

The Classified 9/11 '28 Pages': A Diversion from Real US-Saudi Issues

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The controversy surrounding the infamous "28 pages" on the possible Saudi connection with the terrorists that were excised from the joint Congressional report on the 9/11 attacks is at fever pitch. But that controversy is a distraction from the real problems that Saudi Arabia's policies pose to the United States and the entire Middle East region.

The political pressure to release the 28 pages has been growing for the past couple of years, with resolutions in both houses of Congress urging the president to declassify the information. But now legislation with bipartisan sponsorship has advanced in Congress that would deprive any foreign government of sovereign immunity in regard to responsibility for a terrorist attack on US soil and thus make it possible to sue the Saudi government in court for damages from the 9/11 attacks.



A masked activist carries a placard of Time magazine cover page with picture of Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden during an ant-US rally in Islamabad, on 28 September 2001 (AFP). -

That development prompted Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir to threaten last month to pull out as much as \$750 billion in Saudi assets held in the United States. The Obama administration opposes the legislation, warning of "unintended consequences" - specifically that the US government could face lawsuits because of its actions abroad. Analysts of Saudi economic policy, however, do not take al-Jubeir's threat very seriously since it would simply punish the Saudi economy.

Meanwhile, Obama in an interview with Charlie Rose of CBS News on 16 April, said that his Director of National Intelligence James Clapper is reviewing the 28 pages "to make sure that whatever it is that is released is not gonna compromise some major national security interest of the United States." Obama said Clapper was nearly finished so the issue might finally come to a head within the next few weeks.

But it is unlikely that the declassification of the redacted 28 pages would add any dramatic new revelation to the story of the Saudis and the hijackers who carried out the 9/11 attacks. Former Senator Bob Graham, who was head of the Senate side of the joint intelligence committee, has implied that the 28 pages containing incriminating evidence about the

hijackers' links to the Saudi government. But Graham's smoking gun is more likely to be speculative leads rather than real evidence of Saudi government support for the hijackers.

Past suspicions of an official Saudi role in assisting the hijackers has focused on the two Saudi al-Qaeda operatives, Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar, who moved to the San Diego area in early February 2000 and were immediately assisted by a Saudi man who was suspected by Saudis in the San Diego area of working for the Saudi intelligence service.

What many have cited as even more suspicious is the fact that \$130,000 in certified bank checks were sent to the wife of Omar al Bayoumi, the suspected Saudi intelligence agent, by the wife of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then the Saudi Ambassador to the United States and – more than a decade later – head of Saudi intelligence.

But even if those checks were a covert way of supporting an intelligence operative, the broader theory that Bayoumi's job was to take care of the hijackers does not hold up in light of the information now available. Investigations by the FBI, the CIA and the two major public 9-11 bodies turned up no evidence that Bayoumi provided any financial support to hijackers. On the contrary they showed that Hazmi and Mihdhar were getting money when they needed it through a direct al-Qaeda channel.

On the contrary, the 9/11 Commission learned that the hijackers had left the apartment they had gotten through Bayoumi very soon after moving in, apparently because al-Bayoumi had organised a party in the apartment that was videotaped by one of the participants, and that the al-Qaeda operatives had seemingly not welcomed the attention. Very soon after that, moreover, Mihdhar actually left the United States and didn't return until mid-2001. And in June 2000, Hazmi moved to Arizona apparently through a network of contacts that al-Qaeda had established in Tucson in the 1990s.

So Bayoumi did not play any role in the plans of Hazmi and Mihdhar, and the efforts to find any other evidence that the Saudi government was knowledgeable about bin Laden's 9/11 plans have so far turned up nothing. It is unlikely that the leads related to suspicions of Saudi involvement to be found in the 28 pages are completely different from those that have already been widely discussed in the media.

Bayoumi's relationship with Hazmi and Mihdhar has given rise to speculation about why the CIA failed to inform the FBI about the presence of Mihdhar in the United States until just two weeks before the 9/11 attacks. White House counter-terrorism chief Richard Clarke was outraged that the CIA had known that an al-Qaeda terrorist was on his way to the United States and had kept him in the dark, even though he was supposed to receive every intelligence report on terrorism. He said in a [2009 interview](#) that the only reason he could think that the CIA kept the information to itself was that Cofer Black, the head of the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Center, was determined to recruit Hazmi and Mihdhar as CIA agents inside al-Qaeda. Clarke speculated that the CIA would have used Saudi intelligence to approach the two al-Qaeda operatives and obviously assumed that Bayoumi was the Saudi agent who made the contact.

But more than a year had passed after the contact between the two al-Qaeda operatives and Bayoumi had been broken off before the CIA contacted the FBI and other agencies to request that Mihdhar be put on a watch list and began its own search for Mihdhar. That delay was obviously not the result of an effort to recruit Mihdhar and Hazmi. The truth is far more shocking: as the 9/11 Commission report makes clear, the CIA's Counter-Terrorism

Center had not even continued to focus on Mihdhar after first learning about his visa in February 2000. It had already lost track of him, and had moved on to other issues. Not until a review in August 2001 had revealed its oversight did the CTC do anything about Mihdhar, which is why the hijackers were not tracked down before 11 September.

The Saudi regime certainly played a role in the trail of events that led to 9/11, but there is no need to wait for the declassification of the 28 pages to understand that trail. It has long been well documented that the socio-political constituency for bin Laden's anti-US organisation in the kingdom was so large and influential that the government itself was forced to tread with extreme caution on al-Qaeda until the group's attacks on the Saudi regime began in 2003.

The Clinton administration had learned that Saudi supporters of bin Laden were being allowed to finance his operations through Saudi charities. The regime systematically denied CIA requests for bin Laden's birth certificate, passport and banks records. 9/11 Commission investigators learned, moreover, that after bin Laden's move from Sudan to Afghanistan in May 1996, a delegation of Saudi officials had asked top Taliban leaders to tell bin Laden that if he didn't attack the regime, the 1994 termination of his Saudi citizenship and freezing of his assets would be rescinded.

The US government has known that Saudi financing of madrassas all over the world has been a major source of jihadist activism. The Saudi regime's extremist Wahhabi perspective on Shia Islam is the basis for its paranoid stance on the rest of the region and the destabilisation of Syria and Yemen. The 28 pages should be released, but at a time when the contradictions between US and Saudi interests are finally beginning to be openly acknowledged, the issue is just another diversion from the real debate on Saudi Arabia that is urgently needed.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare.

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