

The FBI Is Keeping 80,000 Secret Files on the Saudis and 9/11

Shane Harris writes in the [“clear evidence” of support](#) for the hijackers from Saudi officials.

But in Florida, a federal judge is weighing whether to declassify portions of some *80,000 classified pages* that could reveal far more about the hijackers' Saudis connections and their activities in the weeks preceding the worst attack on U.S. soil.

The still-secret files speak to one of the strangest and most enduring mysteries of the 9/11 attacks. Why did the Saudi occupants of a posh house in gated community in Sarasota, Florida, suddenly vanish in the two weeks prior to the attacks? And had they been in touch with the leader of the operation, Mohamed Atta, and two of his co-conspirators?

No way, the FBI says, even though the bureau's own agents did initially suspect the family was linked to some of the hijackers. On further scrutiny, those connections proved unfounded, officials now say.

But a team of lawyers and investigative journalists has found what they say is hard evidence pointing in the other direction. Atta did visit the family before he led 18 men to their deaths and murdered 3,000 people, they say, and phone records connect the house to members of the 9/11 conspiracy.

The FBI did initially suspect something was off when their agents descended on the Sarasota house shortly after the attacks, tipped off by suspicious neighbors who had always found the family aloof.

Investigators found signs that the occupants had left in a hurry. Food was left on the counter and the refrigerator was stocked. Toys were still floating in the back-yard swimming pool. Dirty diapers were left in a bathroom. It also looked like the people who lived there weren't coming back. The mail was piling up outside, and the door to an empty safe was wide open. Three cars remained parked in the garage and driveway.

The FBI later said it came up with reasonable answers to explain this odd behavior. But not until after the Tampa field office opened an investigation that claimed to find "numerous connections" between the family and the 9/11 hijackers.

The final answers about what really happened in Sarasota may lie somewhere in those 80,000 pages. To be sure, not all of them concern the FBI's investigation of the Saudi family. The documents represent the entire case file of the 9/11 attacks at the Tampa field office. But some subset surely will reveal more about what the FBI knew, and when, and why it reached a different conclusion.

For the past two years, U.S. district court judge William Zloch has been going through the files, page-by-page, to determine what information that pertains to the Saudi case can be released.

But based on about three dozen pages that had been made public already under the Freedom of Information Act, and [exposé](#) on Christensen's independent news site, [episode of 60 Minutes](#) about the controversy. He said he hopes the judge saw the show, and that the "intense national interest" that's brewing around Saudi connections to 9/11 might resonate with him.

Two years or waiting for the judge's ruling may be close to an end. "I believe this is not a stalling tactic at all. The judge is doing what he has to comply" with rules for handling classified information, Christensen said. "But I would urge him to speed it up."