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Hijackers' Saudi Identities, Real and Fake,  
Raise Uncomfortable Questions for U.S.  
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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- Osama bin Laden may have been born in Saudi Arabia, but unlike Iraqis or Palestinians, Saudi citizens have rarely been viewed as a security threat in the West.

Then came the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. As many as 15 of the 19 suspected hijackers had Saudi identities, some genuine and some false.

Now, the key question for U.S. policymakers putting together a global coalition against terrorism is whether prosperous Saudi Arabia, America's main ally in the Gulf and a key source of oil, is also the main supplier of fighters in Mr. bin Laden's holy war against the U.S.

Saudi dissenters say this is certainly the case. "Most mujahedeen [freedom fighters] in Afghanistan were from Saudi Arabia, which shows that under the cover of being relatively wealthy, the Saudis are as devoted as any other Muslims," said Mohammed Al Masari, an exiled Saudi dissident who heads the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, a London-based group viewed by the Saudi government as promoting terrorism. "People in the West just want to cheat themselves by saying that the problem [of Islamic fundamentalism] is purely economic," Mr. Al Masari said.

The puzzle is complicated by the fact that seven among the Saudis initially identified as suspects, including five pilots, have turned out to be the victims of stolen identities: one person died long ago, while the remainder appear to be living throughout the Middle East.

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Saudi identities are not terribly difficult to get. The U.S. usually gives Saudi citizens five-year multiple-entry visas, while other countries allow Saudis to enter without any visa at all. "A Saudi would not be looked upon with suspicion. I, for example, was never stopped," said Khaled Al Maeena, editor in chief of the Arab News in Jeddah who frequently travels to the U.S.

Upset by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's haste in naming Saudis who later turned out to be unconnected to the Sept. 11 tragedy, Mr. Al Maeena said he

suspects a conspiracy to somehow tarnish the name of Saudi Arabia and Islam. "I'm not saying there were no Saudis there," he said. "But this all looks very fishy."

According to the tightly controlled Saudi press, at least five of the eight Saudi suspects who are still unaccounted for were indeed Islamic guerrillas. Nawaf and Salim Ibrahim Al Hazmi, Ahmed Al Khaznawi Al Ghamdi, Ahmed Ibrahim Al Ghamdi and Hamza Salih Al Ghamdi all left the kingdom in recent years to battle the Russians in Chechnya, Saudi newspapers said, citing as sources the families of the five men.

Some international analysts, meanwhile, note that most of the suspect's names hail from the southern regions along the Saudi Yemen border that are also home to Mr. bin Laden's tribe. Mr. bin Laden, the chief suspect behind the attacks in the U.S. who is believed to reside in Afghanistan, has been stripped of his Saudi citizenship.

While Saudi Arabia is already one of the most fundamentalist Islamic societies in the world -- alcohol is forbidden and women are not permitted to drive -- its government is under increasing public pressure to make the country even more fundamentalist, experts say.

"The radical Islamic tendency has been growing in Saudi Arabia through the 1990s. Do many of these people support bin Laden? Yes," said Mai Yamani, a fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London.

This radicalization, hidden from public view because Saudi Arabia stifles political debate, hasn't been understood sufficiently well in the West, warned Ms. Yamani, herself a Saudi citizen. Until recently, "people were surprised when I was telling them there was so much Saudi anger against the U.S.," she said.

A key reason for this outrage is a large U.S. military presence, established after the Gulf War and seen by many Saudis as an intolerable insult to their country a cradle of Islam that, unlike most Arab lands, has never succumbed to Western colonial rule. U.S. military installations were already targeted by Saudi militants in two deadly bombings in 1995 and 1996. The investigation into the 1996 bombing of Al Khobar towers, which killed 19 U.S. servicemen, caused a public rift between the Saudi government and the FBI, whose agents complained at the time about a lack of cooperation from the Saudi side. Mindful of the public sentiment, Saudi authorities are extremely reluctant to agree to requests from the U.S. that it use its Saudi bases for attacks against Afghanistan.

According to Anthony Cordesman, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and

International Studies in Washington who researched Saudi security policies, between 10,000 and 25,000 young Saudis have participated in Islamist guerrilla groups abroad and while most represent no danger to the government, they do provide a fertile recruitment ground for groups such as Mr. bin Laden's al Qaeda network.

Since Crown Prince Abdullah took over government duties from the ailing King Fahd in 1999, his efforts to tackle corruption and concessions to Islamic fundamentalists appear to have turned many Saudis away from radical dissent, Western and Saudi diplomats say. But a massive involvement by Saudis in any U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and against other Muslim states in the region would alter that delicate balance, they said.