

[In a written response, the FBI took issue with the contention that the FBI was not treating al-Qa'ida as a serious threat in San Diego, citing an internal document dated March 15, 1999 which identified:

[Usama Bin Ladin as the number one priority of the U.S. Intelligence
[page 176] Community. [_____
_____]].

The Assistant Special Agent in Charge in San Diego told the Joint Inquiry that, upon assuming his duties in June 2000, he met with the counterterrorism squad to review this communication and emphasize the stated priorities].

The FBI response also noted that “there was no known al-Qaeda presence in San Diego before 9/11/2001.” However, the record confirms that future hijackers al-Mihdhar, al Hazmi, and perhaps Hanjour, were in the San Diego area and unknown to the FBI during the time they were there.

V. Associates of the September 11, 2001 Terrorists in the United States

In June 2002 testimony before the Joint Inquiry, DCI Tenet and FBI Director Mueller asserted, in explaining how the September 11 hijackers had avoided the notice of the Intelligence Community, that the conspirators intentionally avoided actions or associations that would have attracted law enforcement attention during their time in the United States. The DCI said:

Once in the U.S., the hijackers were careful, with the exception of minor traffic violations, to avoid drawing law enforcement attention and even general notice that might identify them as extremists. They dressed in Western clothes, most shaved their beards before entering the U.S., and they largely avoided mosques.

FBI Director Mueller appeared to concur:

While here, the hijackers effectively operated without suspicion, triggering nothing that would have alerted law enforcement and doing nothing that exposed them to domestic coverage. As far as we know, they contacted no known terrorist sympathizers in the United States.

The former Assistant Director for the FBI's Counterterrorism Division also emphasized this point in his testimony: [page 177]