

Saudi Arabian-U.S. Relations at Crossroads

By Muqtedar Khan | August 13, 2003

The joint congressional report on the intelligence community and the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon released last month covers the question of official Saudi Arabian support for the attackers, drawing attention once again to troubled Saudi-U.S. relations. Despite the highly controversial White House decision to keep details about the possible Saudi connection classified, the report highlights the need to resolve longstanding contradictions in the relationship.

Saudi Arabia has been a close ally, friend, and business partner of the United States for more than 60 years. Saudi Arabia was also a breeding ground for the Sept. 11 attacks. Fifteen of the 19 Arabs involved in the attacks were Saudi nationals. Bin Laden, whose organization Al Qaeda has taken credit for the attacks and promised more, is from Saudi Arabia. The intelligence community is strongly convinced that much of Al Qaeda's finances come from private Saudi sources. The question that remains unresolved is whether Al Qaeda has managed to penetrate the Saudi ruling elite to the extent that it has received intelligence, logistical, or financial support from official Saudi sources.

Saudi Use and Abuse of Islam

The evidence suggests that the terrorist trail will eventually lead to financial and political sources in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabian foreign policy has been guided by the singular overriding desire of regime continuity. In spite of its claims that it is an Islamic state, Saudi Arabia has remained consistently pragmatic and rational in foreign relations: It has not used Islam as a criterion for them, as Iran has.

Saudi leaders have, however, used Islam as a legitimizing tool, first to boost their domestic constituency by building a strategic alliance with Wahhabi Islam, and then to court the global Muslim community with the expansion and lavish redecoration of the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina and the financing of Islamic projects worldwide.

The ambition of the arch-conservative Saudi monarchy to sustain a medieval-style Islamic society and government has resulted in a policy of uniquely Saudi Islamic imperialism. Their Wahhabi Islam is a very narrow, intolerant, and literalist interpretation of Islamic sources. To protect Wahhabism at home from the influence of Islamic revivalism taking place in other parts of the Muslim World, especially Egypt, the Saudis adopted a policy of spreading Wahhabism abroad. They have also tried to prevent Saudi

students living in America from discovering that there are other interpretations of Islam, some of which are tolerant, advocate free thinking, and hold that Islam and democracy are compatible. The Saudis' attempt to protect Wahhabism and the continuity of their regime by reconstructing the rest of the Islamic world in their own image has contributed to the growth of intolerance and bigotry among Muslims. This tendency was most spectacularly manifest in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

America and the Saudi Civil War

The Saudis have been hedging their bets, playing both the Wahhabi card and the U.S. card. Even while seeking to Wahhabize the Muslim World they have continued to maintain good relations with rich and powerful Americans, cultivating the United States by becoming its most important ally in moderating OPEC and maintaining the stability of oil supplies and prices. There are numerous instances when the Saudis have helped western economies by manipulating oil prices and keeping them within limits acceptable to American consumers. By becoming useful to the United States they gained its support and protection.

The fervor of Islamic resurgence has led to a widespread call for regime changes in most of the Muslim World. Islamists have come to power in Iran and Sudan but have failed to everywhere else, with particular lack of success in Egypt and Algeria. Meanwhile the United States, in collaboration with Pakistan and the Saudis, has produced a new type of Islamic fighter, the modern mujahedin, to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, and thus Bin Laden was created. After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, this new breed of Islamic fighters turned to new battlefields. Some chose Kashmir and others chose Bosnia and Chechnya. But Bin Laden decided to go home and try to make Saudi Arabia a more Islamic state.



The presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, which is considered by many Muslims as off limits for non-Muslims, infuriated Bin Laden and acted as a catalyst to exacerbate the conflict between the kingdom and the prince of mujahedin. In the Saudi civil war that resulted, the United States took sides and has since worked to protect the regime from terrorists as well as other Arab threats, such as former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Over the years Islamists in Egypt, such as Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's right-hand man and mentor, had concluded that Egypt could not be transformed as long as it enjoyed U.S. support. Bin Laden soon reached the same conclusion about Saudi Arabia.

Hezbollah, which had driven both the United States and Israel out of Lebanon using truck and suicide bombers, became the strategic model, and in order to politically transform the Middle East, Al Qaeda decided to drive the United States out of the region through a sustained terrorist campaign. Thus it can be argued that the United States suffered the attacks of Sept. 11 because it has supported and sustained the Wahhabi monarchy of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis have also inadvertently sown the seeds of hatred and anger among Muslims against their greatest ally, the United States. The spread of Wahhabi ideas, which are extremely anti-Western and anti-modernity, casts the West as a threat to Islam and the United States as a barrier to Islamization.

A U.S. Dilemma

Now the United States faces the daunting challenge of protecting as well as reforming Saudi Arabia. It needs the

present regime to stabilize geopolitics and the oil economy. Regime change in Saudi Arabia could bring pro-Bin Laden forces to power. Maintaining status quo is also unacceptable because Sept. 11 happened as a result of existing conditions in the kingdom. Even though U.S. President George W. Bush has repeatedly proclaimed that his administration will go after all those who harbor and support terrorists and that he hopes to democratize the entire Middle East, it is generally understood that Saudi Arabia is excluded from both these measures.

But the United States cannot continue to keep the Saudi Arabian issue on the back burner. There are many issues and questions with regards to Saudi Arabia; they cannot remain classified for long. If democracy will reduce terrorism, then we must talk democracy in Saudi Arabia. If liberal Islam promotes dialogue and co-existence, then we must help make the voices of liberal Muslims in the kingdom heard over the cacophony of the fatwa regime.

In the war on terror, the Saudi regime and the United States have common interests and common enemies. Perhaps a more open dialogue between the two will help them protect their interests. For their part, the Saudis have depended on two routes to security—the United States and Wahhabi Islam. Now both countries are at the crossroads.

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