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Lawyer seeks to end visa-free entry for Saudis

By **SHELDON KIRSHNER**
Staff Reporter

TORONTO - A Toronto immigration lawyer has warned the federal government about a potentially serious threat to Canada's national security.

Sergio Karas recently drew attention to the fact that a citizen of Saudi Arabia who wants to travel to Canada is not required to apply for a temporary resident visa under section 190 of the new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which was enacted last year and took effect June 28.

Karas made this concern known to Denis Coderre, the minister of citizenship and immigration, and Johanne Deslauriers, the department of citizenship and immigration's director of social policy, which drafted section 190 (formerly known as section 183).

In a Jan. 17 letter to Deslauriers, copies of which were sent to Coderre and Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham, Karas noted that most of the Arab hijackers who crashed commercial airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon last September were Saudi nationals.

"In light of the events of Sept. 11 it seems difficult to understand why Saudi Arabia remains on the list of countries whose citizens are allowed to enter Canada without first obtaining a visa," Karas wrote.

Karas said Canadian visa officers and intelligence personnel should be given the opportunity to examine the background of Saudis before they enter Canada.

In an interview, Karas described Canada's policy as dangerous, saying it endangers Jewish Canadians.

"The Jewish community should be extremely concerned about this policy. It is amazing that Saudis should be treated on the same level as the United States, Britain and Europeans. After 9/11, it makes no sense whatsoever."

Karas said Saudi Arabia does not accord visa-free entry to Canadians, and it also restricts travel by foreigners inside Saudi Arabia and requires disclosure of religion in visa applications.

He said that Saudis, like Egyptians and Jordanians, should be required to obtain a visa before they travel to Canada.

"According to most respected intelligence sources, it is beyond dispute that the government of Saudi Arabia and Saudi nationals appear to be financing or supporting terrorist activities around the world," Karas said in his letter to Deslauriers.

Canada, he added, is one of the few remaining Western nations still according Saudis the right of visa-free entry.

"I fail to see why Canada should continue to reward the citizens of a

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On May 16, Karas wrote Coderre about the matter.

Neither Coderre nor Deslauriers have replied, nor did Coderre's office return several calls and two e-mail messages from The CJN.

Graham's department acknowledged Karas' letter on Feb. 11 and forwarded it to Coderre.

Karas also sent a letter to Paul Cellucci, the U.S. ambassador to Canada.

On Feb. 7, Leslie Ann Gerson, the minister counsellor in the American embassy, answered: "I can assure you that discussions between our two countries on the visa process, including the use of the visa waiver, are ongoing and that your letter addresses a very real concern."

country which actively supports and funds terrorism, needlessly exposing Canadians to unnecessary risks and international criticism for granting such ill-advised exemption to Saudi nationals."

Karas recommended that Ottawa should immediately relieve Saudi Arabia of its visa-exempt status.

As well, he urged Canadians to call their members of Parliament and complain about Canada's policy.

Among foreign nationals who do not need temporary resident visas under section 190 are citizens of Israel, the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Malaysia, Portugal, Switzerland, Brunei, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Ireland, Costa Rica, Japan, Mexico, St. Vincent, Barbados and Bahamas.

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