

dropped the matter.¹⁰⁹ When additional pieces of the puzzle arrived in the spring and summer of 2001, they were not put together.

The first piece of the puzzle concerned some intriguing information associated with a person known as “Mukhtar” that the CIA had begun analyzing in April 2001. The CIA did not know who Mukhtar was at the time—only that he associated with al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Zubaydah and that, based on the nature of the information, he was evidently involved in planning possible terrorist activities.¹¹⁰

The second piece of the puzzle was some alarming information regarding KSM. On June 12, 2001, a CIA report said that “Khaled” was actively recruiting people to travel outside Afghanistan, including to the United States where colleagues were reportedly already in the country to meet them, to carry out terrorist-related activities for Bin Ladin. CIA headquarters presumed from the details of the reporting that this person was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. In July, the same source was shown a series of photographs and identified a photograph of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed as the Khaled he had previously discussed.¹¹¹

The final piece of the puzzle arrived at the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit on August 28 in a cable reporting that KSM’s nickname was Mukhtar. No one made the connection to the reports about Mukhtar that had been circulated in the spring. This connection might also have underscored concern about the June reporting that KSM was recruiting terrorists to travel, including to the United States. Only after 9/11 would it be discovered that Mukhtar/KSM had communicated with a phone that was used by Binalshibh, and that Binalshibh had used the same phone to communicate with Moussaoui, as discussed in chapter 7. As in the Moussaoui situation already described, the links to Binalshibh might not have been an easy trail to find and would have required substantial cooperation from the German government. But time was short, and running out.¹¹²

Time Runs Out

As Tenet told us, “the system was blinking red” during the summer of 2001. Officials were alerted across the world. Many were doing everything they possibly could to respond to the threats.

Yet no one working on these late leads in the summer of 2001 connected the case in his or her in-box to the threat reports agitating senior officials and being briefed to the President. Thus, these individual cases did not become national priorities. As the CIA supervisor “John” told us, no one looked at the bigger picture; no analytic work foresaw the lightning that could connect the thundercloud to the ground.¹¹³

We see little evidence that the progress of the plot was disturbed by any government action. The U.S. government was unable to capitalize on mistakes made by al Qaeda. Time ran out.