

9/11 report's classified '28 pages' about potential Saudi Arabia ties released

Long-classified section of report raises questions about whether Saudi nationals who were in contact with the hijackers knew what they were planning

David Smith in Washington

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The Obama administration has released the long-classified 28 pages of the official congressional report on the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, which concerned the alleged ties of the Saudi Arabian government to the 9/11 hijackers.

Publishing the long-awaited pages 13 years after they were first classified, the White House insisted they show no link between Saudi Arabia and the hijackers who carried out the terrorist attacks. The pages put into the public domain the remaining unseen section of the 2002 report, from the joint congressional inquiry into intelligence community activities before and after the 9/11 attacks.

“This information does not change the assessment of the US government that there’s no evidence that the Saudi government or senior Saudi individuals funded al-Qaida,” said Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary. “The number one takeaway from this should be that this administration is committed to transparency even when it comes to sensitive information related to national security.”

The publication, awaited for 13 years, will not necessarily end speculation around Saudi influence, however.

The 28 pages show that, according to FBI documents, several numbers found in the phone book of Abu Zubaida, a senior al-Qaida operative captured in Pakistan in March 2002 who is still being detained at Guantánamo Bay, could be linked, at least indirectly, to phone numbers in the US. Among them was a number “subscribed to” by a company in Aspen, Colorado, that managed the residence of the then Saudi ambassador, Bandar bin Sultan.

In addition, according to an FBI document, the phone number of a bodyguard at the Saudi embassy in Washington, “who some have alleged may be a” - several words have been redacted - “was also found in Abu Zubaida’s possession”.

Former president George W Bush had classified the chapter, part of a bigger 2002 congressional investigation into the 9/11 attacks, to protect intelligence sources and methods and, many believe, to avoid offending Saudi Arabia, an oil-rich US ally.

Later investigations found no evidence that the Saudi government or senior Saudi officials

knowingly backed the 19 hijackers of whom were from Saudi Arabia. But politicians and relatives of victims pushed to get the pages published because of questions over whether Saudi nationals in contact with the hijackers after they arrived in the US knew what they were plotting. Barack Obama ordered a declassification review.

The House intelligence committee voted to reveal the pages but with certain redactions to protect sources. Devin Nunes, chairman of the committee, said: "I support the administration's decision to declassify this section of the post-9/11 joint inquiry. Because the information can be released without jeopardising national security, the American people should be able to access it."

"However, it's important to note that this section does not put forward vetted conclusions, but rather unverified leads that were later fully investigated by the intelligence community."

Many of the intelligence community's findings were included in the 9/11 commission report, he added, as well as in a newly declassified executive summary of a CIA-FBI joint assessment that will soon be released by the director of national intelligence.

Adam Schiff, ranking member of the committee, said: "I hope that the release of these pages, with appropriate redactions necessary to protect our nation's intelligence sources and methods, will diminish speculation that they contain proof of official Saudi government or senior Saudi official involvement in the 9/11 attacks."

"The intelligence community and the 9/11 commission, which followed the joint inquiry that produced these so-called 28 pages, investigated the questions they raised and was never able to find sufficient evidence to support them. I know that the release of these pages will not end debate over the issue, but it will quiet rumours over their contents - as is often the case, the reality is less damaging than the uncertainty."

Harry Reid, the Democratic leader in the Senate, said he was pleased by the release. "The American public deserved to see the report's declassified contents and now they can."

Saudi Arabia also welcomed the decision, hoping it would draw a line under the matter. Its ambassador to the US, Abdullah al-Saud, said: "Since 2002, the 9/11 commission and several government agencies, including the CIA and the FBI, have investigated the contents of the '28 pages' and have confirmed that neither the Saudi government, nor senior Saudi officials, nor any person acting on behalf of the Saudi government provided any support or encouragement for these attacks."

"We hope the release of these pages will clear up, once and for all, any lingering questions or suspicions about Saudi Arabia's actions, intentions, or long-term friendship with the United States."

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