

Saudi Suspect May Be Driver in Bomb Plot; Capture Could Provide Break in Air Force Housing Blast

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Body

A **Saudi** citizen detained last week in Ottawa at Washington's request is **suspected** of being the **driver** of a vehicle used in connection with last summer's terrorist **bombing** of a U.S. military **housing** complex in Dhahran, **Saudi** Arabia, that killed 19 **Air Force** members and injured 500 others, senior U.S. law enforcement officials said last night.

If the officials are correct, the **capture** by Canadian immigration authorities of Hani Abdel Rahim Sayegh would constitute a major breakthrough for the FBI in its nine-month probe of the **bombing**, which has been frustrated by what U.S. officials have called inadequate cooperation by **Saudi** investigators.

Sayegh, 28, is said by the officials to have fled **Saudi** Arabia because he was the object of a manhunt there, and has expressed a desire not to return. But he has not cooperated with authorities who have been questioning him while documents are being prepared to justify his deportation to the United States, the officials said.

Sayegh was taken into custody more than a week after U.S. authorities learned he was in Canada, during which time he became the object of intensive surveillance. FBI officials expressed concern last week when The Washington Post inquired about reports of the surveillance, and requested that the newspaper hold off reporting that a **Saudi** citizen in Canada was being closely watched on suspicion of a connection to the **bombing**.

Sayegh was arrested last Tuesday under a Canadian immigration service certificate alleging he was "a security risk to Canada," which Canadian authorities said was based on the government's belief that he had committed a criminal act abroad, was involved in an act of terrorism and was a member of a terrorist organization.

The U.S. officials said that they believe Sayegh is a Shiite Muslim. **Saudi** officials have told Washington privately that they believe the **bombing** was carried out by Shiite Muslim members of a group known as **Saudi** Hezbollah, which they say is a wing of the radical Lebanese-based group known as Hezbollah, or Party of God, that has long been funded, trained and equipped by Iran.

Sayegh's name had surfaced as a **suspect** shortly after the June 25 **bombing** of the Khobar Towers **housing** complex, the U.S. officials said. "We think he's a major player and we have had interest in him for some time," said a senior law enforcement official, speaking on condition he not be identified.

The **bombing** occurred after an explosives-laden truck was driven near a fence that surrounded the **housing** complex. The **driver** of the truck was observed getting into a car idling nearby shortly before the **bomb** was detonated, shattering windows throughout the building and injuring many of its occupants. **Saudi** officials told Washington last fall that they had **captured** the man who drove the truck. Two senior U.S. law enforcement officials

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said while they believe Sayegh was the driver of a vehicle in connection with the bombing, they could not definitively say which vehicle.

Saudi officials did not return phone calls for comment last evening. But Sayegh's deportation to the United States would give the FBI its first direct access to an individual alleged to be associated with the blast. U.S. efforts to interview about 40 Saudi citizens detained by Saudi Arabia on suspicion of involvement in the blast have so far been frustrated by Saudi investigators, who have provided Washington only with summaries of their findings and transcripts of their interviews with the suspects.

Sayegh was said by one U.S. official to have been in Canada since August, and is alleged to have flown there from Saudi Arabia after a brief layover in Boston. The official, who is familiar with details of the joint U.S.-Saudi investigation, declined to say how Washington learned of his whereabouts.

Shiite activists in the United States and in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, where most Saudi Shiites live, separately said yesterday that on the basis of his family names, Sayegh is a Saudi Shiite.

According to one of the activists, who spoke on condition of anonymity, the Sayegh family hails from a village called Tarut, on a small peninsula that juts into the Persian Gulf about 25 miles northwest of the Khobar Towers complex. Many of those Shiites arrested by Saudi security forces after the bombing were from Tarut and adjacent towns in the mostly agricultural area along the gulf coast.

A second Saudi citizen, Fahad Shehri, also has been detained by Canadian authorities in recent months because Shehri claimed to be the object of a Saudi manhunt related to the bombing. But U.S. authorities have disavowed any interest in Shehri, and Saudi authorities have said Shehri is not a suspect. Several dissident sources said Shehri almost certainly is a Sunni Muslim from the area of southwestern Saudi Arabia known as the Hijaz. Shehri is the name of an extended family or tribe centered on the southern Hijaz, they said.

The religious affiliation of the men is important because Saudi authorities, in the aftermath of the bombing, seemed to concentrate their inquiry on the Shiite community. Saudi Shiites have long complained of discrimination at the hands of the Sunni ruling family and the Eastern Province has been the scene of occasional Shiite unrest. Many of those arrested were affiliated with Saudi Hezbollah, an extremist group that follows the anti-Western teachings of radical Shiite clerics in Iran.

But Shiite dissidents in the Eastern Province remain skeptical of the government claim. They say the government has targeted their community to deflect attention from growing extremism within Sunni ranks. And the government's failure to press formal charges against those Shiites still in detention, they say, suggests that it is unable to prove its case.

The government is still holding about 30 or 40 Shiite suspects but released "five or six" during the recent Muslim holy month known as Ramadan, a dissident from the Eastern Province said. "Up till now we are waiting to hear from the authorities," he said.

Correspondent John Lancaster in Cairo contributed to this report.

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