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## Saudi hijacker 'was key link to bin Laden'

US identifies Pentagon suicide attacker as having role in planning the bombing of USS Cole

[War on Terrorism: Observer special](#)

**Edward Helmore and Ed Vulliamy New York**  
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[The Observer](#)



US investigators have identified a Saudi as the man Tony Blair referred to as a key link connecting Osama bin Laden to the Pentagon attack and the bombings of the USS Cole last year and the two US embassies in East Africa in 1998.



American and British intelligence officials now believe Khalid al-Mihdhar, who died in the Pentagon attack, may have played a role in planning the events of 11 September equal to or exceeding that of Mohamed Atta, the 33-year old Egyptian named as the principal organiser.



Al-Mihdhar has taken on a 'more prominent' role in the investigation, senior US administration officials said yesterday, confirming theories developed by British intelligence.



He now appears to have the strongest connection to bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, because he is the only one known to have ties to the group's previous attacks against US targets.



Since late last year, the CIA had been aware of a man called Tawifiq bin Atash, known throughout bin Laden's network by his alias 'Khallad'. Khallad was born in Yemen and had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, going on to become bin Laden's bodyguard and a crucial lieutenant in the al-Qaeda structure: deemed too precious to die.

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According to US intelligence and federal investigators on bin Laden's trail, 'Khallad' was the pivotal figure behind the attack on the Cole. Late in January 2000, he was captured on a video shot in an hotel in Malaysia, along with a group of men known to be part of the al-Qaeda network. One was

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Fahad al-Quso, who was assigned to shoot a film of the suicide attack on the Cole.

Two others were Nawaf al-Hazami, travelling under surveillance by US intelligence, and Khalid al-Mihdhar. Both these names would resonate on 11 September, as being among the 19 hijackers. When one investigator saw their names he uttered an expletive.

As soon as it was determined that he had been at the Malaysian meeting, the appearance of al-Mihdhar there suddenly elevated his importance. But he proved an extraordinarily difficult figure to track. Not only did he use three or four different aliases, but US intelligence agencies spelt each in different ways and are not even certain that his name is really Khalid al-Mihdhar.

Still, it is believed that al-Mihdhar took Seat 12B on the American Airlines flight that crashed into the Pentagon, and eyewitness reports and surveillance tapes have placed him at Dulles airport where the flight originated.

Once he had entered the US in January on a Saudi passport, the FBI picked up his trail in San Diego where he took flying lessons at Sorbi's Flying Club in May 2000. Rick Garza, al-Mihdhar and al-Hazami's flight instructor at the school, has said that al-Mihdhar spoke little English but was able say that he wanted to obtain a private pilot licence.

They were impatient students, Garza said, saying they wanted to learn to fly jets, specifically Boeings. 'They had zero training before they got here, so I told them they had to learn a lot of other things first,' he told the New York Times. 'It was like Dumb and Dumber. I mean, they were clueless. It was clear to me they weren't going to make it as pilots.'

Al-Mihdhar appears to have left the United States in June 2000 and the trail goes dead for a year. Then, in July 2001, he flew from Saudi Arabia to New York on a different Saudi passport, officials say. This time, he listed his address as a hotel in New York but instead travelled to Virginia where he obtained a driving licence at the same time as Hani Hanjour, another of the suspected hijackers on the Pentagon plane.

By then, the CIA had already placed him at the Malaysia meeting and moved to put him on their watch list of potential terrorists. Realising he was already in the country, they alerted the FBI he was wanted in connection with the attack on the Cole.

The FBI has determined that some of the terrorists bought life-size training posters of the inside of Boeing cockpits from a flying shop in Ohio. The posters - priced at \$39.95 - show the exact locations of controls and detail the view the pilots would have from the Boeing 767s. Pilots use the posters for training.

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