

Fifteen of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals who received visas in Saudi Arabia. Before September 11, the United States had not established heightened screening for illegal immigration or terrorism by visitors from Saudi Arabia. In a Joint Inquiry hearing, DCI Tenet described a less than rigorous review of visa applicants in Saudi Arabia before September 11:

Most of the young Saudis [hijackers] obtained their U.S. visas in the fall of 2000. The State Department did not have a policy to stringently examine Saudis seeking visas [page 197] before 11 September because there was virtually no risk that Saudis would attempt to reside or work illegally in the U.S. after their visas expired. U.S. Embassy and consular officials do cursory searches on Saudis who apply for visas, but if they do not appear on criminal or terrorist watchlists they are granted a visa. Thousands of Saudis every year are granted visas, as a routine; the majority are not even interviewed. The vast majority of Saudis study, vacation, or do business in the U.S. and return to the kingdom.

Consistent with this description of the situation, the Joint Inquiry's review confirmed that, prior to September 11, 2001, only a small percentage of visa applicants in Saudi Arabia were interviewed by consular affairs officers; travel agencies were used to deliver visa applications to consular offices in Saudi Arabia; and a relatively low standard was applied in scrutinizing visa applications for accuracy and completeness in Saudi Arabia.

The 19 hijackers received visas at consular offices abroad in accordance with routine procedures. The majority of the hijackers sought new passports shortly before applying for visas. Requests for new passports can stem from theft, loss, or accidental destruction. However, terrorists also often try to hide travel to countries that provide terrorist training by acquiring new passports.

Multiple-entry visas were issued to the hijackers for periods ranging from two to ten years. Eighteen of the nineteen received B-1/B-2 visas for tourist and business purposes. The nineteenth hijacker, Hani Hanjour, was issued a B-1/B-2 visa in error. He should have been issued an F-1 visa for study in the United States because he had expressed a desire to study English here. Recognizing the error, the INS issued Hanjour an F-1 visa when he arrived in the United States.

At their ports-of-entry, the hijackers were issued "stay visas" valid for six months. Some hijackers, Atta, Hanjour, al-Shehhi, al-Mihdhar, and Jarrah, entered and re-entered the United States for several six-month periods before September 11. They stayed for five or six months,