

A Lost Trail in Southeast Asia

In late 1999, the National Security Agency (NSA) analyzed communications associated with a suspected terrorist facility in the Middle East, indicating that several members of “an operational cadre” were planning to travel to Kuala Lumpur in early January 2000. Initially, only the first names of three were known—“Nawaf,” “Salem,” and “Khalid.” NSA analysts surmised correctly that Salem was Nawaf’s younger brother. Seeing links not only with al Qaeda but specifically with the 1998 embassy bombings, a CIA desk officer guessed that “something more nefarious [was] afoot.”⁴¹

In chapter 5, we discussed the dispatch of two operatives to the United States for their part in the planes operation—Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar. Two more, Khallad and Abu Bara, went to Southeast Asia to case flights for the part of the operation that was supposed to unfold there.⁴² All made their way to Southeast Asia from Afghanistan and Pakistan, except for Mihdhar, who traveled from Yemen.⁴³

Though Nawaf’s trail was temporarily lost, the CIA soon identified “Khalid” as Khalid al Mihdhar.⁴⁴ He was located leaving Yemen and tracked until he arrived in Kuala Lumpur on January 5, 2000.⁴⁵ Other Arabs, unidentified at the time, were watched as they gathered with him in the Malaysian capital.⁴⁶

On January 8, the surveillance teams reported that three of the Arabs had suddenly left Kuala Lumpur on a short flight to Bangkok.⁴⁷ They identified one as Mihdhar. They later learned that one of his companions was named Alhazmi, although it was not yet known that he was “Nawaf.” The only identifier available for the third person was part of a name—Salahsae.⁴⁸ In Bangkok, CIA officers received the information too late to track the three men as they came in, and the travelers disappeared into the streets of Bangkok.⁴⁹

The Counterterrorist Center (CTC) had briefed the CIA leadership on the gathering in Kuala Lumpur, and the information had been passed on to Berger and the NSC staff and to Director Freeh and others at the FBI (though the FBI noted that the CIA had the lead and would let the FBI know if a domestic angle arose). The head of the Bin Ladin unit kept providing updates, unaware at first even that the Arabs had left Kuala Lumpur, let alone that their trail had been lost in Bangkok.⁵⁰ When this bad news arrived, the names were put on a Thai watchlist so that Thai authorities could inform the United States if any of them departed from Thailand.⁵¹

Several weeks later, CIA officers in Kuala Lumpur prodded colleagues in Bangkok for additional information regarding the three travelers.⁵² In early March 2000, Bangkok reported that Nawaf al Hazmi, now identified for the first time with his full name, had departed on January 15 on a United Airlines flight to Los Angeles. As for Khalid al Mihdhar, there was no report of his departure even though he had accompanied Hazmi on the United flight to Los Angeles.⁵³ No one outside of the Counterterrorist Center was told any of this. The CIA did not try to register Mihdhar or Hazmi with the State Department’s