

operations as a problem, claiming that the CIA took advantage of this requirement to prevent FBI sources from operating overseas. Another FBI agent stated that FBI Headquarters management did not readily approve overseas travel for sources because of its belief that the Bureau should focus on activity within the United States. When management did approve such operations, it often declined to allow the responsible agents to accompany the sources while traveling overseas, a decision some agents believe significantly diminished the quality of the operations.

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The Joint Inquiry was told by several officials that the FBI was not using its network of counterterrorism sources in the most effective and coordinated manner. The Bureau focused source reporting on cases and subjects within specific field offices and did not adequately use sources to support a national counterterrorism intelligence program. In 1999, the FBI received reporting that a terrorist organization was planning to send students to the United States for aviation training. In response, an operational unit at FBI Headquarters instructed twenty-four field offices to “task sources” for information. However, it appears that no FBI sources were asked about the matter. The problems experienced in Phoenix and Minneapolis – both of which are discussed in separate sections – further suggest that the FBI did not effectively task its sources in the United States to follow up on suspicious activity.

[This problem was painfully manifest in August 2001, when the FBI was made aware by CIA that terrorist suspects Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar were in the United States. Neither the FBI field offices that were involved in the search nor FBI Headquarters thought to ask FBI field offices to ask their sources whether they were aware of the whereabouts of the two individuals, who later took part in the September 11 attacks. A San Diego FBI field office agent who handled such sources, including the source who had numerous contacts with Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, insisted to the Joint Inquiry that he would have been able to find them through his sources].

Finally, that same agent testified that he had “never” discussed any FBI interest in Bin Ladin or al-Qa’ida with that source prior to September 11, “because that was not an issue in terms of my assignments. I was interested in Hamas, Hizbollah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the whole different range.” He stated that “we knew [al-Qa’ida] was an important person or important organization. But we