

# U.S. Khobar Towers Case Has a Warlike Look

by Our Special Correspondent

On June 21, U.S. FBI Director Louis Freeh announced that indictments had been handed down in the June 26, 1996 bombing of the U.S. military residence, Khobar Towers, in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing a score of Americans. The indictment against 13 Saudis and 1 unidentified Lebanese, has caused a storm of protests and an avalanche of speculation. The protests came mainly from Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudi Interior Ministry had announced two weeks earlier, that it was going to publish the results of its own investigation. In an extremely tense situation, where the United States is supporting Israel as it threatens to wage war against the Arab nations, the U.S. Justice Department acted with complete disregard for the national sovereignty and dignity of an important Arab ally. Furthermore, Iran, which the indictment accused of being behind the bombing, had just signed a security and anti-terrorism agreement with Saudi Arabia in April.

Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz responded by announcing that the American indictments have nothing to do with the investigation carried out in Saudi Arabia. In an interview with the Saudi daily *Al-Riyadh* on June 28, Prince Nayef said, "We are in no way interested in what was announced by the U.S. Attorney General, and that will not be considered in the case here. We are the only party which is in charge of the case. We know nothing about this thing the Americans announced." Furthermore, Nayef denied the existence of the "Saudi Hezbollah." However, he did not completely rule out connections between the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Saudis charged with the bombing. As for Iran's involvement, he said, "We have not found any indication of that, never."

## A Fantastic Tale

In a press conference, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft said, "For five years, the Justice Department and the FBI have worked to develop the evidence necessary to bring charges in this country against those responsible for this terrible crime." A smart young boy, if there were one there, could have shouted, "But there is no evidence!"—none is presented in the indictment. It was a tale of half-truths and outright fantasy, intended to point the finger at Iran.

None of the defendants had ever been held or interrogated by American authorities, except for Hani Al-Sayegh, who came to the United States, but later reneged on a plea bargain agreement with the U.S. authorities in 1997. The United

States then deported him to Saudi Arabia. His indictment now demonstrates either FBI incompetence for letting the prime suspect go in 1997, or a "reinvented" story now. Nine of the defendants are detained in Saudi Arabia, and all the FBI received from the Saudi authorities were videotapes showing their confessions. The only area of investigation involving the U.S. authorities, was explosives analysis and other technical and intelligence assistance to the Saudi authorities.

Furthermore, the indictment gives no evidence for connections with Iran, except that the Saudi defendants are predominantly of the Shi'ite Muslim religious minority—co-religionists with the Iranian population. Travel back and forth to holy sites in Iran can be easily used as "facts."

Another fact tailored to fit, is the indictment's reference to the fact that in May 1996, the month before the bombing, a truck carrying explosives from Lebanon was reportedly stopped at a border point between Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The driver of the truck was a Shi'ite Saudi, whom the FBI merely alleges to have been in touch with the Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah. Although at the time, this incident hit the front pages of the leading Arabic newspapers and led to a clampdown on Shi'ite dissidents in the country, it was later cleared up by Bahrain official sources that the explosives were destined to Bahrain, which was experiencing political and security destabilization due to the revival of the movement for the restoration of parliamentary rule. The disturbances were blamed on Bahraini Shi'as, who were allegedly backed by Iran. That episode is over now, with both the resumption of political reform in Bahrain and the restoration of diplomatic relations with Iran. The same is true of Saudi Arabia, which had quelled the unrest among its own Shi'ites and has tremendously improved its relations with Iran.

It should be borne in mind that, at the time, the man officially in charge of running Bahrain's security was none other than the old British intelligence officer Ian Henderson, well-equipped with gang/countergang strategies inherited from his work in colonial Kenya in the 1950s. Moreover, the Bahraini opposition was also operating out of London and supported by intelligence assets within the British Parliament.

Given the claimed discovery of the truck carrying explosives into Saudi Arabia in May 1996, why were no extra measures taken to protect the barracks in Khobar?

Why, then, has the name of Osama bin Laden, turned into a superstar by the FBI's own propaganda, been totally banished from this case? This is odd, since as a Saudi, one would expect he would command extensive terrorist networks within the Kingdom. This was most emphatically expressed in the recent trial in New York, of members of bin Laden's Al-Qaeda group, who were charged in the August 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassies in East Africa. The prosecutors and the court kept telling the jury that the defendants in that case were "in no way related to the bombing of Khobar Towers," and that was "to be taken as a fact and never to be disputed."