

# The Hand of Bandar?

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Aug 5, 2004

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Articles & Testimony

As everyone knows, Saudis, if not Saudi Arabia, were central to the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Fifteen out of 19 hijackers were Saudi, plus the Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, (from whom the kingdom withdrew citizenship in the 1990s). What is perhaps surprising therefore is that Saudi Arabia is not central to the 9/11 Commission Report.

The word "Saudi" or the name "Saudi Arabia" does not appear in the three-page list of "Contents" at the beginning of the 567 pages. But there are 32 Saudis named at the end under the category of "others" in "Appendix B: Table of Names", making them the largest single foreign national contingent. Most are hijackers or candidate hijackers. There are only two members of the Saudi royal family named - Crown Prince Abdullah, curiously described as the "de facto regent" although the temporary title of "regent" was withdrawn from him in 1996, and Prince Turki, described as the "intelligence chief prior to 9/11. "Actually, Turki, the Saudi interlocutor with the Taliban, "resigned" 10 days before September 11 for reasons that are still unclear.

(There is no index to the commission report, so to aid those who want to follow more closely the twists and turns of this story, I provide page numbers.)

One particular name that appears to be missing is that of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador in Washington DC. He does appear in the text (page 373), but only by title rather than by name. His remarks, from a June 2 newspaper interview, just seven weeks before publication, provide some leavening, albeit almost too late, to the withering criticism of the report's conclusions.

"Saudi Arabia has been a problematic ally in combating Islamic extremism." (Page 371) "American soldiers and airmen have given their lives to help protect Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government has difficulty acknowledging this." (Page 373) "Americans are often appalled by the intolerance, anti-Semitism, and anti-American arguments taught in schools and preached in mosques." (Page 373) "Although Saudi Arabia's cooperation against terrorism improved to some extent after the September 11 attacks, significant problems remained. Many in the Kingdom initially reacted with disbelief and denial. In the following months, as the truth became clear, some leading Saudis quietly acknowledged the problem but still did not see their own regime as threatened, and thus did not respond promptly to U.S. requests for help." (Page 373)

Prince Bandar's June 2 interview with a Saudi newspaper, subsequently picked up by the Washington Post ("A

Diplomat's Call for War ", June 6, 2004), called for his government to wage a jihad of its own against terrorism: "If we do not declare a general mobilisation - we will lose this war on terrorism." The notion of there being residual hope for Saudi Arabia was boosted also President Clinton offering "a perceptive analysis" (page 374), making the case for pragmatic reform. Crown Prince Abdullah is also given a good write-up, "call[ing] for greater economic and political reform." The royal family "is trying to build a consensus for political reform" though with the curious caveat of being "uncertain about how fast and how far to go." (Page 374)

It seems as though these three pages (p371 to p374) were written by two different people. The arguments about how to balance the mainly negative comments with something positive appears to have been intense. Indeed, the section culminates with two sentences that defy comprehension: "Such cooperation [against Islamist terrorism] can exist for a time largely in secret, as it does now, but it cannot grow and thrive there. Nor, on either side, can friendship be unconditional."

Prince Bandar, also escapes being named in the footnote (no.122, page 498): "We have found no evidence that Saudi Princess Haifa al Faisal [Bandar's wife] provided any funds to the conspiracy, either directly or indirectly." But her money was, at best carelessly, going to a Saudi in contact with two of the eventual hijackers. Nor is there mention in the report of the troubled relationship between the Saudi embassy and Riggs Bank that has already led to heavy fines on the bank because of the embassy's preference for large cash transactions, actions that are being investigated by the Senate Government Affairs Committee.

On a personal level, my biggest difficulty with the report (and its staff report released earlier) is its comment: "we have found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded [al Qaeda]." (Page 171) Knowing that U.S. officials have told American journalists that senior princes were paying off bin Laden from the mid-1990s, and having had this - and the names of the princes - confirmed by several British officials, I just don't understand the commission's judgement.

I have written about this several times, including in an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal ( "The Saudi Way ", August 12, 2002). Did the commission staff contact me to question me on the matter? No.

Perhaps the need for Saudi oil is so great that some stones are better left unturned. In which case the commission's recommendation that "[t]he United States and Saudi Arabia must determine if they can build a relationship about more than oil" (Page 374) has already been answered - in the negative.

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