

When the travelers left Kuala Lumpur for Bangkok, local officials were able to identify one of the travelers as Khalid al Mihdhar. After the flight left, they learned that one of his companions had the name Alhazmi. But the officials did not know what that name meant.

The information arrived at Bangkok too late to track these travelers as they came in. Had the authorities there already been keeping an eye out for Khalid al Mihdhar as part of a general regional or worldwide alert, they might have tracked him coming in. Had they been alerted to look for a possible companion named Nawaf al Hazmi, they might have noticed him too. Instead, they were notified only after Kuala Lumpur sounded the alarm. By that time, the travelers had already disappeared into the streets of Bangkok.

On January 12, the head of the CIA's al Qaeda unit told his bosses that surveillance in Kuala Lumpur was continuing. He may not have known that in fact Mihdhar and his companions had dispersed and the tracking was falling apart. U.S. officials in Bangkok regretfully reported the bad news on January 13. The names they had were put on a watchlist in Bangkok, so that Thai authorities might notice if the men left the country. On January 14, the head of the CIA's al Qaeda unit again updated his bosses, telling them that officials were continuing to track the suspicious individuals who had now dispersed to various countries.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence of any tracking efforts actually being undertaken by anyone after the Arabs disappeared into Bangkok. No other effort was made to create other opportunities to spot these Arab travelers in case the screen in Bangkok failed. Just from the evidence in Mihdhar's passport, one of the logical possible destinations and interdiction points would have been the United States. Yet no one alerted the INS or the FBI to look for these individuals. They arrived, unnoticed, in Los Angeles on January 15.

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. Since the CIA did not appreciate the significance of that name or notice the cable, we have found no evidence that this information was sent to the FBI.

Even if watchlisting had prevented or at least alerted U.S. officials to the entry of Hazmi and Mihdhar, we do not think it is likely that watchlisting, by itself, have prevented the 9/11 attacks. Al Qaeda adapted to the failure of some of its operatives to gain entry into the United States. None of these future hijackers was a pilot. Alternatively, had they been permitted entry and surveilled, some larger results might have been possible had the FBI been patient.

These are difficult what-ifs. The intelligence community might have judged that the risks of conducting such a prolonged intelligence operation were too high—potential terrorists might have been lost track of, for example. The pre-9/11 FBI might not have been judged capable of conducting such an operation. But surely the intelligence community would have preferred to have the chance to make these choices.