

New York Times, 29 Aug 2015, p. A18

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/29/opinion/a-break-in-the-khobar-towers-case.html>

# Opinion

## Editorial

### A Break in the Khobar Towers Case

By [The Editorial Board](#)

Aug. 28, 2015

The 1996 terrorist attack on Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 United States airmen was among the defining events of America's recent experience in the Middle East. But there has been no judicial accountability. With the reported arrest of the man accused of masterminding the crime, a resolution of the case may be closer. The truck bombing at the eight-story dormitory near the Dhahran Air Base was the deadliest such attack on American forces since the 1983 bombing of the Marines' barracks in Beirut that killed 241 American service members. In 2006, a federal court concluded that elements of Iran's government inspired, supported and supervised the Saudi militant group that carried out the Khobar attack, one reason for the enmity between Washington and Tehran.

The suspected mastermind, Ahmed al-Mughassil, was identified as a senior leader of the Iranian-backed Saudi militant group Hezbollah al-Hijaz. Believed to be living in Beirut since the attack under the protection of the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah group, he was detained there and handed over to Saudi authorities, the Saudi-owned pan-Arab newspaper Asharq al-Awsat reported on Wednesday. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the United States has officially confirmed the arrest.

In all, a 2001 indictment identified 14 suspects, including Mr. Mughassil, 12 other members of Saudi Arabia's Shi-ite minority and a Lebanese member of Hezbollah. That year, Saudi officials said they had detained 11 of the 13 Saudi suspects. But they refused to extradite them to the United States, and it is unclear how the cases were resolved. Some intelligence analysts assume the suspects were executed.

The Saudis have an unhelpful history in this case. They knew of Mr. Mughassil's role in the attack and also that he most likely knew which Iranian officials were involved, according to Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst and senior Obama administration official now with the Brookings Institution. But the Saudis restricted cooperation, hampering the American investigation. They feared that if American investigators proved an Iranian connection, Tehran might retaliate against Saudi Arabia.

It would serve the cause of justice and accountability if the Saudis agreed to extradite Mr. Mughassil to the United States for trial or at least allow the Americans to interrogate him. Given that he is a Saudi citizen, both requests may be rejected. But President Obama should press the case when he meets with King Salman, the new Saudi monarch, at the White House next week.

While the arrest is welcome and long overdue, the timing has raised suspicions, coming as it does in the middle of a fierce debate in Congress about the wisdom of the proposed nuclear deal with Iran and whether Tehran can be relied on to fulfill its terms. Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-majority country and an American ally, sees Iran, a Shiite-majority country, as its main rival and is worried that the deal will open the door to improved relations between Tehran and Washington. The arrest is a reminder of Iran's sordid record of sponsoring extremist groups and terrorist acts, and opponents of the nuclear deal could well use it to try to persuade undecided members of Congress to oppose an agreement that is unquestionably in America's interests.

In fact, Americans are well aware of Iran's record, as are Mr. Obama and the leaders of the other major powers that helped to negotiate the nuclear deal. It is their job to keep the pressure on Iran to reform its ways; on Friday, a senior administration official arrived in Israel to explain how Washington still plans to inflict severe penalties on Iran for its sponsorship of terrorism and support for military proxies.

The country's ideological hard-liners may continue to chant "Death to America," but there are plenty of young Iranians who see a different future for their country and should be encouraged to build it.