

The fact that so many persons known to the FBI may have been in contact with the hijackers raises questions as to how much the FBI knew about the activities of Islamic extremist groups in the United States before September 11 and whether the FBI was well-positioned to thwart the attack. Moreover, the extent to which the hijackers interacted with and relied on other persons in the United States is vitally important in understanding the *modus operandi* of the hijackers and al-Qa'ida and in preventing future attacks.

At a Joint Inquiry hearing in October 2002, FBI Director Mueller commented on his earlier testimony about the hijackers' conduct in the United States:

[When] I say that the hijackers did “nothing that exposed them to domestic coverage” . . . [and when I say that] the hijackers “contacted no known terrorist sympathizers in the United States,” [I] meant in the context of the hijackers not contacting — before 9/11 — terrorist sympathizers on whom we had technical or other form of coverage. The point being that had they done so, we might have been able to identify them as a result of that coverage. When making that statement, I did not have in mind what may have been known to the Bureau about persons such as al-Bayoumi [a Saudi living in California, who may have assisted hijackers, al-Hazmi and al-Midhar]. I can see, however, how the statement could be subject to an alternate interpretation that even as of June 18 we had uncovered no persons who had had contact with the hijackers and were “terrorist sympathizers.” I can assure the Committee that I had no intent to mislead.

In a written response to the Joint Inquiry, the FBI explained that, “while [the hijackers] lived their day-to-day lives in an open manner, [they] pursued their inimical objectives in a cloistered, secretive and highly covert manner that kept them on the periphery of the FBI's counterterrorism coverage.” The FBI acknowledged that:

. . . the hijackers ‘may have had contact’ with subjects of prior or current [counterterrorism] investigations in San Diego. Such contact occurred principally through the hijackers’ attendance of religious services at various mosques in San Diego, some frequented by subjects of FBI [counterterrorism] investigations.

[Page 179] However, the FBI argued that there is “a significant difference between ‘having contact’ and ‘making contact’” and contends that “[t]he record does not suggest that the hijackers unilaterally or affirmatively sought out or initiated contact with the 14 persons named.”

Nonetheless, at least one FBI document prepared shortly after the September 11 attacks concluded that the hijackers, rather than operating in isolation, were assisted by “a web of