

## Khobar Towers, Before the Scapegoating

*On June 25, 1996, an explosive-laden truck detonated outside Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 airmen. Questions came quickly: How could it happen? Who was to blame? Secretary of Defense William J. Perry told Congress, "Our commanders were trying to do right, but given the inconclusive nature of the intelligence, had a difficult task to know what to plan for." However, retired Army Gen. Wayne A. Downing was named to investigate, and Downing pinned blame on Air Force Brig. Gen. Terryl J. Schwalier, the wing commander. A year later, new Defense Secretary William S. Cohen bowed to political calls for a scalp and canceled Schwalier's previously approved promotion to major general, prompting Schwalier to retire. Given the cravenness of this endgame, it's useful to review Perry's take on the case.*

It is clear in retrospect that the actions we took to respond to the threat were not adequate to deal with the attack that actually occurred. ...

Why, in the face of serious concern about force protection and extensive measures to improve force protection, did the Khobar Towers tragedy occur? ... Based on what I have already learned, I can give you a partial answer.

First of all, the security measures we introduced after the bombing of the Saudi National Guard facility [in November 1995] were focused on a threat less powerful than actually occurred.

Secondly, and partially related to our understatement of the threat, our local commanders, for a variety of reasons, had not completed some of the measures that were prescribed and which they agreed needed to be done.

Why did we focus on a threat which proved to be understated?

For the decades of American presence there, it seemed that Saudi Arabia was safe from the terrorist violence occurring in other countries in the Middle East. ...

In November of last year, a group of Saudi religious extremists attacked the office of the US program manager for the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh with a car bomb, killing five Americans. That was a wake-up call. At that point, we made what we believed to be a prudent judgment that this attack might not be an isolated event but a new trend and a high terrorist threat level to Saudi Arabia.

In response to this judgment, we conducted analyses of the vulnerability of our forces in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations conducted a vulnerability analysis of the Khobar Towers that was completed in January of this year.

It was informed by full access to the intelligence information on the terrorist threat to Saudi Arabia.

But the intelligence information, while voluminous and pointing to a high threat level, was also fragmentary and inconclusive. It did not provide the user with any specific threat, but rather laid out a wide variety of threat alternatives.

Consequently, our commanders received recommendations to take a variety of actions. Many actions were completed prior to the June attack. Some focused on preventing an attack similar to the November bombing. Other actions focused on preventing attacks of a completely different nature and may have prevented a different type of attack from taking place.

### "Combating Terrorism in Saudi Arabia"

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Secretary of Defense William J. Perry  
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"Keeper File"

My assessment is that our commanders were trying to do right, but given the inconclusive nature of the intelligence, had a difficult task to know what to plan for.

The critical limitation on anti-terrorist intelligence is warning on specific terrorist operations. You need a critical level of intelligence to prevent an attack. Short of that level of information, commanders have to plan for a wide range of cases.

This attack turned out to be 10 times as powerful as the previous attack. It is evident from what is already known about the attack that the bombers were well-organized, had sophisticated training, did extensive practice, and had access to military-quality explosives and detonating devices. ...

I believe that it is prudent to conclude that we are now facing a significantly higher and more sophisticated threat than was evidenced by the bombing of the Saudi National Guard facility in Riyadh.

Why were the recommended security measures not yet completed at the time of the attack?

Based on his view of the threat and the vulnerability analysis done by OSI, the base commander [Schwalier] undertook an extensive set of security measures at Khobar Towers. ...

Some of these measures were still in process, but most of them had been accomplished at the time the attack was made on Khobar Towers. Indeed, the security measures that were already in place undoubtedly saved dozens, if not hundreds, of lives. However, it is also undoubtedly true that significantly fewer casualties would have occurred if all of the prescribed security measures had been implemented by the time of the attack. ...

It seems clear that local commanders would have put a higher priority on timing if they had perceived a threat as sophisticated and powerful as actually occurred. ...

The changes required to deal with this level of threat will be complex, expensive, and take many months to implement. It is fundamentally difficult to provide protection against such a threat, particularly in an urban environment. Therefore, I have [decided] to move our military forces out of Riyadh and other urban environments, where it is difficult to provide adequate physical security. ■