



Media Mistook Four Saudi Pilots For Hijackers in U.S. Attacks

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Seven-year-old Tala Bukhari awoke early one morning last week at her home in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to her mother's sobs. Relatives had called on the phone to say CNN was reporting that her father, Ameer Bukhari, was a hijacker in the terrorist attacks. The network broadcast photos of Adnan Bukhari, saying he was Ameer's brother and also was believed to have died while hijacking one of the planes.

Tala's father, a flight engineer with Saudi Arabian Airlines, had indeed died in a plane crash -- one year ago, in a mid-air collision between two small planes over a Florida airfield.

"My little daughter woke up and she thought her father was alive," said Lina Makki, Ameer Bukhari's 29-year-old widow. "She asked me, 'Is my dad a terrorist? Is he really one of them?'"

Several major news organizations wrongly identified at least four pilots of Middle Eastern descent as likely hijackers. Two of the wrongly suspected pilots had Arabic names similar to those of two dead hijackers. A pilot living next door to one of them became a third wrong suspect. A pilot with the same last name became the fourth wrong suspect -- even though he'd been dead for a year.

Three of the four went to the same flight school. All four worked for Saudi Arabian Airlines, and they were widely reported to be "sleepers," who had lived in the U.S. for years, brought their families here and blended seamlessly into American society. Investigators and public records now indicate none of these four pilots had any connection to the hijackings.

There were other mistakes. Two flight schools, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and FlightSafety Academy, were widely named as being among the Florida flight schools that trained the hijackers. In fact, it now appears none of the hijackers attended either of these two schools. And some media outlets reported that one of the hijackers was possibly the son of a Saudi diplomat -- a possibility law enforcement now says isn't true.

The other pilot that CNN named, Adnan Bukhari, is alive and well and living in Vero Beach, Fla. He spent the day after the hijackings answering questions from the FBI, which has cleared him of any connection to the crime, people familiar with the investigation say. The two men aren't brothers, family members and their attorneys say.

Time magazine, the New York Times, the Boston Globe and other media outlets named two other Saudi pilots who had lived in Florida, Abdulrahman Alomari and Waleed Ahmed Alshehri, as possible hijackers. In some cases, the reports did so without attribution to sources or caveats that the men were only suspects.

Mr. Alomari is now in Saudi Arabia with his wife and children, law-enforcement officials say. Waleed Ahmed Alshehri is in Morocco in pilot training, Saudi Arabian Airlines says.

Time magazine, in its Sept. 24 edition now on newsstands, described the terrorist named Abdulaziz Alomari as having "lived with his wife and four children in a stucco house in Florida" -- a description that applies to Abdulrahman Alomari. The magazine also mistakenly reported that the hijacker named Alshehri attended Embry-Riddle, "was on American Flight 11," and "surely knew how to fly the large aircraft the terrorists planned to ram into their targets." In fact, it wasn't the hijacker who attended Embry-Riddle, it was the other Mr. Alshehri -- the one Saudi Arabian Airlines says is the son of the Saudi diplomat. The Florida driver's license photos of the two Mr. Ashehri's don't match, a person who has compared them says.

The Wall Street Journal last week reported that the FBI had "linked" an unnamed suspected hijacker to the Vero Beach, Fla., area, and Adnan Bukhari was believed by investigators to be an "associate" of the hijackers. The Journal also named the late Ameer Bukhari and Abdulrahman Alomari as acquaintances of Mr. Bukhari and noted that the terrorist attacks occurred on the anniversary of Ameer Bukhari's death.

CNN issued on-air and online corrections regarding its naming of the Bukharis last week. A spokeswoman said the network had multiple law-enforcement sources supporting its initial story about the Bukharis. A spokeswoman for Time magazine declined to comment.

The New York Times published a news story on Sunday saying Mr. Alomari had apparently been the victim of a case of mistaken identity. In a statement Wednesday, the Times stood by a Sept. 14 story that named Abdulrahman Alomari as an alleged hijacker, but said, "in hindsight, we might have done better" to make the sources of information more prominent in the story.

The Boston Globe published a story on Sept. 15 saying that Abdulrahman Alomari might have been mistakenly confused with the real hijacker. "We try to be as accurate as possible in identifying people," said Richard Gulla, a Globe spokesman.

Part of the confusion stems from American journalists' unfamiliarity with Arab names. Bukhari is a common Arab name, experts say. Former neighbors, instructors and landlords have been eager to supply police and reporters with voluminous details about anyone under FBI scrutiny.

Paul Stimeling, Adnan Bukhari's landlord in Vero Beach, says he is chagrined that he let CNN and other reporters enter Mr. Bukhari's home last week, where they shot videotape of photos and leafed through the pilot's personal effects. "It was just poor judgment on my behalf," Mr. Stimeling said of his decision. "You get caught up in something you have never experienced in your life."

Mr. Bukhari's U.S. lawyer, who asked not to be named, said his client is more upset at reporters who filed live reports from his living room than at the FBI. "People lost all their perspective," the attorney says.

The day of the attacks was the first anniversary of Ameer Bukhari's death. His family marked it by sacrificing a lamb and donating the meat to the poor, then found themselves facing a swarm of questions. "His reputation is very tarnished now," says Ms. Makki. "He was a great person. He was not a terrorist. He had nothing to do with this."

-- Evan Perez and Rick Brooks contributed to this article.

See also: [**At Least 7 of the 9/11 Hijackers are Still Alive**](#)

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