

Official's Asylum Request Could Complicate Saudi-U.S. Diplomacy

The Washington Post

July 8, 1994, Friday, Final Edition

Copyright 1994 The Washington Post

Section: FIRST SECTION; PAGE A11; NATIONAL NEWS, FOREIGN NEWS

Length: 1345 words

Byline: John Mintz, Washington Post Staff Writer

Series: Occasional

Body

Mohammed Khilewi knew nothing would be the same for him after May 17, when he told top Saudi officials by cable of his bitter opposition to the Saudi government's human rights policies. Khilewi, a Saudi diplomat at the United Nations, recalls that associates urged him over the next day not to go public with his criticisms and to come to Washington to meet the Saudi ambassador, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan.

Then, Khilewi says, a man he knew to be a Saudi intelligence official came to his Manhattan apartment. The agent, who works as a Saudi diplomat, he said, offered him money to keep quiet, and then told Khilewi to see Bandar immediately. "You have to go today or your life, your wife and kids' lives will be in danger," Khilewi said the man told him in Arabic. "Don't destroy this opportunity."

A tape that Khilewi says he made of the conversation -- using a recorder hidden under his bed -- is now a prop in an international drama that could prove embarrassing to the Saudi regime and has created a diplomatic dilemma for Washington.

Khilewi, 31, who was a first secretary at the Saudis' U.N. mission, has asked the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to grant him political asylum. He said in his application to the INS that he has a "well-founded fear of persecution" if he returns to his country, adding that he didn't visit Bandar here because he feared being kidnapped.

Khilewi has gone into hiding with his wife and three children and has gone public with his criticisms of the Saudi government.

If the INS grants Khilewi asylum, it would insult the closest U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf. Khilewi, the highest-ranking Saudi official to criticize the regime openly, wants King Fahd to abdicate. He also wants the Saudi government to give its citizens civil rights and to end what Khilewi calls the royal family's corruption. In the past, U.S. officials have not made a public issue of Saudi human rights abuses.

The FBI is investigating the alleged threat against Khilewi and other claims by him, his lawyer said. The FBI declined to comment.

Khilewi said in a telephone interview that he has collected 14,000 pages of Saudi documents that illustrate government wrongdoing. Some of the documents, he said, show that Saudi Arabia finances Islamic terrorists, spies on Jewish activists in the United States and smuggles bombs and firearms across international borders.

The Saudi Embassy strenuously denies his allegations and points out that Khilewi has shown only a few pages to reporters.

Official's Asylum Request Could Complicate Saudi-U.S. Diplomacy

On ABC's "20/20," when Bandar was shown one of Khilewi's documents purporting to describe the Saudis' electronic monitoring of militant U.S. Jewish groups, the ambassador said it was forged by "someone who has access to a pad" of paper with Saudi government letterhead. The Saudi government wishes no harm to Khilewi, Bandar said. "We're not after him," he said. "We want to help this guy... He can come back to his job if he drops this nonsense."

Publicly the Saudis brush off Khilewi as a minor nuisance. "I don't think this young man could lead eight ducks across the street," Bandar said. Added Saudi Embassy spokesman Osama Nugali: "This is not a big deal to our government."

Saudi representatives say privately that Khilewi is unstable and point to his theory -- apparently lacking any evidence -- that King Fahd was involved in the murder of his half-brother, King Faisal, in 1975. Khilewi also has stoked some reporters' suspicions by demanding money for security guards as a condition for face-to-face interviews.

Aziz Abu Hamad, associate director of the New York-based Human Rights Watch/Middle East, a private group, said he does not think Khilewi is unbalanced. "He's passionate, but reasonable and cautious, careful in what he says," Hamad said. But mostly, Hamad said, Khilewi is brave.

"Considering the persecution of Saudi people who voice the mildest dissent," Hamad said, "it takes a lot of courage to say half the things Khilewi says... The royal family is deeply concerned about his dissent." Several princes have arranged telephone calls and visits to Khilewi in New York by at least six of his relatives, who failed to persuade him to return home, Hamad and another source said.

Khilewi said Abdulrahman Rassi, the Saudi man who supposedly threatened him, is an intelligence agent who had moved into his apartment building to monitor his activities after Saudi officials came to suspect his loyalty. Khilewi said in an affidavit to the INS that during their talk Khilewi gave Rassi, as a sign of good faith, his 9mm pistol and "the security file," not otherwise described.

Rassi did not return telephone messages left for him at the U.N. mission; the Wall Street Journal has quoted him as saying he worked only as a diplomat.

Last month another Saudi diplomat joined Khilewi. Ahmed Zahrani, vice consul at the Saudi consulate in Houston, applied for political asylum in London and also is denouncing the Saudi regime.

Khilewi said his distaste for Saudi abuses grew as he gained access to more documents while at the United Nations. Four of his cousins had been jailed for activities in an underground movement protesting the royal family's policies, and another was jailed in 1991 for being one of the first Saudi women to drive a car, a violation of Saudi law.

Khilewi, while not religious, said he was impressed by a group of Saudi Islamic scholars who set up a group in London to protest the Saudi government's civil rights record. He also disagreed with the Saudis' signing of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1988 -- thinking it precludes Third World nations like Saudi Arabia from developing weapons the great powers have.

His lawyers, the father-son team of Leon and Michael Wildes, who filed his asylum application on June 14, said the United States rarely grants asylum to citizens of U.S. allies. In the 1980s, they said, Washington granted asylum to about 3 percent of those requesting it from U.S.-allied El Salvador, while granting asylum to 30 percent of those from Nicaragua, whose leftist government the United States opposed.

"U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia aside, we hope the U.S. government will look to the merits of this case, particularly because our client has corroborated the threats against his and his family's lives," Michael Wildes said.

Wildes, a former federal prosecutor, said he is concerned that U.S. officials may not aggressively investigate Khilewi's claims. Wildes said he met twice with FBI agents a month ago and told the agents about his client's allegations of Saudi complicity in spying and terrorism -- including possible assassination attempts against foreign

Official's Asylum Request Could Complicate Saudi-U.S. Diplomacy

diplomats in the United States, and allegations that some U.S. officials knowingly allowed terrorists to enter this country.

Yet Wildes said the FBI agents expressed little interest in the information and did not keep any of Khilewi's documents. The bureau reversed itself and started the probe, Wildes said, only after news reports on the case.

For years groups such as Amnesty International have charged the Saudis with a wide array of abuses, including arrest of dissidents, torture of criminals and political prisoners, and a ban on political parties and unions. The State Department has acknowledged Saudi abuses in annual reports to Congress, but U.S. policymakers avoid public discussion of the issue because of the Saudis' oil and their strategic importance.

A State Department official said, "We have no credible evidence of Saudi government support for terrorism." The department declined to comment on Khilewi's asylum request.

A 1994 State Department report on terrorism said that "some private Saudi citizens probably provide private funds to Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups throughout the region, as well as to extremist elements in Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. Saudi benefactors also sponsor paramilitary training for radical Muslims from many countries in camps in Afghanistan, Yemen and Sudan."

Special correspondent Yasmine Bahrani contributed to this report.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: HUMAN RIGHTS (89%); ESPIONAGE (89%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (87%); INVESTIGATIONS (84%); MUSLIMS & ISLAM (79%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (78%); INTERVIEWS (77%); HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS (77%); UNITED NATIONS (77%); CORRUPTION (77%); EMBASSIES & CONSULATES (77%); INTELLIGENCE SERVICES (75%); FAMILY (74%); LAWYERS (73%); IMMIGRATION (72%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (72%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (70%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (67%); CIVIL RIGHTS (66%); SMUGGLING (65%); KIDNAPPING & ABDUCTION (64%); CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS (60%); TERRORISM (60%); RELIGION (60%); FEDERAL INVESTIGATIONS (60%)

Company: IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE UNITED NATIONS (83%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (81%)

Organization: UNITED NATIONS (84%); UNITED NATIONS (84%); IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE UNITED NATIONS (83%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (81%)

Industry: LAWYERS (73%); TELEVISION NEWS SHOWS (60%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (73%); INDIAN OCEAN (53%); SAUDI ARABIA (99%); UNITED STATES (94%); GULF STATES (79%)

Load-Date: July 8, 1994