

Time to Question the U.S. Role In Saudi Arabia

By Stephen Zunes | May 20, 2003

The terrorist bombings that struck Saudi Arabia on May 12th have raised a number of serious questions regarding American security interests in the Middle East. First of all, the attacks underscore the concern expressed by many independent strategic analysts that the United States has been squandering its intelligence and military resources toward Iraq—which had nothing to do with al Qaeda and posed no direct danger to the United States—and not toward al Qaeda itself, which is the real threat.

More importantly, however, the bombings bring to the fore the question of whether U.S. interests have been enhanced or threatened by the cozy American relationship with Saudi Arabia. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has traditionally been the most important American ally in the Arab or Islamic world. It is run exclusively by a royal family that allows neither public dissent nor an independent press. Those who dare challenge the regime or its policies are punished severely. There is no constitution, no political parties, and no legislature. It was under such an environment of repression that Osama bin Laden and most of his followers first emerged.

Long shielded by the monarchy's willingness to supply the United States with cheap oil, to subsidize the American arms industry with major weapons purchases, and to make lucrative deals with other major U.S. corporate interests, the United States has allowed this family dictatorship to get away with practices that would have been considered unacceptable from almost any other country.

Traditions of Hypocrisy

Both Democratic and Republican administrations have revealed their blatant hypocrisy by wailing about the plight of Afghan women while being dismissive of the treatment of Saudi women; by condemning the rigid Islamic laws in Iran as human rights violations while defending the even more repressive variants in Saudi Arabia as somehow an inherent part of their culture; by demanding that Palestinian state-

hood be dependent upon establishing a leadership committed to democracy and accountability while backing the corrupt and autocratic Saudi leadership.

Human rights activists for years have been raising doubts about the close strategic relationship both Democratic and Republican parties have had with the Saudi regime, particularly the massive arms transfers and military training, including its repressive internal security apparatus. Such critics have railed against the regime's misogyny, theocratic fascism, and links to terrorism, but to no avail. Despite the close ties between Washington and Riyadh, there have never been any congressional hearings—under either Republican or Democratic leaderships—regarding human rights abuses by the Saudi government.

F. Gregory Gause III, a contemporary specialist on Saudi Arabia at the University of Vermont, notes: "The truth is the more democratic the Saudis become, the less cooperative they will be with us. So why should we want that?"

Such a policy raises both serious moral questions and as well as serious doubts about whether the United States really cares about freedom for Iraq while it helps make possible repression by other Arab governments.

The Wahabbi Tradition

While there is little evidence to suggest that the top leadership of Saudi Arabia supports the al Qaeda terrorist network or other extremists, there has been an



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undeniably lax attitude toward cracking down on financial support for such dangerous organizations under the guise of Islamic charities, particularly among the Wahabbi elites and even elements within the very sizable Saudi royal family itself.

Wahabbism is a particularly reactionary interpretation of Islam, which—while not advocating terrorism—has contributed to the theological underpinnings for al Qaeda and like-minded groups. The Saudis have funded Wahabbi religious education throughout the Islamic world, often in places where it has not only been the sole religious education available, but sometimes also the only formal education of any kind. The U.S.-backed Saudi regime, then, is more responsible than any other government for the spread of this dangerous turn to the right in Islamic theology in recent decades. The global reach of Wahabbism is made possible in large part to the movement's generous funding, which is a result of the billions of petrodollars flowing to Saudi Arabia from the West—in particular, the United States.

Fifteen of the nineteen September 11 hijackers were Saudi, most of the al Qaeda leadership is Saudi, and much of the money trail has already been linked to Saudi Arabia. By contrast, none of the hijackers were Iraqi, no one in the al Qaeda leadership is Iraqi, and none of the money trail has been linked to Iraq. Yet the Bush administration and the leaders of both parties in Congress insisted that Iraq—and not the pro-American Saudi government—had to be the priority in the “war on terror.” In fact, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration initially ordered U.S. immigration officials to target immigrants and visitors from Syria, Libya, Iraq, Iran, and Sudan but not those from Saudi Arabia.

Support for the family dictatorship in Saudi Arabia has been a prevailing theme of U.S. policy for several decades. In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with King Abel-Aziz ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Arabian kingdom that now bears his family's name, and forged the alliance that remains to this day: in return for open access to Saudi oil, the United States would protect the royal family from its enemies, both external and internal.

Support for the Royal Family

This policy has remained in force under both Democratic and Republican administrations. For example, in 1981, President Ronald Reagan declared “I will not permit [Saudi Arabia] to be an Iran,” referring to the successful uprising that had ousted the U.S.-backed Shah two years earlier. Under Reagan, American trainers provided direct assistance to Saudi National Guard (SANG) units that crushed a popular uprising.

The SANG, whose primary function is internal security, is almost entirely armed, trained, and managed by the United States, largely through a network of military contractors. It is noteworthy that al Qaeda's first terrorist attack, a November 1995 bombing in Riyadh that killed five American servicemen, was targeted at a U.S.-operated SANG training center.

Indeed, one of the targets of the May 12 bombings was a residential compound for employees of the Vinell Corporation, the U.S. firm that has been primarily responsible for training SANG forces. The presence in Saudi cities of these white collar mercenaries, which help prop up the country's despotic regime, is at least as provocative as the presence of uniformed American forces out in the desert, most of whom are now being transferred to bases in the tiny neighboring sheikdom of Qatar.

Al Qaeda believes that the Saudi regime is corrupt and evil in large part because the royal family has squandered its wealth for personal consumption and exotic weaponry while most Arabs suffer in poverty. That group is further angered by the regime's tendency to persecute those who advocate for more ethical priorities. It is angry with the United States, therefore, for propping up such a regime. The U.S.-Saudi alliance, in al Qaeda's view, further illustrates the depravity of the Saudi rulers in their decision to allow American troops and advisers on what they see as sacred Saudi soil in order to keep the regime in power. Such a regime is anti-Islamic, from its perspective, and therefore needs to be overthrown.

So, the first challenge, in the eyes of al Qaeda, is to oust the United States from the region, since it is the

U.S. military that is keeping the corrupt Saudi regime in power. Given that al Qaeda is no match for the United States militarily, al Qaeda leadership therefore rationalizes the use of terrorism.

As a result, even putting aside moral arguments against backing such regimes as Saudi Arabia, there are serious questions as to whether the large-scale arms transfers and ongoing U.S. military presence in the Gulf really enhances American security interests. Rather than protecting the United States from its enemies, these policies appear to be creating enemies. On top of all this, the United States may also be supporting a lost cause.

A Lost Cause?

A secret CIA memo circulated at the National Security Council and State Department that was leaked to the press in the spring of 2002 noted how the “culture of royal excess” in Saudi Arabia “has ruled over the kingdom with documented human rights abuses... Democracy has never been part of the equation.” The study also reportedly describes the House of Saud as an “anachronism” that is “inherently fragile” and that there were “serious concerns about long-term stability.”

One can only think back to the 1970s, when the United States was also sending arms and advisers to prop up another Persian Gulf monarchy despite the regime’s severe repression and warnings that such support could lead to a radical Islamic backlash—Iran.

Traditionally, criticism of U.S. support for the Saudi regime has come from the left. In an interesting twist, however, the past year has witnessed an unprecedented degree of anti-Saudi rhetoric from right-wing think tanks, the media, and some sectors of the administration.

The first round came last spring, after Saudi crown prince Abdullah convinced every Arab government, including the Palestinian Authority, to formally declare their willingness to provide security guarantees for and full diplomatic recognition of Israel in return for the Israel’s total withdrawal from Arab lands seized in the 1967 war. This was the most com-

plete Arab acceptance to date of the “land for peace” formula spelled out in the U.S.-sponsored UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, long seen as the basis for Middle East peace. However, the Israeli government and its supporters in Washington—who support Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon’s insistence on holding on to much of the occupied territories—rejected the proposal.

This second round of attacks against Saudi Arabia came as that government increased its outspoken opposition to U.S. plans to invade Iraq. The Saudis long despised Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and were the principal backer of the U.S.-led Gulf War in 1991, yet they believe that the recent U.S. invasion was unnecessary, illegal, and likely to destabilize the region. In effect, it appears that it is not Saudi extremism that has resulted in a long-overdue criticism of the regime, but Saudi moderation.

The lesson Washington appears to be trying to communicate is, “If you challenge our policies on Iraq, on Israel, or anywhere else, you may become the next target of ‘the war on terrorism’.”

Will Saudi Arabia be yet another case of where, like Manuel Noriega’s Panama and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the United States supports a dictatorship for years only to suddenly declare it such a threat that the country must be invaded and the regime overthrown? Such an invasion of Saudi Arabia is already being talked about openly, even as the chaos and resulting dangers from the aftermath of the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are becoming increasingly apparent.

Why is it that Washington cannot seem to grasp that there are more enlightened policy alternatives than the extremes of appeasement and of war?

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