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Saudis Secretly Provided Extensive U.S. Help During Iraq War



The Associated Press

Apr. 24, 2004



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WASHINGTON - During the Iraq war, Saudi Arabia secretly 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.

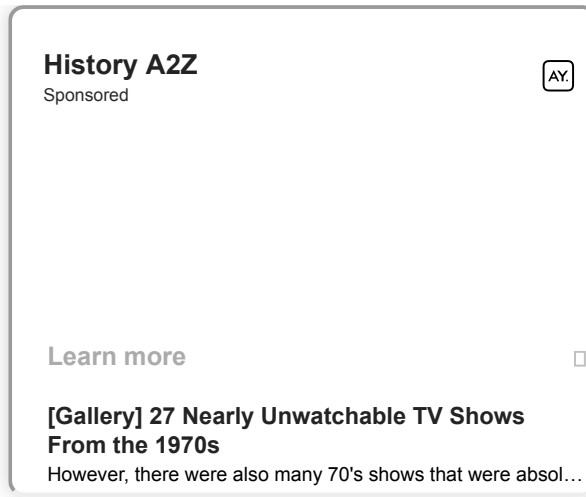


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Much of the assistance has been kept quiet for more than a year by both countries for fear it would add to instability inside the kingdom. Many Saudis oppose the war and U.S. presence on Saudi soil has been used by Osama bin Laden to build his terrorism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



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.

These officials would only talk on condition of anonymity because of the diplomatic sensitivity and the fact that some operational details remain classified.

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.



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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.




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Gen. T. Michael Moseley, a top Air Force general who was a key architect of the air campaign in Iraq, called the Saudis




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

Publicly, American and Saudi officials have portrayed the U.S. military presence during the war as minimal and limited to Prince Sultan Air Base, where Americans have operated on and off over the last decade. Any other American presence during the war was generally described as humanitarian, such as food drops, or as protection against Scud missile attacks.



Saudi Arabia – a move designed to keep from inflaming the Saudi public.

U.S.–Saudi cooperation raised eyebrows last week after it was disclosed that President George W. 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.

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



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

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