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FBI Denies Mix-Up Of 9/11 Terrorists

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By Timothy W. Maier

Nearly 48 hours after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the names of the hijackers flashed across TV screens for the world to see. Based on intelligence information gained from interviews, witnesses, flight-manifest logs and passports found at some of the crash debris sites, the FBI claimed it correctly had identified all 18 hijackers. A short time later the number was amended to 19. A few days later the names were followed with photos of the men blamed for the terrorism that claimed nearly 3,000 lives in New York City, Washington and Pennsylvania. Incredibly fast intelligence work - some of the information coming from the National Ground Intelligence Center in Charlottesville, Va. - enabled investigators to tie the attack to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

FBI Director Mueller acknowledged in 2002 there was no legal proof to prove the identities of the hijackers. Yet the bureau insists it correctly has identified them. FBI Director Mueller acknowledged in 2002 there was no legal proof to prove the identities of the hijackers. Yet the bureau insists it correctly has identified them.

While there is no doubt the hijackings were the work of al-Qaeda, questions remain about whether some of the hijackers actually were the men the FBI identified. Last year that doubt crept into the highest levels of law enforcement after a series of sensational news reports aired by the BBC, ABC and CNN, along with several British newspapers, cast suspicion on whether the FBI got it right. The reports suggested at least six of the men the FBI claimed were hijackers on the planes were in fact alive. They didn't survive the crashes, of course, but never boarded the planes.

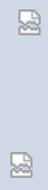
The six claimed they were victims of identify theft. They were "outraged" to be identified as terrorists, they told the Telegraph of London. In fact, one of the men claimed he never had been to the United States, while another is a Saudi Airlines pilot who said he was in a flight-training course in Tunisia at the time of the attacks.

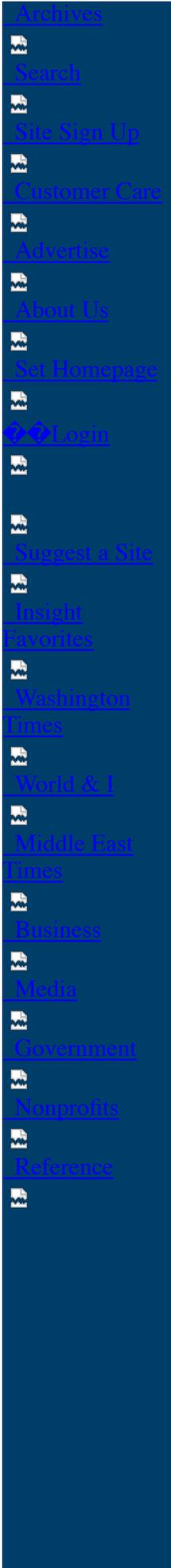
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The stunning news prompted FBI Director Robert Mueller to admit that some of the hijackers may have stolen identities of innocent citizens. In September 2002, Mueller told CNN twice that there is "no legal proof to prove the identities of the suicidal hijackers." After that admission a strange thing happened - nothing. No follow-up stories. No follow-up questions. There was dead silence and the story disappeared. It was almost as if no one wanted to know what had happened. In fact, the FBI didn't bother to change the names, backgrounds or photographs of the alleged 19 hijackers. It didn't even deny the news reports suggesting that the names and identities of at least six of the hijackers may be unknown. Mueller just left the door open.

Until now. Now the FBI is sticking with its original story - regardless of whether photographs displayed of the suspected Sept. 11 terrorists were of people who never boarded those planes and are very much alive. FBI spokesman Bill Carter simply brushes off as false the charges from news reports that the FBI misidentified some of the Sept. 11 terrorists. Carter says they got the names right and it doesn't matter whether the identities were stolen. This comes as a complete about-face from Mueller's comment that there might be some question about the names of the Sept. 11 terrorists because they might have been operating under stolen identities.

What does the FBI director think now? Mueller no longer is commenting on the charges. However, Carter insists the FBI got it right. End of story.

"There has been no change in thought about the identities of those who boarded those planes," Carter tells Insight. "It's like saying my name is John Smith. There are a lot of people with the name of John Smith, but they're not the same person."

What about Mueller's comments last year? "He might have told Congress [about the identity theft], but we have done a thorough investigation and we are confident," Carter says.

How can the FBI be sure that the 19 men it "identified" are indeed the hijackers? "Through extensive investigation," Carter insists. "We checked the flight manifests, their whereabouts in this country, and we interviewed witnesses who identified the hijackers."

But the series of stories last year prompted the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence to investigate the claims, according to Paul Anderson, spokesman for Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), who was chairman of the committee. Anderson says the committee apparently found nothing to dispute the FBI identification of the 19 named individuals.

But confusion remains, particularly for those who claim their names and backgrounds have been attached to a photo of a dead terrorist. The photo might be correct, they say, but the identification is not. The Saudi Arabian Embassy insists that some innocents have been maligned by a rush to identify the Sept. 11 perpetrators.

The six Saudis in question are:

- **Abdul Aziz al-Omari** was identified as one of the hijackers and the pilot who crashed American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Another man with the same name is an electrical engineer in Saudi Arabia. He lived in Denver after earning a degree from the University of Colorado in 1993. Coincidence? Consider this oddity. ABC News has reported that his Denver apartment was broken into and his passport and other documents stolen in 1995. In September 2001 he told the Telegraph, "I couldn't believe it when the FBI put me on their list. They gave my name and my date of birth, but I am not a suicide bomber. I am here. I am alive. I have no idea how to fly a plane. I had nothing to do with this."

More disturbing is that the FBI accidentally may have fused two names to create one identity, because another man, Abdul Rahman al-Omari, who has a different birth date, is the person pictured by the FBI, but he still is a pilot for Saudi Arabian Airlines. After his photograph was released, he walked into the U.S. Embassy in Jeddah and demanded to know why he was being reported as a dead hijacker.

- **Salem al-Hamzi** was identified as one of the suspected hijackers on American Flight 77, the plane that was crashed into the Pentagon. Another man who has the same name works for the Saudi Royal Commission in Yanbu.

- **Saeed al-Ghamdi** reportedly was one of the alleged hijackers on United Airlines Flight 93, the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. He and another hijacker were said to have been in control of the plane when it was destroyed. A Saudi Arabian pilot has the same name.

- **Ahmed al-Nami** was identified as a hijacker on United Flight 93. He also may have been in control of the plane when it crashed. A Saudi Arabian pilot with the same name is alive in Riyadh.

- **Wail al-Shehri** was identified as one of the suspected hijackers on American Flight 11. He reportedly was in control of the plane when it crashed. Another Saudi man who is a pilot has the same name, and his father is a Saudi diplomat in Bombay. His picture was displayed by the FBI as the "terrorist" al-Shehri who crashed the plane. The al-Shehri who is alive had resided in Daytona Beach, Fla., where he enrolled in flight training at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. He currently works for a Moroccan airline. Last year the Associated Press reported that al-Shehri had spoken to the U.S. Embassy in Morocco. His photograph having been released and repeatedly shown around the world is evidence the man in the FBI photograph still is alive, the Saudi Embassy explains.

- **Waleed M. al-Shehri**, a name used by another suspected hijacker on American Flight 11, reportedly is the brother of Wail al-Shehri. The odd coincidence is that the other son of the diplomat father is named Waleed M. This prompted the BBC to

report in 2001 that, "Another of the men named by the FBI as a hijacker in the suicide attacks on Washington and New York has turned up alive and well."

The Saudi Embassy has said it believes that bin Laden's plan was to have the United States blame Saudi Arabia for the attacks. Embassy officials say that, based on the amount of hate mail they have received in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, that scheme has worked.

*Timothy W. Maier is a writer for **Insight**.*
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