

# FBI Polarized by 'Wahhabi Lobby'

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

Critics contend that the FBI's politically correct policy of embracing self-proclaimed "mainstream" Muslim groups is compromising its counterterrorism efforts.

**A**s FBI agents in the field moved in on a dozen suspected terrorists running recruitment operations in Northern Virginia, a senior FBI official appeared June 26 before a Senate Homeland Security panel and avoided testifying about what senators had called him to discuss. The issues were sponsorship of pro-terrorist ideology, extremist political action and terrorist recruitment financed from Saudi Arabia, supposedly a U.S. ally.

Well into the war on terrorism, the FBI is a house divided. On one side, agents are wrapping up terrorist-support networks coast to coast that include radicalized American Muslims bent on unleashing a murderous jihad against their own country. On the other side, in Washington, a culture of political correctness seems to have settled in the bureau's upper management, which some insiders describe as a Clintonlike pandering to the latest favored victim group.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, a favorite self-proclaimed victim has been an aggressive band of Washington-based groups that purport to represent the nation's Muslims and hyphenated Arabs. That constituency is known as the "Wahhabi lobby" for many of its members' alleged ties to Saudi Arabia, whose state religion is considered by many to be an extremist and violent Wahhabi sect of Islam [see "Wahhabi Lobby" Takes the Offensive," Aug. 5, 2002].

Sources say the FBI has silenced a senior counterterrorism agent, Robert Wright of the Chicago field office, for exposing how senior figures in the bureau blocked investigations of al-Qaeda terror networks inside the United

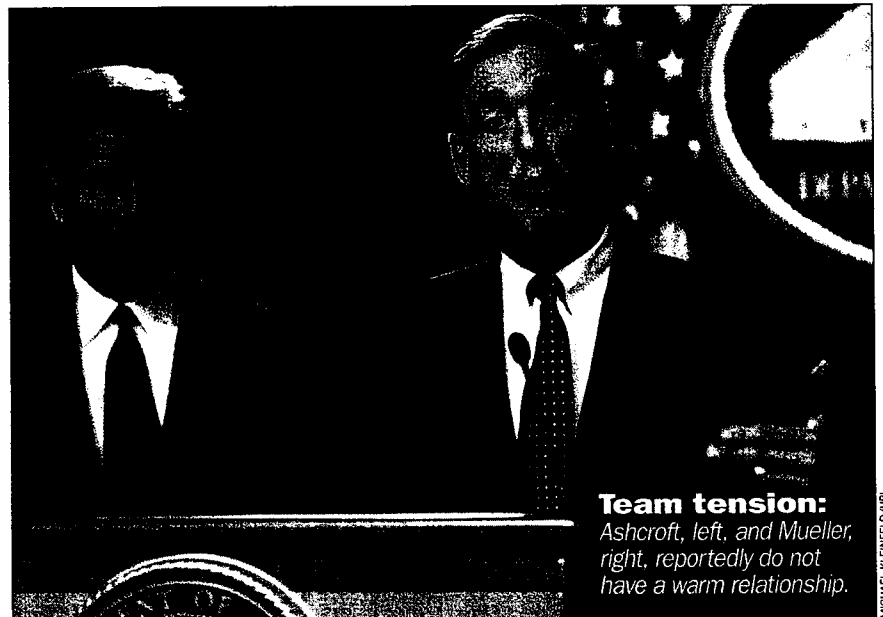
States prior to Sept. 11, and for complaining that a Muslim special agent, Gamel Abdel-Hafiz, refused to wear a wire when questioning terror suspects, allegedly saying, "A Muslim doesn't record another Muslim." Wright's FBI colleague, John Vincent, says he also was called off pre-9/11 cases, and has been speaking in Wright's stead. Wright is receiving legal counsel from David Schippers, the Chicago attorney who led the House commission to impeach president Bill Clinton [see *picture profile*, Jan. 1, 2001]. Schippers tells *INSIGHT* that the Wright case is symptomatic of out-of-control political correctness at the FBI.

Meanwhile, senior administration officials tell *INSIGHT* that FBI Director Robert Mueller was under orders from an unnamed senior White House cam-

paign strategist to appease Muslim and Arab-American groups that have been complaining noisily that federal counterterrorism efforts are impinging on their civil rights. Mueller was widely criticized both inside the bureau and out for addressing the June 2002 national convention of the American Muslim Council (AMC). An FBI spokesman defended Mueller's appearance on grounds that the AMC was one of the most "mainstream" organizations in Washington. This proved especially embarrassing to the director when, at the very time of the Mueller speech, AMC spokesman Eric Vickers appeared on Fox News and MSNBC and refused, under questioning, to denounce by name terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda.

Mueller and other top FBI officials have met subsequently with the AMC and other high-profile Washington groups, including the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), that claim to be mainstream but seem to antiterrorism specialists to be more opposed to the FBI's efforts to fight terrorism than to the terrorists themselves.

The FBI says it holds such meetings to build relations with Arab-American and Muslim communities. But some of its interlocutors are using those relations against the FBI's counterterrorism efforts, say careful observers of the Wahhabi lobby. Representatives of those groups reportedly have used these high-profile meetings to credentialize themselves while serving as character witnesses for terrorism suspects arrested by the FBI. In one case, the activists defended suspected Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Sami Al-Arian, the former University of South Florida professor arrested earlier this year under a 50-



**Team tension:** Ashcroft, left, and Mueller, right, reportedly do not have a warm relationship.

MICHAEL KLEINFELDER

count terrorism indictment. For the previous two years, Al-Arian was the lobbying coordinator at the AMC conventions, working to organize efforts on Capitol Hill to weaken U.S. antiterrorism laws, according to the programs of the 2000 and 2001 AMC conferences.

According to testimony at the June 26 hearing of the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security, the FBI has retained members of the vocal Wahhabi lobby to run "sensitivity-training" classes at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va. The FBI official the subcommittee called to address the Wahhabi issue, Larry A. Mefford, assistant director of the counterterrorism division, did not discuss it.

Overall, some senior FBI leaders have shown a barely concealed contempt for Attorney General John Ashcroft, the man who has been instrumental in persuading Congress to broaden the bureau's counterterrorism powers. Relations between the attorney general and FBI Director Mueller are said to be cool. Some in the FBI, claiming to be civil lib-

## Follow the Money

"It is not an exaggeration to argue that Wahhabism has become the prototype ideology of all Islamic extremist and terrorist groups, even those that despise the House of Saud [ruling Saudi Arabia]," Alex Alexiev told the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security. The senior fellow at the Center for Security Policy also testified:

- "Without the exorbitant sums of Saudi money spent on supporting extremist networks and activities, the terrorist threat we are facing today would be nowhere as acute as it is."

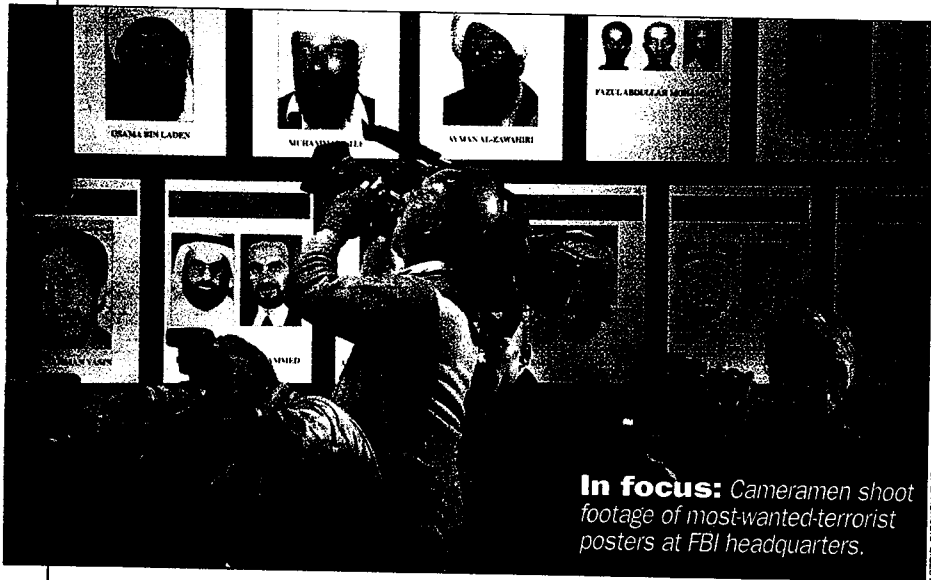
- "The Saudi money is spent according to a carefully designed plan to enhance Wahhabi influence and control at the expense of mainstream Muslims. In Muslim countries, much of the aid goes to fund religious *madrassas* that teach little more than hatred of the 'infidels'

while producing barely literate jihadi cadres."

- "Early on in the Wahhabi ideological campaign, the penetration of the Muslim communities in non-Muslim Western societies was made a key priority. The objective pursued there was ... aimed to ensure Wahhabi dominance in the local Muslim establishments by taking over and building new Wahhabi mosques, Islamic centers and educational institutions, including Islamic chairs at various universities."

- "What have the Saudis been able to buy with this unprecedented Islamic largesse? Quite a bit, it would seem. It has contributed immeasurably to the Islamic radicalization and destabilization in a number of countries and continues to do so. Pakistan, for instance, an important U.S. ally, is facing the gradual Talibanization of two of its key provinces and the prospect of large-scale sectarian strife and turmoil."

— JMW



**In focus:** Cameramen shoot footage of most-wanted-terrorist posters at FBI headquarters.

ASTRID RIECKEN/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ertarians, allege that Ashcroft is too aggressive in going after terrorist suspects and their support networks. As yet there is no reform of the federal investigative and law-enforcement services along the lines of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's painful but potent transformation of the military.

The FBI has gone out of its way to avoid talking about Saudi state sponsorship of terrorism. Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), chairman of the Senate subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security, called the June 26 hearing to discuss that very issue. "The problem we are looking at today," Kyl told Mefford, specifically citing Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia, "is the state-sponsored doctrine

and funding of an extremist ideology that provides the recruiting grounds, support infrastructure and monetary lifeblood of today's international terrorists."

Instead of testifying about what Kyl had requested — the hearing was titled "The Growing Wahhabi Influence of Terrorism in the United States" — the FBI provided standard boilerplate text about the status of the war on terrorism. Mefford told senators in his opening statement, "Thank you for inviting me here today to testify regarding the state of the terrorist threat to the United States."

Despite some impressive FBI victories in recent months, that wasn't what Mefford was invited to speak about. He took pains never to use the word Wah-

habi in his statements and portrayed the Saudis as victims and U.S. partners, but the senators gave him a pass. After leaving the hearing, Mefford spoke with reporters, stealing headlines from the hearing subject by announcing that the FBI had detected al-Qaeda operatives in at least 40 U.S. states.

The Department of the Treasury was not as reticent to touch the Saudi-Wahhabi issue. The department's general counsel, David Aufhauser, is the senior U.S. official responsible for tracking terrorist financing. He provided written testimony that bore the hallmarks of a good State Department scrubbing to avoid offending the Saudis, but his brief responses to the senators' questions revealed much. He told senators of a global "enterprise of terror" that uses charities and other fronts to bankroll al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Asked if Saudi Arabia is behind the funding of Islamist terrorism, Aufhauser responded flatly: "In many ways it is the epicenter."

While he stressed that the United States is "not at war with a faith, nor with any particular sect," Aufhauser said that the Wahhabi strain of Islam, with its "severe and uncompromising" doctrine and practices, "is a very important factor to be taken into account when discussing terrorist financing." The Saudis' multibillion-dollar spending on Wahhabi global propaganda, Aufhauser warned, "is a combustible compound when mixed with religious teachings in thousands of *madrassas* [religious schools] that condemn pluralism and mark nonbelievers as enemies." Wahhabism, the Treasury



BRENDAN MCCORMICK/REUTERS

official told senators, is a pressing problem for the United States: "It needs to be dealt with."

Senior U.S. officials are reticent to discuss the Saudi connection because of ongoing, sensitive counterterrorism cooperation with elements of the kingdom's government. Kyl later recognized the need to be discreet with the Saudis on certain antiterrorism issues. But he told reporters the Saudis are playing both sides of the terrorist war, that such behavior has to stop and that they respond only when attention is focused on their kingdom.

One of the expert witnesses Kyl summoned, Alex Alexiev, warns that U.S. intelligence and security analysts are not looking at the whole picture, and are identifying al-Qaeda as a problem instead of a symptom of a far larger danger. Such an approach, combined with growing political correctness within the FBI and an element there that critics say has pandered to favored electoral constituencies of White House campaign strategists, frustrates what promises to be a generations-long war on terrorism.

The CIA, on the other hand, publicly has tackled Saudi/Wahhabi sponsorship of terrorism. In late 2001, the CIA's National Intelligence Council produced an unclassified report addressing Wahhabism and its Saudi-sponsored global operations. "Propelled by oil-generated state wealth and the charitable contributions of the private sector, the Wahhabi worldview has been propagated throughout the Sunni Islamic world, and continues to gain adherents," the report said. "To the increasing dismay of many moderate Muslim scholars and community leaders, this version of reality is fervently accepted by a growing segment of Muslim opinion."

To experts such as Alexiev, a former senior national-security analyst at the Rand Corporation and currently a senior fellow at the Center for Security Pol-

**Duck and cover?** *When Sen. Kyl, right, called a hearing to discuss Saudi state sponsorship of terrorism, the FBI went out of its way to avoid the subject.*



RICHARD WATSON KYL

icy, most of the U.S.-led effort against terrorism has not tackled the issue. "Most of the measures taken to defeat Islamic terrorism to date have been essentially tactical in nature and therefore of transitory effect," he told senators. "We have, for instance, attempted to block financial inflows to the terrorist networks but have avoided taking a critical look into the real magnitude and nature of terrorist finances, especially with respect to the evidence of state sponsorship."

Alexiev continued: "We have attempted to come to terms with the psychology behind the terrorists' murderous fury, yet refuse to examine systematically — let alone do something about — the effect and implications of daily indoctrination of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Muslims around the world into a hate-driven cult of violence. Without a critical consideration of these realities and the formulation of a forceful strategic response based on it, it is unlikely that we'll make lasting progress in the war on terror."

Wahhabi-run indoctrination operations have been occurring under the FBI's very nose, pressuring traditional Muslim teachings out of the U.S. prison system and military chaplaincy, and radicalizing both convicts and servicemen, critics say. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who joined Kyl at the hearing, stated, "While the potential Wahhabi influence in the U.S. Armed Forces is not well-documented, these organizations have succeeded in ensuring that militant Wahhabism is the only form of Islam that is preached to the 12,000 Muslims in federal prison." The point of the correctional system, Schumer said, should be to rehabilitate prisoners, not radicalize them

into potential terrorists.

"To examine the role of Wahhabism in terrorism is not to label all Muslims as extremists; indeed, it is the exact opposite," Kyl stressed. "Analyzing Wahhabism means identifying the extreme element that, although enjoying immense political and financial resources thanks to support by a sector of the Saudi state, seeks to globally hijack Islam, one of the world's three great Abrahamic faiths. It means understanding who our worst enemies are and how we can support the majority of the world's Muslims — ordinary, normal people who desire to live in a safe, secure and stable environment — in their own effort to defeat terror. In the end, Islamist terror must be defeated, to a significant extent, within Islam, by Muslims themselves."

That wasn't good enough for some victim groups. The Arab-American Institute has launched a letter-writing campaign to Kyl and the subcommittee's ranking Democrat, Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California, denouncing what it calls a "biased, hurtful, anti-Arab-American and anti-Muslim-American panel."

Time is running out for both diplomats and senior FBI officials to stop winking at what is coming out of Saudi Arabia, with the full acquiescence if not direction of the royal family, say experts. "The evidence of conscious Saudi subversion of our societies and values," according to Alexiev, "is so overwhelming that to tolerate it further would be unconscionable. Failure to confront it now will ensure that we will lose the war on terror."

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