

I know nobody read that cable

After the CIA allegedly lost Khalid Almihdhar, Nawaf Alhazmi, and Khallad bin Attash in Bangkok, it asked the Thais to watchlist the three men, meaning that Almihdhar and Alhazmi's departure from Thailand on January 15, 2000 should have been noted and passed to the local CIA station. From there it would have gone to headquarters. Since the two men were flying to the US, they could have been picked up on arrival, or any time later. As they ended up lodging with an FBI counterterrorism informant in San Diego, it could have been a straightforward matter for the Bureau to get close to them.¹

For some reason that has not yet been determined, their departure from Thailand was not reported promptly by the CIA station

1. Though the role of the informant, Abdussattar Shaikh, is beyond the scope of this book, his tale, as it is known (see also Chapter 5, note 28), is a passport to the murky world of intelligence and counter-intelligence operations. The Congressional Inquiry report (p. 51) called his association with the hijackers "the US intelligence community's best chance to unravel the Sept. 11 plot" before the disaster. When his position as the housemate/landlord of terrorists was revealed, the *San Diego Union-Tribune* of September 16, 2001 identified him as a "prominent Muslim leader," a "retired San Diego State University English professor," and essentially proclaimed him an innocent benefactor. Yet, according to investigator Daniel Hopsicker, "a visit to the various locations around San Diego where he was said to have worked reveals that Abdussattar Shaikh never taught at San Diego State, has never been a Professor of English, and possesses a phony PhD from a bogus diploma mill run by people with U.S. military and intelligence connections"; <http://www.madcowprod.com/Shaiikh.html>. Born in 1935, Shaikh left his homeland as it was being partitioned into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan after World War II. Apparently arriving in California around 1970, he rose to a position of prominence in the small but growing Muslim community in the San Diego area. During his many-months residence with Alhazmi, neighbors reported, he received short, late-night visits by cars with darkened windows and also may have been visited by hijackers Mohamed Atta and/or Hani Hanjour; http://www.historycommons.org/entity.jsp?entity=abdussattar_shaikh. For his service to the Islamic community, in October of 2009 Shaikh was honored in suburban Lemon Grove, where he had given Alhazmi and Almihdhar accommodations in his five-bedroom home: "We honor you, Dr. Shaikh, for the love and devotion you have shown to your adopted country. You have touched countless lives." The local press that covered the event made no mention of Shaikh's connection to 9/11, though it did note that he was "trained as a chaplain in the Red Cross"; "Abdussattar Shaikh, Co-founder of San Diego's Islamic Center, Honored for 50 Years of Service Promoting Religious Tolerance," *East County Magazine*, October 8, 2009, <http://www.eastcountymagazine.org/node/2020>.

in Bangkok. After a few weeks went by, a CIA officer in Malaysia noticed this lack of reporting and queried Bangkok about what had happened.² According to the 9/11 Commission:

Presumably the departure information was obtained back in January, on the days that these individuals made their departures. Because the names were watchlisted by the Thai authorities we cannot yet explain the delay in reporting the news.³

The CIA station in Bangkok sat on this request for two weeks. Then it told the CIA station in Kuala Lumpur that there was a delay in responding due to difficulties in obtaining the requested information.⁴ However, it appears the station already had this information and, even if it did not, it could have simply asked the Thais, who had watchlisted the men at the CIA's request.

There was a further problem when Bangkok station finally did send a cable reporting the departure information for the two men, on March 5. The cable omitted Almihdhar's name, only saying that Alhazmi had traveled to the US with a companion, even though the cable was drafted in response to a query from Kuala Lumpur about Almihdhar's whereabouts.

Most media accounts are wrong about this, claiming that the cable only reported Alhazmi's departure, not that of a companion as well. However, the executive summary of the re-written CIA inspector general's report is very clear on this point:

Separately, in March 2000, two CIA field locations [Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur] sent to a number of addressees cables reporting that Alhazmi and another al-Qaeda associate had traveled to the United States. They were clearly identified in the cables as "UBL [Osama bin Laden] associates."⁵

Given that this cable was generated in response to a question about Almihdhar's whereabouts, and that Almihdhar was a known associate of Alhazmi and had flown with him from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok, it would not be too difficult to deduce that Almihdhar

2. This happened on February 11, 2000. See *9/11 CR*, pp. 181 n52, 502; also Justice Department IG report, p. 247.

3. *9/11 CR*, p. 502 n53.

4. Justice Department IG report, pp. 247-48.

5. OIG Report on CIA Accountability With Respect to the 9/11 Attacks, June 2005, p. xv, <http://www.fas.org/irp/cia/product/oig-911.pdf>.

was this associate. Any check of the flight manifest or with immigration would have revealed the associate's identity. In any case, Bangkok station must have had Almihdhar's name, and it is hard to view the omission as anything but intentional. It was the name of an al-Qaeda terrorist who had just entered the US and, as such, incredibly important.

Almihdhar apparently later claimed that both he and Alhazmi thought they were followed on this flight. According to Khalid Shaikh Mohammed's "substitution for testimony" at Zacarias Moussaoui's trial: in the late summer of 2000, "Almihdhar also gave a report to Sheikh Mohammed, telling him of their problems with enrolling in language schools and that they believed they were surveilled from Thailand to the US. Sheikh Mohammed began having doubts about whether the two would be able to fulfill their mission in the US."⁶ This information was obtained by the CIA using the "enhanced" techniques, and its reliability is therefore questionable. However, it was not self-serving for KSM, and it does not look like something the CIA actively wanted to hear, so it may be accurate.

The hijackers were allegedly followed on two other occasions. According to one of their associates, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, the hijackers told him that Ziad Jarrah and Marwan Alshehhi were followed by "security officers" on cross-country casing flights inside the US. This statement was made while bin al-Shibh was still at liberty.⁷

Comparison of the hijackers' flight bookings and their actual flights shows that on several occasions they booked an extra flight with a similar itinerary, but then took only one, apparently hoping to avoid surveillance. On at least one occasion, Alhazmi's flight from Karachi to Kuala Lumpur on January 5, 2000, the ruse worked. The double bookings clearly indicate that the hijackers were concerned about surveillance of their travels.

Between January 15 and March 5, 2000, the CIA's Bangkok station racked up a total of six errors: it failed to locate Alhazmi, Almihdhar and bin Attash in Thailand, although the CIA had information that bin Attash had called a hotel in Bangkok, a logical place to

6. *United States v. Zacarias Moussaoui*, "Substitution for the Testimony of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed," July 31, 2006, <http://www.vaed.uscourts.gov/notablecases/moussaoui/exhibits/defense/941.pdf>.

7. Yosri Fouda and Nick Fielding, *Masterminds of Terror: The Truth Behind the Most Devastating Terrorist Attack the World Has Ever Seen* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2003), p. 135.

start looking for them; it claimed to be searching for the three men unsuccessfully, but the 9/11 Commission found “no evidence of any tracking efforts actually being undertaken by anyone”; it failed to report their departure when they left and to respond promptly to the query from Kuala Lumpur station asking about Almihdhar’s whereabouts; it then claimed that it was having trouble obtaining the departure information, although it either already had it or could obtain it easily; and when it finally reported the departure of the two men, it failed to name Almihdhar in its cable.

Some of these errors, such as the failure to pick up surveillance at the airport, may seem genuine errors of the sort made by all complex organizations. However, Bangkok station’s behavior when being queried about the cable is highly suspicious. Why claim it did not have the departure information and would have difficulty obtaining it, when it probably already had it or could get it easily? And why omit Almihdhar’s name from the March 5 cable?

Contrast this with Kuala Lumpur station. It can certainly be criticized for not bugging the summit, or rather not having the Malaysians do it. Despite this, the list of its failures is shorter, and there is no occasion where credulity must necessarily be stretched beyond the breaking point to believe an explanation.

In addition, on more than one occasion Kuala Lumpur station took actions to assist tracking of the hijackers that were above and beyond what was required of it. The first occurred when it prodded Bangkok station for the departure information about Almihdhar mentioned above. This cable caused serious problems for Bangkok station, which was forced to make the improbable claim it did not have the information and would have trouble getting it, and then to report on Alhazmi’s travel to the US.

A second is noted in a cable sent in response to Bangkok’s March 5 cable reporting the travel by Alhazmi and an associate to the US. This cable, dated the next day, commented that Bangkok’s cable had been read “with interest.”⁸ The station that sent this cable is not named, although Kuala Lumpur is a likely candidate, as it was this station that requested the departure information from Bangkok. This cable was widely cited during the post-9/11 investigations and proved embarrassing to the Agency.

8. Justice Department IG report, p. 248.

The third occasion was a visit to Kuala Lumpur by FBI agent Frank Pellegrino looking for Khalid Shaikh Mohammed some time after the summit. Fellow Bureau agent Jack Cloonan reportedly stated that, at a meeting with Pellegrino, the local CIA station chief took out some of the surveillance photos and said, "I'm not supposed to show these photographs, but here. Take a look at these photographs. Know any of these guys?"⁹ These are simply not the actions of a person trying to hide information from the Bureau.

Kuala Lumpur station's apparent non-involvement in a plot to withhold information from the Bureau lends some support to the conclusion suggested above that Cofer Black and George Tenet were not aware of what was going on at the time. If the effort to withhold the information was "official" CIA policy blessed by Blee's superiors, why was one of the field stations not on board?

* * *

Alec Station apparently did nothing with the March 5, 2000 cable, did not watchlist the two men, and did not inform the FBI that a pair of top al-Qaeda operatives had entered the US. Watchlisting the men would at least have prevented Almihdhar from re-entering the US in July 2001, and informing the FBI would have led to surveillance of them, which would probably have prevented both the *Cole* bombing and 9/11.

It is unclear who read the cable from Bangkok reporting Alhazmi's and his companion's entry into the US at this time, and who is therefore responsible for these failures. However, Tom Wilshire was a manager involved in the operation, and he did access the cable in May 2001, when very little was done again.

Wilshire commented on this in his statement to the Congressional Inquiry:

Later, in early March 2000, long after the dust had settled in Malaysia, information surfaced indicating that Almihdhar's partner was named Nawaf Alhazmi. In early March the CIA also received information indicating that Alhazmi had booked a flight

9. Peter Lance, *Triple Cross: How bin Laden's Master Spy Penetrated the CIA, the Green Berets, and the FBI—and Why Patrick Fitzgerald Failed to Stop Him* (New York: Regan, 2006), p. 340. It is unclear which photos Pellegrino saw, and there is no mention of him seeing the video. He was an experienced agent knowledgeable of al-Qaeda and should have been able to identify "Hambali" and KSM.

that terminated in Los Angeles on 15 January 2000. Again, the new information on Alhazmi was not disseminated.

There are significant omissions here: the March 5 cable did not just say that Alhazmi had booked a flight, but also said that he had traveled to the US and that he had been accompanied by a companion on the flight.

Wilshire was asked again about this during the questioning. He replied,

It's very difficult to understand what happened with that cable when it came in. I do not know exactly why it was missed. It would appear that it was missed completely.¹⁰

The reply is strikingly similar to the explanation he gave for failing to pass on the information about Almihdhar's US visa: "Something apparently was dropped somewhere and we don't know where that was."

Given that we know Wilshire and "Michelle" purposefully blocked the passage of information about Almihdhar to the FBI, it appears that the failure to share the information at this time was also deliberate. The alternative would be that Alec Station purposefully withheld information in January, but had forgotten all about the purposeful withholding by March, when it failed to pass on the same information through some unexplained mishap.

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One of the most remarkable aspects of this episode is sworn testimony provided to the Congressional Inquiry by CIA Director Tenet, when he was questioned about this cable by Senator Carl Levin on October 17, 2002 (emphases added):

SEN. LEVIN: ... Now, then we come to March 5th, same year, 2000, and the CIA learns some additional information, very critical information. On March 5th the CIA learns that Alhazmi had actually entered the United States on January 15th, seven

10. For this and the prior quote, see US Congress, The House Permanent Select Committee On Intelligence and the Senate Select Committee On Intelligence, The Intelligence Community's Knowledge of the September 11 Hijackers Prior to September 11, 2001: Hearing before the Joint Inquiry of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, September 20, 2002.

days after leaving the al-Qaeda meeting in Malaysia. So now the CIA knows Alhazmi is in the United States, but the CIA still doesn't put Alhazmi or Almihdhar on the watch list and still does not notify the FBI about a very critical fact, a known al-Qaeda operative—we're at war with al-Qaeda—a known al-Qaeda operative got into the United States. My question is do you know specifically why the FBI was not notified of that critical fact at that time?

MR. TENET: The cable that came in from the field at the time, sir, was labeled information only and *I know that nobody read that cable*.

SEN. LEVIN: But my question is do you know why the FBI was not notified of the fact that an al-Qaeda operative now was known in March of the year 2000 to have entered the United States? Why did the CIA not specifically notify the FBI?

MR. TENET: Sir, if we weren't aware of it when it came into headquarters we couldn't have notified them. *Nobody read that cable in the March timeframe*.

SEN. LEVIN: So that the cable that said that Alhazmi had entered the United States came to your headquarters, nobody read it?

MR. TENET: Yes, sir. It was an information only cable from the field and *nobody read that information only cable*.¹¹

Here Tenet claimed three times in sworn testimony that nobody read the cable, yet this claim is clearly untrue. According to an extract from the CIA inspector general's report submitted as evidence to the Moussaoui trial (emphasis added):

In early 2000, *numerous* CIA officers in different divisions accessed one or more operational documents that reported Khalid Almihdhar's passport contained a multiple entry visa for the United States and that Nawaf Alhazmi had departed Thailand on a flight bound for Los Angeles. Most of the officers who accessed the documents were in the Counterterrorism Division at that time.¹²

11. "Testimony from the Joint Intelligence Committee," *New York Times*, October 17, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/17/politics/18ITEXT.html?ei=5070&en=9ddb1047607578ac&ex=1227848400&pagewanted=print&position=top>.

12. *United States v. Zacarias Moussaoui*, "Substitute for Passage from CIA OIG Report re: Number of CIA persons who reviewed cables after Spring, 2000," July 31, 2006, <http://www.vaed.uscourts>.

The executive summary of the re-written CIA inspector general's report spells out just how "numerous" these officers were (emphases added):

In the period January through March 2000, some *50 to 60 individuals* read one or more of six Agency cables containing travel information related to these terrorists. These cables originated in four field locations and Headquarters. They were read by *overseas officers and Headquarters personnel, operations officers and analysts, managers and junior employees, and CIA staff personnel as well as officers on rotation from NSA and FBI*. Over an 18-month period, some of these officers *had opportunities to review the information on multiple occasions*, when they might have recognized its significance and shared it appropriately with other components and agencies.¹³

The claim that "nobody read that cable" was only one of several false statements Tenet and other CIA officers made during the course of the 9/11 investigations. As we will see, most of these statements concerned Khalid Almihdhar and the seemingly botched surveillance of the Malaysia meeting attendees.

The impunity with which Tenet made these false statements is also remarkable. He was under oath before the 9/11 Congressional Inquiry, and the 9/11 Commission must have known he made the statements and must have known they were false, but it issued no public reprimand to Tenet. Indeed, lying under oath is a criminal offense, but no charges have been advanced against Tenet for this or any other of his false statements.

After the 9/11 Commission pointed out in 2004 that Tom Wilshire had actually read the cable,¹⁴ and after the substitute for a passage from the CIA inspector general's report used at the Moussaoui trial in 2006 stated that "numerous officers" had also done so,¹⁵ Tenet offered a different explanation in his 2007 book:

CIA officers in the field sent this information back to headquarters but included it at the end of a cable that contained routine

gov/notablecases/moussaoui/exhibits/defense/538B.pdf.

13. OIG Report on CIA Accountability With Respect to the 9/11 Attacks, June 2005, p. xiv, <http://www.fas.org/irp/cia/product/oig-911.pdf>.

14. *9/11 CR*, pp. 267 n63, 537.

15. *United States v. Zacarias Moussaoui*, "Substitute for Passage from CIA OIG Report re: Number of CIA persons who reviewed cables after Spring, 2000," July 31, 2006, <http://www.vaed.uscourts.gov/notablecases/moussaoui/exhibits/defense/538B.pdf>.

information. The cable was marked as being for “information” rather than “action.” Unfortunately, no one—not the CIA officers nor their FBI colleagues detailed to the CTC—connected the name Nawaf Alhazmi with the meeting of eight weeks before.¹⁶

The claim that nobody connected Alhazmi with the Malaysia summit is ludicrous. For example, the Congressional Inquiry reported,

The following day, another station [presumably Kuala Lumpur], which had been copied on the cable by the originating station [Bangkok], cabled CTC’s bin Laden unit that it had read the cable “with interest,” particularly “the information that a member of this group traveled to the U.S. following his visit to Kuala Lumpur.”¹⁷

Tenet offered two erroneous explanations for why nothing was done about this cable. Before doing so, he clearly spent some time personally investigating what went wrong, speaking to the relevant officers, such as “Michelle.” There were also weekly meetings at which the CIA review group investigating what went wrong updated Tenet and other CIA leaders about their findings. One of the group’s major discoveries was that the CIA might have failed to notify the FBI of Almihdhar and Alhazmi’s presence in the US for well over a year, and George Tenet and the other leaders clearly appreciated how damaging this could be for the Agency.¹⁸ Everything suggests that Tenet knew the statements he made were false when he made them.

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The 9/11 Congressional Inquiry was not the only investigation to have this problem with George Tenet. At a private interview with the 9/11 Commission in January 2004, Tenet gave a string of evasive answers, and the Commission doubted he was telling them the full truth. This despite the fact that they took the unusual step of putting Tenet under oath before questioning him, because, according to Philip Shenon, “The CIA’s record was full of discrepancies about the facts of its operations against bin Laden before 9/11, and many of the discrepancies were Tenet’s.” Although Tenet had evidently held all-night cram sessions before the interview, he re-

16. Tenet 2007, p. 197.

17. 9/11 Congressional Inquiry report, p. 147.

18. The meetings are described in Philip Shenon, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (New York: Twelve, 2008), pp. 140-41.

peatedly replied, “I don’t remember,” “I don’t recall,” and “Let me go through the documents and get back to you with an answer.” Shenon summarized:

Tenet remembered certain details, especially when he was asked the sorts of questions he was eager to answer ... But on many other questions, his memory was cloudy. The closer the questions came to the events of the spring and summer of 2001 and to the 9/11 attacks themselves, the worse his memory became.

In addition, the memory lapses concerned not only details, but also “entire meetings and key documents.” Tenet even said he could not recall what was discussed at his first meeting with President George Bush after his election in 2000, which the Commission found suspicious. Neither could he recall what he told Bush in the morning intelligence briefings in the months leading up to 9/11.

Philip Zelikow, one of the staffers who interviewed Tenet, later said there was no one “a-ha moment” when they realized Tenet was not telling them the full truth, but his constant failure to remember key aspects disturbed them, and in the end “we just didn’t believe him.” After the meeting, Zelikow allegedly reported to the Commissioners that Tenet perjured himself. The staff and most of the Commissioners came to believe that Tenet was “at best, loose with the facts,” and at worst “flirting with a perjury charge.” It seems that even Commission Chairman Tom Kean came to believe that Tenet was a witness who would “fudge everything.”¹⁹

One particular thing Tenet failed to recall was a memorandum of notification issued by President Clinton after the African embassy bombings. The memo authorized the CIA to kill Osama bin Laden, using a set of tribal assets that were monitoring him in Afghanistan. Tenet and other CIA leaders repeatedly claimed they had no such authorization, although former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger tipped the Commission off, and the actual document was found.²⁰ The Commission arranged a final interview of Tenet

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 257-60.

20. Clinton issued a series of memos about operations against bin Laden. This memo is the only one that authorized the Agency to kill bin Laden and it only applied to a specific group of tribal CIA assets that were monitoring him. When Clinton was given a draft memo authorizing the CIA to kill bin Laden using other assets, he altered the wording so that the Agency was not so authorized.

in early July 2004, a couple of weeks before *The 9/11 Commission Report* was published, to talk about the memo.

The staff considered the meeting a “final test of Tenet’s credibility,” but when Philip Zelikow said he wanted to talk about the memo, Tenet replied, “What are you referring to?” Zelikow elaborated, but Tenet said, “I’m not sure what we’re talking about.” He then claimed to remember an early draft of the memo, which did not authorize the CIA to kill bin Laden. Zelikow explained that the draft Tenet was referring to was an earlier version of the memo, and that a later version, apparently requested by Tenet himself, authorized the CIA to kill bin Laden. Zelikow was unable to bring the actual memo with him, because it was so highly classified, and Tenet still said he did not remember: “Well, as I say, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Philip Shenon wrote of this, “Zelikow and [Commission staffer Alexis] Albion looked at each other across the table in disbelief. It was the last straw with Tenet, the final bit of proof they needed to demonstrate that Tenet simply could not tell the truth to the Commission.” Zelikow later said he concluded Tenet’s memory lapses were not genuine, but “George had decided not to share information on any topic unless we already had documentary proof, and then he would add as little as possible to the record.”

Tenet later denied this was the case, and said he could not remember the authorization to kill bin Laden because he had been on vacation when it was signed and transmitted to Afghanistan.²¹ However, the 9/11 Commission found that this memo was “given to Tenet.” In addition, the final report described the message in which the instructions were communicated to the assets in Afghanistan that were to kill bin Laden as “CIA cable, message from the DCI.” DCI, Director of Central Intelligence, was Tenet’s official title.²²

Another false statement of Tenet’s, about briefings he gave President Bush in the run-up to 9/11, will also have an important place in the narrative ahead.

We must ask the question: why did Tenet repeatedly make false statements about 9/11? One possible answer is that he genuinely found that the CIA had performed to the best of its ability, but that telling investigators the truth would reveal sensitive informa-

21. Philip Shenon, see note 17, pp. 359-60.

22. *9/11 CR*, pp. 132, 485.

tion. Another is that he was personally involved in the “failures,” instructing Richard Blee to withhold information from the FBI, and was covering up for his own wrongdoing. A third is that he realized something bad had gone on, but did not want to look into it for fear of what he might learn, and covered things up deliberately from investigators. The truth is that we do not yet know enough to understand his motivation with certainty.

Finally, we must remark on the 9/11 Commission’s treatment of Tenet. They almost certainly thought he had strung together a series of fabrications, but there is not a word about this in the final report. Neither is there anything to suggest they stopped to ask themselves why Tenet had done this.