

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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Remember Khobar Towers

by Louis J. Freeh

Nineteen American heroes still await American justice.

Responding to last week's terrorist attacks in Riyadh, President Bush declared that "the United States will find the killers, and they will learn the meaning of American justice." This is a president who is serious about fighting and winning the war on terrorism. The liberation of Iraq and the continued effort to bring al Qaeda to justice are all the proof anyone should need.

On May 1, our commander in chief stood on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln--where he rightly should stand--and reiterated the Bush doctrine: "Any person involved in committing or planning terrorist attacks against the American people becomes an enemy of this country, and a target of American justice." As if in response, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the leader of Iran's powerful Guardian Council, had this to say in a sermon the next day: "The Iraqi people have reached the conclusion that they have no option but to launch an uprising and resort to martyrdom operations to expel the United States from Iraq."

Impervious to the new order against terrorism are the terrorists who maintain their regime in Tehran. While the horrific bombing scenes were still smoldering and littered with their victims in Riyadh, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami received a rousing welcome in Beirut, where he vowed to support "resistance" against Israel and called the U.S. occupation of Iraq a "great mistake" and a "dangerous game." Meanwhile, Mr. Khatami's atomic-energy chief denied that Iran had a nuclear weapons program but told the U.N. that his country was not willing to submit to tougher inspections.

Make no mistake, Iran's terrorist leaders are well versed in "martyrdom operations" against Americans. Hezbollah, the exclusive terrorist agent of the Islamic Republic of Iran, has killed more Americans than any other group besides al Qaeda. In 1982, Hezbollah carried out the suicide bombing in Beirut that killed 241 U.S. Marines. In 1985, Hezbollah brutally murdered a young U.S. Navy diver aboard their hijacked TWA Flight 847 in Lebanon and dumped his body on the tarmac. Into the 1990s Hezbollah terrorists kidnapped, tortured and murdered several American military and civilian officers as well as other Westerners.

On June 25, 1996, Iran again attacked America at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, exploding a huge truck bomb that devastated Khobar Towers and murdered 19 U.S. airmen as they rested in their dormitory. These young heroes spent every day risking their lives enforcing the no-fly zone over southern Iraq; that is, protecting Iraqi Shiites from their own murderous tyrant. When I visited

this horrific scene soon after the attack, I watched dozens of dedicated FBI agents combing through the wreckage in 120-degree heat, reverently handling the human remains of our brave young men. More than 400 of our Air Force men and women were wounded in this well-planned attack, and I was humbled by their courage and spirit. I later met with the families of our lost Khobar heroes and promised that we would do whatever was necessary to bring these terrorists to American justice. The courage and dignity these wonderful families have consistently exemplified has been one of the most powerful experiences of my 26 years of public service.

The FBI's investigation of the Khobar attack was extraordinarily persistent, indeed relentless. Our fallen heroes and their families deserve nothing less. Working in close cooperation with the White House, State Department, CIA and Department of Defense, I made a series of trips to Saudi Arabia beginning in 1996. FBI agents opened an office in Riyadh and aligned themselves closely with the Mabatheth, the kingdom's antiterrorist police. Over the course of our investigation the evidence became clear that while the attack was staged by Saudi Hezbollah members, the entire operation was planned, funded and coordinated by Iran's security services, the IRGC and MOIS, acting on orders from the highest levels of the regime in Tehran.

In order to return an indictment and bring these terrorists to American justice, it became essential that FBI agents be permitted to interview several of the participating Hezbollah terrorists who were detained in Saudi Arabia. The purpose of the interviews was to confirm--with usable, co-conspirator testimonial evidence--the Iranian complicity that Saudi Ambassador Prince Bandar bin Sultan and the Mabatheth had already relayed to us. (For the record, the FBI's investigation only succeeded because of the real cooperation provided by Prince Bandar and our colleagues in the Mabatheth.) FBI agents had never before been permitted to interview firsthand Saudis detained in the kingdom.

Unfortunately, the White House was unable or unwilling to help the FBI gain access to these critical witnesses. The only direction from the Clinton administration regarding Iran was to order the FBI to stop photographing and fingerprinting official Iranian delegations entering the U.S. because it was adversely impacting our "relationship" with Tehran. We had argued that the MOIS was using these groups to infiltrate its agents into the U.S.

After months of inaction, I finally turned to the former President Bush, who immediately interceded with Crown Prince Abdullah on the FBI's behalf. Mr. Bush personally asked the Saudis to let the FBI do one-on-one interviews of the detained Khobar bombers. The Saudis immediately acceded. After Mr. Bush's Saturday meeting with the Crown Prince in Washington, Ambassador Wyche Fowler, Dale Watson, the FBI's excellent counterterrorism chief, and I were summoned to a Monday meeting where the crown prince directed that the FBI be given direct access to the Saudi detainees. This was the investigative breakthrough for which we had been waiting for several years.

Mr. Bush typically disclaimed any credit for his critical intervention but he earned the gratitude of many FBI agents and the Khobar families. I quickly dispatched the FBI case agents back to Saudi Arabia, where they interviewed, one-on-one, six of the Hezbollah members who actually carried out the attack. All of them directly implicated the IRGC, MOIS and senior Iranian government officials in the planning and execution of this attack. Armed with this evidence, the

FBI recommended a criminal indictment that would identify Iran as the sponsor of the Khobar bombing. Finding a problem for every solution, the Clinton administration refused to support a prosecution.

The prosecution and criminal indictment for these murders had to wait for a new administration. In February 2001, working with exactly the same evidence but with a talented new prosecutor, James B. Comey Jr. (now U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York), Attorney General John Ashcroft's personal intervention, and White House support, the case was presented to a grand jury. On June 21, 2001, only four days before some of the terrorist charges would have become barred by the five-year statute of limitations, the grand jury indicted 13 Hezbollah terrorists for the Khobar attack and identified Iran as the sponsor.

Nonetheless, the terrorists who murdered 19 U.S. airmen and wounded hundreds more have yet to be brought to American justice. Whenever U.S. diplomats hold talks with representatives of Iran's Islamic government, Khobar Towers should be the top item on their agenda. The arrest and turnover to U.S. authorities of Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Mughassil and Ali Saed bin Ali Al-Houri, two of the indicted Hezbollah leaders of the Khobar attack believed to be in Iran, should be part of any "normalization" discussion. Furthermore, access and accountability by IRGC, MOIS and other senior Iranian government leaders for their complicity in the attack should be nonnegotiable.

Before his appointment as the top U.S. administrator in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer chaired the National Commission on Terrorism, which studied the Khobar attack. The commission concluded that "Iran remains the most active state supporter of terrorism. . . . The IRGC and MOIS have continued to be involved in the planning and execution of terrorist acts. They also provide funding, training, weapons, logistical resources, and guidance to a variety of terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP-GC." The commission noted that "in October 1999, President Clinton officially requested cooperation [a letter delivered through a third-party government] from Iran in the investigation [of the Khobar bombing]. Thus far, Iran has not responded. International pressure in the Pan Am 103 case ultimately succeeded in getting some degree of cooperation from Libya. The United States government has not sought similar multilateral action to bring pressure on Iran to cooperate in the Khobar Towers bombing investigation."

One of my last official acts as FBI director was to attend a memorial service at Arlington National Cemetery with the 19 stoic Air Force families with whom I had become very close. They all came to my office to thank the FBI for keeping faith with them and presented me with a signed plaque. It will always be for me the most cherished honor of my public service.

Yesterday [May 19] the White House reiterated Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's recent statement that al Qaeda leaders are now conducting their operations from Iran. The time to bring that pressure to bear is right now, with Ambassador Bremer and our armed forces bringing democracy and justice to the Iraqi people next door. This time the United States should not just send Tehran a letter. American justice for our 19 Khobar heroes is long overdue.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louis J. Freeh served as Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 1993 to 2001. Previously, Freeh served as an FBI Special Agent from 1975 to 1981 in the New York City Field Office and at FBI Headquarters in Washington, D.C. In 1981, he joined the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York as an Assistant United States Attorney. Subsequently, he held positions there as Chief of the Organized Crime Unit, Deputy United States Attorney, and Associate United States Attorney.

Freeh was born in Jersey City, New Jersey. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Rutgers College in 1971. Director Freeh received a J.D. degree from Rutgers Law School in 1974 and an LL.M. degree in criminal law from New York University Law School in 1984. He was a First Lieutenant in the United States Army Reserve.

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The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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