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BBC: DID BUSH TURN A BLIND EYE TO TERRORISM?

BBC Newsnight

Tuesday, November 6, 2001

(BBC TRANSCRIPT)

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GREG PALAST:

The CIA and Saudi Arabia, the Bushes and the Bin Ladens. Did their connections cause America to turn a blind eye to terrorism?

UNNAMED MAN:

There is a hidden agenda at the very highest levels of our government.

JOE TRENTO, (AUTHOR, "SECRET HISTORY OF THE CIA"):

The sad thing is that thousands of Americans had to die needlessly.

PETER ELSNER:

How can it be that the former President of the US and the current President of the US have business dealings with characters that need to be investigated?

PALAST:

In the eight weeks since the attacks, over 1,000 suspects and potential witnesses have been detained. Yet, just days after the hijackers took off from Boston aiming for the Twin Towers, a special charter flight out of the same airport whisked 11 members of Osama Bin Laden's family off to Saudi Arabia. That did not concern the White House.

Their official line is that the Bin Ladens are above suspicion - apart from Osama, the black sheep, who they say hijacked the family name. That's fortunate for the Bush family and the Saudi royal household, whose links with the Bin Ladens could otherwise prove embarrassing. But Newsnight has obtained evidence that the FBI was on the trail of other members of the Bin Laden family for links to terrorist organisations before and after September 11th.

This document is marked "Secret". Case ID - 199-Eye WF 213 589. 199 is FBI code for case type. 9 would be murder. 65 would be espionage. 199 means national security. WF indicates Washington field office special agents were investigating ABL - because of it's relationship with the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, WAMY - a suspected terrorist organisation. ABL is Abdullah Bin Laden, president and treasurer of WAMY.

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This is the sleepy Washington suburb of Falls Church, Virginia where almost every home displays the Stars and Stripes. On this unremarkable street, at 3411 Silver Maple Place, we located the former home of Abdullah and another brother, Omar, also an FBI suspect. It's conveniently close to WAMY. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth is in this building, in a little room in the basement at 5613 Leesburg Pike. And here, just a couple blocks down the road at 5913 Leesburg, is where four of the hijackers that attacked New York and Washington are listed as having lived.

The US Treasury has not frozen WAMY's assets, and when we talked to them, they insisted they are a charity. Yet, just weeks ago, Pakistan expelled WAMY operatives. And India claimed that WAMY was funding an organisation linked to bombings in Kashmir. And the Philippines military has accused WAMY of funding Muslim insurgency. The FBI did look into WAMY, but, for some reason, agents were pulled off the trail.

TRENTO:

The FBI wanted to investigate these guys. This is not something that they didn't want to do - they wanted to, they weren't permitted to.

PALAST:

The secret file fell into the hands of national security expert, Joe Trento. The Washington spook-tracker has been looking into the FBI's allegations about WAMY.

TRENTO:

They've had connections to Osama Bin Laden's people. They've had connections to Muslim cultural and financial aid groups that have terrorist connections. They fit the pattern of groups that the Saudi royal family and Saudi community of princes - the 20,000 princes - have funded who've engaged in terrorist activity.

Now, do I know that WAMY has done anything that's illegal? No, I don't know that. Do I know that as far back as 1996 the FBI was very concerned about this organisation? I do.

PALAST:

Newsnight has uncovered a long history of shadowy connections between the State Department, the CIA and the Saudis. The former head of the American visa bureau in Jeddah is Michael Springman.

MICHAEL SPRINGMAN:

In Saudi Arabia I was repeatedly ordered by high level State Dept officials to issue visas to unqualified applicants. These were, essentially, people who had no ties either to Saudi Arabia or to their own country. I complained bitterly at the time there. I returned to the US, I complained to the State Dept here, to the General Accounting Office, to the Bureau of Diplomatic Security and to the Inspector General's office. I was met with silence.

PALAST:

By now, Bush Sr, once CIA director, was in the White House. Springman was shocked to find this wasn't visa fraud. Rather, State

and CIA were playing "the Great Game".

SPRINGMAN:

What I was protesting was, in reality, an effort to bring recruits, rounded up by Osama Bin Laden, to the US for terrorist training by the CIA. They would then be returned to Afghanistan to fight against the then-Soviets.

The attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 did not shake the State Department's faith in the Saudis, nor did the attack on American barracks at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia three years later, in which 19 Americans died. FBI agents began to feel their investigation was being obstructed. Would you be surprised to find out that FBI agents are a bit frustrated that they can't be looking into some Saudi connections?

MICHAEL WILDES, (LAWYER)

I would never be surprised with that. They're cut off at the hip sometimes by supervisors or given shots that are being called from Washington at the highest levels.

PALAST:

I showed lawyer Michael Wildes our FBI documents. One of the Khobar Towers bombers was represented by Wildes, who thought he had useful intelligence for the US. He also represents a Saudi diplomat who defected to the USA with 14,000 documents which Wildes claims implicates Saudi citizens in financing terrorism and more. Wildes met with FBI men who told him they were not permitted to read all the documents. Nevertheless, he tried to give them to the agents.

WILDES:

"Take these with you. We're not going to charge for the copies. Keep them. Do something with them. Get some bad guys with them." They refused.

PALAST:

In the hall of mirrors that is the US intelligence community, Wildes, a former US federal attorney, said the FBI field agents wanted the documents, but they were told to "see no evil."

WILDES:

You see a difference between the rank-and-file counter-intelligence agents, who are regarded by some as the motor pool of the FBI, who drive following diplomats, and the people who are getting the shots called at the highest level of our government, who have a different agenda - it's unconscionable.

PALAST:

State wanted to keep the pro-American Saudi royal family in control of the world's biggest oil spigot, even at the price of turning a blind eye to any terrorist connection so long as America was safe. In recent years, CIA operatives had other reasons for not exposing Saudi-backed suspects.

TRENTO:

If you recruited somebody who is a member of a terrorist organisation, who happens to make his way here to the US, and even though you're not in touch with that person anymore but you have used him in the past, it would be unseemly if he were arrested by the FBI and word got back that he'd once been on the payroll of the CIA. What we're talking about is blow-back. What we're talking about is embarrassing, career-destroying blow-back for intelligence officials.

PALAST:

Does the Bush family also have to worry about political blow-back? The younger Bush made his first million 20 years ago with an oil company partly funded by Salem Bin Laden's chief US representative. Young George also received fees as director of a subsidiary of Carlyle Corporation, a little known private company which has, in just a few years of its founding, become one of Americas biggest defence contractors. His father, Bush Senior, is also a paid advisor. And what became embarrassing was the revelation that the Bin Ladens held a stake in Carlyle, sold just after September 11.

ELSNER:

You have a key relationship between the Saudis and the former President of the US who happens to be the father of the current President of the US. And you have all sorts of questions about where does policy begin and where does good business and good profits for the company, Carlyle, end?

PALAST:

I received a phone call from a high-placed member of a US intelligence agency. He tells me that while there's always been constraints on investigating Saudis, under George Bush it's gotten much worse. After the elections, the agencies were told to "back off" investigating the Bin Ladens and Saudi royals, and that angered agents. I'm told that since September 11th the policy has been reversed. FBI headquarters told us they could not comment on our findings. A spokesman said: "There are lots of things that only the intelligence community knows and that no-one else ought to know.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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Award-winning reporter Palast writes Inside Corporate America for the London Observer. To read other Palast reports, to contact the author or to subscribe to his column, go to [GregPalast.Com](#)

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