

# Agent Linked Pilot Trainees, Bin Laden

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**WASHINGTON** — Weeks before Sept. 11, an FBI agent connected several students at Arizona aviation schools to a militant Muslim group whose founder talked of attacking airports and received a letter from Osama Bin Laden encouraging the downing of commercial airliners, government officials say.

Agent Ken Williams' July 2001 memo raised concerns about the students' affiliation with Sheik Omar Bakri Mohammed's group because the sheik had been involved with a fatwa — an Islamic call to action — that suggested airports as one of several legitimate attack targets in the United States, officials told The Associated Press.

In addition, Williams had identified another Muslim figure in Arizona who wasn't training at aviation schools but was linked through phone communications to one of bin Laden's top lieutenants, Abu Zubaydah, the officials said Wednesday, speaking only on condition of anonymity.

The agent had suspicions that the man might be communicating with one or more the flight school students, but he never succeeded in making a connection, officials said.

The officials declined to further describe the communications or the man who contacted Abu Zubaydah, citing concerns about protecting intelligence-gathering methods.

Abu Zubaydah is believed to be bin Laden's operational chief, who ran al-Qaida's terrorist training camps and is suspected of helping organize the Sept. 11 hijackings, U.S. officials have said previously.

Abu Zubaydah was captured by the FBI and Pakistani officials during a raid in March and remains in U.S. custody. During interrogations, Abu Zubaydah has alleged several threats against U.S. targets that have prompted protective warnings, officials say.

Current and former government officials familiar with Williams' memo and debriefings told the AP the counterterrorism agent from Phoenix had marked his July 10 memo as routine, meaning it did not require urgent action because of an imminent threat.

But they said the five-page document laid out in extensive investigative detail his concerns that students learning piloting, aviation engineering and airport operations at Arizona aviation schools might be preparing to help bin Laden carry out an attack.

Asked Wednesday whether he thought the agent was prophetic, Vice President Dick Cheney answered, "Well, I think he was."

"I'll be the last to argue the system worked perfectly. There's a lot we can do to improve it," Cheney said on CNN.

The officials said the agent had ascertained that several of the Arab students held anti-American views, and that one had expressed his hatred in extreme terms. Through interviews and intelligence, Williams linked several of the Middle Eastern students to the Al-Muhajiroun, an Islamic extremist group in London, the officials said.

There has never been in any evidence that links these students to the Sept. 11 hijackers. And officials have not identified the students or their current whereabouts.

Bakri, also known as Omar Bakri Fostok, has been connected by U.S. and British intelligence to bin Laden and has openly supported bin Laden's calls for jihad, or holy war, against the United States, the officials said.

Williams' memo mentioned one fatwa involving Bakri that identified several possible targets, including airports, the officials said.

Not mentioned in Williams' memo were several other links between the London sheik, who is of Syrian descent, and bin Laden.

Bakri was one of several Muslim leaders to receive a letter faxed from Afghanistan in the summer of 1998 from bin Laden that laid out four objectives for a jihad against the United States, including downing airliners.

"Bring down their airliners. Prevent the safe passage of their ships. Occupy their embassies. Force the closure of their companies and banks," the bin Laden letter to Bakri read.

Bakri also is quoted as calling himself "the mouth, eyes and ears" of bin Laden and his group recruits young Muslims to participate in a jihad across the globe.

Shortly after the USS Cole bombing in Yemen in October 2000, Bakri received an international call claiming responsibility for the attack on the U.S. ship from "Muhammad's Army," an extremist group previously known to be active only in

the Russian regions of Chechnya and Dagestan. U.S. officials believe bin Laden was behind that attack as well.

Bakri has issued other fatwas against British leaders and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf – some since Sept. 11, officials said.

The sources' description of Williams' evidence provides the most extensive disclosure to date of what prompted the veteran counterterrorism agent from Phoenix to send an electronic communication to FBI headquarters in Washington asking that the FBI canvass all U.S. flight schools to identify other Middle Eastern students who might be training.

He also asked that a system be set up to allow federal immigration officials to warn local FBI offices when new students came to train at aviation schools. The FBI had not acted on his suggestions before Sept. 11.

Williams' memo was sent to about 10 officials who worked in the Radical Fundamentalist Unit, the research unit and the bin Laden desk at FBI headquarters in Washington and for the anti-terrorism squad at the FBI's office in New York City, officials said.

Williams has told congressional investigators he subsequently received a message from headquarters indicating terrorism experts were evaluating his intelligence and his request for a flight school canvass and that it might be referred to the FBI's office in Portland, Ore., officials said.

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