

## 9/11 Intelligence Study

On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, a devastating attack was launched by the radical terrorist organization, Al Qaeda, using commercial aircraft as guided missiles to strike at the heart of American society. More than 3,000 innocent lives were lost on that tragic morning and repercussions have continued to affect the course of world politics, international relations, religious and cultural integration, and the attitudes of individuals the globe over.

This study begins with a closer look at some of the intelligence indicators emanated by Al Qaeda's activities over the period of the last decade, prior to 2001, and briefly describes the lead-up to the event and the fall-out that followed. Areas of possible intelligence failure are then considered before concluding with a look at possible lessons learnt as we go forward.

### Overview

The origins of Al Qaeda date back to around 1979 when Saudi born Osama Bin Laden travelled to Afghanistan to help organize the Arab Mujahadeen against the invading Soviet Union. Later on, together with Dr. Abdullah Azzam, Bin Laden formed Maktab al-Khadamat (MAK) to raise funds, recruit for, and train Mujahidin operatives.

After the end of the war, Bin Laden had visions of a rapid reaction force capable of protecting oppressed Muslims around the world. This vision was shared by Ayman al-Zawahiri of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, though not by Azzam, and after Azzam's assassination in 1989, Bin Laden assumed command of MAK and merged it into Al Qaeda.

The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait saw Bin Laden's attention turn toward America, when he opposed the 500,000 strong U.S. military presence on Muslim holy ground in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden further opposed American alliances with Kuwait, Jordan, and Egypt, as well as what he viewed as America's pro-Israeli policy, asserting that non-Muslim 'infidels' were unwelcome on holy Muslim land.

Throughout the 90s Bin Laden ran a number of operations in East Africa, many of which targeted American interests before being expelled by the Sudanese government (under international pressure) and returning to Afghanistan in 1996.

Operation Bojinka, a failed plot masterminded by Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Ramzi Yousef, was uncovered by Manila police in 1995 and is widely accepted as the basis on which the 9/11 attacks were designed. The original plot involved the assassination of Pope John Paul II, the bombing of 12 airliners crossing the Pacific Ocean from Asia to America, and the crashing of a plane into CIA headquarters.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1996, Bin Laden "issued a public fatwa authorizing attacks by his followers against Western military targets on the Arabian Peninsula."<sup>2</sup> In February 1998, Bin Laden

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1 Eleanor Hill. *Joint Inquiry Staff Statement, Part I* (September 18, 2002), 11.

2 *Joint Inquiry Staff Statement, Part I*, 12.

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and four other extremists (including Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri) under the banner of the World Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders, declared war on America when they jointly issued a second fatwa stating, “We do not have to differentiate between military or civilian. As far as we are concerned, they [Americans] are all targets.”<sup>3</sup>

### Pre-Event Actions

In preparation for the 9/11 attacks, Al Qaeda's selection and recruitment of potential hijackers focused primarily on established Al Qaeda members with veteran experience. However, in late 1999, four foreign students and aspiring jihadists arrived in Kandahar, Afghanistan, from Germany, they were: Mohamed Atta, Ziad Jarrah, Marwan al-Shehhi, and Ramzi BinalShibh. Due to their technical expertise, familiarity with western culture, and command of the English language, the four soon came to the attention of Bin Laden and were subsequently recruited into the plot with Atta assigned as the tactical commander.

After returning to Hamburg in early 2000, in order to defer attention from their activities, the four made considerable changes to their radical persona. By cutting their hair, shaving their beards, wearing western clothing, and distancing themselves from other radicals within the community, they were able to deceive many of their closest friends and family into the belief that they were no longer subject to their previously held extremist views.

Another key part in the 9/11 plot involved the piloting of the hijacked planes into select targets; it was this Hamburg Cell who's job it was to attend flight training and execute this responsibility. However, having selected flight training schools located in the U.S., only three of the four hijackers were able to attain U.S. visas. BinalShibh's visa application was rejected a total of four times<sup>4</sup> and hence was unable to continue in his front-line role. He did, however, continue to support the effort from overseas.

Other setbacks also hindered the run-up to the planned attacks. Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi arrived in the U.S. in January 2000, their sole intention being to “learn English, take flying lessons, and become pilots as quickly as possible.” However, due to their poor aptitude for the English language and subsequent difficulties learning to fly, both had given up the idea by the end of May.<sup>5</sup>

By mid 2000, the three Hamburg recruits able to attain visas arrived in the United States. Ziad Jarrah arrived on June 27<sup>th</sup> and immediately started training at the Florida Flight Training Centre (FFTC) in Venice, Florida, eventually gaining his single engine private pilot certificate by the end of August. Marwan al-Shehhi arrived on May 29<sup>th</sup> in Newark and proceeded to meet with Mohamed Atta in New York, who arrived on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June. Shehhi and Atta attended their training at Huffman Aviation in Venice Florida, also passing their private airman test in August. Shehhi and Atta then attended at Jones Aviation in Sarasota, Florida, before failing their Stage I exam for instruments rating and returning to Huffman Aviation.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Osama Bin Laden. Personal Interview by John Miller, (May 1998).

4 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 168.

5 Ibid, 221, 222.

6 Ibid, 224.

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In order to complete the intended mission and hit all four targets as was originally planned, a fourth pilot would be necessary. Hani Hanjour was identified in Al Qaeda's al Faruq camp as a trained pilot and was recruited as the fourth member, eventually arriving in San Diego on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Hanjour had first visited the United States in 1991, where he attended at the Center for English as a Second Language at the University of Arizona. He later returned to the U.S. to train as a pilot, eventually receiving his commercial pilot's certificate from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in April 1999.<sup>7</sup>

#	Name	Nationality	Flight	Target
1	Mohamed Atta*	Egyptian	American Airlines	North Tower, World Trade Centre, New York City: 8.46am
2	Waleed al-Shehri	Saudi	Flight 11, 7.45am Boston to Los Angeles	
3	Wail al-Shehri	Saudi		
4	Abdualaziz al-Omari	Saudi		
5	Satam al-Suqami	Saudi		
6	Marwan al-Shehhi*	Emarati	United Airlines	South Tower, World Trade Centre, New York City: 9.03am
7	Fayez Banihammad	Emarati	Flight 175, 8am Boston to Los Angeles	
8	Mohand al-Shehri	Saudi		
9	Hamza al-Ghamdi	Saudi		
10	Ahmed al-Ghamdi	Saudi		
11	Hani Hanjour*	Saudi	American Airlines	Pentagon, Arlington Avenue, Virginia: 9.37am
12	Khalid al-Mihdhar	Saudi	Flight 77, Washington D.C. to Los Angeles	
13	Majed Moqed	Saudi		
14	Nawaf al-Hazmi	Saudi		
15	Salem al-Hazmi	Saudi		
16	Ziad Jarrah*	Lebanese	United Airlines	Capitol or White House, though due to passenger assault, crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania: 10.03am
17	Ahmed al-Haznawi	Saudi	Flight 93, 8am Newark to Los Angeles	
18	Ahmed al-Nami	Saudi		
19	Saeed al-Ghamdi	Saudi		

Table 1: Assignment of terrorists. (\* indicates pilot)

The remaining 13 'muscle' hijackers were selected between the summer of 2000 and April 2001. Most attended basic training, which included firearms, heavy weapons, explosives, and topography. Recruits learned military discipline and were subjected to artificial stresses to measure their psychological fitness and commitment to jihad. Bin Laden is said to have personally attended at the training camps to meet the trainees and to give lectures.<sup>8</sup> After later having gained U.S. visas in Saudi Arabia, the remaining muscle hijackers returned to Afghanistan for further training on how to conduct hijackings, disarm air marshals, and handle explosives, before travelling temporarily to a safe-house in Karachi, Pakistan, and finally on to the United States via the United Arab Emirates between April and June of 2001.<sup>9</sup>

Final preparations by the hijackers included surveillance flights on commercial routes in similar aircraft to those being hijacked, additional flight training, and solo reconnaissance flights in light aircraft. In all, 19 hijackers divided into four groups boarded the four ill-fated flights on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, as detailed above in table 1.

<sup>7</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 225, 226.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 234, 235.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

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### The Event

Between the hours of 6 and 8 a.m., the hijackers boarded the planes as planned: two departing from Boston, one from Washington D.C., and one from Newark. All were destined for Los Angeles, California. Of the 19 hijackers, ten were singled out by the airport security system, CAPPS I, and subject to further screening procedures, though each subsequently passed this additional measure without undue delay and all 19 took their respective places on-board their flights in business and first class seats at the front of the planes. With the exception of United Airlines flight 93, all flights took-off roughly according to their published schedule.

Within 50 minutes of take-off, at 8:46 a.m., the first of the four, American Airlines flight 11, struck the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. Next to hit was United Airlines flight 175 at 9:03 a.m., striking the South Tower. Within the next two hours, both towers collapsed, killing a total of 2,973 civilians and emergency services personnel.<sup>10</sup>

American Airlines flight 77 was the next to hit at 9:37a.m. striking the west wall of the Pentagon and killing all 64 people on-board, as well as 106 civilians and military personnel inside the building.<sup>11</sup>

At 10:03 a.m., the passengers and crew of the fourth plane, United Airlines flight 93, caused the hijackers to crash prematurely into an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, about 20 minutes flight-time from Washington, D.C. where it is believed that their target was to be a symbol of the American republic, either the Capitol or the White House. All 37 passengers and 7 crew died in the crash.<sup>12</sup>

An article published by the Centre for Contemporary Conflict one year on described the attacks as “especially shocking both because they were so destructive and because they were so unexpected.”<sup>13</sup> The magnitude of their effect continues to ripple outward and onward around the world as the international community, and America especially, focuses its attention on the common threat of international terrorism, and in particular, Al Qaeda. U.S. Congressional Budget Office figures put the total expenditure for the 'War on Terror' between 2001 and 2006 at \$432 billion.<sup>14</sup> 2007 figures alone are closer to \$173 billion and account for approximately 28% of Defense Department funding from Congress.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the fiscal impact, the attacks of 9/11 have also caused a shift in what would previously have been thought of as the unthinkable: a general acceptance by the people for a decrement in the level of personal freedom and privacy in exchange for an increment in the level of state provided security. A recent bill approved by the U.S. Senate, and supported by the White House, allows for “warrant-less searches and surveillance of American phone

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10 *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 285, 293, 311.

11 *Ibid*, 314.

12 *Ibid*, 14.

13 Porch, Douglas and James J. Wirtz. “Surprise and Intelligence Failure,” Centre for Contemporary Conflict: Strategic Insights (Volume I, Issue 7, 2002).

14 Congressional Budget Office. *GWOT Tables* (2006).

15 Congressional Budget Office. *Long-Term Implications of Current Defense Plans: Summary Update for Fiscal Year 2008* (2007).

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calls, e-mails, homes, offices and personal records,” (Reid 2007) “needed” says Mike McConnell, the director of National Intelligence, “in order to protect the nation from attacks that are being planned today to inflict mass casualties on the United States.” (2007)<sup>16</sup> On a social level too there has been a significant impact. Attitudes toward the Islamic religion and people of Middle Eastern origin generally, have been heavily affected as a result of the terrorist acts.

### Missed Indicators

It seems clear that a number of important and telling factors did come to the attention of the Intelligence Community over an approximate period of 11 years concerning the Al Qaeda organization and Osama Bin Laden with regard to the terrorist threat to the continental United States<sup>17</sup> and the use of aircraft as weapons. Al Qaeda has been quite open in describing and demonstrating its intentions to attack both U.S. military and civilian targets and on December 4, 1998, DCI George Tenet, recognizing the threat, declared war on Bin Ladin.<sup>18</sup> However, it seems that despite this move by Tenet, few changes actually occurred in reflection of this state of war.

With limited resources focused on the Bin Laden threat it seems reasonable that analysts would have been unable to cover all bases satisfactorily. One missed opportunity of notable significance was the failure of the Intelligence Community to carry out a threat assessment of aircraft being used as weapons, as was noted by Hill in her September 18<sup>th</sup> joint inquiry staff statement, saying, “there was little, if any, effort by Intelligence Community analysts to produce any strategic assessment of terrorists using aircraft as weapons.”<sup>19</sup> It seems striking that, given the strategic built-up, DCI Tenet’s declaration, and references to the use of aircraft as weapons by terrorist groups, such an assessment was never made. Had such an assessment been carried out, it would very likely have identified a number of significant factors:

- 1) At a minimum, the most obvious of targets would likely have been identified, among them surely: the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and the White House.<sup>20</sup>
- 2) Given those targets and the limitations of the weapon (availability, proximity, access, etc) the analysis may well have lead to the identification, or narrowing down of specific flight paths, vulnerable flights (airlines, flight numbers, schedules) and possible methods of hijack/attack.

Had this analysis been completed, it is conceivable that the outcome of 9/11 could have been very different for two primary reasons:

Firstly, an analysis of possible indicators to look out for could have been produced and disseminated to other agencies, law enforcement, and airlines/airport security to increase awareness of the threat and to encourage the reporting of suspicious activities for further investigation. The Phoenix memo, for example, may have received more weight had the FBI better understood its relevance:

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16 Al Jazeera. “U.S. senate approves spy bill,” (2007).

17 Hill, 15.

18 Ibid, 9, 17.

19 Ibid, 9.

20 Ibid, 16.

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On July 10, 2001, an FBI Phoenix field office agent sent an 'Electronic Communication' to four individuals in the Radical Fundamentalist Unit (RFU) and two people in the Usama Bin Ladin Unit (UBLU) at FBI Headquarters, and to two agents on International Terrorism squads in the New York Field Office. In the communication, the agent expressed his concerns, based on his first-hand knowledge, that there was a coordinated effort under-way by Bin Laden to send students to the U.S. for civil aviation-related training.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, policy makers may have seen reason enough to implement additional security measures on flights subject to vulnerable routes. One measure that stands out is that of requiring the cockpit door to be secured during flight, a requirement that has since been implemented by the Federal Aviation Association (FAA) in line with the Aviation and Transportation Security Act of November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 - a simple change in cockpit procedure that could easily have been identified and implemented in response to a proper assessment of the threat of aircraft being used as weapons.

Another area of weakness appears to be in the sharing, or centralization, of information and the availability of resources to action incoming information in a timely manner. Information that either does not reach the appropriate recipient or lays dormant past its use-by-date has the ability to turn from gold-dust (useful intelligence) into -- dust (history). It is therefore imperative to the process that intelligence is shared with the people who need it in a timely fashion, which appears not to have been the case in many instances concerning the build-up to the events of 9/11. The following excerpt, taken from a post 9/11 investigation, demonstrates the issue of timeliness:

The Intelligence Community acquired additional, and highly significant information regarding Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi in early 2000. Information concerning both lay dormant within the Intelligence Community for as long as 18 months.<sup>22</sup>

### Lessons Learned

Having reviewed some of the failures, there are a number of lessons that can be learned going forward.

Firstly, the importance of resourcing. The stream of incoming raw information itself has increased ten-fold over recent years, especially due to the development of new technologies. This increase in collection is not being met with an increase in the availability of analysts, creating a situation of information overload wherein 'more' information is getting 'less' attention and leaving the analytical function vulnerable to failure.

Going forward, technology itself is likely to provide a solution, and in some areas already

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21 U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. *Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001* (December, 2002), xiii.

22 Ibid, xii.

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does. With the development of advanced software applications able to analyse incoming raw information by intelligently detecting and analysing patterns, translating voice and text foreign language conversations in real-time, and performing other analytical tasks, much of the problem caused by technology will likely also be solved by technology.

Secondly, the non-centralization and failure of agencies, departments, and governments to share vital intelligence presents a serious barrier in detecting early warning signals and is a key contributor to the issue of timely dissemination. The months leading up to the event provided an increasing number of reports indicating an imminent attack against U.S. interests.<sup>23</sup> It is this stretch of the time-line which begs the fast and focused availability of relevant intelligence which can only be achieved with the full cooperation of the community and an infrastructure to support it.

In addition to the above, it seems clear that the closer one comes to the actual event, the clearer the signal becomes; meaning, the improvement of tactical intelligence systems, even to the degree where systems are fully automated, reacting within minutes rather than days, weeks, or months, integrated with security systems, could bring great benefits in preventing future attacks. Given the 9/11 scenario, had air traffic control been alerted to, and able to immediately establish, without doubt, the status of the first hijacked flight, they may have had the chance to issue a security warning to all flights, prompting all to initiate an established security protocol, such as enforcing cockpit security, before the second, third, or fourth hijack teams had the opportunity to take control.

Finally, it is evident that cooperation on a global level is also highly desirable. As was discussed in the 9/11 Commission Report, “travel played a big part”<sup>24</sup> in the planning, preparation, and execution of the attacks, and given the nature of international travel (passports, advanced booking, payments, etc.) another opportunity presents itself here for the Intelligence Community to stay that one step ahead, but it is one which can only be achieved by the fostering of strong alliances and cooperation from around the world.

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<sup>23</sup> Hill, 10.

<sup>24</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 168.

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