

September 11, 2001: The Saudi Split - a Motive for 9/11?

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A little known conflict between the United States and Saudi Arabia in summer 2001 sheds new light on 9/11. What role did the tensions back then play? And why did the attacks occur actually in early September?

Until today it is largely unknown that the Saudi government planned a radical course change in summer 2001. Via official diplomatic channels the U.S. government was informed that the Saudis intended to stop coordinating their policy with the United States. The attacks of 9/11 destroyed these plans to separate and gain more independence only weeks later.

The intimate relationship between Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador in the United States from 1983 till 2005, and U.S. President George W. Bush is legendary. Yet, the bond between the two former fighter jet pilots included more than just personal sympathy. The close friendship of Bandar and Bush represented also the special business relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, dating as far back as to the first half of the 20th century. Its simple core: the Saudis are selling their oil and then promptly reinvest the received U.S. Dollars back in the United States – for weapons and large infrastructure projects. Thus in the end most of the American money is floating back to U.S. corporations.

This so-called “Petrodollar recycling” is crucial not only for the American economy but also for the U.S. currency itself. If the Arab nations, led by the Saudis, would ever decide to sell their oil for Euros instead for Dollars – like the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had declared some time before the invasion of his country – then the global need for Dollars would be reduced so dramatically that U.S. monetary supremacy would seriously be at risk.

So America and the Saudis are bound together in a close economic symbiosis. This leads also to a close political alliance – which tends to be fragile because of the extreme differences in the political systems of both countries. People in Saudi Arabia are living in one of the most anachronistic dictatorships in the world. The almighty rulers there allow political reforms towards more democratic participation only reluctantly. A further constant factor of instability in Saudi domestic policy is the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

When the hawkish Ex-General Ariel Sharon became Israeli president in early 2001, and when Arab satellite TV stations started to bring more and more pictures of the Israeli occupation in Palestine directly into Saudi living rooms, then the pressure on the own leadership became urgent. Normal Saudi citizens clearly understood that Israel acted with permission of the United States who at the same time were the closest ally of the own unpopular ruling class. The Saudi people got more and more upset by this.

In March 2001, when President Bush was just two months in office, Bandar appeared at the White House. He brought a message from the Saudi Crown Prince, the de-facto ruler of the country. Progress in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians would be crucial for building a coalition of moderate Arabs, also to pressure Saddam Hussein. (1)

The U.S. government on the other hand was under pressure from the Israel lobby, which had a great, historically grown influence on American politics. The Sharon administration however had little interest in making diplomatic concessions to the Palestinians but preferred a policy of military strength and supremacy instead. A characteristic example was Sharon's later decision to build a wall between Israel and the West Bank.

The conflict in summer 2001

The Saudis were severely irritated by the American passivity in the conflict. They decided to send a signal. In May Crown Prince Abdullah publicly turned down an invitation into the White House. He justified this by declaring the United States would ignore the suffering of the Palestinians.

Early in June 2001 Bandar was invited to a dinner with Bush. Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice were also present. The Saudi ambassador spoke very intensely for several hours. The situation in the Middle East was getting worse, Bandar said. He added:

"This continuous deterioration will give an opportunity for extremists on both sides to grow and they will be the only winners. The United States and the moderate Arabs will pay a very high price. There is no doubt that the moderate Arab countries, as well as the United States, have lost the media war and the Arab public opinion. What the average Arab person sees every day is painful and very disturbing. Women, children, elderly are being killed, tortured by the Israelis." (2)

Bandar pointed out that more and more the Arab world's impression would be that the United States backed Israel completely. This would seriously damage the American interests in the region. The ambassador made clear that the United States had to find a way to separate the actions of the Israeli government and its own interests in the region. He also admitted that for the first time in 30 years there would be serious problems with the internal situation in Saudi Arabia – a real threat for the stability of the administration. (3)

In summer 2001 the conflict in the Middle East got more tense. Several cease-fires between Israel and Palestine were broken. The United States still remained passive. On August 27, Bandar again visited Bush. He began:

"Mr. President, this is the most difficult message I have had to convey to you that I have ever conveyed between the two governments since I started working here in Washington in 1982."

Again he stressed the close relationship of both countries and the growing problems of the Middle East conflict. Apparently Bush had allowed Sharon to "determine everything in the Middle East", he said. Yet, the Israeli occupation policy would have to fail. Bandar compared it with British policy in the American colonies in the 18th century and with the Soviet policy in Afghanistan. (4)

The threat of the Crown Prince

Then came the key statement: "Therefore the Crown Prince will not communicate in any form, type or shape with you, and Saudi Arabia will take all its political, economic and security decisions based on how it sees its own interest in the region without taking into account American interests anymore because it's obvious that the United States has taken a strategic decision adopting Sharon's policy." (5)

This message was a shock to Bush and the whole U.S. administration. It was a clear political break with the United States, a split that had loomed long before. According to Chas Freeman, a former American ambassador in Saudi Arabia, a lot of common interest had disappeared already after the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War in 1991. More and more Saudis also questioned the ongoing presence of the U.S. military in their country. (6)

Therefore President Bush decided to relent. In a quickly drafted letter to the Crown Prince he declared that he firmly believed in the right of the Palestinian people to have self-determination and their own state. This was a concession that not even President Clinton had ever made during his tenure.

The threat of the Saudis to politically split away and to stop coordinating with the United States was a major diplomatic earthquake. Everyone involved in any way with the above mentioned Petrodollar money stream got very nervous because this special business model highly depended on a safely working political cooperation of both countries.

It is hard to imagine what might have happened if Bush had not relented so quickly. At least the Saudis were inclined to set up an urgent meeting of Arab leaders to form a coalition to completely back the Palestinians. They were also willing to seriously question the military and intelligence cooperation with the United States. (7)

These thoughts got very specific and threatening to the United States on August 25, when the Crown Prince ordered his military Chief of Staff, General Salih, who had just arrived in Washington for a high-level review of Saudi-U.S. military collaboration, to immediately return to Saudi Arabia without meeting any Americans. The Crown Prince also ordered a delegation of about 40 senior Saudi officers who were about to leave for Washington to get off their plane. The annual review of military relations was canceled abruptly. The Pentagon was in shock. (8)

August 25, was also the day the first tickets for the presumed 9/11 hijackers were bought. (9)

Why did the attacks occur in early September?

Of course, according to all the evidence, it took several months to plan the attacks. It is almost unimaginable that the whole plot was orchestrated spontaneously in two weeks. However the question is, as to what extend the attack plan might have been ready for execution in 2001 – and the masterminds were only waiting for a politically convenient moment to act. At last no one has ever given a convincing reason for why the attacks actually occurred in early September – and not in early October, late May, or mid July.

Bush's quick concession had temporarily averted the threatening developments. The Saudi Crown Prince was delighted. Yet, in his answer from September 6, he insisted that Bush should give also a public statement about the issue. Bush confirmed to give such an announcement in the week after September 10. (10)

Over the weekend of September 8-9, diplomats of both countries discussed what should happen next. A speech by Bush or Powell? Also a meeting between Bush and Arafat at the United Nations in late September was considered. The U.S. president welcomed the suggestion, thereby pleasing the Saudis. Even without a final decision ambassador Bandar was euphoric: "Suddenly I felt that we really were going to have a major initiative here that could save all of us from ourselves – mostly – and from each other." (11)

On September 9, the New York Times reported about these negotiations. The newspaper confirmed that the "mounting pressure" from Saudi Arabia had forced the United States to act. The Saudi foreign minister had just completed a tour of Arab countries during which he called for a united front on behalf of the Palestinians at the United Nations session in New York. The New York Times cited diplomats who stressed that this was highly unusual. The prince rarely traveled and the diplomats could not recall such a senior Saudi official making "an open appeal for the Palestinians, and implicitly against the United States".

In the same article the newspaper cited U.S. administration officials saying that there was an inclination to go ahead with a meeting with Arafat and to start a process of serious dialogue "if events unfolded in a more favorable way in the next 10 days". However, Israeli president Sharon only gave a "halfhearted blessing" to these plans. Regarding a possible speech of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell at the time of the United Nations General Assembly in late September, the New York Times reported on September 9:

"A speech now being drafted at the State Department would seek to explain for the first time the basic tenets of this administration's Middle East policy, an administration official said. It would deal with such issues as the Palestinian aspiration for a state, but it was still not decided how that would be phrased, the official said. It would also deal with the need for secure borders for Israel and possibly with the sensitive topic of settlements." (12)

However, nothing of this was accomplished after several hijacked planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on the following Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

When news emerged that 15 of the 19 presumed hijackers had been Saudis, the attacks became a huge burden for Saudi rulers. Their room for political maneuver was promptly reduced to a minimum. To issue any demands or to press the U.S. government to something had become totally impossible. Also a political split from the United States had become unimaginable now. Instead the Saudis were busy to distance themselves from the attacks.

A motive for 9/11?

Considering that the attacks are still unsolved and a responsibility of Bin Laden remains – contrary to popular allegations – unproven, the episode of this planned Saudi split in summer 2001 can be a starting point for further thoughts. Was it part of the plan of the attacks' masterminds – whoever they were – to force the Saudi Crown Prince aside the United States and to permanently stop the threat of a political split? Was the peace process in the Middle East, the main goal of the Saudi initiative, also damaged intentionally? If this is true, then 9/11 was a broad success.

After the attacks Saudi Arabia, like Pakistan and other countries, became an even closer ally of the United States. This was no free decision of these administrations, but directly forced by the extreme polarization after 9/11 (Bush: "Either you're with us or you are with the

terrorists”).

Only two days after the attacks Ambassador Bandar and President Bush met secretly at the White House to discuss the future relations of both countries. No dissent was mentioned any more. (13) The talks went on with a visit of the Saudi foreign minister at the White House on September 20. In an statement published afterwards the minister stressed that it had been proven that the FBI’s list of the alleged Saudi hijackers was erroneous. Yet, investigators – and the press – chose to widely ignore these remarks. (14)

Since then the suspicion of a Saudi involvement in the attacks is looming more or less in the open. (15) In 2012 the U.S. Senate even passed a law allowing legal actions against the Saudis regarding 9/11. (16) The law is the result of a lobbying effort of several influential senators and the law firm Motley Rice, representing some of the families of the attack’s victims. (17) This organized public pressure on Saudi Arabia can also be seen as a useful tool of influential circles in the United States to keep the Saudis under enduring control.

On the one hand it is true that several Saudis, partly with connections to their government, had close contacts with the alleged hijackers. Indeed there is even evidence for an organized Saudi support network in the United States before 9/11. Furthermore it’s true that the official investigations and the U.S. government tried hard to avoid or even censor this aspect. Yet, on the other hand it is still totally unproven if people from this Saudi support network had any knowledge of the actual terror plans. The missing evidence for this allegation reminds of the still lacking proof for the official story of the attack’s planning itself.

One should remember that the main witnesses for the official account of the planning of the 9/11 plot, like Abu Zubaydah, Ramzi Binalshibh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, were all kidnapped to secret prisons and tortured after their respective arrests. No official investigator had ever access to them. Nonetheless their statements still build the foundation of the 9/11 Commission Report – a fact even criticized by U.S. media like NBC years ago, however, without any effect. (18) Also the legal proceedings regarding 9/11, like the trial in Guantánamo, are, by all legal standards, hardly more than a farce.

Considering this background one should be careful with “disclosures” about Saudi complicity in the attacks. There are strong political and economic forces trying to continue their pressure on Saudi Arabia. At the same time it appears doubtful how Saudi government circles should have benefited from 9/11 and what interest they should have had in supporting the attacks. As mentioned before it was an immediate effect of 9/11 that Saudi rulers lost most of their room for political maneuver – which was foreseeable.

Questions for the possible motives of 9/11 should therefore include considerations of the polarization afterwards and the Saudi-American conflict in summer 2001.

About the author: Paul Schreyer, born 1977, is a German author and journalist, writing for the online journals Global Research, Telepolis, and others. He is author of the book “Inside 9/11.”

Notes:

(1) Bob Woodward, “State of Denial”, New York, 2006, p. 25

(2) Ibid., p. 45

(3) Ibid., p. 46

(4) Ibid., p. 75

(5) Ibid., p. 76

(6) Robert G. Kaiser, David B. Ottaway, "Saudi Leader's Anger Revealed Shaky Ties", Washington Post, 10.02.02

<http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/a-list/2002w48/msg00075.html>

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid.

(9) 9/11 Commission Report, p. 249

<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>

(10) Bob Woodward, "State of Denial", New York, 2006, p. 77

(11) Robert G. Kaiser, David B. Ottaway, "Saudi Leader's Anger Revealed Shaky Ties", Washington Post, 10.02.02

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(12) New York Times, "Bush might meet Arafat if truce talks yield results", 09.09.01, Jane Perlez

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/09/world/bush-might-meet-arafat-if-truce-talks-yield-results.html>

(13) Bob Woodward, "State of Denial", New York, 2006, p. 80

(14) Press release Saudi Embassy, "Prince Saud Al-Faisal meets with U.S. President Bush", 20.09.01

<http://www.saudiembassy.net/archive/2001/news/page165.aspx>

(15) Anthony Summers, Robbyn Swan, "The Kingdom and the Towers", Vanity Fair, August 2011

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(16) "Bold Step Forward: 9/11 Families applaud Senate Judiciary Committee's approval of JASTA bill", press release Motley Rice LLC, 20.09.12

<http://www.motleyrice.com/news/view/9-11-families-applaud-senate-judiciary-committee-approval-of-jasta-bill-952>

(17) Website "9/11 Families United For Justice Against Terrorism"

<http://www.justiceagainstterrorism.org/>

(18) NBC, "9/11 Commission controversy", 30.01.08, Robert Windrem / Victor Limjoco

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080306112600/http://deepbackground.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2008/01/30/624314.aspx>

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