

Bombing of Khobar Towers:
An Attack of Saudi Arabians on the United States Military

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It was a hot summer night in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia. For weeks, the Saudi Arabians wanted the United States military out of there. It had gotten so bad that women were not allowed to leave the base without a head covering.¹ On June 25, 1996, they were finally antagonized enough. They were upset, and they were sending threats, too. Sneaking into the United States military's joint base, attackers exploded the Khobar Towers where the United States air force was housed. Shawna Haertter, a member of the US air force casualty crisis team at that time, explained that the attackers smuggled and used over 5,000 pounds of explosives from Lebanon. "It's what happens when you invade a country, take it over," Haertter stated. Who could conjure such an evil plan? Of course, there has to be a valid reason for who did this and why they did, and there must be various theories to how the United States handled it.

Joseph Bauman, a staff writer at Deseret News, wrote that the United States' military was in Saudi Arabia to help enforce a "no-fly zone" over Iraq.² According to Roger A. Lee, the United States military and the United Kingdom³ air and naval forces were stationed in Saudi Arabia for this. After the Gulf War⁴, Iraq agreed to an armistice. Along with this cease-fire, these United Nations were permitted to sift through Iraq for any prohibited weapons being used, and Iraq was told to enforce a "no-flying zone". The purpose for these "no-fly zones" was originally supposed to help keep Iraq muslims safe; it ended up causing more tension between the United Nations and Iraq because the "no-fly zones" allowed the United Nations to seek for and destroy Iraq's weapons capable of mass destruction. This tension between the United States, the United

¹ Haertter, Shawna. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 19, 2016.

² Bauman, Joseph. "SQUADRON AT HAFB IS AWARDED MEDALS." *DeseretNews.com*, Deseret Digital Media, 1 Feb. 1997, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/540935/squadron-at-hafb-is-awarded-medals.html?pg=all>.

³ The United States and the United Kingdom are the United Nations.

⁴ The Persian Gulf War was known as the Gulf War. It lasted from 1990 to 1991. Iraq had invaded Kuwait (a country between Saudi Arabia and Iraq) on August 2, 1990. It ended on February 28, 1991; Iraq had nearly collapsed, and George Bush (US president at the time) declared an armistice.

Kingdom, and Iraq was ignored in most cases, but it was a problem that gradually kept increasing every week.⁵

According to Ken Dilanian, an associated press of Deseret News, Ahmed al-Mughassil “is suspected to lead such an attack.” *New York Times* writer, David D. Kirkpatrick, also wrote an article agreeing with this accusation after al-Mughassil was arrested. He said that al-Mughassil was recognized as “a senior leader of an Iranian-backed Saudi militant group that sought to kill American military personnel.” In 1993, al-Mughassil wanted his groups to supervise the United States military troops in Saudi Arabia. They did, and a few were caught when they tried to “drive into Saudi Arabia with explosives obtained in Lebanon,” as written by Kirkpatrick. Three people were arrested in this attempt.⁶

Haertter contradicts this by saying that no one knows for sure, but “they were just Saudi terrorists that didn’t want us there at all.” In the article published to Desert News, it was explained that later, there were thirteen Saudi Arabians named “in connection with the bombing”; one Lebanese man was also named guilty for providing the attack weapons. In the article, Dilanian wrote, “none of the 13 has yet been brought to court to face charges.” According to Dilanian, Iran was later charged \$254 for the attack’s victims, but the government denied being involved; they never paid the charges.

⁵ Lee, Roger A. “The No-Fly Zone War.” *History Guy*, SolidOpinion, 22 Nov. 2014, http://www.historyguy.com/no-fly_zone_war.html.

⁶ Kirkpatrick, David D. “Saudi Arabia Said to Arrest Suspect in 1996 Khobar Towers Bombing.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 26 Aug. 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/27/world/middleeast/saudia-arabia-arrests-suspect-khobar-towers-bombing.html?_r=0.

People are also known to believe that Iran had taken part in the attack.⁷ Kirkpatrick also wrote that in 2006, Iran was officially named responsible.⁸ A Saudi militant group called Hezbollah al-Hijaz worked with them and a Lebanese Hezbollah group. As determined earlier, it was still concluded that al-Mughassil lead this attack. How did he do it?

According to Kirkpatrick, al-Mughassil and his groups had been sneaking explosives in to Saudi Arabia since his fellow associates were arrested. They hid them around Qatif⁹ for years, and no one suspected anything. On June 25, 1996, everyone in Saudi Arabia was just about asleep, including the army and marines, who were both outer layers to the joint base. Two huge white trucks, each carrying one of al-Mughassil's adherents, drove through the joint base. "The marines think, 'Oh it's okay; it's just a truck,' and then the navy's out to sea, the army's sleeping..." is what Haertter said about the situation. According to her, no one thought anything of them driving through.¹⁰

The two trucks that drove in at first were carrying around 5,000 pounds of explosives. They parked these trucks outside of Building 131 at Khobar Towers, the building where the United States Air Force was being housed. These trucks were said to be followed by a smaller car too; it was apparently being driven by the suspect al-Mughassil. This was the getaway car they used for when they set off the bombs.¹¹ It was spread that al-Mughassil had two people who

⁷ Dilanian, Ken. "Suspect in 1996 Khobar Towers Bombing Arrested." *DeseretNews.com*, Deseret Digital Media, 26 Aug. 2015,

<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/765679617/suspect-in-1996-khobar-towers-bombing-arrested.html>.

⁸ It was thrown around that a Sunni group known as Al Qaeda could have also been partially responsible. They would complain about being neglected and discriminated, and they had been known to take part in other bombings. There was never enough evidence to blame them.

⁹ Qatif (al-Qatif, as referenced earlier) is a governorate and urban area in Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia.

¹⁰ Haertter, Shawna. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 19, 2016.

¹¹ Meade, George G. "20 Years Later: Remembering the Attack on Khobar Towers." *U.S. Air Force*, USAF News and Information, 24 June 2016, <http://www.af.mil/news/articledisplay/tabid/223/article/811370/20-years-later-remembering-the-attack-on-khobar-towers.aspx>.

“drove the truck bomb into the lot, parked it next to the building and fled.”¹² The bombs went off moments later when al-Mughassil and his workers had driven away in the smaller car. It shattered windows miles away, blew a “50-foot-wide-by-16-foot-deep crater” in the building, and traumatized many United States military members.¹³ Haertter said that her friend had been there for this attack, and he recalled walking without thinking his cuts and shards of glass were bad; he had told Haertter that “people holding their own eyeballs were waiting because you knew someone was worse than you.”¹⁴ According to Kirkpatrick, the explosion was so detrimental that it “tore the face off the building.”

There is a hero involved in this attack that is almost always forgotten when people discuss this topic, though. His name is Alfredo R. Guerrero, a staff sergeant for the United States air force at the time. He was standing with the guard on top of Building 131 at the time of the attack. Unlike the marines and the army, he thought that there was something awfully suspicious of the white trucks parked outside of the building. When he saw a car following the trucks and the driver hurriedly scurrying from the scene, he knew something was up. He began a floor by floor evacuation of the building; this was said to have saved many lives. Guerrero was not supposed to be on top of the building at that time, but he was checking on the airmen who were

¹² Kirkpatrick, David D. “Saudi Arabia Said to Arrest Suspect in 1996 Khobar Towers Bombing.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 26 Aug. 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/27/world/middleeast/saudia-arabia-arrests-suspect-khobar-towers-bombing.html?_r=0.

¹³ Kozaryn, By Linda D. “Khobar Tower Bombing.” *Defense.gov News Article: DoD Releases Report on Khobar Tower Bombing*, United States Department of Defense, 18 Sept. 1996, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=41452>.

¹⁴ Haertter, Shawna. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 19, 2016.

assigned to be guarding the building around 10:00 p.m.¹⁵ No matter if it was just fortunate timing or not, Guerrero was a hero during the 1996 bombing; he is a hero who should not be forgotten.

Along with Guerrero, there were other people involved in the attack whose actions during it were brought to the attention of the public. Sixteen Purple Heart medals¹⁶ were given out to some injured militants after the attack, and twenty-three Air Force Commendation medals¹⁷ were given to other intrepid heroes. Only three people received both types of awards: Staff Sergeant Steven P. Gethers, Staff Sergeant Peter T. McNutt, and Airman First Class Jereme D. Schuchard.

¹⁸ These are only a few of the brave heroes involved in such a perilous attack.

It would be reasonable to think that the United States air force was left vulnerable after the attack, but Haertter said “nothing ever happened again; they built barricades out in front of the dorms.” According to some websites, there were nineteen deaths in the air force and almost 500 injuries out of everyone.¹⁹ Haertter explained that only half of this is accurate. According to her, there were “four hundred and ninety eight injuries... but the deaths were all marines.” As part of the casualty crisis team, Haertter was informed of the deaths the air force had right away so that she could notify the families, and she explained that she did not remember a death from the air force, but she did remember lots of wounded airmen. “We had injuries,” Haertter stated.

¹⁵ Meade, George G. “20 Years Later: Remembering the Attack on Khobar Towers.” *U.S. Air Force*, USAF News and Information, 24 June 2016, <http://www.af.mil/news/articledisplay/tabid/223/article/811370/20-years-later-remembering-the-attack-on-khobar-towers.aspx>.

¹⁶ A Purple Heart is given to a militant who was injured by an instrument of war in the hands of an enemy.

¹⁷ An Air Force Commendation medal is presented for sustained acts of heroism.

¹⁸ Bauman, Joseph. “SQUADRON AT HAFB IS AWARDED MEDALS.” *DeseretNews.com*, Deseret Digital Media, 1 Feb. 1997, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/540935/squadron-at-hafb-is-awarded-medals.html?pg=all>.

¹⁹ Kirkpatrick, David D. “Saudi Arabia Said to Arrest Suspect in 1996 Khobar Towers Bombing.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 26 Aug. 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/27/world/middleeast/saudia-arabia-arrests-suspect-khobar-towers-bombing.html?_r=0.

Even though they had built new dormitories in that base, the United States air force later relocated to the Prince Sultan Air Base in a remote desert south of Riyadh.²⁰ They cleaned up extremely fast; before you knew it, they were ready to continue enforcing the “no-fly zone!”

Many people lack any knowledge of the Khobar Tower bombing that occurred on June 25, 1996. Because of the various theories floating around in different articles written in different perspectives, the majority of people that are aware of this attack probably do not understand who had attacked the United States air force or why they did. This is important event in the United States’ history, as is any event. It is important that people become educated on this topic because it is part of what made our country what it is today, it helped to put America in the place it is today, and it added to the life of Americans. It affected those nineteen servicemen that died, those four hundred ninety-eight servicemen wounded, and all of their families. The Saudi Arabians who bombed the building where the United States air force was being housed in 1996 should be known; they affected America’s lives, and everything involved in the Khobar Tower bombing should be shared.

²⁰ Saudi Arabia’s capital city

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