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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BROADCASTING BOARD OF GOVERNORS

Office of Inspector General

Memorandum of Conversation

Visas for the 9/11 Hijackers
Subject

Embassy London
Office

1/28/03
Date

Tom Furey, Consular Section Chief
Official

Bert Krieg
Inspector

Thomas P. Furey was the Consular Section Chief at Riyadh from September 11, 2000 until July 2002. His predecessor was Alan Kepchar. During Mr. Furey's tenure in Saudi Arabia, four visas were issued to the September 11th hijackers at Riyadh, and 10 visas at Jeddah. He observed that the American visa adjudicators who accepted the applications and issued those visas were properly following the NIV procedures, policies and regulations that were in place in Saudi Arabia at that time.

The visa officers and consular associates assigned to the two posts in Saudi Arabia, and the two in the United Arab Emirates as well, were indeed carrying out accepted visa policy prevailing when the visas were issued to the terrorist hijackers. Adjudicator attention was fully focused on ferreting out potential immigrants, those applicants who might overstay their visit or work in the U.S. Those applicants proved to be TCNs since the overstay rates of Saudi and Emirati citizens visiting the U.S. were absolutely minimal. We had virtually no negative feedback from the INS, commented Mr. Furey. Both countries had such well established "welfare systems" that their citizens couldn't afford to stay away. Both had also applied for Visa Waiver Program status and were denied "only because they were unwilling to provide reciprocal treatment to visiting Americans." The Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Visa Office leadership in Washington was well aware of this situation and tacitly agreed that personal appearances could be waived for Saudis and Emiratis.

All four posts (Riyadh, Jeddah, Abu Dhabi and Dubai) have been strapped for consular resources over the past several years. Visa officers received no Arabic language training and usually had no overlap with their predecessors. Mr. Furey himself was obliged to regularly adjudicate visas during the lunch break and at other times. Incomplete visa applications were accepted because the problem lay with the outside amateur translators who assisted non-English speaking applicants – the vast majority – to fill in the forms. Since the applicants were returning home anyway, what difference did it make whether they listed their exact anticipated location in the U.S. and the like correctly and precisely, argued the adjudicators.

During the period prior to September 11th, Mr. Furey noted that there was virtually no input from his political section or other agency colleagues at post regarding potential Saudi terrorists or criminals. He could recall only one entry being submitted by Riyadh to the Visas Viper Program

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whose purpose was to enter those names in the CLASS watchlist. This intelligence vacuum occurred despite the well-known dissatisfaction with the Saudi royals by dissident groups in Saudi Arabia. Visa officers cannot read their applicants' minds and must rely on the intelligence community's input to effectively adjudicate potential terrorist cases; "we needed more and better information in CLASS," commented Mr. Furey.

When he arrived at Riyadh, Mr. Furey found his visa operation to be chaotic; applicant traffic at the embassy was very heavy, disorganized and continuous. And this was during the slow visa season. Every day new applicants came into the section to ask questions, to submit their applications and pay their visa fees. At the same time other applicants, mainly TCNs, were interviewed while visas were being issued.

To better organize this visa process and establish a satisfactory means of collecting the required MRV fees, Mr. Furey introduced the "Visas Express" concept. Visas Express was based on an adaptation of his previous experience in Mexico where a national "900 number" telephone system was used to set visa appointments, and banks were used to collect the visa fees. Unfortunately Saudi Arabia had no 900 number system and banks there were unwilling to collect visas fees. Consequently, Mr. Furey devised a procedure whereby 10 carefully screened and selected national travel agencies performed the preliminary visa data entry and fee collection functions, turning the completed visa applications over to the posts for review and adjudication. The visa adjudicators still had the same opportunity to interview applicants that they had before the program was inaugurated. Mr. Furey started Visas Express in May 2001 and put it into full operation the first of the following month to handle the June plus heavy visa volume.

Mr. Furey commented that his Front Office, Ambassador Fowler and DCM Chuck Brayshaw (who was also DCM in Mexico with Tom Furey), never tried to pressure visa adjudicators to issue visas. Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials did complain, however, when some of the TCN servants of the Royals were refused visas.

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