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WORLD

Trump Administration Turns Over Official's Name Amid Dispute Over Saudi Role in 9/11 Attacks

The limited disclosure, which follows pressure from victims' families, comes amid strained U.S. relations with Riyadh



The names of victims inscribed at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York. Nearly 3,000 people were killed when terrorists crashed hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and, after passengers resisted, a field in Pennsylvania. PHOTO: LI RUI/XINHUA/ZUMA PRESS

By Sadie Gurman and Aruna Viswanatha

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WASHINGTON—The Trump administration turned over a key piece of new information to lawyers for 9/11 victims' families, a move that could cast light on long-disputed reports of Saudi government involvement in the terrorist attacks.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation provided the name of a Saudi official contained in a

2012 report that the bureau has long sought to shield from full public view. It declined to release any other information the families had sought, which could have further complicated already-tense relations between Washington and Riyadh.

The decision, revealed in a Thursday court filing, marks the latest turn in a long battle between the families and the FBI to get access to an unredacted copy of the report and other information. The families sought the document as part of a lawsuit against Saudi Arabia that accuses its government of helping coordinate the 2001 attacks.

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Victims' families had for months urged the government to provide the full report, telling President Trump in a letter recently that it would help them "finally learn the full truth and obtain justice from Saudi Arabia."

The FBI, citing the "exceptional nature of the case" said it would provide only the name of the one Saudi official that the families had wanted most to obtain, but no other information. The name of the official won't be made public, but would be given privately to lawyers for the victims' families, according to the filing.

James Kreindler, an attorney for the families, said they intend to file a motion to lift the protective order, and would continue to fight for more information. He said the name that was revealed wasn't a surprise but declined to characterize the person further.

The families celebrated the decision. "This was a key document, but by no means the only evidence we have been pursuing and securing from the FBI," the families said in a statement, describing it as a "big victory and good result."

An FBI official played down the significance of the information, saying that the document's reference to the Saudi official at issue referred to an "investigative theory being pursued by the FBI at that time" and "does not represent an objective statement of fact."

The official said the FBI was shielding additional information to protect classified information related to “ongoing investigations” and to protect its source and methods. Attorney General William Barr asserted the state secrets privilege to keep the other information secret, saying there was a “reasonable danger” that releasing it would “risk significant harm to national security.”

Nearly 3,000 people were killed when terrorists crashed hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and, after passengers resisted, a field in Pennsylvania.

Saudi Arabia has denied official complicity in the attacks. While 15 of the 19 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, official U.S. government reviews haven't made public any concrete evidence of Riyadh's involvement.

The Saudi Embassy didn't respond to a request to comment.

The U.S. government's decision comes amid broader tensions between Washington and Riyadh, through which Mr. Trump has largely stood by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The document at issue consists of a four-page 2012 summary of an FBI inquiry into three people who may have assisted two of the hijackers in California in finding housing, obtaining driver's licenses and other matters.

Two of the people, Fahad al-Thumairy and Omar al-Bayoumi, were linked to the Saudi government, according to FBI and congressional documents. The third person, whose name is redacted, is described in the summary as having tasked the other two with assisting the hijackers.

Last year, lawyers for the families subpoenaed the FBI for an unredacted copy in the belief that the third person was potentially a senior Saudi official who exercised authority over both of the men.

Mr. Trump's allies had also urged him to release the information. Days after the October 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at a Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Rep. Matt Gaetz (R., Fla.), a close ally of the president, met in Washington with Prince Khalid bin Salman, younger brother of Prince Mohammed. Mr. Gaetz called on him to produce documents in the court case and “make right the loss of the 9/11 families,” Mr. Gaetz said.

At the time the prince, known as KBS, was serving as Saudi ambassador to the U.S., but he was recalled to the kingdom amid outrage over the killing. The CIA said in a secret assessment last year that it had medium-to-high confidence that Prince Mohammed probably ordered Mr. Khashoggi's death.

That has put Mr. Trump in a bind given his desire to maintain ties with the Saudi government, which he has said is an important ally and supports the U.S. defense industry with billions in arms purchases.

Saudi Arabia's official involvement in the planning of the 9/11 attacks is the subject of some dispute. The 9/11 Commission said in its 2004 report it didn't find evidence that Mr. al-Thumairy had provided assistance.

It also said it had seen "no credible evidence" that Mr. al-Bayoumi "believed in violent extremism or knowingly aided extremist groups."

In 2015, another 9/11-related commission revisited the issue and assessed more recent evidence regarding Messrs. al-Thumairy and al-Bayoumi, and said it didn't find the new information enough to change the original findings. It said there was an "ongoing internal debate" within the FBI about the potential significance of some of the information, and encouraged FBI leadership to continue the investigation accordingly.

Attorneys for the victims' families argued that the two men had provided support to two hijackers in a "highly coordinated, state-run-and-initiated covert operation," and filed affidavits written by former FBI officials over the past two years supporting their position.

The alleged mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, opened the door in July to helping victims of the attacks in their lawsuit against Saudi Arabia if the U.S. government spares him the death penalty at a Guantanamo Bay military commission.

— *Alex Leary*
contributed to this article.

Corrections & Amplifications

The 2015 review by the 9/11 Review Commission of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks was separate from the original 9/11 Commission. An earlier version of the article referred to it as the same commission. (9/13)

Write to Sadie Gurman at sadie.gurman@wsj.com and Aruna Viswanatha at Aruna.Viswanatha@wsj.com

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