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From the Los Angeles Times

Saudi Aid to War on Terror Is Criticized

Investigation: Former CIA officer calls the country 'completely unresponsive' of America's efforts.

By DAVID WILLMAN and GREG MILLER

Times Staff Writers

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WASHINGTON — Saudi Arabia—although long considered a crucial ally of the United States—has provided little if any assistance to investigators hunting the friends and finances of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda terror network, according to intelligence and law enforcement specialists.

On Sept. 20, President Bush sought to put the world on notice that he saw no gray area in the fight against terrorism, warning that "from this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

Yet for more than a month after the attacks of Sept. 11—while authorities have rounded up alleged terrorists and frozen suspicious bank accounts across Europe—the Saudis have made no such overt moves.

"It's a problem," said Robert Baer, a former CIA officer in the Middle East. "Saudi Arabia is completely unresponsive as of today. The rank-and-file Saudi policeman is sympathetic to Bin Laden. They're not telling us who these people were on the planes."

Vincent M. Cannistraro, the former chief of counter-terrorism operations for the CIA, also said that the U.S. is getting little if anything from its presumed ally.

"We're getting zero cooperation now," said Cannistraro, who earlier worked in Saudi Arabia for the agency. "There is a whole pile of Saudi businessmen who have been providing regular contributions to Al Qaeda."

Cannistraro, who left the CIA in 1990 after a 27-year career, said he has retained contacts within Saudi Arabia. Based on their information, Cannistraro said he believes the amount of money flowing from there to Al Qaeda is, "at a minimum, tens of millions a year. That's a bare minimum. . . . The amounts of money from Saudi businessmen going to the Al Qaeda organization accounts for much of the resources the Al Qaeda has."

Six or more of the 19 suspected hijackers who crashed U.S. jetliners on Sept. 11 are believed to have obtained their visas at the U.S. consulate in Jidda, Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi ambassador to the U.S., Prince Bandar, did not respond to repeated messages seeking his comment for this article. Bandar has recently denied that members of the royal family have sent money to Bin Laden. But Bandar also has said that Saudi citizens over the years have paid "religious" taxes to charitable organizations and that proceeds were, in turn, funneled to Afghanistan.

"I am not saying somebody will not use the goodwill of these charity organizations and recycle that money and send it for a bad cause," Bandar told PBS' "Frontline" this week. "I am not denying that. I am saying we have never been confronted with such a possibility without taking a look at it. And if it's true, we stopped it. . . . Anybody who sends money to those bad guys, we should be after them."

Bandar, however, is but one voice within the roiled Saudi monarchy.

"The Saudi royal family is divided, and that's what accounts for this paralysis," said Paul Michael Wihbe, a Middle East specialist and former consultant to the U.S. Defense Department who is now with the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies in Washington.

Wihbe, who in 1997 wrote a report, "Succession in Saudi Arabia: The Not-So-Silent Struggle," said that support for Bin Laden's message and resentment of the U.S. run deep there. He said these realities are not lost on members of a royal family whose grip on power could be loosening.

"In Saudi Arabia he [Bin Laden] has, no doubt, tremendous support within the . . . clergy," Wihbe said. "There is tremendous support for him in the middle class, in the professional class—and in the armed forces."

Indeed, Wihbe noted that three clerics of the Wahhabi branch of Islam, the predominant, conservative faith of Saudi Arabia, recently issued decrees against the House of Saud monarchy. The clerics' fatwas repudiated the monarchy's relationship with the U.S.

"This is unprecedented—it's a challenge to the House of Saud," Wihbe said, adding that what has ensued is an "unprecedented distancing" in Saudi-U.S. relations.

Bush appeared to acknowledge the delicacy of the moment during his news conference on Thursday night, asking and answering his own question on the subject. "[Am] I pleased with the actions of Saudi Arabia? I am," Bush said.

Yet Cannistraro, the former CIA official who worked in Saudi Arabia, said the situation is far more problematic. He noted that Turki bin Faisal, the veteran head of Saudi Arabia's intelligence service—a Georgetown University graduate who had been a reliable counterpart for U.S., British and French intelligence—was ousted in late August by the head of the country's military, Crown Prince Abdullah.

"He was sacked with no explanation," Cannistraro said, adding that the newly installed Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Nawaf ibn Abdulaziz, has "no background in intelligence whatsoever."

Cannistraro said that in years past, Saudi intelligence "penetrated Al Qaeda several times [including] in Afghanistan. One of their people was discovered four years ago and executed by Bin Laden. A couple of other people came out before they could get caught." The changeover in the

leadership of Saudi intelligence, he said, is "hurting us badly."

Bandar, asked on PBS if he feared repercussions within Saudi Arabia by cooperating with the U.S., said: "No. . . . I don't have to please people [in] downtown Washington. But I must always take into account Saudi people."

On Capitol Hill, the Saudis' behavior since the attacks of Sept. 11 is being watched closely--and discreetly.

When asked in recent days about the extent of the Saudis' cooperation, Sens. Bob Graham (D-Fla.) and Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), the ranking members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, offered limited responses.

Hatch, asked if the Saudis are cooperating, would say only, "I hope so."

Graham indicated disappointment, citing Saudi news accounts that called for the U.S. to confine its war against terrorism to Bin Laden. "If that is the expectation of the Saudi government, we haven't adequately communicated what our definition of victory is," Graham said.

To be sure, the intricacies of U.S.-Saudi dealings are of immense sensitivity to both Bush and to King Fahd, the 80-year-old monarch who has headed the Persian Gulf state since 1982.

For Fahd and the greater Saudi royal family, there is fear of terrorism, if not revolution. For Bush and the U.S., there is concern that unrest in Saudi Arabia would end U.S. access to state-of-the-art military facilities, notably Prince Sultan Air Base. About 6,000 U.S. troops remain in Saudi Arabia--a remaining hedge against President Saddam Hussein of neighboring Iraq.

And then there is the oil. According to the American Petroleum Institute, the U.S. now imports about 60% of its oil--with 23% coming from Persian Gulf countries and 14.7% from Saudi Arabia specifically.

For nearly 30 years, since the long pump lines caused by the energy crisis of the early 1970s, Saudi Arabia has stood as America's best friend among oil producers in the volatile Middle East. When other nations angled to precipitously drive up oil prices, the Saudis stood for stability and, at times, increased production.

But over the last decade, divisions have festered within Saudi society and even the royal family regarding the country's posture toward the United States.

The presence in Saudi Arabia of U.S. troops during the Persian Gulf War--while instrumental in vanquishing Iraqi forces from the tiny gulf nation of Kuwait--stirred deep resentment among many of the Wahhabi Muslims. Indeed, Bin Laden, scion of one of Saudi Arabia's most commercially successful families, emerged as a fierce critic of the kingdom's accommodations for the U.S., a posture he continues to leverage. Bin Laden left Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s and was stripped of his citizenship in 1994.

"His most immediate objective is to somehow try to raise the cost to us of having a presence in the Middle East, and specifically in Saudi Arabia," said Dennis B. Ross, who tried to negotiate Mideast peace agreements on behalf of former Presidents Bush and Clinton.

"Our presence in Saudi Arabia, for [Bin Laden], is what transformed him into the kind of virulent figure that we see," Ross added. "He sees us corrupting the faith, being close to the holy sites [of Mecca and Medina], and he's determined to rid Saudi Arabia of our presence because he also thinks that's the key to ridding Saudi Arabia of the House of Saud."

John L. Martin, who supervised prosecutions of terrorism and espionage cases as head of the Justice Department's internal security section until his retirement in 1997, said there is ample reason to question the Saudis' cooperation. Martin sees a parallel between the ongoing hunt for Bin Laden and the government's frustrated attempts to apprehend those responsible for the deaths of 19 U.S. servicemen in the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers, a housing facility near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The FBI believes the killings were perpetrated by Saudi nationals, with assistance from individuals within Iran.

Sealed indictments in the case were filed in June. But the FBI has been rebuffed repeatedly by Saudi police officials. "The Saudis will not do anything that will embarrass themselves," Martin said, adding:

"This is a regime where, if you steal, you'll have your hand cut off publicly. They have public beheadings. Nothing goes on within Saudi Arabia without the regime knowing about it. They can do more."

Times researcher Janet Lundblad in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

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