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Bombshell filing: 9/11 hijackers were CIA recruits



At least two 9/11 hijackers had been recruited into a joint CIA-Saudi intelligence operation that was covered up at the highest level, according to an explosive new court filing.

A newly-released [court filing](#) raises grave questions about the relationship between Alec Station, a CIA unit set up to track Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden and his associates, and two 9/11 hijackers leading up to the attacks, which was subject to a coverup at the highest levels of the FBI.

Obtained by SpyTalk, the filing is a 21-page declaration by Don Canestraro, a lead investigator for the Office of Military Commissions, the legal body overseeing the cases of 9/11 defendants. It summarizes classified government discovery disclosures, and private interviews he conducted with anonymous high-ranking CIA and FBI officials. Many agents who spoke to Canestraro headed up Operation Encore, the Bureau's aborted, long-running probe into Saudi government connections to the 9/11 attack.

Despite conducting multiple lengthy interviews with a range of witnesses, producing hundreds of pages of evidence, formally investigating several Saudi officials, and launching a grand jury to probe a Riyadh-run US-based support network for the hijackers, Encore was abruptly terminated in 2016. This was [purportedly due](#) to a byzantine intra-FBI bust-up over investigative methods.

When originally released in 2021 on the Office's public court docket, every part of the document was redacted except an "unclassified" marking. Given its explosive contents, it is not difficult to see why: as Canestraro's investigation concluded, at least two 9/11 hijackers

had been recruited either knowingly or unknowingly into a joint CIA-Saudi intelligence operation which may have gone awry.

‘A 50/50 chance’ of Saudi involvement

In 1996, Alec Station was created under the watch of the CIA. The initiative was supposed to comprise a joint investigative effort with the FBI. However, FBI operatives assigned to the unit soon found they were prohibited from passing any information to the Bureau’s head office without the CIA’s authorization, and faced harsh penalties for doing so. Efforts to share information with the FBI’s equivalent unit – the I-49 squad based in New York – were repeatedly blocked.

In late 1999, with “the system blinking red” about an imminent large-scale Al Qaeda terror attack inside the US, the CIA and NSA were closely monitoring an “operational cadre” within an Al Qaeda cell that included the Saudi nationals Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar. The pair would purportedly go on to hijack American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11.

Al-Hazmi and al-Midhar had attended an Al Qaeda summit that took place between January 5th and 8th 2000, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The meeting was secretly photographed and videotaped by local authorities at Alec Station’s request although, apparently, no audio was captured. En route, Mihdhar transited through Dubai, where CIA operatives broke into his hotel room and photocopied his passport. It showed that he possessed a multi-entry visa to the US.

A contemporaneous internal CIA cable stated this information was immediately passed to the FBI “for further investigation.” In reality, Alec Station not only failed to inform the Bureau of Mihdhar’s US visa, but also expressly forbade two FBI agents assigned to the unit from doing so.

“[I said] ‘we’ve got to tell the Bureau about this. These guys clearly are bad...we’ve got to tell the FBI.’ And then [the CIA] said to me, ‘no, it’s not the FBI’s case, not the FBI’s jurisdiction’,” Mark Rossini, one of the FBI agents in question, has alleged. “If we had picked up the phone and called the Bureau, I would’ve been violating the law. I...would’ve been removed from the building that day. I would’ve had my clearances suspended, and I would be gone.”

On January 15th, Hazmi and Mihdhar entered the US through Los Angeles International Airport, just weeks after the foiled Millennium plot. Omar al-Bayoumi, a Saudi government “ghost employee” immediately met them at an airport restaurant. After a brief conversation, Bayoumi helped them find an apartment near his own in San Diego, co-signed their lease, set them up bank accounts, and gifted \$1,500 towards their rent. The three would have multiple contacts moving forward.

In interviews with Operation Encore investigators years later, Bayoumi alleged his run-in with the two would-be hijackers was mere happenstance. His extraordinary practical and financial support was, he claimed, simply charitable, motivated by sympathy for the pair, who could barely speak English and were unfamiliar with Western culture.

The Bureau disagreed, concluding Bayoumi was a Saudi spy, who handled a number of Al Qaeda operatives in the US. They also considered there to be a “50/50 chance” he – and by extension Riyadh – had detailed advance knowledge of the 9/11 attacks.

That remarkable finding wasn’t known publicly until two decades later, when a tranche of Operation Encore documents were declassified upon the Biden administration’s orders, and it was completely ignored by the mainstream media. Don Canestraro’s declaration now reveals FBI investigators went even further in their assessments.

A Bureau special agent, dubbed “CS-3” in the document, stated Bayoumi’s contact with the hijackers and support thereafter “was done at the behest of the CIA through the Saudi intelligence service.” Alec Station’s explicit purpose was to “recruit Al-Hazmi and Al-

Mihdhar via a liaison relationship”, with the assistance of Riyadh’s General Intelligence Directorate.

A most ‘unusual’ CIA unit

Alec Station’s formal remit was to track bin Laden, “collect intelligence on him, run operations against him, disrupt his finances, and warn policymakers about his activities and intentions.” These activities would naturally entail enlisting informants within Al Qaeda.

Nonetheless, as several high level sources told Canestraro, it was extremely “unusual” for such an entity to be involved in gathering intelligence and recruiting assets. The US-based unit was run by CIA analysts, who do not typically manage human assets. Legally, that work is the exclusive preserve of case officers “trained in covert operations” and based overseas.

“CS-10”, a CIA case officer within Alec Station, concurred with the proposition that Hazmi and Mihdhar enjoyed a relationship with the CIA through Bayoumi, and was baffled that the unit was tasked with attempting to penetrate Al Qaeda in the first place. They felt it “would be nearly impossible...to develop informants inside” the group, given the “virtual” station was based in a Langley basement, “several thousand miles from the countries where Al Qaeda was suspected of operating.”

“CS-10” further testified that they “observed other unusual activities” at Alec Station. Analysts within the unit “would direct operations to case officers in the field by sending the officers cables instructing them to do a specific tasking,” which was “a violation of CIA procedures.” Analysts “normally lacked the authority to direct a case officer to do anything.”

“CS-11”, a CIA operations specialist posted to Alec Station “sometime prior to the 9/11 attacks” said they likewise “observed activity that appeared to be outside normal CIA procedures.” Analysts within the unit “mostly stuck to themselves and did not interact frequently” with others. When communicating with one another through internal cables, they also used operational pseudonyms, which “CS-11” described as peculiar, as they were not working undercover, “and their employment with the CIA was not classified information.”

The unit’s unusual operational culture may explain some of the stranger decisions made during this period vis a vis Al Qaeda informants. In early 1998, while on a CIA mission to penetrate London’s Islamist scene, a joint FBI-CIA informant named Aukai Collins received a stunning offer: bin Laden himself wanted him to go to Afghanistan so they could meet.

Collins relayed the request to his superiors. While the FBI was in favor of infiltrating Al Qaeda’s base, his CIA handler nixed the idea, saying, “there was no way the US would approve an American operative going undercover into Bin Laden’s camps.”

Similarly, in June 2001, CIA and FBI analysts from Alec Station met with senior Bureau officials, including representatives of its own Al Qaeda unit. The CIA shared three photos of individuals who attended the Kuala Lumpur meeting 18 months earlier, including Hazmi and Mihdhar. However, as an FBI counter-terror officer codenamed “CS-15” recalled, the dates of the photos and key details about the figures they depicted were not revealed. Instead, the analysts simply asked if the FBI “knew the identities of the individuals in the photos.”

Another FBI official present, “CS-12”, offers an even more damning account. The Alec Station analysts not only failed to offer biographical information, but falsely implied one of the individuals might be Fahd Al-Quso, a suspect in the bombing of the USS Cole. What’s more, they outright refused to answer any questions related to the photographs. Nonetheless, it was confirmed that no system was in place to alert the FBI if any of the three entered the US – a “standard investigative technique” for terror suspects.

Given Hazmi and Mihdhar appeared to be simultaneously working for Alec Station in some capacity, the June 2001 meeting may well have been a dangle. No intelligence value could be extracted from inquiring whether the Bureau knew who their assets were, apart from ascertaining if the FBI’s counter-terror team was aware of their identities, physical appearances, and presence in the US.

Quite some coverup

Another of Canestraro's sources, a former FBI agent who went by "CS-23," testified that after 9/11, FBI headquarters and its San Diego field office quickly learned of "Bayoumi's affiliation with Saudi intelligence and subsequently the existence of the CIA's operation to recruit" Hazmi and Mihdhar.

However, "senior FBI officials suppressed investigations" into these matters. "CS-23" alleged, furthermore, that Bureau agents testifying before the Joint Inquiry into 9/11 "were instructed not to reveal the full extent of Saudi involvement with Al-Qaeda."

The US intelligence community would have had every reason to shield Riyadh from scrutiny and consequences for its role in the 9/11 attacks, as it was then one of its closest allies. But the FBI's eager complicity in Alec Station's coverup may have been motivated by self-interest, as one of its own was intimately involved in the unit's effort to recruit Hazmi and Mihdhar, and conceal their presence in the US from relevant authorities.

"CS-12", who attended the June 2001 meeting with Alec Station, told Canestraro that they "continued to press FBI Headquarters for further information regarding the subjects in the photographs" over that summer. On August 23rd, they stumbled upon an "electronic communication" from FBI headquarters, which identified Hazmi and Mihdhar, and noted they were in the US.

"CS-12" then contacted the FBI analyst within Alec Station who authored the communication. The conversation quickly became "heated", with the analyst ordering them to delete the memo "immediately" as they were not authorized to view it. While unnamed in the declaration, the FBI analyst in question was Dina Corsi.

The next day, on a conference call between "CS-12", Corsi, and the FBI's bin Laden unit chief, "officials at FBI headquarters" explicitly told "CS-12" to "stand down" and "cease looking" for Mihdhar, as the Bureau intended to open an "intelligence gathering investigation" on him. The next day, "CS-12" emailed Corsi, stating bluntly "someone is going to die" unless Mihdhar was pursued criminally.

It was surely no coincidence that two days later, on August 26th, Alec Station finally informed the FBI that Hazmi and Mihdhar were in the US. By then, the pair had entered the final phase of preparations for the impending attacks. If a criminal probe had been opened, they could have been stopped in their tracks. Instead, as foreshadowed by the officials in contact with "CS-12," an intelligence investigation was launched which hindered any search efforts.

In the days immediately after the 9/11 attacks, "CS-12" and other New York-based FBI agents participated in another conference call with Bureau headquarters. During the conversation, they learned Hazmi and Mihdhar were named on Flight 77's manifest. One analyst on the line ran the pair's names through "commercial databases," quickly finding them and their home address listed in San Diego's local phone directory. It turned out they had been living with an [FBI informant](#).

"CS-12" soon contacted Corsi "regarding information on the hijackers." She responded by providing a photograph from the same surveillance operation that produced the three pictures presented at the June 2001 meeting between Alec Station and FBI agents; they depicted Walid bin Attash, a lead suspect in Al Qaeda's 1998 East Africa US Embassy bombings and its attack on the USS Cole.

Corsi was unable to explain why the photo was not shown to FBI agents earlier. If it had been, "CS-12" claims they would have "immediately linked" Hazmi and Mihdhar to bin Attash, which "would have shifted from an intelligence based investigation into a criminal investigation." The FBI's New York field office could have then devoted its "full resources" to finding the hijackers before the fateful day of September 11, 2001.

Alec Station operatives fail upwards

Alec Station's tireless efforts to protect its Al Qaeda assets raises the obvious question of whether Hazmi and Mihdhar, and possibly other hijackers, were in effect working for the CIA on the day of 9/11.

The real motives behind the CIA's stonewalling may never be known. But it appears abundantly clear that Alec Station did not want the FBI to know about or interfere in its secret intelligence operation. If the unit's recruitment of Hazmi and Mihdhar was purely dedicated to information gathering, rather than operational direction, it is incomprehensible that the FBI had not been apprised of it, and was instead actively misdirected.

Several FBI sources consulted by Canestraro speculated that the CIA's desperation to penetrate Al Qaeda prompted it to grant Alec Station the power to recruit assets, and pressured it to do so. But if this were truly the case, then why did Langley refuse the opportunity to send Aukai Collins – a proven deep cover asset who had infiltrated several Islamist gangs – to penetrate bin Laden's network in Afghanistan?

One alternative explanation is that Alec Station, a powerful rogue CIA team answerable and accountable to no one, sought to infiltrate the terror group for its own sinister purposes, without the authorization and oversight usually required by Langley in such circumstances. Given that Collins was a joint asset shared with the FBI, he could not be trusted to participate in such a sensitive black operation.

No member of Alec Station has been punished in any way for the supposed "intelligence failures" that allowed 9/11 to go ahead. In fact, they have been rewarded. Richard Blee, the unit's chief at the time of the attacks, and his successor Alfreda Frances Bikowsky, both joined the CIA's operations division, and became highly influential figures in the so-called war on terror. Corsi, for her part, was promoted at the FBI, eventually rising to the rank of Deputy Assistant Director for Intelligence.

In a perverse twist, the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the CIA's torture program found that Bikowsky had been a key player in the agency's black site machinations, and one of their chief public apologists. It is increasingly clear that the program was specifically concerned with eliciting false testimony from suspects in order to justify and expand the US war on terror.

The public's understanding of the 9/11 attacks is heavily informed by testimonies delivered by CIA torture victims under the most extreme duress imaginable. And Bikowsky, a veteran of the Alec Station that ran cover for at least two would-be 9/11 hijackers, had been in charge of interrogating the alleged perpetrators of the attacks.

The veteran FBI deep cover agent Aukai Collins concluded his memoir with a chilling reflection which was only reinforced by Don Canestraro's bombshell declaration:

"I was very mistrustful about the fact that bin Laden's name was mentioned literally hours after the attack... I became very skeptical about anything anybody said about what happened, or who did it. I thought back to when I was still working for them and we had the opportunity to enter Bin Laden's camp. Something just hadn't smelled right... To this day I'm unsure who was behind September 11, nor can I even guess... Someday the truth will reveal itself, and I have a feeling that people won't like what they hear."

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*- Kit Klarenberg is an investigative journalist exploring the role of intelligence services in shaping politics and perceptions.