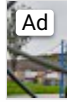


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Saudi Arabia's help during war was more extensive, officials say

Published Aug 27, 2005

During the Iraq war, Saudi Arabia secretly has helped the United States far more than has been acknowledged, allowing operations from at least three air bases, permitting special forces to stage attacks from Saudi soil and providing cheap fuel, U.S. and Saudi officials say.

The American air campaign against Iraq was essentially managed from inside Saudi borders, where military commanders operated an air command center and launched refueling tankers, F-16 fighter jets and sophisticated intelligence gathering flights, according to the officials.

Much of the assistance has been kept quiet for more than a year by both countries for fear it would add to instability inside the kingdom. Many Saudis oppose the war, and U.S. presence on Saudi soil has been used by Osama bin Laden to build his terror movement.

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But senior political and military officials from both countries told the Associated Press the Saudi royal family permitted widespread military operations to be staged from inside the kingdom during the coalition force's invasion of Iraq.

While the heart of the ground attack came from Kuwait, thousands of special forces soldiers were permitted to stage their operations into Iraq from inside Saudi Arabia, the officials said. These staging areas became essential once Turkey declined to allow U.S. forces to operate from its soil.

In addition, U.S. and coalition aircraft launched attacks, reconnaissance flights and intelligence missions from three Saudi air bases, not just the Prince Sultan Air Base, where U.S. officials have acknowledged activity.

Between 250 and 300 Air Force planes staged from Saudi Arabia, including AWACS, C-130s, refueling tankers and F-16 fighter jets during the height of the war, the officials said. Air and military operations during the war were permitted at the Tabuk air base and Arar regional airport near the Iraq border, the officials said.

Saudis also agreed to permit search and rescue missions to stage and take off from their soil, the officials said.

Gen. T. Michael Moseley, a top Air Force general who was a key architect of the air campaign in Iraq, called the Saudis "wonderful partners," although he agreed to discuss their help only in general terms.



"We operated the command center at Saudi Arabia. We operated airplanes out of Saudi Arabia, as well as sensors, and tankers," Moseley said. He said he treasured "their counsel, their mentoring, their leadership and their support."

U.S.-Saudi cooperation raised eyebrows last week after it was disclosed that President Bush shared his Iraq war plans with Saudi ambassador Prince Bandar bin Sultan before the start of the war.

Some lawmakers have demanded to know why a foreigner was brought in on private war planning.

When asked about the briefing, Bandar played down the extent of Saudi help. "We were allies. And we helped our American friends in the way that was necessary for them. And that was the reality," he said.

U.S. and Saudi officials said Bandar was briefed several times before the war as part of securing Saudi assistance, and received regular updates as U.S. needs changed.

Preparations for U.S. operations inside Saudi Arabia started in 2002 when the Air Force awarded a contract to a Saudi company to provide jet fuel at four airfields or bases inside the kingdom, documents show.

When the war started, the Saudis allowed cruise missiles to be fired from Navy ships across their air space into Iraq. A few times missiles went off course and landed inside the kingdom, officials said.



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The Saudis provided tens of millions of dollars in discounted oil, gas and fuel for American forces. During the war, a stream of oil delivery trucks at times stretched for miles outside the Prince Sultan air base, said a senior U.S. military planner.

The Saudis also were influential in keeping down world oil prices amid concern over what might happen to Iraqi oil fields. They increased production by 1.5-million barrels a day during the run-up to war and helped keep Jordan __ which had relied on Iraqi oil __ supplied.

Saudi officials said they provided significant military and intelligence help on everything from issues of Muslim culture to securing the Saudi-Iraqi border from fleeing Saddam Hussein supporters.

Secret assistance to United States

Saudi Arabia secretly helped the U. S. during the Iraq war far more than the Bush administration has admitted. Much of the assistance was kept secret for fear it would cause instability inside the Middle East.

Saudis help to the U. S. during the Iraq war

Missile attacks

Allowed cruise missiles fired from Navy ships to cross into Saudi air space to targets in Iraq

Discounted fuel

Provided tens of millions of dollars in discounted oil, gas and fuel

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Intelligence

Provided military and intelligence help on issues from Muslim culture to border control of fleeing Hussein supporters

Air base use

Permitted coalition flights from three air bases

Sources: Associated Press; ESRI; GlobalSecurity.org

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