

COMMISSION SENSITIVE
MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

MFR 0406467

Event: Kevin O'Neill, Division Chief, Diplomatic Security (PSP/DEAV)

Type of event: Interview

Date: February 12, 2004

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Tom Eldridge

Team Number: 5

Location: GSA, 301 7th Street, S.W., Room 5125

Participants - Non-Commission:

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Participants - Commission:

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Documents/handouts received by the Commission: None

Other contacts referred to: None

TEXT:

Background

Mr. O'Neill has a 1973 B.S. in Marine Transportation from the California Maritime Academy, and a 1982 MBA from San Francisco State U. in 1982. He entered Diplomatic Security in May 1987.

Mr. O'Neill has served in Kinshasa, as Assistant Regional Security Officer (ARSO) with responsibility for the Congo and Zaire, as Deputy RSO in Tallinn, Estonia with responsibility for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and as Deputy RSO and RSO in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

DRSO and RSO in Riyadh

O'Neill was the Deputy RSO in Riyadh beginning in August 1999. The RSO (Lamb) left Saudi Arabia in May 2001, and O'Neill was promoted to the post immediately upon his departure by cable.

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Security situation at Riyadh embassy

O said the security situation when he arrived was very good. He said physical security had been improved through the placement -- after the 1998 embassy bombings -- of large flower boxes filled with dirt (not flowers) all around the embassy. He drew us a crude map of the embassy and its surroundings showing the setbacks, which were large, on all sides.

The embassy is in the diplomatic quarter, a special district with its own DQ police (with a colonel in charge of it). O said this quarter had been set up by the Saudis to entice foreign governments to relocate from Jeddah to Riyadh when the capital was moved there by the Saudis.

Basically, there were guard booths for Saudi police at all major intersections around the embassy. Streets were blocked off around the embassy as well.

The front entrance was not really used for entrance by cars. Rather, cars entered through the rear entrance. [REDACTED]

O said the locally hired guards, while employed by a company owned by Saudis, were not Saudis [REDACTED]

O said (he was told that) the way they convinced the Saudis to improve security around the U.S. embassy was by pointing out that a school for Saudi children, that sat catty-corner from the embassy, was within the blast zone for an attack on our embassy. [REDACTED]

O said where they changed things during his tenure was with regard to procedures. "We beefed up the procedural considerably over time." He explained that embassy security is in layers, and the procedures to be followed in allowing someone to pass through these layers had to be tightened during his tenure.

Terrorism threat level

In general, O'Neill said that "people were very sensitive to the fact [REDACTED] [REDACTED] This led to an approach that was fluid, flexible, and rapid. O'Neill and the embassy staff did not stand on ceremony or wait to have meetings on important security information. "We'd have off-line meetings all the time," O'Neill said. "You didn't wait for a meeting."

When we asked O why they needed to change their procedures, he said that "there was a growing sense that things were getting worse." He added that "The last four months, it went right off the charts."

[Redacted] 9/11 Classified Information [Redacted]

O said he discounted this possible threat because there were so many mosques and other Muslims living in and around the embassy. O said this was one in a long string of threats received during that summer.

O said the embassy was at the highest threat alert level all summer – threat con delta.

Said O, “the only thing more we could do was shut down the embassy.”

O said they had meetings of the Emergency Action Committee (EAC) several times per week to discuss threat and response planning.

[Redacted] 9/11 Classified Information [Redacted]

In the summer of 2001, when things were going off the charts, O would call the RSO in Jeddah – Laurie Darlow – and make sure she got the latest information. He would ask her, “have you gotten the latest information?”

[Redacted] 9/11 Classified Information [Redacted]

9/11 Classified Information [Redacted]

[Redacted] 9/11 Classified Information [Redacted]

The official Saudi Line on the terror threat

O said the Saudis officially maintained that there were no problems of any kind in the kingdom. No crime, and no terrorism.

O said this façade started to crack while he was there. For example, he cited a statement put out by the Kingdom in late 2000 in which it acknowledged that there was a risk of break-ins, and urged Saudis to “lock your doors.”

The deteriorating economic situation

[Redacted] 9/11 Classified Information [Redacted]

O said this led to changes such as, Saudis had to apply for the University (versus just sign up), and Saudis had to pay for medical care (versus it was always free).

Relations with Saudis in Riyadh

O said no Saudis were allowed to socialize with Americans, that they had to get permission from their government to engage in any socialization or face an accusation that they were doing something improper. O said he did not remember fondly his time in Riyadh ("I try to block Saudi Arabia out of my mind as much as possible.")

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Security and Visa Policy and Process – Visa Express

O'Neill fully corroborated what Consul General Tom Furey said about the role of security considerations in the decision to create Visa Express in Saudi Arabia. O saw the hundreds of people milling around outside the embassy on any given day waiting to get in to the embassy, and considered these crowds a threat to the embassy. O said during the height of the travel season, there were as many as 800 people a day coming into the embassy to apply for visas. Said O'Neill, "I'll jump at the opportunity to lower it to 50."

People seeking entry would first be buzzed inside a blockhouse by a local guard.

9/11 Agency Internal Matters

O said that he had several meetings with Tom Furey about Visa Express. Security was an integral part of the creation of Visa Express, O said. He said that "Tom came up with this idea, but he couldn't do it without security considerations."

O said that, on an average day before Visa Express, he saw approximately 175 people come into the embassy grounds to apply for a visa. "After we put this into place, the crowds just disappeared." "It was an order of magnitude drop."

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[O said this was not the first place he had seen such a program. He remembered something similar from his time in the Baltics.]

O said that there were many new threat reports in June 2001, and that these threats "could have" played a role in the decision to expand Visa Express during that month. [REDACTED]

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At the consular section

Once they arrived at the consular section, there were two rooms. One room was for Saudis; a second room was for Third Country Nationals (TCNs). Consular officials were behind bulletproof glass windows in these rooms. There were two bulletproof metal doors that allowed access to the consular space.

O said this division of space was known as a "hard line," a term used to define protection at a certain level for the people behind such as escape time, etc. The level of construction was defined by a report written by the Inman Commission, created by DS in 1983-1984. As a result, buildings constructed to secure specifications are known as "Inman Buildings."

Visas Viper Meetings

O said he did attend Visa Viper meetings. However, his description of those meetings made them appear rather perfunctory. Mostly, O said, they were an opportunity for the consular people to give the RSO information such as about individuals who needed to be kept out of the embassy. O'Neill said his impression was that consular officials were very strict about to whom they gave visas, and that this sometimes led to hostile interactions at the visa windows. O'Neill and his people would be called to the consular section to escort someone off the premises. O'Neill recalled Saudis who were upset and his telling them to leave the embassy and go fix their applications before they could return and resubmit them.