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Who Blew the Leads?

By Adam Zagorin

In the wake of 9/11, Saudi authorities came under criticism in the U.S. for sluggishness in investigating the attacks, in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens. Now it appears that the U.S. bears some responsibility for the slackness with which leads were pursued. According to several former employees of the U.S. embassy in Riyadh, the FBI legal attaché's office housed within the embassy was often in disarray during the months that followed 9/11. When an FBI supervisor arrived to clean up the mess, she found a mountain of paper and, for security reasons, ordered wholesale shredding that resulted in the destruction of unprocessed documents relating to the 9/11 investigations. A letter obtained by Time confirms that the Senate Judiciary Committee is investigating the matter.

In 2001 the FBI's Saudi office comprised a secretary and two agents--Wilfred Rattigan and his lieutenant, Egyptian-American Gamal Abdel-Hafiz. They also oversaw six nearby countries. The FBI sent reinforcements within two weeks of 9/11, but it appears that the bureau's team never got on top of the thousands of leads flowing in from the U.S. and Saudi governments. In a June 6 letter to FBI Director Robert Mueller, the Senate Judiciary Committee renewed a request for information about allegations that the FBI's Riyadh office was "delinquent in pursuing thousands of leads" related to 9/11.

When the senior FBI supervisor was sent to the Riyadh office nearly a year after 9/11, she found secret documents literally falling out of file drawers, stacked in binders on tables and wedged behind cabinets, according to an FBI briefing to Congress. The process of sending classified material to the U.S. had fallen so far behind that a backlog of boxes, each filled with three feet of paper containing secret, time-sensitive leads, had built up. Since embassies must be prepared for the possibility of a hostile takeover, the rule is that officials should need no more than 15 minutes to destroy all their sensitive documents. Accordingly, the supervisor ordered the shredding of hundreds, perhaps thousands of pages, many of them related directly to the ongoing 9/11 investigation, an FBI briefer told Congress.


In a statement to Time last week, the FBI said the shredded material was "duplicative" or "only informational."

But the Judiciary Committee's letter cites reports that some of the documents "had not been translated or reviewed." Or copied, according to several former Riyadh embassy employees. The result, they say, was that over two or more months, agents had to go back to Saudi security officials to try to obtain copies of what had been destroyed. "It was leads, suspicious-activity material, information on airline pilots," says an employee. In a deposition for a lawsuit filed by Bassem Youssef, the FBI's previous No. 1 in Riyadh, Mueller conceded that there were problems in the office after 9/11.

The Judiciary Committee letter, signed by chairman Arlen Specter and members Charles Grassley and Patrick Leahy, mentioned an allegation that Rattigan and Abdel-Hafiz at one point could not be contacted by the FBI and "may have surrendered their FBI cell phones to Saudi nationals." That charge possibly arose from a working trip that the agents' colleagues say the two made to Mecca during the Muslim pilgrimage season. The pair were required to give up their FBI-provided cell phones just as an FBI official in the U.S. was trying to get in touch with them. When the U.S.-based G-man called, according to one account, a Saudi answered the phone and was asked, "Who the f___ are you?" To which the Saudi replied, "And who the f___ are you?" The committee's letter also raised the allegation that "agents on temporary duty in Riyadh were provided prostitutes." In its statement, the FBI said it had found that charge to be unfounded. The bureau also said an investigation concluded that none of the management issues at the Riyadh office "rose to the level that would impact public safety."

Rattigan and Abdel-Hafiz have left Saudi Arabia, but both still work as FBI agents. Rattigan is suing the FBI, claiming that it discriminated against him on the basis of his race, religion and national origin. (He is an African American of Jamaican descent who converted to Islam in Saudi Arabia in the months after 9/11.) Rattigan at times wore Arab headgear and robes on work assignments in Saudi Arabia, as did Abdel-Hafiz, also a Muslim, which did not go down well with some FBI managers in Washington. Rattigan claims that among the ways the FBI thwarted him was by refusing to provide him with adequate resources to cope with the workload after 9/11. --With reporting by Brian Bennett/Washington

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