



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: 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.

STOURTON: What kind of practical support did Saudi Arabia offer the Americans, I mean how strong was the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US at the time?

AL-JUBEIR: Very strong. The United States asked Saudi Arabia for a number of issues. Whether it involved flights, or operational issues, everything that the US asked for we provided. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia worked very closely with President Musharraf Pakistan too, in terms of him joining the coalition - we provided assistance to Pakistan while it was doing so, we worked very closely within the organisation of Islamic conference. A meeting was held in, in Quatar that looked into this issue and that sanctioned the use of force in Afghanistan against the Taleban. Initially, in the first days of the crisis, our religious scholars came out very strongly and condemned this attack and this set the tone for scholars throughout the Moslem world to follow suit, so I mean those were the areas that we worked with the US on. We also worked on putting together a consensus within the Arab world of where we stood in this war on terrorism.

STOURTON: Can you explain something that I'm not entirely clear on regarding the use of American bases in Saudi Arabia at the time? Was there a problem because there were all sorts of stories about the Americans wanting to use bases in Riyadh?

AL-JUBEIR: Well to, to begin with there are no American bases in Saudi Arabia, they're Saudi bases. We allow the United States to use them to enforce UN resolutions with regard to Iraq, but there is no American base in the classic sense in Saudi Arabia. With regard to the Saudi bases, the United States did not ask for use of our bases in the war effort because the practical perspective. They would have to launch their aircraft from Saudi Arabia, fly over Iran into Afghanistan, make a U-turn, fly back over Iran and come to Saudi Arabia. The aircraft would not have the range, they would need to refuel at least twice and in most cases refuel over Iran, and this was not an option, nor was this something that the Iranians would agree to, so from that perspective our bases from an operational perspective were not useful to the US and

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?

AL-JUBEIR: Yes, we were very shocked. Well September 11 was, for Saudi Arabia, a triple shock. The first shock was just the sheer horror of the crime and the second shock was when we discovered that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi. The third shock, which to us was the most painful shock, was the reaction to Saudi Arabia in the United States and the doubts that were expressed by Americans about Saudi Arabia, for example, things like the Saudi educational system breeds terrorists, things like the Saudi religious establishment encourages this, things like the Saudis are funding terrorism and, and on and on and on. We never expected there to be doubts in the American mind or among the American public about Saudi Arabia as a country, Saudis as a people, or Saudi Arabia as a friend and ally of the United States, but in any case, these doubts occurred, we were very surprised and were trying to deal with them. As part of this, the shock that America went through, America may have over reacted when it instinctively rounded up every Arab that was visiting the United States just because of their name or because of their nationality. We had several hundred Saudis who were arrested or detained, including a person who was on dialysis, waiting for a kidney transplant, and he was in critical condition because of his inability to go through dialysis and so we, we were very concerned about the welfare of our citizens and were very upset where cases such as the gentleman that I mentioned who had a medical condition, it was very upsetting to us. We worked these issues out with the United States and very quickly reduced the number of Saudis who were in detention. Most of these individuals were either students who had names that sounded like the names of the hijackers, they were patients who were in the United States for medical treatment and had overstayed their visas or forgotten to renew their visas because their treatment took longer than they expected. In most cases they didn't speak English, but we worked it through the legal process, we hired lawyers for them and we were able to bring about the release of almost all of them, I think we have less than a handful of people

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 about that?

AL-JUBEIR: The Israeli Palestinian conflict is the one conflict that resonates throughout the Arab and Moslem world, but in particular the Arab world. The United States is the only country that can move the process forward. Whenever the US is engaged it moves forward, whenever the US is disengaged, it slides back. Whenever it slides back, violence increases and emotions increase and resentment towards America in the Arab world increases and so our view has always been that the US must be engaged because of its credibility and its prestige in the Arab and Moslem world and we've always felt that the more progress we make on the Israeli Palestinian track, the less pressures people in the Arab world feel and, in particular, governments, because we need to engage in nation building, we need to think about joining the World Trade Organisation, we need to build institutions, we need to build civil societies, and it's difficult, if not impossible, to do so when your public is focused and emotional about the violence that takes place in the Palestinian territories. It's

difficult to work with the United States if your public is angry with America, or hostile, or inclined, if your public is angry with America and so we urged the United States to do all it can in order to move this process forward, and frankly when we recognised that the process is not going anywhere, and that there was not much effort given by the United States, Crown Prince Abdullah put forward his vision for a peaceful settlement in order to refocus people on the peace process, hopefully to re-energise the peace camp in Israel and in the United States and to provide open doors that may provide an opportunity to extract the region from the situation that it was in.

STOURTON: The Palestinians seemed to think that there was a flurry of interest in the middle east immediately after September the 11th, that people made renewed and determined efforts and then, with the fall of Kabul and I suppose military victory in Afghanistan, there had been a sort of waning of interest on the part of the United States.

AL-JUBEIR: I didn't see that, I know that we were in discussions with the US in the second half of September about the President's commitment to declaring his vision for a Palestinian State, and I believe he did so in the first week of October and a month later, the Secretary of State elaborated on that vision more. I don't see that there was an inordinate amount of activity after September 11 until the fall of Kabul, I think that the US was moving in that direction and the activity occurred because the President declared his vision and that was followed subsequently by the Secretary of State's speech, which was followed by more intensive discussions between Arab countries, I can speak for Saudi Arabia, between us and the Americans about what exactly this means, how are you going to implement it, how do you move forward, how do you ensure that Prime Minister Sharon is able to be moved in that direction and so, any time you declare a new statement or a new vision, it creates activity or a buzz around it.

STOURTON: What about the President's speech, the State of the Union address in which he talked about an axis of evil comprising Iran, Iraq and North Korea, what was the view in Saudi Arabia of that?

AL-JUBEIR: Our sense is that it is better to engage countries than to have them be outcasts. That was the view of the United States, we don't share it, certainly not when it comes to having had good ties and growing ties with Iran once we reached out and engaged them a number of years back. They have been responsible in their role as neighbours in the Gulf and in their role as partners in OPEC, we believe that, those trends should be encouraged and you encourage it by engaging them, not by casting them aside.

STOURTON: Well if we move onto the Saudi peace proposals at the Arab League Summit, what was the impetus behind those?

AL-JUBEIR: The Crown Prince had been very vocal on the need to do something about the peace process and the Crown Prince had urged the United States and the Palestinians, he had also urged other Arab countries to come forth with ideas or with plans or with positions that one can move forward. None of them did, and so the situation on the ground went from bad to worse, and in December of last year, he decided to present his vision for a settlement which is very simple - full withdrawal from the territories for normal relations with the Arab countries, and he was going to present this to the Arab league in meeting in Beirut in March. By December the situation on the ground had become so bad that he decided not to do it and he just left it in his drawer literally. In February he met with the American journalist Tom Friedman, and Tom Friedman asked him the question about why don't the Arabs present a plan that basically says to Israel withdraw and we'll have peace, and the

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

Lebanese, Egyptians, Saudis and I believe also a Yemeni citizen, this is a global effort. You cannot destroy the infrastructure in Afghanistan if you don't have a handle on the infrastructure or the public relations infrastructure in Europe. You cannot defeat these phenomena unless you have a multi national effort and an effort that involves information sharing, that involves legal issues, that involves law enforcement, much more than it does a purely military effort. We have seen, since September 11, a coalition emerge composed of over 100 nations in the fight against terrorism. We have never had as much information sharing or law enforcement cooperation between nations on this planet as we have had since September 11. It may not be perfect cooperation but it is unprecedented cooperation. We have never had a unanimity of view that such actions are illegal and harmful and must be combated as we have today, so in that sense the world has made a lot of progress. The pendulum may have swung a little too far when it comes to issues of personal liberties or personal freedoms, but my personal sense is that it'll swing back in the middle as we go forward. Has it changed the way the world works? Probably not, but it has changed the way the world looks at a particular problem and how to deal with this particular problem. We must be careful that we don't turn this into a mission of idealism in which the goals or the standard is set so high as to be unattainable. This is a war against a criminal organisation that has operations in 50 plus countries, and the world must join hands in order to break up this organisation and dismantle it and bring its members to justice and in the process, the world should set up a mechanism that will prevent the re-emergence of a similar organisation on this planet. If we stretch the mission or the objective beyond that, we are very likely not to achieve it.

STOURTON: There's just one other thought that occurred to me, which is the fact that Prime Minister Sharon has tended to suggest that the problem in Palestine can be equated with the problem with bin Laden, that it's a similar form of terrorism.

AL-JUBEIR: I see. Well that's his opinion, he's entitled to his opinion, but his opinion is wrong. Now let's be careful about not stretching this too broadly. You do not want to create a position where every person who has a problem with a minority or with a political group will term this group a terrorist organisation and say I'm fighting terrorism, therefore you must help me. The Palestinian situation involves a liberation movement, it involves people whose land is occupied and who are seeking their freedom and that's why they take up arms against their occupier. This is a far cry from the Al Qaeda system, which seeks as its objective to kill people for no tangible reason. We must also be careful that other countries don't use the world's anger at what happened September 11 in order to pursue their own pet projects against their own opponents or adversaries and the Israeli prime minister has tried to portray Israel's conflict with the Palestinians as a conflict against terrorism and saying that Israel is in the same boat as America is with bin Laden, but that's not an accurate description.