

The Informant Who Lived With The Hijackers

At first, FBI director Bob Mueller insisted there was nothing the bureau could have done to penetrate the 9-11 plot. That account has been modified over time--and now may change again. NEWSWEEK has learned that one of the bureau's informants had a close relationship with two of the hijackers: he was their roommate.

The connection, just discovered by congressional investigators, has stunned some top counterterrorism officials and raised new concerns about the information-sharing among U.S. law-enforcement and intelligence agencies. The two hijackers, Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi, were hardly unknown to the intelligence community. The CIA was first alerted to them in January 2000, when the two Saudi nationals showed up at a Qaeda "summit" in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. FBI officials have argued internally for months that if the CIA had more quickly passed along everything it knew about the two men, the bureau could have hunted them down more aggressively.

But both agencies can share in the blame. Upon leaving Malaysia, Almihdhar and Alhazmi went to San Diego, where they took flight-school lessons. In September 2000, the two moved into the home of a Muslim man who had befriended them at the local Islamic Center. The landlord regularly prayed with them and even helped one open a bank account. He was also, sources tell NEWSWEEK, a "tested" undercover "asset" who had been working closely with the FBI office in San Diego on terrorism cases related to Hamas. A senior law-enforcement official told NEWSWEEK the informant never provided the bureau with the names of his two houseguests from Saudi Arabia. Nor does the FBI have any reason to believe the informant was concealing their identities. (He could not be reached for comment.) But the FBI concedes that a San Diego case agent appears to have been at least aware that Saudi visitors were renting rooms in the informant's house. (On one occasion, a source says, the case agent called up the informant and was told he couldn't talk because "Khalid"--a reference to Almihdhar--was in the room.) I. C. Smith, a former top FBI counterintelligence official, says the case agent should have been keeping closer tabs on who his informant was fraternizing with--if only to seek out the houseguests as possible informants. "They should have been asking, 'Who are these guys? What are they doing here?'" This strikes me as a lack of investigative curiosity." About six weeks after moving into the house, Almihdhar left town, explaining to the landlord he was heading back to Saudi Arabia to see his daughter. Alhazmi moved out at the end of 2000.

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In the meantime, the CIA was gathering more information about just how potentially dangerous both men were. A few months after the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, CIA analysts discovered in their Malaysia file that one of the chief suspects in the Cole attack--Tawfiq bin Attash--was present at the "summit" and had been photographed with Almihdhar and Alhazmi. But it

wasn't until Aug. 23, 2001, that the CIA sent out an urgent cable to U.S. border and law-enforcement agencies identifying the two men as "possible" terrorists. By then it was too late. The bureau did not realize the San Diego connection until a few days after 9-11, when the informant heard the names of the Pentagon hijackers and called his case agent. "I know those guys," the informant purportedly said, referring to Almihdhar and Alhazmi. "They were my roommates."

But the belated discovery has unsettled some members of the joint House and Senate intelligence committees investigating the 9-11 attacks. The panel is tentatively due to begin public hearings as early as Sept. 18, racing to its end-of-the-year deadline. But some members are now worried that they won't get to the bottom of what really happened by then. Support for legislation creating a special blue-ribbon investigative panel, similar to probes conducted after Pearl Harbor and the Kennedy assassination, is increasing. Only then, some members say, will the public learn whether more 9-11 secrets are buried in the government's files.

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