

MIKE KELLY

**9/11 families: Attorney General Bill Barr must release secret files on Saudi Arabia | Mike Kelly**  
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When several thousand people sign a letter, you expect it to get noticed. But if recent history is any guide, don't count on it.

On Tuesday, 3,361 survivors of the 9/11 terror attacks and relatives of those who died sent a strident letter to Attorney General William Barr, demanding still-secret intelligence files that could shed light on whether Saudi Arabian officials helped to carry out the deadliest terror attack in American history.

So far, Barr has held back on sharing those files for what has come to be known as the "9/11 community," many of whom are part of a federal lawsuit, filed in New York City, claiming numerous Saudi links to the attacks.

While continuing to cite a "state secrets" law in refusing to declassify the Saudi files, Barr nonetheless shared some of those documents with lawyers representing alleged 9/11 ringleader Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is facing trial and a possible death sentence at the U.S. Navy Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The news of the transfer of the files to Mohammed's lawyers — first reported in June by this columnist in The Record, NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY Network —infuriated many 9/11 survivors and relatives of victims and spurred them to write their letter to Barr.

The letter is less than two pages. But so many 9/11 survivors and victims' relatives signed it that the document ran on for another 123 pages.

The letter offers up a glimpse into the still-festering wounds of the 9/11 attacks. The opening sentence — essentially a slap-in-the-face accusation against Barr — underscores the growing belief years after the attacks that the true story of what happened on 9/11 has not been fully told.

Such concerns, especially the belief that U.S. intelligence officials know far more about the Saudi connection than they are telling, has been a nagging footnote of 9/11 history for nearly two decades. But that acrimonious debate burst into the open in recent months with especially terse accusations against the Trump administration.

"Once again," said the letter addressed to Barr, "the actions of the U.S. Department of Justice under your direction make clear that you and large swaths of the federal government do not care about justice for the American people."

Barr did not respond to telephone and email requests for comment through the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington.

But if Barr's past behavior is any guide, neither he, nor the Trump administration, are expected to change course and turn over tens of thousands of pages of secret FBI and CIA files — some dating back to the attacks themselves — that reportedly show numerous links to Saudi Arabia's spy services and other officials.

Many survivors and victims' relatives now say that U.S. officials have essentially taken sides, protecting Saudi interests and not helping American citizens learn the truth about the attacks. Barr, as the controversial face of the current Justice Department, has emerged as a central target in the dispute, in part after he personally entered the case earlier this year claiming that the federal state secrets laws allow him to hold back on the Saudi documents. Many survivors and relatives now say they feel abandoned and betrayed, particularly by Barr — a theme that was evident throughout Tuesday's letter.

"The FBI, the DOJ, and you, Mr. Barr, turned your backs on the 9/11 community when you chose to side with Saudi Arabia, the sponsor of the 9/11 attacks, over the American people," the letter said. "Your continued misguided and inappropriate obstruction of the 9/11 community's lawsuit against Saudi Arabia is an affront to the judicial system and justice itself, and a betrayal of the American people you are duty-bound to serve."

### **The latest move**

Tuesday's letter was the latest salvo in the slow-moving legal battle to uncover the true story behind the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when 19 Islamist operatives — 15 from Saudi Arabia — hijacked four commercial jetliners, crashing two in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, another into the Pentagon and a third into a farm field in Pennsylvania. "It just doesn't get any more disgusting and more obvious that our own government is actively choosing to side with the Saudis over victims of terror," said Brett Eagleson of Middletown, Connecticut, who was 15 when his father was killed at the World Trade Center.

Notably missing from those signing the letter was Terry Strada, of Basking Ridge, the national chairwoman of 9/11 Families and Survivors United for Justice Against Terrorism and an outspoken figure in the effort to prove the Saudi connection to the attacks.

Strada, who gave birth to a son five days before her husband, Thomas, died in the collapse of the World Trade Center, declined to say why she did not sign the letter. Several of her relatives signed the letter, however.

At the center of the latest legal dispute is the lawsuit by 9/11 survivors and relatives, that seeks compensation from Saudi Arabia for its links to the attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people. The lawsuit, which has tens of thousands of plaintiffs, is believed to be the biggest in U.S. legal history.

But U.S. authorities — along with a cadre of American lawyers hired by the Saudi government — have repeatedly attempted to scuttle the lawsuit.

Barr is expected to testify Tuesday before the House Judiciary Committee about several recent controversial decisions, including his criticism of federal prosecutors in the Roger Stone case. At that time, survivors and relatives hope that Barr will also be questioned about his refusal to turn over Saudi-related documents to the 9/11 survivors and victims' relatives while reportedly sharing as many as 25,000 pages with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's lawyers. In addition, Barr may also be questioned on whether he plans to declassify files from a special FBI investigation, "Operation Encore," that examined the Saudi link to 9/11.

Tuesday's letter claims that the U.S. government, beginning with President George W. Bush and extending to the Obama and Trump administrations, deliberately covered up the full story of Saudi involvement.

### **New Jersey 9/11 connections**

For New Jersey, the search for truth has many roots.

Before the attacks, several of the hijackers stayed in motels — including in South Hackensack and Wayne. Some hijackers opened bank accounts and rented cars. At least two obtained false identification from a store in Paterson that specialized in creating IDs for non-citizens. The most troublesome link to Saudi Arabia involves two hijackers — Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, who stayed at the Congress Inn Motel on Route 46 in South Hackensack a month before the attacks.

Al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi were known operatives in Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist network, which carried out the 9/11 attacks. But more than a year before those attacks, the CIA tracked the two from the Middle East to Malaysia and Thailand and finally to Los Angeles. After landing in Los Angeles in January 2000 and unable to speak English, Mihdhar and Hazmi were met by two men with links to Saudi intelligence services. The two Saudi operatives are believed to have assisted Mihdhar and Hazmi in finding a place to live and in later taking flying lessons in preparing for the 9/11 hijackings.

But in what historians now view as a massive and horribly tragic miscue, the CIA did not tell the FBI that two al-Qaeda operatives had entered the U.S.

While they stayed at the Congress Inn, a South Hackensack police officer, on routine patrol, thought their rented Toyota with California plates seemed suspicious. The officer checked the license plate number of the Toyota on an FBI computer crime index and even determined that Mihdhar had rented the car.

But without the CIA telling the FBI about Mihdhar and Hazmi, the FBI computer index offered no warning and the South Hackensack officer was unaware that he was so close to two terrorists. So he let them go.

“I’m incensed that this has just gone on and on and disgusted that our government will not give us the documents,” said Tim Frolich, 56, who grew up in Little Falls and lost the use of his left foot when he was struck by falling concrete and steel as he escaped the South Tower, where he worked as an accountant for Fuji Bank.

Frolich said he was pleased with the harsh tone of Tuesday’s letter. But will it be enough to open U.S. files on the 9/11 attacks?

Many survivors and victims’ relatives hope so. “The levee continues to crack,” said Eagleson.

Mike Kelly is an award-winning columnist for NorthJersey.com.

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