



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD D. SPENCE ON THE REPORT ON THE BOMBING OF KHOBAR TOWERS

“In the wake of the June 25 bombing of the American compound at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, the House Committee on National Security sent a delegation of professional staff members to Saudi Arabia to conduct a preliminary investigation of the incident.

“Although the professionalism and courage of the men and women who suffered this terrible disaster is apparent and should be a source of pride for all Americans, the bombing raises issues of intelligence failures and operational deficiencies that at least suggest that military leaders and policymakers were unaware of the potential risks that U.S. service personnel faced in Saudi Arabia.

“First, as the report indicates, the performance of the troops living in Khobar Towers and stationed in the Dhahran area was superb. As a result of the rapid reaction of the Air Force Special Police who observed the bomb-laden truck and immediately began to evacuate the building, as well as the efforts of doctors, medical personnel and soldiers to save lives, a much larger tragedy was almost certainly averted.

“But individual professionalism and heroism during the bombing cannot obscure larger problems that may have contributed to the unpreparedness of U.S. troops in the face of a serious terrorist threat. Intelligence failures left the military personnel in Khobar Towers, as well as the 4404th wing’s leaders, largely unaware of the magnitude of the threat they faced. Intelligence support fell short in at least three ways. First, available intelligence was virtually devoid of specific knowledge of terrorist and dissident activity inside Saudi Arabia. Thus, the information provided to senior theater military commanders by the intelligence community did not convey an adequate assessment of the threat environment.

“Second, there were failures of analysis. Even after the shock of the initial bombing in Riyadh last fall, formal threat assessments appear to have remained reactive to events, never crediting potential threats with capabilities beyond those already demonstrated. The possibility of a terrorist bomb larger or more sophisticated than the one detonated in Riyadh was apparently discounted. Finally, and perhaps most

significantly, these intelligence assessments did not acknowledge their own limitations. They did not communicate a level of uncertainty that should have been appropriate considering the lack of specific knowledge available and the difficulty of understanding the complex currents of Saudi society. Based on such intelligence assessments, commanders in the theater likely had a false sense of confidence in the level of threat they faced and the requisite level of security required to protect U.S. forces.

“The problems stemming from such intelligence failures were exacerbated by the organizational and operational shortcomings resulting from the characterization and execution of Operation Southern Watch as a temporary mission. Though it has been ongoing now for four years, and since 1994 there has been little likelihood that Saddam Hussein would comply with the necessary U.N. sanctions, the 4404th Fighter Wing remains a provisional organization lacking in continuity, cohesion, and adequate personnel resources. In particular, short-tour rotations — where 10 percent of the command is new to the theater every week — create an unacceptable level of unit instability that, in turn, places an undue burden upon the wing’s senior officers and enlisted personnel. Such high turnover also makes it virtually impossible for military commanders to build a relationship of trust with the Saudis — a relationship which, had it existed, might have allowed the more rapid and effective implementation of security measures that could have deterred the June 25 bombing or, at a minimum, dramatically lessened its impact.

“It is also clear that deference to Saudi cultural sensibilities and domestic political concerns discouraged commanders in the field from aggressively pursuing more expansive security measures. While important, consideration of host country cultural sensitivities or domestic politics should not be allowed to compromise the protection of U.S. forces, particularly in regions where a significant threat of terrorism directed against Americans exists. When American troops are deployed abroad to protect U.S. national interests and to help maintain regional stability, it is incumbent upon political and military decision makers to take a “top-down” rather than a “bottom-up” approach to security and force protection.

“The actions taken by the Defense Department after the Riyadh bombing last November and prior to the June 25th Khobar Towers bombing appear to have lacked urgency, were largely generic anti-terrorism measures that were not focused on any Saudi Arabia specific threat, and did not entail hands-on involvement by senior U.S. officials. While this matter clearly requires additional investigation, we found no evidence indicating that a concerted effort was made by the Department of Defense to recalibrate the admittedly delicate balance that always exists between mission and risk following the November 1995 Riyadh bombing.

“While I am primarily concerned with American policy and actions in this matter, I also believe that the Saudis must more seriously consider our concern for their cultural and political sensibilities within the equally important context of U.S. domestic concerns, particularly where the safety of American troops is an issue. The stability which the U.S. military presence brings to the Gulf region benefits both nations, but the Saudis must understand the importance of the American people’s support to the long-term success of the mission. A better balance needs to be found.

“Unfortunately, 19 young Americans lost their lives in the Khobar Towers bombing and a mission of vital national security interest to the United States and other nations was placed at risk. I applaud the measures now being taken by Secretary Perry to ensure greater force protection. I hope the results of the investigation now being conducted at Secretary Perry’s request by retired General Wayne Downing

will shed some light on these and many other questions. It is my belief that such a review, combined with the committee's preliminary work, will form the foundation from which Congress can better determine how this tragedy occurred and, perhaps more importantly, what measures are now appropriate to better prepare for such threats in the future.

“The House National Security Committee will continue this process with hearings scheduled to begin on September 11.”

Note: The report is available on the National Security Committee Homepage at www.house.gov/nsc/welcome.htm.



The Khobar Towers Bombing Incident

Staff Report

August 14, 1996



The Khobar Towers Bombing Incident

The terrorist bombing that killed 19 American military personnel, wounded more than 200 others, and harmed hundreds more Saudi soldiers and civilians in and around the Khobar Towers complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia on June 25, 1996 exposed more than the physical vulnerability of Americans serving abroad. It exposed the shortcomings of a U.S. intelligence apparatus that left Americans unprepared for the threat that confronted them. It exposed significant problems of continuity and cohesion in the units deployed for Operation Southern Watch. And it exposed the risks to U.S. military personnel deployed on contingency operations where political and cultural sensitivities of the host country are significant factors.

The ability to acquire and process accurate and timely intelligence is critical to the successful execution of any military mission. It is equally essential for force protection — especially in a world of increasing terrorist threats. The dearth of reliable intelligence on the terrorist threat, coupled with the inability to extrapolate from the intelligence that was available, even after the Riyadh bombing in November 1995, was one of the primary factors contributing to the Khobar Towers tragedy. Because intelligence regarding terrorist threats is more often than not incomplete and uncertain, both intelligence analysts and military operators must recognize it for both what it is and is not and hedge in developing force protection and operational plans.

In the case of the Khobar Towers bombing, problems resulting from incomplete intelligence on the terrorist threat were exacerbated by numerous operational and organiza-

tional shortcomings that limited the ability of Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia to effectively protect against the increased terrorist threat. In particular, short tours of duty, even for senior commanders, compromised the ability of deployed units to properly address the urgent need to make long-term security improvements.

Commanders, their staffs and security personnel also need greater continuity if they are to bring stability to organizations that currently face constant personnel turbulence and to develop effective personal and professional relations with Saudi officials with whom they must work. Because the various sensibilities of the host nation often conflict with

or complicate the operations of U.S. forces deployed overseas, American military and political leaders must remain vigilant for potential problems.

Intelligence and organizational shortcomings are a growing hallmark of “temporary” or “contingency” missions that in reality become long-term commitments. Despite the fact that Operation Southern Watch has been ongoing since 1992 and the probability of Iraqi compliance with UN resolution is low, Saudi

and American leaders and the U.S. Air Force observed and perpetuated the illusion of a “temporary” operation. The Department of Defense needs to review other ongoing contingency operations to ensure that similar perceptions are not compromising force protection needs or jeopardizing U.S. security interests. The proposed movement of significant numbers of U.S. military personnel to more secure quarters now agreed to by the United States is clearly warranted, if not overdue.

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THE KHOBAR TOWERS BOMBING INCIDENT

On June 25, 1996, a terrorist's truck bomb exploded at the Khobar Towers housing compound in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 American service personnel, wounding more than 200 others, killing at least one Saudi civilian and injuring hundreds of other civilians. The force of the explosion was so great it heavily damaged or destroyed six high rise apartment buildings and shattered windows in virtually every other structure in the compound, leaving a crater in the ground 85 feet wide and 35 feet deep. The blast was felt 20 miles away in the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain. It was the worst terrorist attack against Americans in more than a decade.

The Khobar Towers complex is home for the airmen of the 4404th Fighter Wing (Provisional) of the U.S. Air Force, part of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and coalition forces from the United Kingdom, France, and Saudi Arabia participating in Operation Southern Watch, the United Nations effort to enforce the "no-fly" and "no-drive" zones in Iraq south of the 32nd parallel. Because the bombing was directed specifically at Americans with such devastating effect, it has led to questions concerning the security of U.S. military personnel in Saudi Arabia and in other regions of the world.

At the request of Chairman Floyd Spence, a staff delegation of the House National Security Committee traveled to Dhahran and visited the site of the bombing from July 10-13, 1996 as part of the committee's investigation of the incident. The delegation spent several days interviewing field commanders, being briefed by those responsible for security measures, and speaking with the military personnel who played a critical role just prior to and immediately after the blast. The staff also sought interviews with Saudi officials and FBI agents in theater, but as the staff's visit

coincided with the Saudi weekend and Sabbath, the Saudis did not provide anyone to be interviewed. Likewise, the staff delegation was unable to interview Department of Justice officials, who responded that any disclosure of information could compromise the integrity of their ongoing investigation. (A copy of a letter from Attorney General Janet

Reno is included as Appendix A. A complete list of individuals who were interviewed is included as Appendix B.)

The Khobar Towers bombing tragedy calls into question more than just the safety of American military forces in Saudi Arabia. It also raises issues related to the conduct of the Operation South-

ern Watch mission, the importance of accurate intelligence on terrorist activities and capabilities, the sufficiency of the operational command structure, and the appropriate balance between the need to protect American personnel stationed abroad and the desire not to challenge the sovereignty or offend the sensibilities of host countries who have granted American forces conditional rights to deploy on their territory. What follows is an unclassified summary of the staff's observations and findings regarding the Dhahran incident.

The Bombing Incident

On June 25, 1996, at approximately 2200 hours Dhahran local time, a fuel truck laden with an estimated 3,000-5,000 pounds of explosives approached the northwest end of the Khobar Towers compound from the north and turned east onto 31st Street just outside the perimeter fence separating the compound from a public parking lot. The truck, and a car that it was following, continued to travel along the pe-

The Khobar Towers bombing tragedy calls into question more than just the safety of American military forces in Saudi Arabia.



rimeter fence toward the northeast corner of the compound. Staff Sergeant Alfredo Guerrero, present at an observation site on the roof of Building 131, at the northeast corner, spotted the suspicious car and fuel truck as they continued to travel along the perimeter fence toward their location. When the vehicles reached Building 131, they turned left, pointing away from the building, and stopped. The fuel truck, positioned behind the car, began to back up into the hedges along the perimeter fence directly in front of Building 131. Staff Sergeant Guerrero's suspicion was confirmed when two men emerged from the truck and quickly got into the car, which then sped away. At this point, he radioed the situation to the security desk and began, along with the other two guards on the roof, to evacuate the building.

Emergency evacuation procedures then began for Building 131 as the three security personnel ran door to door, starting from the top floor and working their way down, knocking loudly on each door and yelling for the residents to evacuate. Three to four minutes after the truck had backed up against the perimeter fence, the bomb exploded, ripping off the entire front facade of the eight-story building. Khobar Towers residents and officials of the 4404th Fighter Wing, the provisional U.S. Air Force unit conducting Operation Southern Watch, were unanimous in their belief that quick action on the part of the guards, who had only been able to work their way down several floors of the building, helped saved the lives of a number of residents of Building 131. Many residents of Building 131 were caught in the building's stairwells at the moment of the explosion, which may have been the safest place to be, in the estimation of engineers and security experts on the scene. However, the force of the blast demolished the building and severely damaged five adjacent buildings. Nineteen American service personnel were killed and more than 200 injured. Hundreds of Saudi and third country nationals living in the complex and immediate vicinity were also wounded.

The bomb blast blew out windows throughout the compound and created a crater 85 feet wide and 35 feet deep. The blast was felt as far away as Bahrain, 20 miles to the southeast. Most of the buildings in the "American sector" of the Khobar Towers complex suffered some degree of damage. While residents of Khobar Towers, 4404th Fighter Wing leaders, and U.S. intelligence experts conclude that Americans were the target of the terrorists, and the damage was extensive, an even greater number of casualties might have occurred had the driver positioned the truck differently against the fence and had not at least one row of "Jersey" barriers of the kind used in construction and on U.S. highways been present to absorb or deflect part of the blast



Front view of Building 131 after the blast

away from the lower level of Building 131. Senior leaders of the wing, after consultation with their engineers and with investigators at the scene, have concluded that this arrangement helped to prevent the collapse of the lower floors of the building. Had the lower floors and thus, the entire building, collapsed, the number of fatalities likely would have been much greater.

The Khobar Towers Compound

Khobar Towers is a series of high-rise apartment buildings comprising approximately 14 city blocks. U.S. forces occupy a portion of these buildings on the north end of the complex stretching roughly two and one half blocks. Other buildings house troops from the multinational forces participating in Operation Southern Watch, in particular the British, French, and Saudi militaries, while some buildings are also used for Saudi civilian housing. There is only one main access route into and out of the compound.



The crater resulting from the bomb measured 85 feet wide and 35 feet deep

The buildings were originally built in the 1970s as shelters for Bedouins, but remained vacant until the time of the Persian Gulf War. During the war and in its aftermath, American military forces operated out of a military airbase located near Dhahran's commercial airport, where the facilities were rudimentary and quarters cramped. During the war, the Saudis offered to house U.S. troops at Khobar Towers. Accommodating the 500,000 U.S. troops who participated in the Gulf War, even on a temporary basis, called for the use of every possible facility. After the war, the Saudis offered continued use of space in the Khobar Towers to coalition forces conducting Operation Southern Watch, and U.S. forces have been housed in Khobar Towers for the past six years.

The complex is located in the midst of an urban environment, laced with residential and commercial areas and mosques. On the north end is the public park and parking lot where the June 25 bombing took place. The urban setting of the complex creates unique security difficulties, and establishing perimeters is particularly challenging. The nearest perimeter fence was along the north end, only about 85

feet from several residential structures in the complex; a long perimeter fence on the east side was slightly further out, but still relatively close to the Khobar Towers buildings. And the perimeter marking the U.S. part of Khobar Towers from the other military and civilian housing runs down the middle of a four-lane street. Prior to the bomb blast, Air Force security officials at the complex had identified the perimeter fence as one of the more serious physical security concerns in conducting antiterrorism vulnerability assessments.

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Use of a General Alarm System

The Khobar Towers buildings themselves are of sturdy construction, built with a minimum of combustible material and consequently without a fire alarm system. There has been speculation as to whether a central alarm system should have been installed and operational at the time of the blast to reduce reaction and evacuation times. The opinion of Air Force security officials is that a fire alarm would not have made a substantial difference, and might even have



added to the confusion and worked against any attempts to inspire sleeping troops with a sense of urgency about the suspected bomb threat. For general alarm purposes, the Air Force uses a loudspeaker system in Khobar Towers called "Giant Voice." However, on the night of June 25, there was insufficient time to activate it. In fact, commanders and security officers at Khobar Towers have concluded that a central alarm system is unlikely to have reduced the number of fatalities or injuries the night of the blast, given that it was only a matter of a few minutes between the time evacuation procedures began and the detonation. A number of people survived the blast by being in the stairwell when it occurred. Had a general alarm been sounded, it is possible that more people would have exited the building and would have been at greater risk from the blast's effects. Although the windows in many of the buildings were blown out, not a single building collapsed from structural damage as a result of the bomb. Even Building 131, outside of which the bomb detonated, remained standing, although the face of the building was completely sheared off.

Vulnerability of the Compound

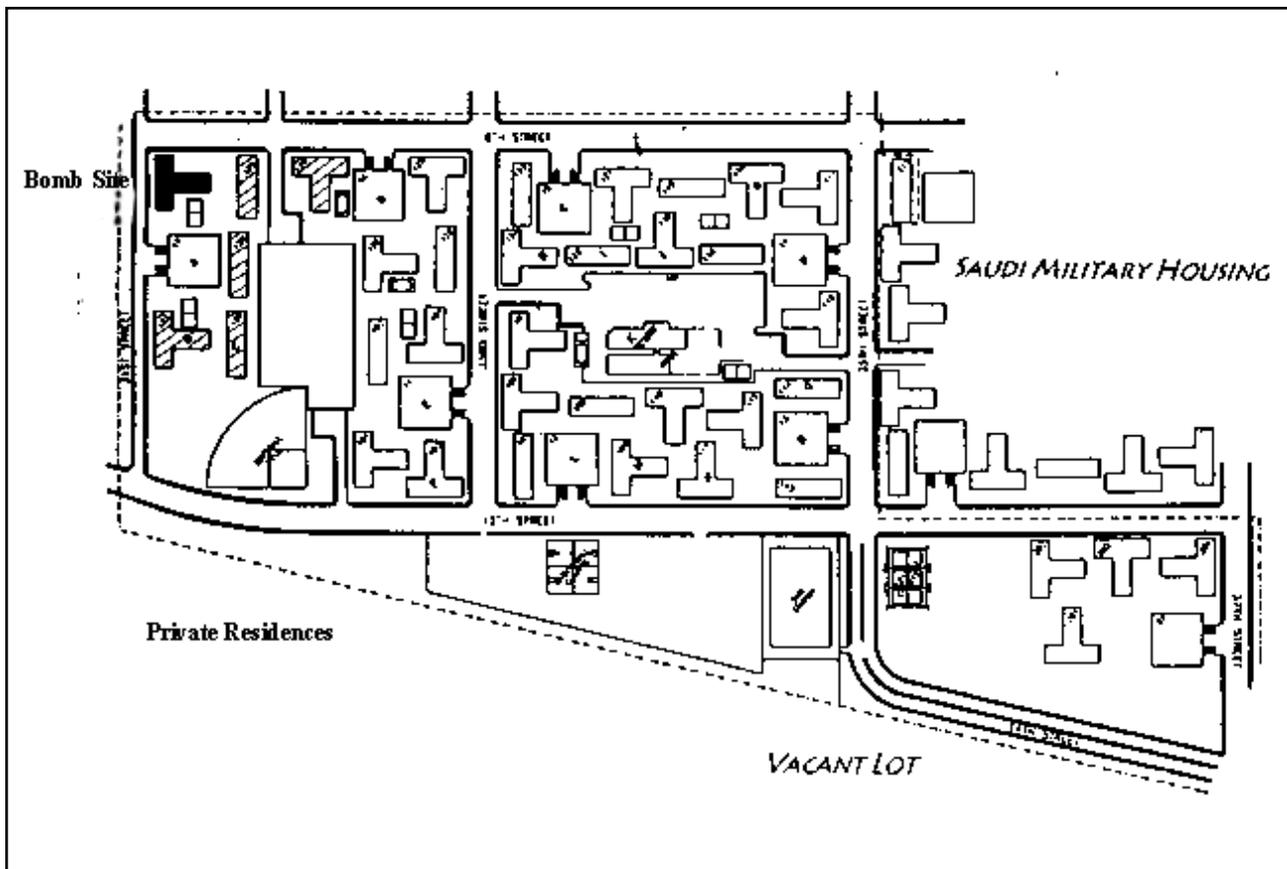
In sum, the Khobar Towers apartment complex, and the American portion within, is an inherently vulnerable location to terrorist threats. The decision recently reached by the United States and Saudi Arabia to move Operation South-

ern Watch and other American military personnel to a more remote location is a sound decision. Factors cited in press reports as contributing to vulnerabilities of the complex and contributing to casualties — the lack of a fire alarm, delays in activating the Giant Voice, for example — are of marginal importance, at least in the judgment of Khobar Towers residents and security officers in the 4404th Fighter Wing. These security officers and senior wing leaders also said that a more rapid evacuation may have done more harm than good, exposing more troops to the effects of the blast. Troops housed in an urban environment, with limited perimeters, are inviting targets for terrorist attack. While no location is entirely immune to terrorism, the vulnerabilities of Khobar Towers made the risks especially high.

The Security Situation Prior to June 25, 1996

Prior to the November 13, 1995 bombing of the Office of the Program Manager of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM-SANG) in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, American intelligence and U.S. military leaders considered the risks to U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia as low. While terrorist threats against the United States are not unusual in the re-

Map of the Khobar Towers Compound





Buildings used to house U.S. and coalition forces and Saudi civilians

gion, until recently terrorist activity in Saudi Arabia has been considered sporadic and rare. In particular, the threat from internal Saudi factions and dissidents was rated low by the U.S. intelligence community. The Saudi ruling family enjoys generally widespread support, based upon its extensive system of state-run social services, its largesse with its oil wealth, and its very conservative interpretation and strong support of Islam. Moreover, the ruling Al-Saud royal family brooks no dissent. The Saudi system of justice is swift and sure: public executions are the norm for serious crimes and beheadings are not uncommon. The Saudi approach to justice has long been seen as a deterrent to crime and to those who would violate the tenets of Islam.

Second, despite the cultural sensitivities aroused by U.S. leadership of and participation in the Gulf War, Americans have long operated in Saudi Arabia on a routine, albeit restricted, basis. The ARAMCO oil concern employs tens of thousands of U.S. citizens, and other Westerners also work in the Kingdom generally without incident. Internal dissent aimed at the Saudi regime did not, until very recently, begin to make a link between the ruling regime and the U.S. military presence.

The OPM-SANG Bombing and Its Aftermath

Both the Saudi and American belief that Saudi Arabia was an unlikely venue for anti-American terrorist activity was shattered on November 13, 1995, when a car bomb exploded outside the headquarters of the OPM-SANG mission. The building was used by American military forces as a training facility for Saudi military personnel. The car bomb contained approximately 250 pounds of explosives. Five Americans were killed in the OPM-SANG bomb blast and 34 were wounded. Until then, terrorist actions against Americans in the Kingdom had been considered unlikely by the U.S. intelligence community.

As a result of the OPM-SANG bombing, security measures were stepped up at installations where American troops maintained a presence throughout Saudi Arabia. The U.S. intelligence community reviewed its analysis of threats to American military forces and the results of that analysis were factored into the subsequent vulnerability assessment that was conducted for the wing commander by the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations (OSI). As with all Air Force installations, routine vulnerability assessments of Khobar Towers and other facilities in Saudi Arabia were conducted by OSI every six months. The most recent vulnerability assessment prior to the June 25 bombing at Khobar Towers was completed in January 1996

and identified numerous security shortcomings. As a result of the OPM-SANG bombing, the threat condition for American forces in Saudi Arabia was raised from THREATCON ALPHA — the second lowest threat condition — to THREATCON BRAVO, the next highest threat condition. Consistent with this increased threat situation, additional security measures were implemented at the Khobar Towers facility in Dhahran. (An explanation of the various Threat Conditions is attached as Appendix C.) Security officials held weekly meetings to discuss and review security procedures, and also convened bi-monthly security forums with participation of British and French coalition forces.

Incidents at Khobar Towers

Since November 1995, security forces at Khobar Towers recorded numerous suspicious incidents that could have reflected preparations for a terrorist attack against the complex. Much of the suspicious activity was recorded along the north perimeter of Khobar Towers, which bordered on that portion of the complex used to house Americans. Several incidents involving individuals looking through binoculars at the complex were reported. On one occasion, an

Public park and parking lot where the bombing took place





individual drove his car into one of the concrete Jersey barriers along the perimeter, moving it slightly, and then drove away. This may have been an effort to determine whether the perimeter could be breached. Other incidents reflected the heightened state of security awareness. For example, a suspicious package, which turned out to be non-threatening, was noticed on May 9, 1996, in the elevator of Building 129 and led to the building's evacuation. (As Colonel Boyle, the 4404th's Support Group commander, noted, buildings were evacuated no less than ten times since the November OPM-SANG bombing.)

While a number of incidents could have reflected preparations for an attack on Khobar Towers, there was no specific intelligence to link any of them to a direct threat to the complex. Again, the peculiar position of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia complicated the ability of security officials and intelligence analysts to reach definitive conclusions. Security officials at Khobar Towers remain unsure whether surveillance by outsiders was anything more than an attempt by local Saudis to observe the culturally different Americans in Western attire. In one incident involving shots fired outside the compound, it was determined that teenage boys were firing a new rifle and no threat to the compound was intended. Nevertheless, the number of reported incidents and the heightened state of alert after the OPM-SANG bombing led security officials and wing leaders to reassess the security situation within the complex.

Security Enhancements Implemented in Spring 1996

In response to these local incidents and following the November 1995 OPM-SANG bombing, Brigadier General Terryl Schwalier, commander of the 4404th Fighter Wing (Provisional) initiated a number of security enhancements that included the placement of additional concrete Jersey barriers around the Khobar Towers perimeter; staggered barriers, or "serpentine," along the main entrance to the complex; and the posting of guards on rooftops. Additionally, bomb dogs were employed, Air Force and Saudi security patrols were enhanced, the entry gate to the compound was fortified, and access was restricted. In March 1996, General Schwalier met with Lieutenant Colonel James Traister, the wing's new Security Police Squadron commander, to discuss measures to prevent penetration of the compound. Although the two officers discussed a range of security threats, security efforts focused on preventing a penetration of the complex itself, and in particular, the threat of a car bomb.

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In March, Lieutenant Colonel Traister conducted an additional, personal assessment of the compound's vulnerabilities to terrorist action. He subsequently presented his recommendations to General Schwalier, who accepted all of them. In April, Colonel Boyle and Lieutenant Colonel Traister initiated a series of additional counter-terrorism measures. These included posting additional guards on the roofs, laying seven miles of concertina wire along the compound perimeter, and trimming vegetation on the compound

side of the perimeter fence. Security forces increased their patrols, working 12-14 hour shifts six days a week. Staff Sergeant Guerrero noted that security patrols were losing every third break because they were helping to fortify the perimeter. Overall, numerous additional security enhancements were implemented beginning in April. Among the most visible were substantial guard pillboxes built from sandbags mounting machine guns to protect the main entrance. Lieutenant Colonel Traister also initiated monthly security group meetings with representatives of the other coalition forces in Khobar Towers. Several security police said they originally believed Lieutenant Colonel Traister was "crazy" because of his obsession with security enhancements at the compound.

Expansion of the Security Perimeter

Colonel Boyle dealt directly with his Saudi security counterparts regarding the issue of the compound perimeter, which was located less than 100 feet from several housing units along the north end of the compound. On two occasions — in November 1995 and March 1996 — Colonel Boyle said he asked Saudi security forces for permission to extend the perimeter. The Saudi security forces responded that doing so would interfere with access to a public parking lot that was adjacent to a public park and mosque, stating that the property was owned by Saudi government ministries and that they did not have the authority to approve such a move on their own. While never flatly refusing to extend the perimeter, the Saudis continued to assert that the existing perimeter was sufficient against the baseline threat of a car bomb similar to the Riyadh OPM-SANG bombing, and they did not act to accommodate the U.S. request. Instead, they offered to increase Saudi security patrols both inside and outside the compound, and to run checks of license plates in response to American concerns over suspicious vehicles.

Neither Colonel Boyle nor General Schwalier said they considered the issue of perimeter extension to be of sufficient urgency to necessitate the intervention of higher au-



thorities. This belief was based upon at least two factors, they said. First, they did not consider the Saudi reluctance to act on the U.S. request as unusual, given the generally slow pace of Saudi society and previous experiences in achieving expeditious Saudi action. As a result of the perceived need not to offend their Saudi hosts by demanding quick resolution of problems to American satisfaction, the perimeter extension issue remained open. Second, both were consumed by the need to quickly implement the required security improvements within the compound, as well as by their numerous other duties. Both General Schwalier and Colonel Boyle said that their priorities were to accomplish what was needed within Khobar Towers first before turning to additional enhancements that would require long-term negotiation and did not necessarily promise the desired outcome.

Thus, General Schwalier, Colonel Boyle, and Lieutenant Colonel Traister continued to work through the checklist of other measures that could be implemented without the prior approval of the Saudis and that would mitigate some of the vulnerabilities presented by the perimeter fence problem. The aforementioned OSI vulnerability assessment conducted in January 1996 recommended 39 specific security enhancements to the compound. However, extension of the perimeter was not identified as a recommended security fix by either the July 1995 or the January 1996 vulnerability assessment and was, therefore, not pursued with great urgency or elevated up the chain of command for higher-level intervention.

Assessment of Actions Taken and Not Taken

After the November 1995 Riyadh bombing, security became a major focus of activity within the 4404th Fighter Wing, with more than 130 specific actions taken in response to the vulnerability assessments that were conducted in July 1995 and January 1996. Given command priorities, actions that could be accomplished unilaterally were taken relatively quickly — actions such as trimming the hedges on the U.S.

side of the perimeter fence to increase visibility along the compound perimeter. Other actions requiring greater funding were considered as part of a five-year plan for security improvements. This included placing Mylar coating on all windows to reduce the impact of a bomb blast by limiting the shattering and fragmentation of glass windows and doors. In retrospect, had Mylar been available at the time of the blast, it is possible that some casualties might have been avoided. Even had the bomb been within the

parameters of the device used in the November 1995 OPM-SANG attack, untreated windows and sliding glass doors in the Khobar Towers apartments still would have been vulnerable to the blast effects. Likewise, the heavier “black-out” curtains that had already been approved for acquisition but not yet installed would likely have lessened casualties resulting from shattered glass.

General Schwalier said he did not consider a relocation of troops from the more exposed locations within the vulnerable buildings to interior quarters further away from the perimeter. While in retrospect such a relocation might have saved lives, prior to the blast relocation was not considered a priority due to the threat perception that discounted the prospect of a bomb the size of the one that ultimately exploded outside Building 131. Relocation also would have resulted in disruptions to the operations — residents were housed by military unit in order to main-

tain some cohesion and some apartments were used as offices — and a decrease in the quality of life for personnel having to “double-up” in living quarters. Given the small size of the American sector of the Khobar Towers complex, consolidating personnel to a degree that would have produced substantial security improvements — such as vacating the entire outer ring of apartment buildings exposed to the perimeter — would have involved measures not perceived as warranted by the threat situation.

Overall, theater military commanders exercised an aggressive and proactive approach to security in the wake of the OPM-SANG bombing in November 1995. Indeed, some

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Buildings occupied by U.S. forces



residents of Khobar Towers believe it is possible that the bombers struck when they did because they saw a window of opportunity closing. Lieutenant Colonel Traister's security enhancements following the OPM-SANG bombing were visible and extensive — they would not have gone unnoticed by anyone planning to attack the compound.

General Schwalier and other leaders in the 4404th Fighter Wing clearly did not press the Saudis for timely action to resolve specific U.S. security concerns. While the issue of Saudi cultural and political sensibilities is treated more fully below, the decision not to elevate these concerns to a higher level of decision-making must be seen in the context of the overall environment in which U.S. forces found themselves. Wing leaders were impressed by their superiors and in turn impressed upon their troops the need for a cooperative relationship with Saudi officials and Saudi society in general. The command is imbued with a desire not to unnecessarily offend Saudi cultural or political norms.

Host Country Sensibilities

As with any U.S. military deployment abroad, there is a need to strike an appropriate balance between the military requirement for force protection and the political and diplomatic requirements to understand and work within the cultural norms of the host country. Under the best of circumstances in Saudi Arabia, this is not an easy balancing act, although in some cases, security needs of U.S. forces are consistent with Saudi preferences. For example, the recent agreement to relocate U.S. forces to a more remote location at Al Kharj initially stemmed from a suggestion made by the Saudis.

At Khobar Towers, residents commented about their Saudi hosts and the challenges of working through issues with them. The Saudi approach to resolving issues is informal, indirect and seeks measured consensus rather than quick, clear decisions. As a result, to Americans the Saudi decision-making process seems to lack a sense of urgency. Moreover, many of those interviewed expressed frustration at the seeming lack of Saudi attention to important security details prior to June 25. A common element in the comments was that the Saudis did not take security as seriously as the Americans.

The very presence of American forces in the Kingdom is considered by some Saudis to be sacrilegious and an affront to Islam. Additionally, the strong U.S.-Saudi military relationship has increasingly been exploited by political dissidents in Saudi Arabia, under the ostensible guise of religious observance but often for different reasons. Conse-

quently, the ruling family has sought to keep the American presence as segregated as possible from Saudi society. A visible display of U.S. "decadence" — particularly women with exposed skin or driving vehicles — is an affront to traditional Saudis, and therefore a political problem for the ruling family. In such an environment, it is difficult to ensure that U.S. military personnel are treated fairly and can do their jobs effectively, without insulting the sensibilities or culture of their hosts, and possibly risking the internal political consensus that sanctions U.S. troop deployments.

These cultural differences can have serious security implications. For example, in the late spring of 1996 U.S. forces requested that the Saudis trim back the vegetation that was growing up along the fence around the perimeter of the Khobar Towers complex. The Saudis refused to do so for cultural reasons. The overriding U.S. concern was security — American guards needed an unobstructed view of activity along the outside perimeter of the complex. However, the Saudis desired to keep American activity out of view of the average Saudi citizen. In this case, the Americans trimmed the vegetation on the compound side of the perimeter fence and employed security forces on top of selected buildings to enhance observation. The Saudis did not trim the vegetation on their side.

Many of the vulnerabilities that were identified by the OSI January 1996 vulnerability assessment required corrective action that could only be taken with the support of the Saudis. For example, stepping up identification checks outside the compound, trimming vegetation outside the perimeter, and running license plate checks on suspicious vehicles required the active cooperation and participation of Saudi security authorities. Some of these measures were accomplished, some were not, and some, such as license plate checks, were only accomplished intermittently.

From the standpoint of domestic politics, the Saudis wish to ensure that the American military presence is perceived as temporary rather than permanent. For example, there is no formal "status of forces" agreement between the Americans and the Saudis, as is the case in many other nations where American troops are forward deployed, that comprehensively defines the rights and responsibilities of U.S. forces and the host nation. Rather, the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia is delineated by a series of "stationing" agreements covering individual deployments and extending back to 1953. This complex series of arrangements requires certain adjustments in the operational activities of the deployed forces. For example, extraordinary care is taken to ensure that the flight operations of Southern Watch are crafted to minimize the effects on Saudi society, to the point of changing course to

The political and cultural sensitivities of the Saudis are impressed upon U.S. forces from the day they arrive for duty.



avoid flying over Saudi princes' palaces. These arrangements also complicate the force protection mission. For example, the relationship between U.S. security police and their Saudi counterparts has remained intentionally informal and ad hoc.

The political and cultural sensitivities of the Saudis are impressed upon U.S. forces from the day they arrive for duty. For instance, in his "Commander's Inbriefing," presented to all newly arriving troops, General Schwalier outlined the standards of the 4404th Wing. "General Order Number One" was presented as "respecting our hosts."

The Role of Intelligence

One of the primary factors contributing to the loss of American life from the bombing at Khobar Towers was the lack of specific intelligence regarding the capabilities of the terrorists who carried out the June 25 attack. Therefore, significant questions have been raised concerning the adequacy of intelligence collection, analysis, and the ability to recognize the limits of the intelligence upon which threat analyses were based, and upon which the 4404th Fighter Wing planned its security measures.

The Threat Baseline

Prior to the Riyadh bombing of October 1995, U.S. threat analyses considered the likelihood of a terrorist incident against Americans in Saudi Arabia very low. In the words of Major General Kurt Anderson, commander of Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia (JTF-SWA), the threat was portrayed as coming from an isolated terrorist incident, "not by large, organized groups." It was also based on what intelligence analysts considered to be a "demonstrated capability." This analysis formed the threat "baseline" that was used in the July 1995 OSI vulnerability assessment.

According to General Anderson, the Riyadh bombing "changed the rules of the game." The threat analysis conducted after the OPM-SANG incident concluded that there was a much higher likelihood of terrorism targeted at U.S. forces. The size of the Riyadh device — approximately 250 pounds of explosives — also was a surprise. However, the analysis conducted after the OPM-SANG bombing did not allow that terrorist groups were capable of building a device larger than the Riyadh car bomb.

The Riyadh attack put everyone within the theater on high alert, and the frequency of terrorist incidents within the region seemed to increase. A number of these involved

small bombs set off in Bahrain that apparently were related to internal problems there and not to the situation in Saudi Arabia. Increased security awareness at Khobar Towers also revealed what looked like a pattern of surveillance of the facility. In November 1995, and in January, March and April 1996, Air Force security police reported a number of incidents, including Saudis taking photographs and circling the parking lot adjacent to the north perimeter, but they were uncertain about their linkage. Also in the spring, a car bumped and moved the Jersey barriers at the Khobar Towers perimeter, which security police interpreted as a possible test of the perimeter's strength.

In retrospect, other incidents also were suggestive. In January, the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh issued a public advisory noting that it had received "disturbing reports that additional attacks may be planned against institutions identified with the United States and its interests in Saudi Arabia." In March there was an unconfirmed intelligence report that a large quantity of explosives was to be smuggled into Saudi Arabia during the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca which draws huge numbers of Muslims to the Kingdom every year. Also, on March 29, a car was seized at the Saudi-Jordanian border with 85 pounds of explosives. Perhaps more significant than the amount of explosives was the fact that they were very expertly concealed within the car's engine compartment. Throughout the spring a number of other reports involving bomb materials were received by U.S. intelligence. Finally, in May, when the Saudis convicted the four men

for the Riyadh bombing and sentenced them to death, the U.S. Embassy released another advisory reporting threats of "retaliation against Americans in Saudi Arabia" if the men were executed.

To General Anderson, these incidents did not represent a "road map" leading from the OPM-SANG bombing

in Riyadh to the Khobar Towers bombing. However, taken together with other information available to U.S. intelligence and suggesting the possibility of more sophisticated terrorist capabilities, the pattern of incidents suggests there may have been substantial shortcomings in the U.S. ability to process accurately intelligence regarding the terrorist threat to U.S. forces inside Saudi Arabia.

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Intelligence Collection

While the precise extent of U.S. intelligence gathering operations inside Saudi Arabia cannot be discussed within the context of an unclassified report, commanders in the theater said they lacked adequate insight into internal Saudi society or the terrorist threat and prized highly the few in-



dependent intelligence sources they possessed. Further, given the increasing sophistication of the devices and the operations employed by terrorist groups operating in Saudi Arabia, which suggested to intelligence experts that those responsible for the bombings were most likely part of larger, well-connected organizations, the difficulties facing intelligence collection against terrorist organizations in the region generally and in Saudi Arabia specifically are likely to be enduring.

A substantial degree of the intelligence available to the United States on Saudi Arabia comes from the Saudis themselves. However, on politically sensitive topics — such as the level of activity of Saudi dissidents — there is reason to doubt the comprehensiveness of intelligence that is passed to Americans by the Saudis. To American experts, there appears to be no tradition of “pure intelligence” — intelligence free from political influence — in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Saudi style of decentralized and diffused bureaucratic power is a complicating factor. It is a common belief among U.S. intelligence and military officials and that information shared by the Saudis is often shaped to serve the ends of competing Saudi bureaucracies — interior and defense ministries, for example — from which it originates.

American intelligence collection efforts regarding terrorist or dissident activities in Saudi Arabia must also obviously compete with other intelligence needs. Given the operational mission of the Air Force in Saudi Arabia, the principal focus of intelligence activity remains the Iraqi threat to U.S. and allied aircraft contributing to Operation Southern Watch. In addition, there have been ample reasons to operate discreetly in the Kingdom and to avoid the risks that would be associated with intelligence activities, particularly human intelligence activities. The Saudis are among our closest allies in the Middle East and the monarchy has been seen as generally stable in a tumultuous region. Developing the kind of human intelligence sources most useful to protecting U.S. forces against terrorist threats would require a long-term and possibly high-risk commitment.

Intelligence Analysis

The problems of intelligence collection relative to the terrorist threat against Americans in Saudi Arabia have been accompanied by problems of analysis. While the issue of intelligence analysis requires further investigation, several observations are in order.

Based upon a review of available intelligence information, it is questionable whether the U.S. intelligence com-

munity provided theater commanders with sufficient intelligence. At the very least, formal intelligence analyses of the terrorist threat to U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia failed to project an increasing bomb-making capability on the part of terrorist groups. Prior to the Riyadh bombing, there were no incidents involving a bomb of that size (250 pounds) in Saudi Arabia, therefore the intelligence threat analysis concluded that there was not likely to be such a device. Likewise, while the threat level was raised to a 250-pound car bomb after the Riyadh bombing, it was not raised beyond. It appears that threat assessments were more reactive than predictive. While neither military nor civilian intelligence agencies had voluminous detailed intelligence on which to

base their projections, officials interviewed said the expertise required to build a larger truck bomb is not substantially beyond that required to build a smaller car bomb such as was used in the November 1995 Riyadh bombing. While intelligence reports received subsequent to the Riyadh bombing were not conclusive, they should have forced

analysts to at least reconsider their analyses, although the extent of the appropriate “hedge” factor is difficult to quantify.

For the U.S. intelligence community and the military, focusing on the Iraqi threat — a tactical necessity and familiar focus — apparently has been coupled with a certain complacency about developments within Saudi Arabia, and perhaps in other Gulf states as well. The result has been to leave commanders in the theater lacking a good understanding of particular terrorist capabilities and threats against U.S. forces. General Anderson said the Kingdom was “considered very benign” with respect to the terrorist threat to U.S. forces in the region, a belief that was open to question even prior to the June 25 bombing. Certainly, events proved General Anderson to be operating under a misapprehension. Saudi Arabia is located in a violent quarter of the world, where anti-American sentiments are strong and where Americans have been frequent targets of terrorism. The Saudi monarchy has made many enemies in the region. Within Saudi Arabia itself, more than 630 people were killed in a series of violent episodes in the city of Mecca between 1979 and 1989. Press reports and scholarly articles about dissidents within the Kingdom have been frequent in recent years.

General Anderson said that he has requested that USCENTCOM assign a counterterrorist intelligence analyst to his staff to fill what he perceived as an unfilled requirement. He said the analyst would have two duties: to give him a better understanding of developments inside Saudi Arabia and to give him a “sanity check” on U.S. intelligence products. The lack of in-house intelligence analysis capability likely contributed to an unquestioning accep-

Based upon a review of available intelligence information, it is questionable whether the U.S. intelligence community provided theater commanders with sufficient intelligence.



tance by the command of formal threat assessments provided by the intelligence community.

Recognizing the Limits of Intelligence

Intelligence support to U.S. forces conducting Operation Southern Watch did not do an adequate job of understanding and accommodating its own shortcomings. Despite collection and analysis problems, few if any in the intelligence or operational chain of command seem to have adopted a skeptical attitude concerning the limits of intelligence assessments of the potential threat to U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia. The command could not know what it did not know; there was no recognition of limits.

One area requiring further investigation is how the limitations inherent with available threat intelligence were explicitly recognized and presented to the operational consumers as intelligence products worked their way into the theater. For example, one senior U.S. intelligence official interviewed said he would never have been so specific in quantifying terrorist bomb-building capabilities. Yet security officials at Khobar Towers considered a 250-pound bomb, one roughly the size of the OPM-SANG bombing, to be a fixed threat baseline. Based upon staff interviews, it is evident that intelligence assessments that began as broad ranges of possible terrorist threats evolved and were viewed by those responsible for security at Khobar Towers as firm conclusions.

As a result, officers such as General Schwalier or his security subordinates did not have the appropriate understanding and incentive to hedge against a degree of uncertainty in the projected threat. While neither General Schwalier nor his subordinates asserted that this hedging would have made a decisive difference in the measures taken within the time available prior to the bombing, they did say it might have made a difference in the urgency associated with U.S. discussions with the Saudis regarding security. Acknowledgment of the limited nature of intelligence analysis of the terrorist threat against U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia might well have increased the urgency with which recommendations to push out the Khobar Towers perimeter fence into adjacent civilian areas were pursued with the Saudis, or even the decision to move out U.S. forces of Khobar Towers altogether.

Continuity of Command in the 4404th Fighter Wing

Intelligence problems were exacerbated by a number of organizational and operational factors which limited the ability of JTF-SWA and its subordinate commands to respond to new security challenges. While none were sufficient to singularly account for the June 25 bombing, there were pervasive deficiencies that in the aggregate resulted in

a serious problem. In the race to respond to the increased threat following the Riyadh bombing, the 4404th Fighter Wing was handicapped by these shortcomings.

Organizational Handicaps

The 4404th Fighter Wing (Provisional) is a unit facing constant organizational turbulence. Average tour length is 90 days. According to General Schwalier, the command averages between 200 and 300 new personnel every week, or about 10 percent of its total manpower. To keep up with the turnover, General Schwalier conducts an orientation briefing for incoming personnel each week.

This level of personnel turbulence affects the wing leadership as well as the flight line. Prior to General Schwalier's appointment one year ago, the wing commanders also had short tours. As the thirteenth commander of the 4404th Fighter Wing in four years, General Schwalier is the first to serve a one-year tour. This concern was raised by General Schwalier's predecessor in his end-of-tour report. That report was provided to General Schwalier, who requested approval of the extension of tour lengths for nine senior members of the wing staff. Since the June 25 bombing, General Schwalier has recommended that another nine positions be approved for extended tours.

In addition, according to General Schwalier, the structure of the command is "a bare bones operation." When the wing was designed at the start of Operation Southern Watch, it was intended only to carry out a temporary mission until Iraq complied with UN resolutions and sanctions were lifted. Four years later, and despite the continuing augmentation of the unit following Operation Vigilant Warrior in 1994, the mission is still formally a temporary one. The result is that the command lacks many of the support staff and other resources typical in a permanent wing structure. The wing's skeletal structure oversees the operation of a wide variety of aircraft, including F-15s, several types of F-16s, A-10s, EF-111s, several types of C-130s, a C-21, AWACS planes, KC-10s and KC-135s, RC-135s, U-2 spy aircraft, search and rescue helicopters, and has forward air controllers riding in Army helicopters.

The wing is also widely dispersed geographically. Although the contingent in Dhahran and housed at Khobar Towers is the largest, at a total authorized strength of 2,525, other substantial contingents operate out of Riyadh (1,221), Kuwait (799, in four locations), and other facilities within Saudi Arabia (441, in four locations). General Schwalier admitted that he spent "much time on the road" visiting these "remote" sites, attempting to build teamwork among elements of the command and provide the requisite command supervision.

The necessity for unit cohesion is important for a variety of reasons. Beyond the constant rotations and dispersed basing, the conduct of no-fly zone missions is an ongoing



problem for the Air Force as well as the other services. The missions, despite the fact that they are conducted in “harm’s way,” are widely considered by those who fly them to be deleterious to pilot training and skills, and a monotonous routine. No-fly-zone duty also is a personal hardship requiring frequent family separations, not merely for pilots but for maintenance and other personnel. Yet many in the wing had served a number of rotations on no-fly-zone missions, including repeat tours in the theater. According to wing leaders and pilots interviewed, no-fly-zone duty and the resulting need to retrain for basic combat missions imposed a six- to nine-month burden on pilots and units.

The Impact of Short Tours

The overall result of short tours, a widely dispersed command, and personnel turbulence is a command that lacks much if any continuity or cohesion. While the professionalism of individual members of the command was apparent, the lack of continuity among senior leaders was widely recognized by those interviewed as a shortcoming. General Schwalier remarked that it was a “consuming” leadership challenge — a viewpoint that was echoed at every echelon of the command.

General Schwalier identified three primary problems that stemmed from the lack of continuity. The first was an inability to build a better relationship with the Saudis. According to General Schwalier, “You can’t build that in two weeks.” For example, a common assessment within the wing leadership is that, although security assistance on the part of the Saudis had been improving prior to the June 25 bombing, accomplishing more difficult tasks such as expanding the Khobar Towers security perimeter would take months. The estimate of Colonel James Ward, commander of the Army-run logistics operation designed to accommodate any surge of forces into the theater, was that such a project would require four to six months. Thus, when the initial negotiations about such measures ran into Saudi resistance, General Schwalier’s assessment was that these were “still a possibility” that he might be able to “get to,” but improving security within the compound was a more immediate concern.

A second problem was the difficulty of building organizational and command stability within the wing. In particular, implementing the recommendations of the periodic, six-month vulnerability assessments conducted for the wing appear to have fallen victim to this sort of organizational and command instability. For example, the vulnerability assessment returned from OSI to the wing in September 1995 had been completed the preceding July. Thus, “by the time the assessment appeared, the people (who had requested it) were gone,” said General Schwalier. When he discovered

the three-month lag, General Schwalier demanded that future vulnerability assessments be completed and returned to the command in a more timely fashion.

Colonel Boyle, the departing wing Support Group commander who had overall responsibility for security measures, said one of his biggest challenges was training his organization to the specific requirements of the mission before personnel rotated to other assignments. “You never got beyond the elementary” level, he said. For example, guards manning observation posts or other positions often worked only in single locations or a small number of locations. Short tours and the demands of the mission prevented them from acquiring a broader understanding of the security operation or even manning a substantial variety of posts.

The third problem stemmed from the other effects of working within a 90-day rotation cycle. While the basic building blocks of the wing — the fighter and other squadrons that conducted the flying missions — might be kept relatively intact, arriving and departing as a whole, higher echelon, wing-level support activities were primarily conducted by ad hoc organizations, with personnel arriving and departing individually. Even senior leaders often would have no more than 24 to 36 hours of overlap with their predecessors.

Difficulties of Developing Institutional Knowledge On Security Matters

The lack of unit and leadership continuity made building and retaining institutional knowledge difficult. After-action reports or other similar documents were not immediately available to all incoming commanders; apparently were not centrally collected, controlled, or disseminated by the wing, the Air Force, or USCENTCOM; and may not even have been required. Available reports did not routinely include “status-action” assessments highlighting problems to be addressed. Nor typically were there pre-rotation familiarization tours for incoming commanders, staff or senior enlisted personnel within the wing. These particular concerns were focused on the support functions of the wing.

The experience of Lieutenant Colonel Traister, the commander of the wing’s security squadron at the time of the bombing, is indicative of the challenge senior leaders faced as a result of the lack of continuity. By all accounts, including those of his subordinates, Lieutenant Colonel Traister has been a superb commander, but he was confronted with many problems resulting from organizational instability.

Lieutenant Colonel Traister benefited from the fact that his previous position was as part of the CENTAF staff. By virtue of this position, he was able to determine who had been his predecessors as commanders of the 4404th security

Even senior leaders often would have no more than 24 to 36 hours of overlap with their predecessors.



squadron, read their after-action reports (although he said the records were incomplete and did not contain “status-action” recommendations), and contact a number of them for personal interviews and recommendations. He also was able to determine who would be filling important positions that could affect his own work, such as who his OSI counterpart would be. By contacting his counterpart, Lieutenant Colonel Traister was able to establish the beginning of what he saw as an essential relationship between the two and the building of teamwork with the special investigator with whom he would work closely. However, prior to his arrival at Khobar Towers, he could get access to only the July 1995 vulnerability assessment, not the 1996 assessment done after the Riyadh bombing. Yet even that, he said, was a step that his predecessors typically had been unable to accomplish and was made possible because of his previous assignment responsibilities which permitted him access to the reports and appropriate personnel.

Accordingly, when he arrived at Khobar Towers and received from General Schwalier his security mission, Lieutenant Colonel Traister enjoyed advantages his predecessors had not and was more rapidly able to take measures to improve security. He said that he spent between two and three weeks evaluating the compound and the resources he had at his disposal, a process that he said “takes three to six months” under normal circumstances. At the same time, he recognized a human intelligence shortfall, and that he required “an analyzed (intelligence) product” that the skeletal wing staff, the JTF-SWA staff, or even USCENTCOM would not be able to give him. He also came to understand that the shortage of Arab linguists in the wing — the entire 4404th has just one — would be a continuing problem for the security squadron. Lieutenant Colonel Traister said that when he was stationed in Japan, where the threat level was lower, the security squadron had retained a linguist of its own and made arrangements to acquire others in times of crisis.

Institutional Shortcomings

General Schwalier also faced a number of institutional shortcomings that affected the ability of the command to accomplish longer-term tasks. Although many of these have no direct bearing on security issues, several do. For example, the 4404th operated without an established mid- or long-term budgeting mechanism as is found in other wings. After three or four months in command, General Schwalier began to focus on the need to prepare a five-year budget plan. Despite the fact that the wing had been operating on a temporary mission basis since 1992, this was the first long-term budget plan for the wing. Its expenses had previously

been paid out of contingency funds, which were accounted for in yearly, ad hoc procedures with funds reprogrammed from other Department of Defense programs. Under General Schwalier’s plan, the first year’s budget, covering all aspects of the wing’s operations, totaled \$27 million, with \$3 million for construction. Though these construction funds allowed for some repair of the Khobar Towers facility, which had generally been neglected and was in need of repair, about one-third was intended for security improvements. The larg-

est item was \$700,000 for “black-out” curtains for every apartment and office. Lower in priority were funds for Mylar covering for the Khobar Towers windows to reduce the possibilities for fragmented glass in the event the windows were shattered. As General

Schwalier’s plan had not yet made its way through the annual Air Force budgeting program, it is unclear what the likelihood was that these recommended improvements — long-term investments for what then was considered a “temporary” mission — would have been realized.

A number of institutional problems at higher echelons of command also bear upon questions of security. The focus of operations and intelligence at JTF-SWA was primarily on conducting the Southern Watch no-fly-zone mission. According to Major General Anderson, the Joint Task Force commander, his intelligence staff was a relatively small, 65-person operation whose focus was on the Iraqi order of battle relevant to each day’s air tasking order. General Anderson currently has one officer assigned to force protection issues, but estimates that he needs at least seven or eight personnel to deal with force protection issues, given the current threat level. He also said he lacks adequate intelligence analysis capability for the purposes of providing a “sanity check” on intelligence assessments provided by theater and national intelligence organizations, and an analyst is among the personnel he has requested. The need for this analytical capability, or at least access to it, was also expressed by others in the theater.

Also, General Anderson has been given the mission of “force protection czar” for the JTF-SWA area of operations, though his authority is only for the purposes of coordination rather than command, which is retained at USCENTCOM. General Anderson did not receive this force protection coordination authority until April 12, nearly six months after the Riyadh bombing. According to Army Colonel Ward, for some time “no one (in Saudi Arabia) was in charge of force protection after (the) OPM-SANG (bombing).” And several elements of General Anderson’s authority as force protection czar took lower echelons by surprise in that USCENTCOM changed or contradicted recommendations worked out previously.

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Contrasting Service Approaches To Command Continuity

It is unclear precisely what the proper tour lengths or level of organizational or financial commitment to the mission of the 4404th Fighter Wing should be, but it is clear that the nature of the mission resulted in some organizational requirements going unmet. While matching military forces to missions is more an art than a science, comparing the Air Force's execution of its mission in Saudi Arabia with that of other services provides a useful benchmark. For example, the Army units under Colonel Ward's command have a much higher percentage of long-service positions; roughly 10 percent of the 900 soldiers under his command serve at least a one year tour. When senior commanders and their staff rotate to the theater, they typically undertake two extended familiarization tours, with the first of these tours coming several months prior to deployment. While many of these positions are associated with the longer-term logistics effort for which there is no exact Air Force parallel, others, particularly the Patriot missile units, are more analogous to the no-fly zone mission. The Patriot units — which are deployed with a higher-than-normal manpower level — serve a 120-day tour, and the senior leaders and staff all have at least one substantial familiarization tour prior to deployment. Also, each unit has ready access to the after-action reports of predecessor units. In part because of its logistics mission, the Army has had a traditional long-term budget process in place for its units serving in Saudi Arabia for some time; Colonel Ward's next budget includes \$7 million for military construction including a "couple of million" for security. Finally, his staff includes two interpreters and his organization includes a counter-intelligence team with an Arab linguist.

While the reasons for shorter tours have a degree of validity in terms of lessening the strains of repeated no-fly-zone tours, family separations, and loss of warfighting skills, at a minimum senior positions within the wing demand a greater degree of continuity than has been the case in past. The fact that General Schwalier was the lone long-term member of the wing — and that, in four years of operation, he was the first commander to serve more than a very short tour — is indicative of the reluctance and unwillingness of political and military leaders to admit that the mission was more than temporary and to bestow upon it the full complement of resources, manpower, and capabilities.

The "Contingency" Nature of Operation Southern Watch

Confronting the fact that Operation Southern Watch is in fact a long-term commitment and not a temporary contingency mission poses a domestic political problem for the Saudis and Americans, and an institutional problem for the Air Force. The Saudis must face the fact that a continued U.S. military presence will be necessary to maintain stability in the region — an admission that raises sensitive domestic political concerns for the Saudi ruling family. The United States must similarly understand the nature of its commitment and aggressively confront the risks such a mission entails, including the continuing threat of terrorism. For the U.S. Air Force, such an admission would call into question the policy of constant personnel rotation, at least at the wing leadership level.

Any belief that Iraq would quickly comply with the UN provisions that resulted in the Southern Watch mission has been misplaced, certainly since late 1994 when Iraqi forces moved south to threaten Kuwait and the United States

responded with Operation Vigilant Warrior. And given the statements by U.S. policymakers in the wake of the Riyadh and Khobar Towers bombings about American determination to maintain forces in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. military presence in the Kingdom stands revealed for what it has always been: a long-term commitment to security and stability in the Gulf. The Saudis have also, in effect, made such an admission

by agreeing to bear many of the costs of relocating the 4404th to Al Kharj, an airbase in a more remote location.

While the lack of leadership and organizational continuity within the 4404th has had wide-ranging effects, it also played a substantial role in problems confronting the wing's security personnel in its efforts to react to terrorist threats. Neither the wing or JTF-SWA level possessed the intelligence analysis capability to evaluate what proved to be seriously limited intelligence. There were no budgetary procedures or processes for making long-term investments in the Khobar Towers complex, even for security reasons. Only through the efforts of General Schwalier and his senior staff were improved security measures within the compound achieved following the November 1995 Riyadh bombing. Achieving greater security would have required expanding the perimeters of the Khobar Towers complex or, as is now planned, a move out of the facility altogether. These are measures whose quick consideration and implementation

The lack of leadership and organizational continuity... played a substantial role in problems confronting the wing's security personnel in its efforts to react to terrorist threats.



transcend the day-to-day influence of the 4404th or JTF-SWA, as the direct involvement of the office of the Secretary of Defense in the recent negotiations indicates.

Immediate Post-Bombing Reaction

In the immediate aftermath of the June 25 bombing, the medical and other support systems and personnel of the 4404th Fighter Wing appear to have reacted with a high degree of professionalism. Commanders and troops alike recounted stories of individual heroism. Major Steven Goff, a flight surgeon who was badly wounded in the attack, worked methodically in the compound's clinic to treat more than 200 of his compatriots who were seriously injured. Prior to receiving formal medical treatment, many of the wounded were initially treated by the "buddy care" system, which also appears to have worked as planned and insured that no one was left alone. After the bombing, according to those interviewed, guards rapidly but methodically went into every building and checked out every room to ensure that no one was trapped or unaccounted for.

The medical system also appears to have performed well, and was blessed with abundant resources. At the clinic, three Air Force physicians were assisted by an Army doctor

and additional personnel from coalition forces, including the Saudis. Emergency supplies of blood and other necessary materials were sufficient to treat more than 250 people. Everyone who was brought to the clinic for medical treatment, regardless of the severity of their injuries, lived; the only fatalities on the evening of June 25 were 16 airmen in Building 131 who likely died instantly from the initial explosion, a communications specialist in Building 133 who was killed when the glass door to his balcony shattered from the force of the blast, and two other fatalities in Building 131 who might have survived had they been nearer to the medical facility.

Since the bombing, security at the Khobar Towers complex has been increased significantly. An additional 44 security personnel have deployed to Khobar Towers, and 44 more were requested by Lieutenant Colonel Traister and are expected to be deployed in the near future. The perimeter has been extended beyond the public parking lot on the north end of the compound, an additional 1,000 barriers have been erected, and the number of observation posts has been increased. Saudi security patrols have been increased outside the perimeter and agreement with the Saudis to move to a more secure and remote site has been reached. According to statements by Defense Secretary Perry, the relocation will be conducted as quickly as possible.



Observations

- The unpreparedness of U.S. forces stationed in Saudi Arabia for the magnitude of the terrorist bomb in Dhahran raises significant questions about the adequacy of intelligence support. While intelligence information was provided, it was not of either the quality nor the quantity necessary to alert commanders to the magnitude of the terrorist threat they faced. The lack of on-the-ground intelligence collection and analysis capabilities deserves priority attention and argues for a greater commitment of resources.
- Greater counter-terrorism intelligence analysis effort is needed by U.S. forces stationed in Saudi Arabia. The intelligence staff working for the JTF-SWA commander is small, focused on the Operation Southern Watch mission and lacks adequate resources to function as an independent “sanity check” on the quality of intelligence received from USCENTCOM or national intelligence agencies. The JTF commander requires this analysis capability to function in his capacity as the local “force protection czar.” Likewise, tactical fighter wings and other significant elements of the JTF should have the capability for timely access to this independent, in-theater analysis.
- The uncertainties inherent in intelligence efforts against terrorist groups and in friendly but closed societies such as in Saudi Arabia needs to be adequately conveyed to military commanders so they can assess intelligence information in the proper context and retain an ability for independent judgments about the threats they face. Commanders need to better understand the limits of intelligence they receive and be cognizant of a range of threats rather than fixate on a “baseline” or overly specific threat assessment.
- Three-month troop rotations place unnecessary and counterproductive strains on unit leaders and staffs. It is difficult to establish leadership and unit continuity in contingency operations, let alone to address issues where it is essential to build relationships of trust with host nations. Newly-deployed commanders, security chiefs, and other force protection specialists should not have to relearn the same lessons learned by their predecessors and work to establish the same kinds of productive relationships with their Saudi counterparts. While short tours may make sense for those on the flight line, senior leaders, staff and key personnel should be deployed for sufficient period to develop the expertise and experience necessary to ensure the safety of their commands.
- Short rotations reflected the pretense of a “temporary” mission. Despite the fact that Operation Southern Watch had been ongoing since 1992 and the probability of Iraqi compliance with UN resolutions was low, Saudi and American leaders and the U.S. Air Force planned and operated based on the presumption that Operation Southern Watch was only a temporary mission. An appropriate and earlier recognition by the civilian and military leadership (a recognition certainly warranted by Operation Vigilant Warrior in 1994) that the mission, for all practical purposes, was a “permanent” one might have resulted in a higher degree of leadership and unit continuity and minimized a number of organizational and operational shortcomings. The Department of Defense needs to review other ongoing operations to ensure that U.S. force protection needs and U.S. security interests are not being compromised by the limitations inherent in running quasi-permanent operations under the politically-acceptable rubric of “temporary” contingencies.

Appendix A:



Office of the Attorney General
Washington, D.C. 20530

OFFICE OF THE
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

1996 JUL -5 PM 3:07

July 5, 1996

The Honorable William J. Perry
Secretary of Defense
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Media reports concerning the bombing of the al-Khoobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, purport to disclose very detailed information pertinent to the ongoing criminal investigation. Some of the reports appear to be based on either public statements or leaks by U.S. Government employees.

The investigation of a terrorist act directed at the United States overseas is, by its nature, very difficult to conduct. Public disclosures of details pertinent to the investigation compound the difficulty and may compromise the prospects for the eventual success of the investigative effort. In the event of a U.S. prosecution, such disclosures present significant litigation problems.

While the public interest in this investigation is understandable, it is imperative that all federal employees refrain from unauthorized public disclosures of information pertinent to the investigation. Disclosures concerning the events leading up to the bombing--including any prior warnings or surveillance of the U.S. facility--as well as the details of the bombing and the results of the investigation should be limited to those made through authorized agency channels. Authorized disclosures should be coordinated with this Department prior to their release by contacting the Department's Terrorism and Violent Crime Section at 202-514-0849.

The al-Khoobar bombing investigation involves the dedicated and professional efforts of a large number of federal personnel. It is imperative that the professionalism of this effort not be compromised by unauthorized disclosures.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Janet Reno".

Janet Reno

Appendix B:

List of Individuals Interviewed by the Delegation

Major General Kurt B. Anderson, JTF/SWA/CC
Brigadier General Terry J. Schwalier, 4404WG(P)/CC
Brigadier General Daniel M. Dick, BG Schwalier's Replacement
Colonel James R. Ward, ARCENT
Colonel Gary S. Boyle, 4404 Spt Gp/CC
Lieutenant Colonel James J. Traister, 4404 SPS/CC
Chief Master Sergeant Jimmy D. Allen, 4404 SPS/CCE
Richard M. Reddecliff, Office of Special Investigations
Staff Sergeant Alfredo R. Guerrero, Security Patrol
Senior Airman Corey P. Grice, Security Patrol
Airman First Class Christopher T. Wagar, Security Patrol
Staff Sergeant Douglas W. Tucker, Security Patrol
Lieutenant Colonel John E. Watkins, F-16 pilot
Major James D. Hedges, F-16 pilot
Captain Steven E. Clapp, F-16 pilot
Captain John P. Montgomery, F-16 pilot
Major Steven P. Goff, Flight Surgeon

Appendix C:

Explanation of Terrorist Threat Conditions

THREATCON NORMAL — Applies when a general threat of possible terrorist activity exists, but warrants only a routine security posture.

THREATCON ALPHA — Applies when there is a general threat of possible terrorist activity against personnel and facilities, the nature and extent of which are unpredictable, and circumstances do not justify full implementation of THREATCON BRAVO measures. However, it may be necessary to implement certain measures from higher THREATCONs resulting from intelligence received or as a deterrent. The measures in this THREATCON must be capable of being maintained indefinitely.

THREATCON BRAVO — Applies when an increased and more predictable threat of terrorist activity exists. The measure in this THREATCON must be capable of being maintained for weeks without causing undue hardship, affecting operational capability, or aggravating relations with local authorities.

THREATCON CHARLIE — Applies when an incident occurs or intelligence is received indicating some form of terrorist action against personnel and facilities is imminent. Implementation of this measure for more than a short period probably creates hardship and affects the peacetime activities of the unit and its personnel.

THREATCON DELTA — Implementation applies in the immediate area where a terrorist attack has occurred or when intelligence has been received that terrorist action against a specific location or person is likely.

Source: Air Force Instruction 31-210, 1 July 1995