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Called Off the Trail? FBI Agents Probing Terror Links Say They Were Told, 'Let Sleeping Dogs Lie'

By Brian Ross and Vic Walter  
Dec. 19

— Two veteran FBI investigators say they were ordered to stop investigations into a suspected terror cell linked to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network and the Sept. 11 attacks.

In a dramatic interview with ABCNEWS, FBI special agents and partners Robert Wright and John Vincent say they were called off criminal investigations of suspected terrorists tied to the deadly bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa. U.S. officials say al Qaeda was responsible for the embassy attacks and the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

"September the 11th is a direct result of the incompetence of the FBI's International Terrorism Unit. No doubt about that. Absolutely no doubt about that," Wright said. "You can't know the things I know and not go public."

In the mid-1990s, with growing terrorism in the Middle East, the two Chicago-based agents were assigned to track a connection to Chicago, a suspected terrorist cell that would later lead them to a link with Osama bin Laden. Wright says that when he pressed for authorization to open a criminal investigation into the money trail, his supervisor stopped him.

"Do you know what his response was? 'I think it's just better to let sleeping dogs lie,'" said Wright. "Those dogs weren't sleeping. They were training. They were getting ready."

The FBI says its handling of the matter was appropriate at the time.

"Truthfully, if 9/11 had not occurred, we wouldn't be here [giving the interview]," said Vincent, a 27-year veteran at the bureau until he retired a few days after being interviewed by ABCNEWS. "Because of 9/11, we're here because we see the danger."

'You Will Not Open Criminal Investigations'

The suspected terrorist cell in Chicago was the basis of the investigation, yet Wright, who remains with the FBI, says he soon discovered that all the FBI intelligence division wanted him to do was to follow suspected terrorists and file reports — but make no arrests.

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"The supervisor who was there from headquarters was right straight across from me and started yelling at me: 'You will not open criminal investigations. I forbid any of you. You will not open criminal investigations against any of these intelligence subjects,'" Wright said.

Even though they were on a terrorism task force and said they had proof of criminal activity, Wright said he was told not to pursue the matter.

¶ 1998 al Qaeda terrorists bombed two American embassies in Africa. The agents say some of the money for the attacks led back to the people they had been tracking in Chicago and to a powerful Saudi Arabian businessman, Yassin al-Kadi. Al-Kadi is one of 12 Saudi businessmen suspected of funneling millions of dollars to al Qaeda and who had extensive business and financial ties in Chicago.

Yet, even after the bombings, Wright said FBI headquarters wanted no arrests.

"Two months after the embassies are hit in Africa, they wanted to shut down the criminal investigation," said Wright. "They wanted to kill it."

The move outraged Chicago federal prosecutor Mark Flessner, who was assigned to the case despite efforts Wright and Vincent say were made by superiors to block the probe. Flessner said Wright and Vincent were helping him build a strong criminal case against al-Kadi and others.

"There were powers bigger than I was in the Justice Department and within the FBI that simply were not going to let it [the building of a criminal case] happen. And it didn't happen," Flessner said.

He said he still couldn't figure out why Washington stopped the case — whether it was Saudi influence or bureaucratic ineptitude.

"I think there were very serious mistakes made," said Flessner. "And I think, it perhaps cost, it cost people their lives ultimately."

Muslim Agent Refused to Record Fellow Muslim, Agent Says

Perhaps most astounding of the many mistakes, according to Flessner and an affidavit filed by Wright, is how an FBI agent named Gamal Abdel-Hafiz seriously damaged the investigation. Wright says Abdel-Hafiz, who is Muslim, refused to secretly record one of al-Kadi's suspected associates, who was also Muslim. Wright says Abdel-Hafiz told him, Vincent and other agents that "a Muslim doesn't record another Muslim."

"He wouldn't have any problems interviewing or recording somebody who wasn't a Muslim, but he could never record another Muslim," said Vincent.

Wright said he "was floored" by Abdel-Hafiz's refusal and immediately called the FBI headquarters. Their reaction surprised him even more: "The supervisor from headquarters says, 'Well, you have to understand where he's coming from, Bob.' I said no, no, no, no, no, no, I understand where I'm coming from," said Wright. "We both took the same damn oath to defend this country against all enemies foreign and domestic, and he just said no? No way in hell."

Far from being reprimanded, Abdel-Hafiz was promoted to one of the FBI's most important anti-terrorism posts, the American Embassy in Saudi

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Arabia, to handle investigations for the FBI in that Muslim country.

The FBI said it was unaware of the allegations against the Muslim agent when he was sent to Saudi Arabia or of two similar incidents described to ABCNEWS by agents in New York and Tampa, Fla. They said Abdel-Hafiz contributed significantly to many successful terror investigations.

In a statement to ABCNEWS, the FBI also defended the agent, saying he had a right to refuse because the undercover recording was supposed to take place in a mosque.

But former prosecutor Flessner said that was a lie and the mosque was never part of the plan.

"What he [Abdel-Hafiz] said was, it was against his religion to record another Muslim. I was dumbfounded by that response," said Flessner. "And I had perfectly appropriate conversations with the supervisors of his home office and nothing came of it."

#### Closing In on Bin Laden Money Trail

On Sept. 11, 2001, the two agents watched the terror attacks in horror, worried that men they could have stopped years earlier may have been involved.

The White House confirmed their fears. One month after the attacks, the U.S. government officially identified al-Kadi — the same man the FBI had ordered Wright and Vincent to leave alone years earlier — as one of bin Laden's important financiers.

Al-Kadi told ABCNEWS he can prove his total innocence, repeatedly denying, from his office in Riyadh, any connection to bin Laden or al Qaeda.

"Not even one cent went to Osama bin Laden," he said.

But on Dec. 6, U.S. Customs agents, as part of their own investigation, conducted a midnight search of a Boston-area company believed to be secretly owned and controlled by al-Kadi.

The company provides computer software to the FBI and other key federal agencies, which means al-Kadi and his employees could have had access to some of the government's most sensitive secrets.

Al-Kadi is on the U.S. government's "dirty dozen" list of leading terror financiers being investigated by the CIA. The federal government says it is pursuing possible criminal charges.

"I was relieved that Customs was picking it up ... where we failed big time," said Wright. "There's so much more. God, there's so much more. A lot more."

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