

Secrets of the Saudi Royal Family

Critics Call Saudi Rule Hypocritical and Corrupt

By **BRIAN ROSS** and **JILL RACKMILL**

N E W Y O R K, Oct. 15, 2004 -- Oct. 18, 2004 - A Saudi prince moved roughly two tons of cocaine from Colombia to an airport outside Paris, using his diplomatic status and a royal family 727 jet, U.S. and French law enforcement authorities told ABC News.

"It doesn't happen without him," said Tom Raffanello of the Drug Enforcement Agency in Miami. "He is the key co-conspirator. He's the straw that stirs the drink, he made it happen. No plane, no dope. Dope stays in Colombia."

Prince Nayef bin Fawwaz Al Shalaan is under indictment by U.S. and French authorities, but living outside the reach of American law in Saudi Arabia, according to Raffanello. The United States and Saudi Arabia have no extradition treaty. A trial for the prince's alleged co-conspirators is scheduled to begin next month in a federal court in Miami.

"He's a fugitive in the United States. He's a fugitive in violation of federal narcotics law," Raffanello said.

Prince Nayef bin Fawwaz Al Shalaan claimed in an Arab newspaper that he was cleared of any wrongdoing by the Saudi government, stating he was seeking investors in a deal for plastic pipe, not smuggling cocaine. "That's an alibi, he moved dope," said Rafanello.

The DEA speculated that terrorism was a possible motive, but there is no formal terrorism charge in the indictment.

"Later on in the investigation, we came to find out that he would use some or all of the profit to fund terrorism, through whatever indices he was using to do it," Raffanello said.

The prince has an earlier drug charge -- he was indicted in Mississippi on narcotics charges in 1984, and remains a fugitive in that case as well, according to the DEA.

Saudi law is harsh with regard to drug trafficking; three accused drug smugglers were reported to have been beheaded just last month, according to the Saudi Interior Ministry.

But the influence of the royal family can be formidable.

Fabrice Monti, a former French police investigator, said the powerful Saudi interior minister, Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz, actually threatened to cancel certain business deals with the French government if the narcotics investigation of a fellow prince continued.

"The Saudi government acted as one to set up a protective barrier between the prince and French justice and threatened to not sign a very important and lucrative contract in the works for a very long time," said Fabrice Monti, who has written a book on the subject.

The Saudi government declined repeated requests for comment on the case.

The drug case is an extreme example of what critics decry as a morally corrupt and hypocritical Saudi royal family.

This past summer, far from the political unrest and terrorist threats, far from a faltering economy where one out of three men is unemployed, far from a country under strict Islamic law, some of the richest and most powerful Saudi royals were buying jewels, flying on private jets, and dining at the finest restaurants on the French Riviera.

"When I see this I think of the saying that they fiddle while Rome burns," said Mai Yamani, author of "Cradle of Islam: the Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity." Yamani is a former Saudi native now living in exile in London and a research fellow with the Middle East Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Until he became too sick to travel, Saudi King Fahd would arrive every August in his personal 747 aircraft with a huge entourage to spend the summer at a palace he had built outside Marbella, Spain, used, at most, just one month a year.

The south of France is also a popular vacation destination for the Saudi royal family, including Saudi Prince al Walid bin Talal, the king's nephew, who has summered in Cannes for the past 30 years.

"We're just vacationing like any other vacationers," said Saudi Prince al Walid, 47, from on board his 281-foot yacht, "The Kingdom," in

Cannes this past August. Formerly owned by Donald Trump, the yacht comes complete with its own disco studio and helicopter. "I am with my daughter and my son here. They're jet skiing right now. You know, it's like any other family."

According to clerks in the luxury stores in Cannes, one Saudi prince bought a \$1.2 million emerald and diamond necklace, while a Saudi princess purchased a \$10,000 Christian Lacroix outfit with pink and purple raccoon boas.

"The princes are sleeping. They are spending in Europe," Yamani said. "This spending is happening while the terrorists on the Web sites are threatening guerrilla war."

The first woman from her country to earn a doctorate from Oxford, Yamani saw firsthand the lavish lifestyle of the Saudi royal family when her father, Sheik Yamani, served as oil minister of Saudi Arabia in the 1970s.

"Conspicuous consumption. All the waste and the style of life that they are living," she said. "And I think of the anger and the rage of those young men, the Saudis, who are reading about all this and discussing it on the Web sites."

Perhaps the most immediate threat to the Saudi royal family is that of Osama bin Laden, who comes from a wealthy Saudi family and has urged his al Qaeda followers to end the royal family's reign.

In a 1998 interview with John Miller of ABC News, bin Laden said, "They sin and do not value God's gift. We predict their destruction and dispersal."

In May and November of last year alone, suicide bombings at housing compounds in the capital city of Riyadh accounted for more than 50 deaths. Recent months have seen a rash of Americans being kidnapped and subsequently killed in Saudi Arabia, shown in gruesome details in videos posted on the Web. Groups affiliated with al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Prince al Walid said he travels with a large group of bodyguards, but said he does not worry about bin Laden's threats. He also refuted charges that the royal family was ignoring a security crisis.

"And I think that all indications that we're winning the war in Saudi Arabia against al Qaeda," he said. "This is not a crisis, these are issues that any country has to face."

Described as the fifth richest man in the world at an estimated \$22 billion net worth, Prince al Walid defended the riches of the Saudi royal family, as well as their spending habits.

"Wealth is a blessing," he said. "You know if wealth is used properly, it is not abused but rather used, there's nothing wrong with that."

But the royal family's jet set lifestyle lies in sharp contrast to the way most people live back in Saudi Arabia.

Many young Saudi men with college degrees say finding a job is nearly impossible if you don't know the right people.

And Yamani said the lack of recreational outlets for young people causes additional problems. There are no venues," she said. "There are no restaurants where they can sit as men and women, there are no cinemas. There're no clubs."

Other critics take offense at what they say is the royal family's blatant mockery of the Islamic religion.

"The royal family are not only not observing Muslims, actually they are enemies of Islam," said Dr. Saad al Faqih, a Saudi dissident living in London who heads the Movement for Islamic Reform In Arabia. "Not only squandering our money, but deceiving us, behaving with this hypocrisy, and destroying our religion, our identity, our social life."

Al Faqih's group broadcasts via satellite into Saudi Arabia every night, denouncing the royal family. Last year al Faqih called for public demonstrations and an estimated 200 people took to the streets, the first time in memory such an event had taken place. Most of the participants were arrested.

"Well you know the official position in Saudi Arabia is that public demonstrations are not allowed," said Prince al Walid, adding that he was indifferent to the issue.

The Saudis have tried to block al Faqih's satellite transmissions and recently accused him of being part of a terrorist plot to assassinate members of the royal family.

Al Faqih denied the accusations, but said, "Well, it's good to see them disappear. It's good to see them disappear."

Prince al Walid insisted the royal family was beloved by its subjects.

"The interaction, the relation between the Saudi royal family and the people I would say is further than ideal, it's utopian," he said.

But Yamani described a different reality. "The royal family have alienated vast majorities of the Saudi people to whom they give their names," she said. "They know they are losing power."

There are more than 5,000 princes in the royal family of Saudi Arabia and only a few are alleged to be involved in criminal activity.

But the extent that such behavior is tolerated and covered up only strengthens the case of royal family critics.

"And it makes me very sad because you're watching this behavior, and you're watching the decay, and these people are putting their head in the sand," Yamani said. "And waiting until the place burns."

ABC News' Marni Lane, Maddy Sauer and Jessica Wang contributed to this report.

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