

Gulf donors linked to Taliban funds

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By James Blitz in London and Daniel Dombey in Washington
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The US has told its Nato partners that funds from individuals in Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia now rival drug money as a source of financing for Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan.

The US launched a high-profile push to reduce Gulf funding for the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other militant groups operating out of Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 2001 attacks. As a result, in recent years insurgent links to Afghanistan's burgeoning heroin trade have become the principal focus.

But Richard Holbrooke, US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, expressed fresh concerns to Nato ambassadors during a briefing this week on the US's strategic review of Afghan-Pakistan policy, which is expected to be announced tomorrow.

"He said that the prime source of funding for the Taliban is not from narcotics but from private individuals in the Gulf region," said a western diplomat, without giving further details.

Another official attending the meeting said that Mr Holbrooke had suggested that much of the funding from poppy production appeared to go to individuals linked in some way to the Afghan government.

"There is real concern about funding for extremists in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region coming from the Gulf, which we understand rivals or exceeds the money they are getting from drugs," said another diplomat, quoting estimates of \$150m-\$300m (€110m-€220m, £103m-£206m) for insurgents' drugs cash.

Diplomats make clear that the money did not appear to come from Gulf governments but from groups and private individuals.

The US has for some time been pushing Saudi Arabia to ensure that funds raised for charities do not ultimately finance Islamist militants.

The drive has been headed by Stuart Levey, Treasury undersecretary in the administration of George W. Bush, who was this week formally retained in his post by Barack Obama, Mr Bush's successor as president. Mr Levey has pushed for years for Saudi Arabia to oversee effectively the international activities of Saudi-based organisations through a charities commission.

The Saudi embassy in Washington did not immediately reply to a request for comment last night.

Matthew Levitt, a former Treasury official now at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a US think-tank, said the Saudis had made improvements since the September 11 attacks. But he said: "The Saudis are generally reluctant to concede either that there is Saudi-based financial support for terrorism or that Saudi counter-terrorism efforts are inadequate."

The Afghanistan-Pakistan review will be one of the centerpieces of attention at next week's Nato summit, with the US still looking for more aid from its European allies to boost Afghanistan's security forces.

Some diplomats complain it is more difficult to secure consensus for such aid when the US review has not been released barely more than a week before the summit. Some Europeans worry that if the summit is seen as little more than a rubber-stamp for barely digested US conclusions on Afghanistan, it will be hard to win support for more resources for the conflict.

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