

Flights of Saudi Nationals Leaving the United States

Three questions have arisen with respect to the departure of Saudi nationals from the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11: (1) Did any flights of Saudi nationals take place before national airspace reopened on September 13, 2001? (2) Was there any political intervention to facilitate the departure of Saudi nationals? (3) Did the FBI screen Saudi nationals thoroughly before their departure?

First, we found no evidence that any flights of Saudi nationals, domestic or international, took place before the reopening of national airspace on the morning of September 13, 2001.²⁴ To the contrary, every flight we have identified occurred after national airspace reopened.²⁵

Second, we found no evidence of political intervention. We found no evidence that anyone at the White House above the level of Richard Clarke participated in a decision on the departure of Saudi nationals. The issue came up in one of the many video teleconferences of the interagency group Clarke chaired, and Clarke said he approved of how the FBI was dealing with the matter when it came up for interagency discussion at his level. Clarke told us, "I asked the FBI, Dale Watson . . . to handle that, to check to see if that was all right with them, to see if they wanted access to any of these people, and to get back to me. And if they had no objections, it would be fine with me." Clarke added, "I have no recollection of clearing it with anybody at the White House."²⁶

Although White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card remembered someone telling him about the Saudi request shortly after 9/11, he said he had not talked to the Saudis and did not ask anyone to do anything about it. The President and Vice President told us they were not aware of the issue at all until it surfaced much later in the media. None of the officials we interviewed recalled any intervention or direction on this matter from any political appointee.²⁷

Third, we believe that the FBI conducted a satisfactory screening of Saudi nationals who left the United States on charter flights.²⁸ The Saudi government was advised of and agreed to the FBI's requirements that passengers be identified and checked against various databases before the flights departed.²⁹ The Federal Aviation Administration representative working in the FBI operations center made sure that the