

Interviewee: **Saudi Arabia Ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar,**
Date of Interview: October 7, 2003
Location: Ambassador's Residence, McLean Virginia
Treat as: Confidential
Interview write-up: Kevin Scheid
Reviewed by: Philip Zelikow, Dan Byman
Commission participants: Phillip Zelikow, Daniel Byman, Dieter Snell, and Kevin Scheid
Other participants: Members of the Saudi Embassy Staff
Other notes: The interview was not recorded

The Ambassador invited the delegation that planned to travel to Saudi Arabia to his residence for a working meeting (Prince Bandar usually conducts business at his residence). He welcomed the delegation's visit and was pleased that the Commission would take the time and interest in visiting the Kingdom. He explained that he was disappointed in the Congressional Joint Inquiry into 9-11 because of its accusations about Saudi Arabia, while never visiting the Kingdom or speaking with officials in the Saudi government. He explained that his government is struggling with these accusations and is finding it difficult to remove the shadow of 9-11 from their relationship with the United States.

Mr. Zelikow provided the Ambassador an overview of the Commission's responsibilities, the motivations of the Congress in establishing the Commission, and the fact that there will be public hearings coming up in the weeks and months ahead.

Ambassador Bandar spoke at length about what he felt were some of the origins of al-Qai'da and the 9-11 attacks. He referred us to his government's joint support with the United States of Afghanistan in the 1980s. He called this a success, but after this success the United States did not follow through in helping the Afghan people to recover from the years of war. This provided a breeding ground for the young Mujahadin fighters who were successful in their military campaign to look for new battles. Neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia tried to reform the fighters into civilian life again. Had we done so, we might have had a very different outcome.

The Ambassador felt that the attack was designed deliberately to destroy relations between the US and Saudi Arabia. The fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi was no mistake or coincidence. The simplicity of the attack was sinister. The hijackers left a paper trail of their actions to see if they were being followed. They would fly first class across the country and then live in a flophouse in Las Vegas for the night. They were testing the system. He indicated that in Saudi Arabia you go to the mosque five times a day. In the mosque you would see a fundamentalist who would stand alone, not shake hands with those they felt to be a bad Muslim. They would live together in homes in Saudi Arabia where they would turn off the electricity and live as they did in the days of the prophet. There were signs and indications. In this context, the Ambassador quoted the American author Ralph Ellison who wrote in The Invisible Man: "... I am invisible because you choose not to see me." The Ambassador felt that in Saudi Arabia they chose not to see these radical fundamentalists. In fact they treated them much like

Americans treat the Amish, we allow them to flourish and have no reason to believe that their way of life would do anyone harm.

The Ambassador said that for each instance where the American government might have dropped the ball somehow, the Saudi Government also dropped the ball, whether it is in the law enforcement or intelligence arenas. We have the same enemy, we are both targets, but the United States has greater capability to deal with this threat. George Tenet used to come to visit the Ambassador and tell him that terrorists were planning something big and that the Saudis need to help. The Saudis were slow to help because he couldn't help explain when or where this attack would occur.

The Ambassador referred to Churchill, citing his insistence that Britain should never try to make peace with Hitler. But his government and the general population didn't agree. He was rejected until the war was clearly at hand and they called Churchill back to the government.

The Saudis did take some actions. UBL's financial assets were frozen in Saudi Arabia many years ago and he hasn't had access to the \$300 + million that has been reported. He estimates that UBL had between \$36 to 38 million available to him, but that this was a terrific amount in Afghanistan. Tracking the money is a difficult task when the amounts to run these operations are small. It might be a good way to avoid their reconstituting their capabilities, however.

Cooperation between the US and Saudi Arabia is improving. After Khobar cooperation between our security services was episodic. After 9-11 many of the same problems arose, but this has been fixed after the May attacks in Saudi Arabia because of a new recognition of the extent of the problem. One example of inconsistent cooperation on the US side was a request the embassy received for help with a translation. The embassy was willing to help, but wanted to hear the actual recording of the conversation not a transcript. This took three months to work out the arrangements within the US [redacted] before they were able to help. In the end the information was valuable, but the players had long before moved. The Ambassador saw other examples of security issues not allowing US agencies to coordinate between the CIA, NSA, and FBI.

Where Saudi Arabia stands in the mind of the average American is very important to the Saudi government. The Ambassador indicated that he had just returned from visits around the United States. He was very humbled by the outpouring of support for the Kingdom. He suggested that his government and the US need to discuss the attacks more and be open about them. If there is any hesitation on the part of the Saudi government it is because of a lack of desire to antagonize people unnecessarily. The Ambassador was particularly troubled by speeches given in the US Congress that bash Saudi Arabia when the particular individual hasn't tried to contact the government and get the facts straight.

Mr. Zelikow indicated that the Ambassador's views were helpful and that his willingness to help the Commission with its work was appreciated. He indicated that we needed get to the truth and understand the cultural aspects of the issue. He stressed the importance

of a "full exposure of the facts." He alluded to a need to interview the Ambassador again on some particular issue. The Ambassador said he would help in any way he could.

The Ambassador concluded his comments with a comment on the strong forces pulling Saudi Arabian culture. Since 1948 Saudi students have been coming to the US. There is a long history of travel and sharing between the two countries. But after 9-11, tourist from Saudi Arabia to the US are down by 80 percent, Saudi patients in US medical facilities are down by 80 percent and students from Saudi Arabia have decreased by 60 percent. The Ambassador sited the case of a famous journalist from Saudi Arabia who waited several months for a visa, each time postponing his medical treatments because he was told his visa was soon to be issued. The journalist died without receiving the treatments.

Mr. Zelikow suggested that we need to find a way to find a balance of security and risk. Ambassador Bandar suggested that we work on the "gray areas." What the Saudi Government had trouble with are gray areas in the relationship, where they don't understand what America is trying to do or communicate.