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Chance to foil 9/11 plot lost here, report finds

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By Kelly Thornton
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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The "best chance" to uncover the Sept. 11 plot was lost in San Diego – where FBI agents were tantalizingly close to discovering two terrorists living with a government informant in Lemon Grove, according to a congressional report released yesterday.

The report, which lists mistakes and missed opportunities by intelligence agencies, found no single piece of intelligence that could have tipped off authorities and prevented the deaths of more than 3,000 people.

But, the report stated, the inability of the FBI and CIA to share information led to this scenario: Hijackers Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid al-Midhar rented rooms in the home of an unwitting FBI informant, who passed along their first names to his FBI handler.

But the names meant nothing because the CIA – which had observed the men at an al-Qaeda meeting in Malaysia in late 1999 – hadn't put them on a watch list and didn't do so until August 2001. The FBI office in San Diego wasn't told until after Sept. 11, according to the report.

The nearly 900-page report issued by a joint panel of the House and Senate intelligence committees focuses closely on events in San Diego, where four men were subjects of FBI counterterrorism investigations either before or while the hijackers were living here during 2000. Those men later turned out to have relationships with the hijackers.

But it is the specter of hijackers living right under the noses of FBI agents that has attracted the most attention. "The informant's contacts with the hijackers, had they been capitalized on, would have given the San Diego FBI field office perhaps the intelligence community's best chance to unravel the Sept. 11 plot," the report stated.

The report said the longtime informant – who fell under suspicion after the attacks but is now considered an unwitting landlord with no knowledge of his tenants' plan to crash a jet into the Pentagon – had

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"repeated contact" with hijackers Alhazmi and al-Midhar and mentioned their first names to his FBI handler in summer 2000. He described them as "good Muslim Saudi youths" who had come to study English. Although the report did not name the informant, law enforcement sources have identified him as Abdussattar Shaikh, a retired professor and community leader. He has vehemently denied being an informant.

Shaikh initially declined to discuss the report yesterday. But after reading it, he said he became incensed that he is being portrayed as an informant.

He said he met FBI Agent Steve Butler – whom sources have identified as Shaikh's "handler" – about eight years ago, when Butler came to the Islamic Center of San Diego, a large Clairemont mosque, to investigate a bomb threat. The two struck up a friendship and had lunch many times.

"We discussed our personal lives," Shaikh said yesterday. "I know his life, he knows mine. I know so many things about him; he was very kind to me."

He said they never discussed other Muslims or Muslim extremism, and that he never reported suspicious activity or people in the context that an informant might.

When Shaikh heard the names of his former renters announced as Sept. 11 hijackers during a radio news report, he said he pulled off the road – reeling from shock and disbelief – and immediately called Butler, "the only contact I had."

It was then that Shaikh helped his friend. "He never asked me anything, until after 9/11. Then he asked me. I told him, 'I will tell you what I know.'" Shaikh said he agreed to be polygraphed, and he passed.

Shaikh said part of his motivation in striking up relationships with Butler and others like him in law enforcement and government was to advance understanding of the Muslim religion.

"This is the greatest country and I try to bring Muslims into the mainstream and this is what I get?" he said.

Butler, who was sent to Washington to testify before the committee, told members that things might have been different if he'd had access to the intelligence information on the two hijackers.

"It would have made a huge difference," said the report, quoting Butler. "We would have immediately opened up investigations" and "probably would have" located them because they were "very, very close." Butler has since retired.

The report, and some of members of the congressional committee, sharply criticized intelligence agencies for underestimating al-Qaeda's presence in the United States and failing to aggressively investigate and share information about the group's activities before Sept. 11.

"The attacks of September the 11th could have been prevented if the right combination of skill, cooperation, creativity and some good luck had been brought to task," said Sen. Robert Graham, the Florida Democrat and presidential candidate who chaired the Senate Intelligence Committee during the investigation.

Dan Dzwilewski, who is in charge of the FBI office in San Diego, said the report underscored what he and his colleagues have thought all along: that nothing could have prevented the attacks. The hijackers were law-abiding, immersed in the community, listed their names in the phone book like anybody else and did nothing to call attention to themselves, he said.

"Even with all the information that was out there, even if it had been shared, it would not have given us an advance warning of the attack," he said.

The report detailed investigations of San Diego men by counterterrorism agents before or while the hijackers lived in San Diego. Those men, mentioned in the 832-page report, eventually became friends, helpers or employers of the two hijackers.

Two of the men listed in the report are the owner and manager of a business that employed Alhazmi.

The report indicated that one of the men, a Palestinian-born U.S. citizen who owns several businesses in the San Diego area, "cheered upon learning of the Sept. 11 attacks" and had been investigated by the FBI in 1991, 1994 and 1997 for associations with terrorist groups and threats against Israelis.

The men were not named in the report but Alhazmi worked briefly at Sam's Star Mart gas station on Spring Street in La Mesa, which at the time was a Texaco franchise owned by Osama "Sam" Mustafa and managed by Ed Salamah.

Also mentioned in the report was an unnamed Muslim cleric who became a spiritual adviser to Alhazmi and al-Midhar. Anwar Al-Awlaki is the former leader of the Masjid Ar-Ribat al-Islami mosque on Saranac Street on the border of San Diego and La Mesa, which was attended regularly by the hijackers and their acquaintances.

The FBI opened a counterterrorism inquiry into imam Anwar Al-Awlaki's activities in June 1999. When the imam moved to one of the largest Muslim communities in the country at the Dar Al-Hijrah mosque in Falls Church, Va., Alhazmi and hijacker Hani Hanjour followed and began attending that mosque, the report said.

Omar al-Bayoumi, who was suspected of being an advance man for the hijackers, was investigated by the FBI in 1998, but the report said only that it was related to counterterrorism.

Al-Bayoumi, a student, was suspected of being a Saudi intelligence official. In January 2000, he had a meeting at the Saudi Consulate in Los Angeles and then went to a restaurant where he met Alhazmi and al-Midhar, the report said. The pair arrived in San Diego soon after.

The hijackers stayed in al-Bayoumi's home for several days until he found them an apartment. He paid their first month's rent and security deposit and threw a welcoming party for them, the report said. FBI officials said yesterday that bank records indicate al-Bayoumi was reimbursed, presumably by the hijackers.

According to the report, al-Bayoumi also had ties to al-Qaeda, but an extensive investigation after the Sept. 11 attacks resulted in no terrorism charges. He was charged with immigration violations, which are not extraditable offenses.

A fifth man, Osama Basnan, was mentioned as someone the FBI was aware of before Sept. 11, though he was not under investigation until afterward. Basnan, a Saudi who pleaded guilty to using false immigration documents in San Diego federal court in October 2002, was also on the FBI radar before Sept. 11.

William Gore, who led the FBI office in San Diego before and after Sept. 11, 2001, said some of the San Diego men mentioned in the report have been mischaracterized for political purposes.

Copley News Service writer Otto Kreisher contributed to this report.

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