

## Deadly Mistakes

### **U.S. Investigators Knew About Planned Terror Attacks, Let the Suspects Get Away. More Clues That CIA and FBI Could Have Prevented the Attack on America**

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - Sept. 11, 2001. Scant hours ago, 19 terrorists hijacked four passenger planes and flew two of these into the towers of the World Trade Center, the third fell into the Pentagon, the fourth crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. Although firefighters still search for the survivors at the scenes of the disaster, President George W. Bush is ready to announce the mastermind of the attacks: Osama bin Ladin.

Really? Others demand the proof. Secretary of State Colin Powell announces that he will be presenting the documents very soon. In the end, he leaves it to British premier Tony Blair to present the evidence to the world. The 20-page document that Blair publishes is a collection of clues and assumptions meant to demonstrate that only the terror organization of Osama bin Ladin is capable of planning and carrying out this manner of terror action. The document says: "There is evidence of a very specific nature with regard to the guilt of Bin Laden and his followers that is too sensitive for publication."

That is true. Besides confirming that two of the hijackers had close contacts to the al Qaeda terror organization, the documents also bear witness to the failure of the Central Intelligence Agency, which learned about plans for an attack 18 months before Sept. 11, and did nothing against the terrorists.

In the meantime, the joint investigation of the House and Senate intelligence committees is investigating this matter. ZEIT has acquired the testimonies and reports seen by the committee. Almost on a daily basis, the joint investigation is revealing new details that are slowly showing the certainty of what at first seemed like a nasty insinuation: The CIA could have prevented the attacks of Sept. 11, had it not committed a series of systematic mistakes.

Kuala Lumpur, Jan. 5, 2000. The terrorist Tawfiq bin Atash has called a few loyal followers to a meeting in the capital of Malaysia. Bin Atash, codenamed "Khalid", is a close confidante of Osama bin Laden. Together with bin Laden he fought in Afghanistan against the Red Army and lost one of his legs in battle. The one-legged man's choice of Kuala Lumpur for the meeting was carefully considered. Several years ago, Malaysia declared that Islam was the state religion. Muslims can enter without visas. Even better, a Malaysian member of al Qaeda owns an apartment on the edge of the city. The apartment is used regularly by the terrorist organization as a safe house. The one-legged man waits there for his accomplices, with the aim of plotting terrorist actions.

The CIA found out about the place and timing of this meeting in advance, and asked the Malaysian secret service to keep it under surveillance. When the terrorists leave the apartment, the cameras of the Malaysian police click away. Whole series of photos are taken. The terrorists wander around the city like regular tourists. Sometimes they go to Internet cafes and spend several hours on the computers, always watched inconspicuously by observation teams. Next to the one-legged man the Malaysian police also gets pictures of Ramzi Mohammed Binalshibh. The Yemenite, 27 years old at the time, has lived in Germany since 1995. He is the logistical brains of the Hamburg al Qaeda cell, whose members in 18 months will murder 3,000 people. Binalshibh has traveled to the meeting from Germany. For as yet unexplained reasons, the CIA does not inform its partner services in Germany of the logistics expert's visit to Malaysia. He can return unmolested to Germany and start organizing the attacks together with the other members of his Hamburg cell. There is much indicating that the decisive plans for the attacks in the United States were put together in Malaysia. Also at the meeting are Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid Almihdhar. Later they will

be among the 19 hijackers.

Almihdhar is well-known to the CIA. Long before his appearance in Malaysia, the American spy agency knew his name, his passport number and other personal data. The CIA also knows that Almihdhar has for a long time possessed the multiple re-entry visa that allows him to travel to the United States at will. He received the visa from the U.S. consulate at Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. It is valid until Apr. 6, 2000.

It was Almihdhar who inadvertently tipped off the CIA about the meeting. The CIA has had its sights on the Saudi Arabian citizen and his family clan for some time. Almihdhar's father-in-law owns a safe house for al Qaeda terrorists in the Yemeni city of Sanaa. The apartment is an important nerve center in the terror organization's network. Information about operations in the whole world comes together there, and the investigators already know about it.

The FBI found out about this apartment already back in August 1998. At the time, the FBI was looking for the masterminds of the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Suicide commandos detonated nearly simultaneous bombs in front of the two embassies, killing 223 and wounding almost 5,000 people. Soon after, a letter taking credit was faxed to London. The FBI managed to find out who had sent it, from Azerbaidjan. From there, a clue led them back to the apartment of Almihdhar's father in law, in Yemen. The FBI put the house and the telephone under surveillance, with success. A surviving member of the suicide squad from Kenya called Almihdhar's father-in-law and was heard saying: "Tell them that I did not go on the trip." The attacker tells how he lost his courage seconds before the bomb went off, how he jumped out of the car. Soon thereafter, the FBI registered a further call. This time from a satellite phone that is thought to be Osama Binladin's private number. And from that time, Almihdhar's telephone number has been under constant surveillance. As a result, the CIA learned about the planned meeting in Malaysia one month in advance.

Los Angeles, Jan. 15, 2000. After the meeting with the one-legged man, Almihdhar and Alhazmi travel by separate routes. After a stop in Bangkok, Almihdahr arrives in Los Angeles. His accomplice goes to the same destination via Hong Kong.

The security and control apparatus at Los Angeles International Airport have never been as great. One month earlier, an Algerian al Qaeda member was arrested at the border to Canada with 50 kilos of explosives in his trunk. was on his way to Los Angeles, where he wanted to set off a bomb at the airport on New Year's Eve.

Almihdhar and Alhazmi presumably know nothing about that yet, as they line up for passport control. Both have U.S. visas in their own names, which the CIA knows by now. Although they have come in under their own names, the passport control lets them through without problems. The Customs computers do not show that the two Saudi Arabian citizens are actually terrorists. For reasons still unknown to this day, the CIA did not inform either the FBI or the INS or the State Department that the two were something other than respectable students. This is surely the most fateful error in a whole chain of omissions and mistakes by which the American services allowed the later Sept. 11 hijackers to get away.

When they arrive in Los Angeles, Almihdhar and Alhazmi presumably already have their mission. Presumably only the place, time and exact details of the attack still needed to be worked out. The two do not spend long in LA but continue to San Diego, where they rent an apartment. At the Parkwood Apartments, a complex with 175 rooms, they live in Apt. No. 127. Alhazmi signs the lease. Apparently they do not worry in the least that they might be discovered, and they do nothing to conceal themselves. Alhazmi even gets a telephone line and his name and number make it into the local phone book. For 3,000 dollars he buys a blue 1988 Toyota Corolla, which he registers in his proper name.

Four months after their arrival in the U.S., Alhazmi and Almihdhar take six hours of theoretical lessons at the Sorbi Flying Club in San Diego. They say openly that they want to learn how to fly a Boeing, as quickly as possible. At first, they must make do with a small Cessna. The first flight hours turn into a disaster. The terrorists are very clumsy, they lack the talent to fly a plane. As Alhazmi prepares to land under the guidance of the flight teacher, Almihdhar goes into a panic and starts a loud prayer. "This is not

going to work," the teacher says. He refuses to train the two as pilots.

Frankfurt am Main, June 2000. The mission of the two terrorists appears to have ended before it even began. In June 2000, Almidhar travels to Frankfurt. What he does in Germany is unclear. Probably he meets Binalshibh, the logistics expert of the Hamburg cell. Because the CIA does not inform its German partner services about the terrorists, Almidhar's visit goes unobserved. But Binalshibh and Almidhar knew each other even before the meeting in Malaysia. They are relatives. Binalshibh is the cousin of Almidhar's wife. Presumably Almidhar has told his relatives that he has failed as prospective pilot, and now needs a replacement. Presumably that poses serious problems for Binalshibh, at least in the short term. He has registered for a flight school in the United States by telephone, but he cannot be one of the pilots. On May 17, two weeks before Almidhar's arrival in Germany, the U.S. embassy informed Binalshibh that his application for a visa had been rejected. The other members of the Hamburg cell have more luck. Like Binalshibh, they applied for their visas soon after his return from Malaysia and have already used the phone and e-mail queries to inform themselves about 31 flight schools in the United States.

Soon after Almidhar's arrival in Germany, Mohamed Atta and two other members of the Hamburg al Qaeda cell travel to the United States and begin their training as pilots. On Sept. 11, 2001, Atta will fly the plane that stuck the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

From Germany, Almidhar returns to the U.S. Now that he and Alhazmi are no longer potential pilots, their task will be to coordinate the planning for the attacks. First, Alhazmi must take care of his immigration paperwork, because his visa is due to expire. He applies to the INS on July 7, 2000. Just before that date, the CIA headquarters in Langley was informed explicitly by its Malaysia station that according to its documents, the al Qaeda terrorist Alhazmi traveled to the United States in January. But everyone stays relaxed in Langley. Alhazmi is not put on a watch list. Neither the FBI nor the State Department are informed. Nor is the INS informed, so no one there has any reason to be suspicious when Alhazmi applies (using his San Diego address) for an extension of his visa. His wish is met.

San Diego, Sept. 2000. The neighbors are getting mistrustful. Alhazmi and Almidhar have lived in the complex for eight months and still have no furniture. They sleep on the floor and go constantly to make phone calls from a pay phone, although they have a telephone in their apartment. The two Saudis apparently notice that their neighbors are suspicious, for without warning they cancel their lease and move to the apartment of Abdussatar Shaikh, a Muslim they met at the San Diego mosque. He, a retired English teacher, rents them a room and helps them set up a bank account and an Internet connection.

Shaikh is also an occasional informant to the local branch of the FBI. He provides the bureau with information on militant Muslims in San Diego. His case officer regularly visits him at home. Sometimes Almidhar and Alhazmi are present in the apartment during these talks. On these occasions, Shaikh closes the door to the living room, so that his tenants do not figure out anything about his activities as an informant. Neither the informant nor his case officer realize that the two young men are actually al Qaeda terrorists.

Almidhar moves out after six weeks. He tells his host he is returning to his wife and children in Saudi Arabia. In fact, he is on a terror mission. On Oct. 12, 2000, a suicide commando carries out an attack on the USS Cole in Aden harbor. A rubber dinghy packed with explosives motors right into the side of the ship. Seventeen U.S. soldiers are killed, 38 are wounded. The CIA suspects that Almidhar is involved.

Alhazmi meanwhile stays in San Diego, still living at the house of the FBI informant. He still has realized nothing, although the worst terrorist attack in American history is being prepared under his roof. Alhazmi spends hours in front of the computer and surfs the Internet. He tells his landlord he is looking for a wife, preferably a Mexican. Shaikh tries to teach him a few Spanish phrases, like: "Que pasa?"

In late Dec. 2000, Alhazmi also leaves San Diego and moves to Mesa, Arizona, to a fellow Saudi named Hani Hanjour, who has lived in the U.S. since 1996 and already got his pilot's license from a school in Scottsdale, Arizona. Now that Alhazmi and Almidhar have failed as pilots, Hanjour is supposed to take

over the role.

But he lacks flight experience. He therefore arranges to take a few hours at a flight school in Phoenix, Arizona. Although he has been resident in the U.S. for several years, his English is so bad that the operator of one flight school guesses that he must not have a valid flight license. Presented with the license, the teacher takes it for a forgery and informs the FAA. But the license turns out to be genuine.

Washington, D.C., Jan. 2001. Both FBI and CIA are now looking for the masterminds of the attack on the Cole. The CIA finally determines that Khallad, the one-legged man was behind the attack. The observation reports on the meeting in Malaysia are pulled out again. Now, finally, the CIA people read the reports with interest. They assume that Kuala Lumpur was the planning meeting for the Cole attack. The other participants in Malaysia, including Almihdhar and Alhazmi, are suspected of having been involved at least in the planning for Cole. Although the CIA can see from its own reports that Almihdhar possesses a valid U.S. visa and Alhazmi must still be in the United States, the investigators do not set off any alarms, and they do not pass the names on to the FBI. Under the law, the CIA as a foreign intelligence agency is not allowed to be active within the United States.

At the CIA, the hunt for the terrorists in the Binladin network is the highest priority. "We are at war with al Qaeda," CIA director George Tenet writes in an internal memorandum. "I don't want to spare resources or personnel." In Feb. 2001, soon after the inauguration of George W. Bush, Tenet warns explicitly in a speech to Congress that more al Qaeda attacks are likely. "Osama Binladin and his global network of members and followers remain the most direct threat to the security of the USA." And: "We have reinforced security measures around government and military facilities. The terrorists are looking for 'soft targets' that would cause the greatest number of casualties."

There is still much to organize. Alhazmi is constantly driving from place to place in his old Toyota. But he doesn't always pay attention to the speed limit, and on Apr. 1, 2001, Alhazmi runs into a radar trap on Interstate 40 in western Oklahoma. He is stopped by the police and must show his ID, driver's license and registration. The trooper sends his name out by radio to see if there are any warrants. There are no entries in the police data bank. A ticket is issued to him and Alhazmi is free to keep driving. The fine for speeding is 138 dollars, which Alhazmi pays by postal money order.

New York, June 11, 2001. FBI agents from the New York office and from Washington headquarters meet to exchange information with CIA representatives, with the aim of advancing the investigation into the Cole bombing. The CIA agents show the photos from Malaysia to their colleagues from the FBI and name Khallad as the mastermind of the attack. The CIA agents also mention Almihdhar, who can be seen in one of the photos together with Khallad. When the FBI agents ask for more exact information, the CIA people fall silent. They do not tell their FBI colleagues that Almihdhar possesses a valid U.S. visa and is at that same moment presumably in the United States. One year later, one of the CIA agents will be on the brink of tears as he tells a congressional committee that his group were not yet authorized to tell this information to the FBI. Internally however, the CIA already feared the worst. To leading members of the government, CIA investigators say the following: "Based on an analysis of all intelligence sources and reports in recent months, we believe that UBL will carry out a significant terror attack against U.S. and/or Israeli interests in the weeks to come. The attack will be spectacular, intentionally cause high casualties and be directed at U.S. facilities or interests." The Fourth of July is given as a possible date.

On July 4, Almihdhar returns to the United States after several months abroad on Saudi Arabian Airlines Flight 53. Just before, while still in Saudi Arabia, he was able to get an extension on his U.S. visa through Oct. 3, 2001. Although the CIA suspects that he may have participated in the Cole attack, Almihdhar encounters no problems in re-entering the U.S. He uses his Saudi Arabian passport, in his actual name, and enters the New York Marriott Hotel as his address on the immigration form. Then he continues on to Arizona, to meet Alhazmi and the others.

Phoenix, July 10, 2001. Kenneth Williams is a detective with experience. For 11 years he has worked for the FBI counter-terrorism squad in Phoenix, Arizona. Today, Williams sends a report of several pages to

his superiors at FBI headquarters in Washington and his colleagues at the counter-terror squad in New York, who are considered the experts in Islamic extremism since the attack on the WTC in 1993.

In recent months Williams noted with concern that more and more young Muslims from the Middle East were taking flight lessons in Arizona. Williams investigates 10 people from Pakistan, India, Kenya, Algeria, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia. A few of them are taking flight hours, others are studying airplane construction or international flight safety. The FBI agent has interrogated several of these students and heard a few hostile statements about the United States. He also noticed that these students were suspiciously well-informed about security measures at American airports. In his report, Williams therefore speculates that the flight school students could be followers of Osama Binladin. Williams considers it possible that terrorists may be learning how to fly so that they can later hijack a passenger plane. The FBI agent recommends running a check of all flight schools. His colleagues in New York reply that Williams's comments are "speculative and not very significant." In a few months they will learn that one of the flight school students investigated by Williams is an acquaintance of the suicide pilot who steered his hijacked plane into the Pentagon.

Crawford, Aug. 6, 2001. U.S. president George W. Bush is on vacation. He wants to spend the whole month at his ranch in Texas. Every morning, however, he still receives his Presidential Daily Brief, or PDB, wherein the CIA informs the president about the country's security situation. On this morning, the report is straight from the CIA director. His PDB runs 11 and one-half printed pages, instead of the usual two to three, and carries the title, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." Therein the CIA chief explains that al Qaeda has decided to carry out attacks within the United States, and that presumably members of the terrorist organization have been in the country for some time. It is unclear whether the CIA director informed the president about the statements of arrested al Qaeda members. According to their confessions, the terrorist organization for some time has been thinking about hijacking planes and using them as missiles.

Minneapolis, Aug. 15, 2001. A flight school in Minneapolis tells the FBI that one of its students is interested in flying Boeings, although he does not yet possess a license for small Cessnas. On the next day the student is arrested, officially because of a visa violation. The student, a French citizen of Moroccan descent, is Zaccarias Moussaoui. His confiscated papers and his laptop are immediately sent to FBI headquarters in Washington, where however they are left unread.

An FBI agent takes over the case at the Minneapolis flight school. 47-year-old Colleen Rowley, a 21-year veteran of the bureau, contacts the French authorities and learns that they suspect the arrested man of having contacts to Islamist extremists. Rowley informs Washington headquarters and requests to search Moussaoui's laptop. Her request is rejected. "We do not know if he is a terrorist. They don't have enough proof that he is a terrorist." Rowley keeps trying, she wants to see the laptop herself. She meets with an annoyed reaction headquarters and is finally told not to even call anymore.

In reality, Moussaoui had close contacts to the hijackers of Sept. 11, as seen in evidence found on his laptop (first examined after the attacks). One of the trails leads to Germany. Moussaoui received a great deal of money from Ramzi Binalshibh. Rowley is still unaware of this when at the end of Aug. 2001 she addresses a memo to her superiors. She writes that the Frenchman may have been taking flight lessons in the hope of one day flying a plane into the World Trade Center.

Langley, Aug. 23, 2001. The Israeli intelligence service Mossad presents to its American counterpart a list of names of terrorists who are living in the United States and seem to be planning to carry out an attack in the near future. According to documents obtained by DIE ZEIT, Mossad agents in the United States were following at least four of the 19 hijackers, including Almihdhar. The CIA now finally does what it should have done 18 months earlier. It informs the State Department, the FBI and the INS about Almihdhar and Alhazmi, who are immediately put on a watch list as presumed members of al Qaeda. In Almihdhar's case, the warning adds that he most likely participated in the Cole bombing. A response does not take long. The immigration service writes back that according to its documents, both of the wanted men are currently in the United States.

Now the investigative machinery kicks into gear. Because Almihdhar listed his address as the Marriott Hotel in New York, FBI agents visit all of the hotels of this chain in the metropolis, in vain.

One of the New York FBI agents calls headquarters in Washington and asks for reinforcements. He wants to widen the dragnet cast for Almihdhar. The FBI agent knows how dangerous Almihdhar is, for he spent months working on the Cole case. As a result he met CIA agents who mentioned the name Almihdhar. When he reads the name again on the watch list, with the additional notation that Almihdhar is suspected of involvement in the Cole bombing, the FBI agent becomes annoyed at his CIA colleagues, for having previously kept this information from him.

But he becomes even more annoyed when his own headquarters refuses any support. Invoking the strict legal separation between intelligence and police investigations, the lawyers at the bureau's National Security Law Unit point out that the search for Almihdhar has been prompted by intelligence information.

"Someday someone will die - and will or not - the public will not understand why we were not more effective and throwing every resource we had at certain 'problems,'" the frustrated FBI agent writes on Aug. 29, 2001 in an e-mail to his headquarters. "Let's hope the National Security Law Unit will stand behind their decisions then, especially since the biggest threat to us now, UBL, is getting the most 'protection.'"

Laurel, Maryland, Aug. 25, 2001. Almihdhar is in Room 343 of the Valencia Motel in Laurel. He is not alone. Alhazmi, his brother, the pilot Hanjour and a further terrorist are also there. The five of them rarely leave the room. When the cleaning lady knocks and wants to make the beds, the terrorists open the door a crack and have her hand them fresh towels. "We thought they were gay, five men in one room," someone staying in a room next door later said. The sequence and timing of the attack have been determined. One by one, the men buy their tickets. Twelve days to go. Everything according to plan.

Washington, D.C., Sept. 11, 2001. Early in the morning, the five terrorists drive to Dulles Airport. In their Toyota, the police will later find a receipt for the payment of flight lessons in Phoenix, four drawings of a Boeing 757 cockpit, a boxcutter, a map of Washington and a page with notes and phone numbers.

The terrorists check in at around 7:30 a.m. The nationwide manhunt for Alhazmi and Almihdhar has been underway for 20 days. But both men go right through airport security without problems. Their tickets and the passports that they must show are all in their real names. A few hours later, four hijacked planes create infernos in New York and Washington.

The CIA director learns about the attacks while having breakfast at the St. Regis Hotel in Washington, a few steps away from the White House. "Everything points to Osama Binladin," he says. He must tell the president who he suspects is in all likelihood behind the attacks. He gets up from the table and departs hastily.

Washington, D.C., Sept. 12, 2001. The biggest manhunt in American history has begun. Thousands of FBI agents crisscross the country and within a few days reconstruct the lives of the hijackers in the U.S. Which is not very difficult, since the terrorists in no way behaved secretly while in the country. Alhazmi even called the police after he was assaulted. FBI director Robert Mueller, who only took over the bureau in the week before the attacks, says, "I cannot say with certainty that there was no chance, no leads that could have led us to the hijackers in time."

CIA director Tenet, a Clinton-era appointee, tells the Senate intelligence committee that he can speak proudly on behalf of the CIA, that it has nothing to hide. At no point before the attacks did his agency make careless mistakes, fail to concentrate, or show a lack of discipline.

New York, Oct. 23, 2001. "We know that Hamburg was the central operative base for planning the attacks of Sept. 11," says Attorney General John Ashcroft while standing alongside his German counterpart, Otto Schily, during a press conference in New York. The investigations therefore need to be shifted more clearly from the U.S. to Europe.

Minneapolis, May 21, 2002. Colleen Rowley, who can no longer stand how U.S. agencies are hiding their failures, sits down at her computer and writes a 13-page letter to the FBI director in which she once again lists all of the mistakes and omissions of which she is aware. She had warned urgently about potential terrorist attacks by militant Islamists in Aug. 2001. "I am very upset about the way," she writes, "that you and others on the highest levels of the FBI management concealed the facts... and portrayed them falsely and continue to do so." The agent brings her dossier to Washington personally and gives two copies to the Senate intelligence committee. Two weeks later a facsimile of her letter is on the cover of TIME magazine. The FBI is in trouble.

Washington, D.C. June 4, 2002. The FBI does not want to serve as the sole scapegoat for what the CIA has burdened it with. After all, the CIA committed the decisive mistake by not passing on the information about Alhazmi and Almihdhar for 18 months. This information is leaked to NEWSWEEK, which quotes an FBI man, "No question, if we had gotten the information in time, we would have bagged all 19 of the hijackers." The spies have started to sling mud at each other. Did the CIA and FBI fail disastrously? A joint commission of Senate and House members is supposed to explore these questions.

Washington, D.C., Sept. 11, 2002. The joint investigation began its work more than three months ago, but is being torpedoed by the Bush administration, says the Republican Senator Richard C. Shelby, vice-chairman of the committee to the New York Times. The government refuses to reveal just what information was passed on to President Bush in advance of the attacks. "I am certain that so far our questions have only scratched the surface," says Shelby. "I am sure that one or two bombshells are still going to go off."

As more information about mistakes and omissions of the CIA and FBI end up leaking to the media, an investigation is initiated against the congressional committee members. The FBI begins an investigation and asks the senators and House members if they are prepared to take polygraphs.

Washington, D.C., Sept. 18, 2002. The joint investigation's public hearings begin. Relatives of the victims of Sept. 11 also get to testify. 1,300 of them have joined an interest group, their spokesperson is Stephen Push, who lost his wife. She sat in the plane that was hijacked by the group around Almihdhar. "If the intelligence community had been doing its job, my wife would be alive today."

FBI and CIA agents then testify before the committee. They have been promised anonymity and testify from behind a wall that conceals them from the eyes of the attending public. Many relatives of the victims sit there, silently holding photos.

As a few agents confess how they were kept from investigating by their superiors, the widow of a firefighter who died in the WTC is overwhelmed. "These people are guilty of negligence in their jobs," she says. "They should be put in front of a court. They are at least partly responsible for the death of 3,000 people."

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