

went abroad for weeks or months, re-entered the United States, and received additional six-month stays.

Since the majority of the hijackers were Saudi nationals who received their visas in Saudi Arabia, questions have been raised about the “Visa Express” program, a process in many countries that encourages visa applicants to submit non-immigrant applications to designated travel agencies or other collection points for forwarding to U.S. embassies. In Joint Inquiry interviews, State Department [page 198] officials described Visa Express as simply an application collection process and not a visa adjudication, issuance, or determination system. Visa Express is merely a way of “dropping the application off.” Travel agencies assist by giving applicants correct forms, helping non-English speakers fill out the forms, and collecting fees. Approximately sixty embassies and consulates throughout the world use travel agencies or other businesses in this manner.

The Visa Express program in Saudi Arabia began in May 2001. Five of the 19 hijackers applied for visas in Saudi Arabia in June, so it is likely that they used travel agencies to acquire application forms and deliver them to the embassy. None of the five, including al-Mihdhar, was on a watchlist at the time. Thus, when name checks were performed, the system showed no derogatory information. If derogatory information did exist in the system, as was the case with a suspected terrorist who applied for a visa in Saudi Arabia in August 2001 under the Visa Express program, the watchlist system should block issuance of a visa.

State Department officials informed the Joint Inquiry that the Visa Express program was terminated in Saudi Arabia in July 2002 because news reports suggested that the program allowed Saudi applicants to skirt the normal process. According to State Department officials, the program did not affect the number of Saudis interviewed because applicants are selected for interviews when their applications present signs of an intention to immigrate. These officials said that all applications, including those delivered to consular officers under the Visa Express program in Saudi Arabia, were checked against the watchlist.

The Joint Inquiry also received information from the Immigration and Naturalization Service about the 19 hijackers, two of whom, including Nawaf al-Hazmi, had overstayed their visas. In addition, Hani Hanjour had been issued an F-1 visa to study English, but did not