



extended interviews

Edward Stourton

Adel al-Jubeir, Adviser to the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah

AL-JUBEIR: I was in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I had come home a little early from the office and I was actually swimming laps and I was told that there was a airplane that crashed into the World Trade Centre. I thought it was an accident so I turned on CNN and watched it and as I was watching, the second plane comes in. The first thing that went through my mind was that there must be a glitch in the air traffic control system and then immediately I thought no, there must be a deranged air traffic controller who did this intentionally and then the next thing that went through my mind was this was a terrorist attack.

STOURTON: And who did you think might be responsible?

AL-JUBEIR: When I assumed that it would be in the first instance bin Laden, because he was the only person who had a desire, who had a past and the organisation with the capability to do something like this.

STOURTON: And can you give us an idea of the diplomatic activity that followed in the first few days, can you tell us about some of the people perhaps you met, or conversations you had in the following days?

AL-JUBEIR: Well as soon as it happened of course Saudi Arabia very quickly despatched its Foreign Minister Prince Saud to the United States to offer condolences and to offer assistance in how we moved forward on this. We talked to our allies in the Arab world in the Gulf Cooperation Council and we came up with, a strategy in terms of where we go as this issue progresses because it was obvious that the United States would retaliate, it was obvious that there would be a price to pay for those who committed this act and there were questions about what our role should be in this, and we also quickly realised that Pakistan would have to play a major role. We coordinated very closely with General Musharraf or President Musharraf on this issue and we tried to work with the Americans and with everybody else on it.

STOURTON: Was there a concern that the issue would distract the world from the Israeli Palestinian conflict?

AL-JUBEIR: There wasn't a concern - it was a reality. Prior to September 11, the Crown Prince had made it very clear to the United States that it must engage in bringing peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The President responded to the Crown Prince's pleas by clearly stating the position that he believed in a Palestinian State, that he believed in 242338, that he believed in the free zone settlements, that he believed in a settlement of the Jerusalem issue and that he was committed to doing so. We had a commitment from the administration that the President would meet with Chairman Arafat on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in mid September. We expected that the Americans would be engaged heavily in the peace process and that they would push or prod Israel in the direction that Israel needed to be prodded. We had everything in place by September 8. The President responded to the Crown Prince in a letter, the Crown Prince responded

back to the President and on the 8th of September, we were informed that the President would go along with this plan. Three days later, bin Laden slams aeroplanes into buildings, murders several thousand people and everything unravels.

STOURTON: Can you tell me about the reason why diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and the Taleban weren't broken off until the 25th September. Was there a particular reason behind that?

AL-JUBEIR: We had broken off relations pretty much with the Taleban several years earlier. They had given us a commitment that they would deliver bin Laden to Saudi Arabia and that we would put him on trial. They then reneged on that commitment and as a consequence we cut back our representation in Afghanistan and we asked them to remove their representatives from Saudi Arabia, I believe they may have had one or two people there. After 11th of September we thought, as did the United Arab Emirates, who also had representatives in Afghanistan and had relations with the Taleban, we thought that maybe we could persuade them or we could urge them to hand over bin Laden so that war can be avoided in Afghanistan. They gathered a meeting, if you remember, of scholars to look into this issue. The conclusion or the recommendation of that meeting was that, while there has been no proof presented that bin Laden was responsible for the attacks, the meeting recommended that the Taleban ask him to leave the country and so, when the Taleban did not do so, we took the position that we are now formally cutting off relations with you, so it wasn't, we were looking for an opportunity to do so and we were looking for a way to maybe use it to prod the Taleban into the right direction and when that didn't happen we cut off relations with them formally.

that's why the US did not ask for it. The US had wanted to use a command and control centre in Riyadh which we agreed to from the first day. It was unfortunate that there were a lot of leaks in the newspapers about Saudi Arabia denying the US access to the command and control centre, but those leaks were just not correct at all because the day they appeared in the newspapers, there were over a hundred American officers operating out of that command and control centre.

STOURTON: So when Donald Rumsfeld visited Saudi Arabia on October the 3rd, that wasn't anything to do with trying to persuade your country to co-operate more fully in terms of a military basing for attacks on Afghanistan.

AL-JUBEIR: No, not at all. I believe the Secretary of Defence visited the region partly to show the flag, partly to reassure friends, partly to touch base with friends, partly to consult with friends, but there was no discussion in terms of use of Saudi facilities because that was an issue that had already been settled from day one. We were willing to provide whatever was required to make this effort a success, the United States asked for everything that it wanted and we provided it to the United States. I have been hearing things to the effect that oh, America did not ask for use of bases because we knew the Saudis would say no. That's not correct, that's speculation in the press, that's speculation on the part of pundits, but if you look at the statements of the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary of Defence, the Secretary of State, the NSC advisor, they have been unequivocal and they have been consistent in terms of the cooperation of Saudi Arabia in the effort to go after the evil doers, and that just is in stark contrast to what somebody reads from time to time in the media, or what somebody reads attributed to un-named officials.

STOURTON: I know the Egyptians were and still are greatly concerned at the number of arrests of their nationals in the United States, and I believe it was a concern for Saudi Arabia too, particularly around the end of October. Can you tell us about that?

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that are still detained on, on charges. I don't believe that anyone has any charges linked to terrorism.

STOURTON: That must have to a degree worked against the message that the authorities were trying to put out that this wasn't a war against Islam and yet, on the other hand, there were so many people from Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the Middle East being arrested.

AL-JUBEIR: Most certainly yes, it did. For the people of Saudi Arabia this issue was the most emotional one. The President early on went and visited the mosque in Washington, he met with Moslem leaders and Arab Americans, he repeated the notion that this is a war against terrorism not a war against Islam or against Arabs, and I think that had a very positive impact. But then you had the arrests of the citizens and that kind of toned down that message to some extent, but I believe for the most part this situation is behind us today.

STOURTON: How should one interpret the fact that so many of those involved in the attacks came from Saudi Arabia?

AL-JUBEIR: I think that Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organisation has membership from fifty different countries; he could have had any nationality he wanted on those aircraft. One of the four pilots was Saudi, the fourteen others on the airplanes were, had no mission critical roles to play and, according to bin Laden's own statements, did not know they were on suicide missions. We believe that bin Laden chose Saudis with the express purpose of trying to give this operation a Saudi face in order to drive a wedge between the US and Saudi Arabia, and seeing the reaction in the US and in particular in the media about Saudi Arabia and the doubts that it created about Saudi Arabia in October, November and December of last year, tells me that Osama bin Laden almost succeeded in his desire to drive a wedge between the two countries.

STOURTON: What is your assessment of the possibility of there being another bin Laden and the US being threatened by another terrorist of the same type?

AL-JUBEIR: I think that I wouldn't be surprised if it happened, I hope and pray that it doesn't but I think one would be foolish to discount the notion of a terrorist attack against anybody, anywhere, I just think it's a fact of life and we just need to find ways of dealing with it.

STOURTON: The Middle East is a key issue throughout this entire campaign, I mean I've heard it said that some believe that the use of bases in the Middle East depended upon America making more efforts with the peace process. Can you say anything

Crown Prince's response to that was, have you been in my drawer, because that's exactly what I had in mind, but the actions of Prime Minister Sharon persuaded me not to do it, and Tom Friedman published this and it took a life of its own and the Crown Prince decided to move forward with his vision and present it to the Arab Summit, which he did and which the Arab Summit adopted unanimously. Back to your question about why did he do it? There was a vacuum, there was a need for clarity in terms of peace process, there was a need to move beyond vagueness and beyond what will you give me hypothetically - if I give you something else hypothetically, there was a need to have something concrete on the table, and that's what the Crown Prince did. He simplified the issue, it became, withdraw from the territories occupied in '67 in exchange for normal relations with the Arab world and that was it, and so when we look at the reaction of the world to this and when we look at the reaction in Israel to this and when we look at the reaction in the Arab world to this, I believe that it was a success in terms of refocusing attention on this issue, opening the door for possibility of negotiations and progress in the peace talks and that's what we had, but unfortunately the Israeli invasion, or the reinvasion of the West bank literally put a monkey wrench in this, and now we're trying to solve that problem before we go back to the issue of full withdrawal for normal relations.

STOURTON: Do you think it's had a lasting effect as it seems very much back to business in terms of what's happening, the horror in the Middle East?

AL-JUBEIR: I think that the significance of what the Crown Prince put on the table and the significance of that proposal being adopted unanimously by the Arab world is just now beginning to sink in, in terms of the Israeli public. I believe that in Europe, people realised the significance of it. I believe in the Arab world people have begun to realise the significance of it, as they have in Washington. Let's take a look at that; this is the first time where you have the Arab world unanimously saying we will recognise Israel with the 1967 borders. This is the first time the Arab world's saying we will all sign peace treaties with Israel if Israel withdraws from the territories occupied in 67, allows a Palestinian State to be established on those territories and withdraws from the Golan Heights and any territory it might have with Lebanon. It has never happened before; this is the first time that the Arab world says, as part of this bargain we will consider the Arab Israeli conflict formally ended. This is the end of conflict provision; it has never been put on the table before. This is the first time where the Arab world is saying that we will sit down and work with the Israelis on mutual security arrangements, it has never happened before. This goes beyond anything that the United Nations Security Council resolutions require because the UN Security Council resolutions essentially deal with Israel and its neighbouring countries, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. What the Crown Prince's initiative did when it became the Arab peace initiative is, it basically said all the Arab countries would make peace with Israel in one day. We've never had that, we've never had that clarity and, and I think that the fact that it's on the table now gives people a lot to think about and hopefully will allow the Israeli public to look at it rationally and decide that they need a government that will move in that direction, not a government that will move away from that direction.

STOURTON: Can I just ask how you think September 11th has changed the diplomatic landscape?

AL-JUBEIR: Prior to September 11, people had not paid much attention to the issue of terrorism, everybody thought I can protect myself, I can look after my own interests and that's it. Nobody thought of it as the global phenomena that it is and by terrorism in this case I mean the Al Qaeda network. If Kabul was the centre of Al Qaeda, Europe was a close second. This is the crime that was committed on September 11. It was thought out in Afghanistan, was planned in Hamburg, the funds went through the Gulf, I believe Dubai, the people who participated were

