport. So intensive was the surveillance that agents obtained a photocopy of the passport and visa stamp and delivered it to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Two months later, the Bangkok CIA station identified Hazmi as Mihdhar's traveling companion and reported that he had traveled on from Bangkok to Los Angeles on January 15, 2000.

The most critical information about Mihdhar and Hazmi was withheld from the FBI for more than a year and a half. The FBI was informed about the Malaysia meeting as soon as it happened, and even about Mihdhar's presence at it. But there was no mention of his passport with a multiple-entry US visa, giving him easy access to American territory, where the FBI had the principal responsibility for counterterrorism. Nor did the CIA tell the FBI that Hazmi had actually entered the country, which would certainly have triggered an alert. The CIA itself did not put either man on any other security watch list.

Two weeks after their arrival in Los Angeles, Mihdhar and Hazmi moved to San Diego, apparently at the urging of a new acquaintance, Omar Bayoumi, a man once under FBI surveillance and believed to be an operative or asset of the Saudi intelligence service. He invited the two newly arrived Saudis to San Diego, where they rented an apartment in the complex where he lived. Bayoumi co-signed the lease and even wrote a check for the rent because the two had only cash.

In May 2000, the two men rented a room from another San Diego man who was an FBI informant, and who reported their arrival and their first names to his handler. The handler did not ask the last names or show any other interest.

The informant is not named in the inspector general's report, but he has been identified in previous press accounts as Abdussattar Shaikh, another Saudi immigrant. (Both Shaikh and his FBI handler, now retired, refused to speak with the FBI inspector general probing the bureau's response to 9/11, a remarkable circumstance that is recorded in the report only in a footnote, and without explanation.)

The actions of Hazmi and Mihdhar strongly suggest that they were being protected and were themselves aware of it. They conducted themselves, not as underground conspirators, trying to keep one step ahead of the most powerful spy apparatus in the world, but as men seemingly indifferent to threats to their security.

According to the FBI report: "... they did not attempt to hide their identities. Using the same names contained in their travel documents and known to at least some in the Intelligence Community, they rented an apartment, obtained driver's licenses from the state of California Department of Motor Vehicles, opened bank accounts and received bank credit cards, purchased a used vehicle and automotive insurance, took flying lessons at a local flying school, and obtained local phone service that included Hazmi's listing in the local telephone directory."

Even though this is not the first time the actions of Hazmi and Mihdhar have been detailed, one rubs one's eyes in astonishment at this passage. Hazmi could only have made himself more obvious if he had taken out an ad in the Yellow Pages under "T" for terrorist. But the CIA, which knew who he was, chose not to expose him to the FBI.

In June 2000, Mihdhar left the US, not returning until July 4, 2001, when he flew into John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. Hazmi lived in San Diego for several more months, then moved to Phoenix and eventually the East Coast.

Following the bombing of the USS Cole in December 2000, interest in Mihdhar and Hazmi revived. A US intelligence source identified one of the participants in the January 2000 Malaysia meeting as the ringleader of the Cole attack, and the FBI, which had lead responsibility for the investigation, began to review all those who attended that meeting.

However, in discussions in January 2001 and again in May and June 2001, CIA officials did not tell the FBI that Mihdhar, now known to be associated with the suspected organizer of the Cole bombing, had a US visa, or that Hazmi, Mihdhar's associate, had entered the United States.

Much of this material in the report is difficult to follow, partly because of bureaucratic complexities, partly because of the large amount of redaction, apparently to conceal the nationality of the intelligence agency that had monitored the Malaysia meeting (most likely the Israeli Mossad). The inspector general's report cites cooperation by Malaysian, Thai and Yemeni security services without redaction.

The CIA finally told the FBI what it knew about Mihdhar and Hazmi on August 27, 2001, five days after the FBI had discovered independently, on August 22, that Mihdhar might be in the US, and the agency had opened its own investigation. The New York FBI office was notified, but the job of tracking down Mihdhar was assigned to a novice agent as his first intelligence case, an indication of the low priority given to the investigation. Only perfunctory steps to locate Mihdhar and Hazmi had been taken by September 11, when the two men boarded the American Airlines jet.

The FBI inspector general's report reveals for the first time that the CIA not only failed to inform the FBI about Mihdhar, but that CIA officials intervened to suppress a memorandum drafted by an FBI agent detailed to the CIA-run Counter-Terrorism Center (CTC), who wanted to notify the FBI about the suspected terrorist with a US visa. The blow-by-blow account of this incident in the FBI report strongly implies a CIA cover-up.

The FBI agent, dubbed “Dwight” in the inspector general’s report, drafted the memorandum, a Central Intelligence Report (CIR), on January 5, 2000, only hours after the Malaysia meeting had taken place. The same day, a CIA desk officer, dubbed “Michelle,” relayed instructions from her supervisor barring distribution of the CIR to the FBI.

Three hours later, “Michelle” drafted and circulated an internal CIA cable which summarized the information on Mihdhar, including his multiple-entry US visa. This cable declared that his travel documents had been copied and passed “to the FBI for further investigation.” This was a lie, which was later used by the CIA to substantiate its initial claim that it had notified the FBI about Mihdhar.

This cable could not possibly be an innocent mistake, since it was sent out after its author had relayed the instructions to “Dwight” that his memo to the FBI *not* be sent. Under questioning from the inspector general, no one at the CIA or the FBI could corroborate the claim in the cable by “Michelle” that the CIA had notified the FBI about Mihdhar—a claim that was diametrically opposed to what the CIA was doing in practice.

The report notes that the CIA initially withheld information about the existence of the January 2000 memorandum by “Dwight” from the inspector general’s office. Quoting from the report:

“In February 2004, however, while we were reviewing a list of CIA documents that had been accessed by FBI employees assigned to the CIA, we noticed the title of a document that appeared to be relevant to this review and had not been previously disclosed to us. The CIA OIG [Office of the Inspector General] had not previously obtained this document in connection with its review. We obtained this document, known as a Central Intelligence Report (CIR). This CIR was a draft document addressed to the FBI containing information about Mihdhar’s travel and possession of a US visa. As a result of the discovery of this new document, a critical document that we later determined had not been sent to the FBI before the September 11 attacks (see Section III, A, 4 below), we had to re-interview several FBI and CIA employees and obtain additional documents from the CIA. The belated discovery of this CIA document delayed the completion of our review.”

The aggrieved tone is unmistakable. First the CIA withheld the document from the FBI, then the CIA attempted to conceal the existence of the document from the FBI’s postmortem probe.

The cover-up was followed by a curious epidemic of amnesia. No one who worked on, received or read the draft CIR from “Dwight,” including “Dwight” himself, could remember anything about it. Again the report:

“When we interviewed all of the individuals involved with the CIR, they asserted that they recalled nothing about it. Dwight told the OIG that he did not recall being aware of the information about Mihdhar, did not recall drafting the CIR, did not recall whether he drafted the CIR on his own initiative or at the direction of his supervisor, and did not recall any discussions about the reason for delaying completion and dissemination of the CIR. Malcolm said he did not recall reviewing any of the cable traffic or any information regarding Hazmi and Mihdhar. Eric told the OIG that he did not recall the CIR.

“The CIA employees also stated that they did not recall the CIR. Although James, the CIA employee detailed to FBI Headquarters, declined to be interviewed by us, he told the CIA OIG that he did not recall the CIR. John (the deputy chief of the Bin Laden Unit) and Michelle, the desk officer who was following this issue, also stated that they did not recall the CIR, any discussions putting it on hold, or why it was not sent.”

Again, the tone of incredulity is clear. None of these people remember anything, and one of them actually refuses to be interviewed! And this is not about a minor matter, but concerns the first report on a man who was one of the 19 hijackers on 9/11.

The FBI inspector general’s report is, like all previous official investigations into the events of 9/11, a cover-up for the state apparatus.

These investigations share one common feature: they completely exclude, a priori, any question of government complicity in terrorist attacks. Instead, we have the familiar litany of breast-beating over mistakes, complacency, inattention and inadequate resources.

Despite the all-purpose explanation that “mistakes were made,” names are never named in any of these probes. No one is ever held accountable. No one is shamed or punished.

There is a definite reason for this: the US government does not want to generate a Watergate syndrome, in which punishment meted out at a lower level leads to people implicating higher-ups and focuses attention on the role of top officials.

There can hardly remain any serious doubt that a section of the American intelligence apparatus functioned as the guardian angels for at least some of the suicide hijackers. The question is: why?

Until there is an investigation of 9/11 by a genuinely independent body—one wholly free of the US military/intelligence apparatus—it is impossible to specify precisely the role of the government in these events.

But on the basis of a political analysis alone, it is clear that 9/11 did not come as a bolt from the blue. As in the investigation of any crime, a critical question to be posed is: who benefits? For powerful sections of the US ruling elite and its state apparatus, a major terrorist attack on US soil was anticipated, desired and, most probably, facilitated in order to provide the necessary climate of fear and patriotic fervor to implement a sweeping program of political reaction, both at home and abroad.

Without 9/11, there would be no US occupation of Iraq, putting an American army squarely at the center of the world’s largest pool of oil. Without 9/11, there would be no US bases across Central Asia, guarding the second largest source of oil and gas. And without 9/11, the Bush administration would have been unable to sustain itself politically, faced with a deteriorating economy and widespread opposition to its tax cuts for millionaires and social measures to appease the fundamentalist Christian Right.

The Democratic Party is deeply implicated, supporting both the war in Iraq and the cover-up of the role of the state in the 9/11 attacks. The Clinton administration sought to provoke a confrontation with Iraq in 1998, but had to back off in the face of public opposition to a new war in the Middle East—opposition that was only overcome in the wake of September 11. Moreover, the connection between US intelligence agencies and reactionary Islamic fundamentalists like bin Laden goes back nearly two decades, involving Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

Despite its tactical differences with the White House and squabbles over positions of influence, the Democratic Party accepts the basic program of the Bush administration. Should the Democrats return to power, they would not withdraw US forces from Iraq or Central Asia, nor rescind Bush’s tax cuts for the wealthy, nor repeal the USA Patriot Act or attacks on democratic rights.



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