

# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

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## How the Saudis Can Defend Against American Critics By Jamal A. Khashoggi

### **Editor's Note:**

The Saudi-American Forum would like to thank Mr. Khashoggi for permission to share his article with our readers. This article originally appeared in *The Daily Star* on January 28, 2004.

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### **How the Saudis Can Defend Against American Critics By Jamal A. Khashoggi**

Saudi-American relations appear publicly to be doing well. There are regular contacts between officials from both countries and active cooperation in security matters and in the war against terrorism. The latest example was the decision by the two countries to add a Bosnian company to the United Nations list of terrorist organizations.

However, this cooperation does not mean we should rest on our laurels and rely entirely on the Americans. Rather, we should be even more vigilant for as long as extreme conservatives such as Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and former Pentagon official Richard Perle are part of the Bush administration. We should deal with the latter with particular care and count our fingers each time we shake hands with one of them, and feel for our wallets whenever they give us a hug. For not only are they fervent friends of Israel and proud of it, they also have very close ties with the Likud extremists there, and, as such, hold Israel's interests and its security and future above all other considerations. There will never be a day when Saudi interests and those of the Israelis will coincide. Even if one day we reconcile ourselves to coexist with them, we will not tie our future to theirs.

This is unlike Saudi relations with Iraq, from which the kingdom was alienated for decades. We are now moving closer than ever to one another. It will never be the same with Israel, for the latter was never one of us to begin with.

We do not know what the future holds, and for that matter neither do the Americans, who are deeply involved in their Iraqi adventure. One thing is certain however: Washington is interested in us for our oil, but also for our Islam - and we have a great deal of both. Saudi Arabia has also, unfortunately, become a factor in the upcoming U.S. presidential election; candidates believe that the more they attack the kingdom and point their finger at us, the more patriotic they will appear. We must fight this tendency. The speaking tour that Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador in Washington, undertook several weeks ago to address Americans, was aimed at doing just that.

I discussed American-Saudi relations lately with a friend who had just returned from the United States and knows the country very well. He was pessimistic and not at all convinced by the public smiles and handshakes. Even U.S. President George W. Bush's statements that the accusations against Saudi Arabia do not constitute administration policy failed to reassure my friend. It is clear that Bush will not make serious attempts to put an end to these accusations for as long as none of his close aides are involved. Nor should we expect the negative attention to change with a new administration. Even the Democrats, who may have little chance of winning the upcoming election, have jumped on the bandwagon. In a recent article published in London's *The Guardian*, for example, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called for continued pressure on Saudi Arabia.

However, there has been a shift in the kind of articles about Saudi Arabia appearing in American publications. Well-researched pieces written by various scholars and published in respectable and specialized periodicals have now replaced the superficial and often unsubstantiated articles that used to appear, for example, in *The Wall Street Journal* and *U.S. News and World Report*. Since these articles have an impact on American public opinion, and regardless of whether we agree with their findings, we should be aware of their content in order to respond to those who will ask us for answers the next time they visit the kingdom.

Saudi diplomats have tried to minimize the impact of American pressure by avoiding any steps that would be seen as confrontational. However, it is time for us to reevaluate the gains and losses of the recent past and, based on that, to make rational decisions concerning the future shape of our very important and strategic relationship with the United States.

On the one hand, we should maintain our high level of cooperation with Washington in the war against terror, since both our countries are on the receiving end of attacks. The same goes for oil: It is in our interest to keep selling it to the United States and the West and to preserve moderate oil prices. On the other hand, we should confront American attacks against us, whether in the press or in the courts, since the pursuit of innocent people is another issue altogether from collaboration against terrorism. We have seen how harmful the accusations leveled against Saudi businessmen have been, and how the tight controls imposed on Saudi students have forced many of them to leave the United States to enroll in British universities, or even educational establishments in Australia and New Zealand.

Our reaction so far has been to appreciate the situation Americans found themselves in after Sept. 11, 2001, and to wait until the storm passes. But the storm, far from passing, is increasing in intensity and an ever-larger number of demands and accusations are being made as time goes by. We are also aware that there are those in Washington and Israel who see the situation as a golden opportunity to strike the coup de grace against the kingdom's position and influence in the Arab and Muslim worlds - as well as to its role as a U.S. ally.

That is why we have to fight back. Last November, Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan and Saudi Ambassador to the United Kingdom Prince Turki al-Faisal won a legal battle against the families of Sept. 11 victims, who had irresponsibly accused them of financing terrorist activities. This was good news. Also good news was the legal victory that Mohammed Abdel Latif Jamil

and his company won against the European edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, which had claimed that the Saudi-Arab Monetary Agency was keeping a close watch over the company's transfer deals because of suspected links to terrorism, an accusation that proved groundless. The newspaper was fined and forced to issue a denial. These, however, are but the early rounds in a long battle.

We should look for the weak links in the chain of American accusations against Saudi Arabia in order to support those unjustly attacked. And we should do this by undermining their legal bases. We should force American courts to make public what it says is "secret evidence" that Attorney General John Ashcroft relies upon in making his accusations. Once we can do that, the American public will be at pains to believe evidence of this kind, drawn mostly from cheap Arab magazines, and on the strength of which funds have been frozen and many a home destroyed. But then again these stories need another article.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Jamal A. Khashoggi**, a former editor in chief of Saudi Arabia's *Al-Watan*, is adviser to the Saudi ambassador in London, Prince Turki al-Faisal. He is a regular political commentator for Local Saudi Channel, MBC, BBC, Aljazeera TV, Abu Dubai and Dubai TV. In addition, he writes a weekly column in *Al Madina* newspaper, Beirut's *Daily Star*, Kuwait's *Alrai Alam*, and Doha's *Al Sharq* and occasionally in several Arab and international publications. Mr. Khashoggi received his Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Indiana State University, USA.

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- impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



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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[info@Saudi-American-Forum.org](mailto:info@Saudi-American-Forum.org)

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