



## The 9/11 Report

*The Story of the terrorist attacks upon America in 2001*

Reviewed by

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This is the story of the terrorist attacks upon America from the viewpoint of the 9/11 Commission, which for almost two years examined the facts and circumstances surrounding these incidents. A narrative with recommendations was its mandate, given by Congress a year after the day in September 2001 that rocked the world. Shortly after the release of the report at the end of July 2004, it was already in the hands of one million readers. It is a spectacular document.

### Cold War's End

The approximately 50 recommendations can be compared to the changes that Washington implemented after each world war. But this report marks the end of a different kind of conflict. For the so-called Cold War ended only with the shocking attacks on America. Until September 11, 2001, the United States went on structurally and mentally in the Cold War. This allowed the terrorists to carry out their plans. Today America is at war against Islamist terrorism - of course not against Islam, as the report underlines several times. However, conflicts between North and South are gaining center stage, and the Middle East is their main theater. The report underscores this in detail.



Photo: W.G. Schwanitz

The familiar Manhattan skyline turned into a zone of attacks and devastation on 9/11.

The ten members of the commission and their staff, under the leadership of Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, reviewed more than 2.5 million pages of documents. They interviewed more than 1,200 individuals in ten countries. The report also includes parts of testimonies by POWs, such as Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, the mastermind of the attacks. Moreover, nearly every senior official from the current and the previous administrations was interviewed, including presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. A privately financed bureau is working now as a watchdog on how the recommendations are being implemented. One source was not mentioned: hijacker-videos that went missing and may surface someday.

After the attacks, fanciful explanations surfaced, especially in Europe and the Middle East, among them the theory that the incident was a homemade plot. The facts in the report disprove them all. The recent history of the terrorists and their plans appears to be well researched. The system was blinking red, but no one was able to connect the dots. The best insights were gained by Richard A. Clarke, who had been responsible for anti-terrorism at the White House since 1998. He knew that al-Qaeda already had sleeper cells in America. Nobody, however, maintains the report, foresaw that airplanes might be used as bombs. But the general idea is 30 years old.

## Shortcomings

This leads to the **first shortcoming** of the report: It is mainly focused on the time since 1993 and lacks a historical dimension on terror and terrorism. Naturally, the report was not intended for the academic reader. Nevertheless, it doesn't take a broad view - beyond the America horizon. Some developments are called new that are actually old. Terrorism came to America in 1993 with the first attack on the World Trade Center, but Europe and the Middle East have had to cope with it longer.

Even if we only consider developments related to American foreign policy, there is much more to be researched on terror and terrorism. After 1969, the administrations of Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan were plagued by it. The main point has been the conflict over Palestine between Arabs and Israelis. Americans developed some recipes that have been forgotten. The report has neglected the benchmarks of 1914, 1948 and 1969. For America, the most striking process began in 1942, when it became for the first time a Middle Eastern power.

This leads to the report's **second shortcoming**: Its authors avoided establishing historical relations between U.S. foreign policy and the terrorist attacks. In one part, they claim Osama bin Laden's grievance with the United States may have started in reaction to specific U.S. policies. In another part, they argue that neither poverty nor a foreign policy caused terrorism. Surely this is a slippery slope that promotes one-sided explanations or justifications of what happened on 9/11.

In Europe, common but incorrect are the polemics of "you earned what you got" and stories of the "poor" terrorists. On the other hand, happy people with reasonable prospects for a decent life rarely turn into extremists.

We should not underestimate the connection between foreign policy and the rise of terrorism. Before I illustrate it with a report by the American embassy in Kuwait to the State Department, I shall clarify a distinction that is made mostly in Europe and the Middle East. Terror is a repressive strategy by rulers who use the state monopoly on force to manipulate people so that they create or tolerate terrorist regimes. Terrorism is also a media-oriented use of shocking force by individuals who ambush mostly civilians to intimidate others or attract supporters. Either way, groups or loners follow an ideology.

Terror from above and terrorism from below can inter-weave functionally, structurally, nationally and globally. That happened in the Middle East in the last century: a regional system of terror and terrorism emerged with a lot of ideological and material support from foreign powers. Terror and terrorism were adversary forces in an international or transnational correlation. The report here is scanty, clouding the picture more than illuminating it.

Radical Islamic terrorism and Washington's policies are also historically connected in a chain of events in the Middle East. For instance, there was the 1953 overthrow of an elected government in Iran with U.S. backing. Three years later, Washington withdrew the credit to build the Aswan High Dam, troubling the Egyptians. Their radical response led to the Suez war of 1956, which not only showed that World War III could well have been ignited in that region, but opened the Middle Eastern door for Moscow. Surely, there are arguments on the American side too, but the accumulation of problems in the hostile East-West climate nourished a negative U.S. image. The Arab defeat during the war of 1967 turned into a Muslim trauma. West Germany and France stopped supplying weapons to areas of crisis.

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NEA	CU	INR	NO.					
E	P	IO	TO : Department of State					
L	FBO	AID	INFO : Amembassy BEIRUT					
	SP	MC	FROM : Amembassy KUWAIT					
	COM	FRB	DATE: November 14, 1968					
IN	LAB	TAR	SUBJECT: Press Criticism of US-Israeli Negotiations on Phantoms					
TR	XMB	AIR	REF :					
ARMY	CIA	NAVY	<p>An unidentified writer in the Kuwait weekly <u>al-Hadaf</u> has portrayed in vigorous terms the retribution that he would recommend be visited upon American Embassies in the Arab World in the event of delivery of Phantom aircraft to Israel. Translated excerpts from this item are attached. This journalistic foray, exceedingly blunt and virulent by local press standards, has evoked considerable comment in local diplomatic and western circles.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">COTTAM</p> <p>Enclosure: Translation of excerpts from unsigned column in Kuwait weekly <u>al-Hadaf</u>, October 31, 1968</p>					
OSD	USIA	NSA						
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Middle Easterners wondered who would shift the balance with new arms. Washington publicly considered delivering sophisticated Phantom jets to Israel the following year. In Kuwait City the Arab weekly *Al-Hadaf*, which was the organ of exiled Palestinians in the Gulf States, appeared. According to Mr. Cottam of the American embassy in a report to the State Department at the end of October 1968, the paper contained an inflammatory article and an appeal. An Arab in the article asks,

*What do I do if an Israeli Phantom kills my children? Then I blow up the American embassy. I find every American. A massacre will take place, and there shall be rivers of American blood in the streets. The Americans ought to recognize their mistake in delivering Phantoms to Israel for their own domestic-policy reasons. Stop the Arab oil and the American interests. American policy will deliberately open the Arab region for Communism [Phantoms arrived as helicopter gunships later].*

Translation of Excerpts from Unsigned Column  
in Kuwait Weekly "al-Hadaf," October 31, 1968

If Israel obtains these planes and attacks Kuwait, killing my son or daughter, what do I do? Everyone in Kuwait, in Iraq, in Egypt, in North Africa, in the Arabian Peninsula, in the Sudan, should ask himself this question. Are we to leave the American Flag hoisted in our country?

No.

If I am not hit by a Phantom Super-Jet, I shall find a bomb and go straight to the American Embassy and blow it up, and I shall fight every American for killing my children. The American people should realize the horrible mistake of giving such planes to Israel in exchange for internal political matters in USA.

If Phantom Super-Jets are given to Israel, a massacre will take place.

All American Embassies in the Arab World will be blown up and there shall be rivers of American blood in the streets.

This is ugly, very ugly indeed.

The oil of the Arabs willingly serves the interest of the Arab people and the American people.

Is this the compensation for goodness? Let the American Embassies in all the Arab World listen.

If Phantoms are delivered to Israel, the Americans should say goodbye to oil and to American interests. The Arab East shall be cleansed of every American citizen, and American policy will deliberately open the Arab World for Communism.

The following appeared in a box in al-Hadaf on the same date:

The Society of the Friends of the Enemies of USA in Kuwait announces its need for 14 FIDA'IYIN to be distributed over 14 Arab states, in order to blow up American Embassies in these states, and to kill Americans if their Government agrees to deliver Phantom Super-Jets to Israel.

Applicants should not be:

- i. Citizens of countries suffering from aggression, so that the above action will not destroy the blessed peaceful efforts.
- ii. Citizens of the oil states.

He who finds himself qualified for the above action should call at the above society accompanied by a Kuwaiti guarantor!

END OF EXCERPTS 

And there was this appeal:

*The society of friends of American enemies in Kuwait seeks 14 fighters. These fedayeen will be posted in 14 Arab countries to kill Americans and blow up their embassies if Phantoms arrive in Israel. Every volunteer has to have a Kuwaiti citizen as a sponsor.*

Here are the roots of the system of guarantors that the report now rightly singles out as a target in combating terrorists. What surfaced in 2001 had a long history. Many of the hijackers were familiar with Kuwait, Qatar, the Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. They acted in the radical spirit of *Al-Hadaf*.

Back to the question of how old the idea of the misuse of airliners in an enemy's hinterland is: The report indicates that Khalid Sheikh Muhammad got this idea at the end of 1998 with the blessing of Osama bin Laden. He had already tried it in the Manila plot, in which a dozen airliners were supposed to be blown up over the Atlantic. But the police in the Philippines, who informed the Americans, foiled it. The report describes it as an early manifestation of a new kind of terrorism.

Here is its **third shortcoming**: information gaps about terror and terrorism. Hijackings became a trend in the Middle East after the war of 1967. Palestinians, in their radicalism of weakness, tried to use this tool to attract media attention to the new situation, in which most of their land had fallen under Israeli occupation. The Munich Olympics in 1972 featured the first terrorist attack covered live worldwide. But the chaotic countermeasures only emboldened the terrorists of Fatah and Black September. A year later, a top-secret report by the East German intelligence service detailed "plans of Palestinian and Israeli terrorists" (Palestinians in the Israeli sphere).

According to this document, many Fatah functionaries had refused to hijack planes from East European airlines like Aeroflot. They had planned to hijack a plane from a South Asian country such as Thailand and explode it over a densely populated area in Israel. To this end, the hijackers considered the use of uniforms by European aviation companies, by the West German and British police, by the Swiss or U.S. army, and the use of fake Israeli passports. All elements were already present: disguised hijacking from low-security countries, fake uniforms and passports, planes as weapons of mass destruction in the enemy's civilian hinterland.

Thus, the step from population centers in Israel to similar centers in the United States, considered since 1969 as the enemy's larger hinterland and low-security zone, was not a big one. Even the suicide mission was not new; such an activity was considered a command action with the death of the actors as the ultimate consequence.

What was new 32 years later was the parallel actions and the dimension of the killing. Bin Laden looked for a psychological shock. He anticipated the towers' collapse and spoke of a Hiroshima.

The report's insight that in Islamic regions not much knowledge exists about the West is true. If intellectuals there know more, they often serve a fashionable Occidentalism, as the report states. Some of the recommendations target this situation.

But we can say the same about America: knowledge about Islamic regions has been not well-developed, whether among average citizens or prominent politicians. Those who did not work in the oil industry, tourism, the military, diplomacy, academics or business, or had no relatives in the Middle East, had no clue about the region - a huge sociocultural gap. The report itself displays inadequacies regarding the region: Sunnis are called a sect, the explanation of the historical roots of terrorism is weak, names in oriental languages are often misspelled.

The commission should have used the system of transliteration used by the Library of Congress. Then every foreign name could have appeared at least once as it is in the person's native land. A correct version is necessary, since the report mentions that terrorists got away through slightly changing their names. There needs to be a standard for checkpoints and watch lists as well. Yes, the officers there have to take the foreign names as they are in the passports, but one standard entry thereafter in the system could turn out to be important.

America has a short history with the Middle East. It decided the outcome of both world wars but then drew back. The defeat of the traditional powers Great Britain and France in the Suez war made America the leading power in the Middle East, but for Washington the region played a secondary role in the most important question: how to avoid a nuclear world war. There was a primary out-of-area reason to deal with the Middle East. Only a few administrations have really attempted to reach a just settlement of the conflict over Palestine. Was it solvable under the conditions of the hostile East-West politics of the Cold War, when the blocs sided with "their" parties?

### **The U.S. and Middle East after 1945**

We cannot be sure, but the hatred towards an originally sympathetic superpower rose. America remains a great hope in the Middle East. It would be desirable to have a similar fair and honest report on U.S. Middle East policy since World War II that might lead to understanding what are appropriate and inappropriate policies for the region and above all to a serious attempt to reach a just settlement of the main conflict, that between Arabs and Israelis. We should not wait too long. Other dangerous regional problems are rapidly accumulating.

**National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States:** The 9/11 Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Authorized Edition, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 567 pages. \$10.00, soft bound.

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