



Be Careful What You Wish For

The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations

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No country has more vexed Americans in the crisis that began on September 11 than Saudi Arabia. Osama bin Laden was born and raised there and is a product, albeit an extreme and unique one, of the educational and cultural milieu of the country. He was able to recruit 15 fellow Saudis, equally products of that milieu, to participate in the terrorist attacks. But America's vexation (as opposed to its revulsion, which those who perpetrated the attacks of September 11 richly deserve) is less with our Saudi enemies than with our Saudi friends.

No government in the Arab world is closer to Washington than that of Saudi Arabia. Just over ten years ago the Saudis opened their country to half a million American troops and cooperated openly with the American military effort against Iraq. Yet now Saudi cooperation with the United States appears grudging and reluctant, at least in public. Saudi leaders, at times, go out of their way to distance themselves from the United States, particularly when addressing domestic audiences.

Why the Saudi hesitancy to back America in its hour of need, particularly when bin Laden is as much their enemy as he is ours?

The answer lies in how, for the Al Saud rulers of Saudi Arabia, this crisis differs from that of 1990–91. Then, their rule was directly threatened by an Arab army that had already swallowed up one monarchy. The threat presented by bin Laden and his sympathizers is much less immediate. In fact, the Saudis believed that they had, through their own security measures in the

mid-1990s, largely eliminated it domestically. Identification with the United States now, at a time of increasing anti-Americanism in the Arab world, could excite more domestic opposition to the Al Saud. With the social and economic changes that the Saudi kingdom has experienced over the past 20 years, there is a larger, more educated, and more attentive public with which the Al Saud have to deal. Rather than run the risk of alienating it through unstinting support for the United States, the Al Saud have chosen to hedge.

Which raises another question: if the Saudis have to be this attentive to their own public opinion, are they so weak and unstable that they have no value as a strategic partner? No. They are in command domestically, with the institutions of religion firmly under the state's control, the fiscal situation much improved over the past few years, and the internal cohesion of the ruling family relatively strong. They surf their public opinion more from the desire to avoid creating unnecessary problems than out of fear that an unpopular decision could mean their downfall. The Al Saud will be around for awhile, sitting on all that oil.

Which leads to the two-part question: where are Saudi-American relations going, and where should they be headed? We in the United States need to distinguish between our understandable exasperation with the Saudis' public stance in this crisis, and the broader question of whether any alternative government in Saudi Arabia would be better for us. Is it our interests that have been hurt by Saudi policy since

September 11, or our feelings? There are issues on which the United States can push the Saudis harder, like their opaque financial system, and others, like their education system, where American pressure would likely backfire. Iraq and oil could both become bones of contention in the relationship in the near future. For their part, the Saudis seem to wish to put some distance between themselves and us, to return to the close but not openly allied relationship of the pre-Gulf War period. That might not be such a bad idea.

Bin Laden and the Saudi Islamic Context

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Al Saud rulers of a small emirate in central Arabia made a pact with the Muslim preacher and reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the political fortunes of the family have been tied to his austere and puritanical interpretation of Islam. The ulama (men of religion) were the pillars of early Saudi administrations, acting as judges, tax collectors, and military recruiters.

With the advent of oil wealth in the second half of the twentieth century, Saudi rulers created a vast system of mosques, schools, and universities operated by the ulama, large bureaucracies staffed by them (including the Saudi ministries of justice and pilgrimage affairs and the women's education system), and international and nongovernmental organizations like the Islamic Conference Organization, the Muslim World League, the Muslim World Congress, and the World League of Muslim Youth to promote the spread of their interpretation of Islam.

For their part, the ulama have been highly supportive of Al Saud rule, even as oil wealth has reduced their political importance by providing the Saudi rulers with a new means to attract the support, or buy the quiescence, of their population. The doctrines of "Wahhabism" call for obedience to the ruler who accepts the doctrine, offer-

ing little support for those who would seek to overturn the political order. The higher ranks of the ulama have regularly issued fatawa (plural of fatwa, or religious judgment) condemning the domestic enemies of the Al Saud, ratifying transfers of power within the family, and supporting the policy choices of the rulers—from the modernization plans of earlier decades, with the introduction of new technologies like radio and television to the kingdom, to the difficult foreign policy choices of the 1990s, including the invitation of American and other foreign forces to the kingdom in 1990, the attack against Iraq in 1991, and Saudi participation in the multilateral Arab-Israeli peace talks that followed the Gulf War.

Official support from the men of religion has not, however, precluded serious challenges emerging to Saudi rule from those who contend that the Al Saud are not living up to the strict religious standards they profess. In the late 1920s the founder of the modern Saudi kingdom, King Abd al-Aziz (known in the West as "Ibn Saud") had to rally loyal tribesmen and townsmen to put down a revolt among his "Wahhabi" shock troops. Abd al-Aziz's success in a series of battles against them established the primacy of his family's rule over those who advocated an unlimited jihad to spread Wahhabi doctrine.

The spirit of these religiously inspired rebels, however, never disappeared from Saudi society. Their successors found both material and ideological sustenance on the fringes of the vast religious bureaucracies built by the Saudi government. Violent opposition flared up from time to time against such innovations as women's education and the introduction of radio and television, though it was easily contained by the government. In 1979, on the eve of the Muslim year 1400, a group of religious zealots captured the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the holiest site in Islam, accusing the Al Saud of abandoning the principles of Islam and calling for a general revolt. It took three weeks

for Saudi forces, advised and assisted by French special units, to retake the mosque.

It is from this tradition of religiously based rebellion, not the more formal and politically quietist tradition of establishment Wahhabism, that Osama bin Laden emerged. The political consciousness that led him to his intense antipathy toward the United States and the Saudi regime was, ironically, formed by the two great foreign policy successes of American-Saudi cooperation: the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the Gulf War.

The success of the Afghani jihad, seen literally as a miracle by many of those involved, convinced bin Laden that spiritual strength and an uncompromising commitment to battle could bring down a superpower. His acquaintance in Afghanistan with Egyptian and Palestinian Islamists introduced him to new trends in revolutionary Islamist thought, stemming from the thinking of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb. Qutb formulated the idea of the “modern *jabiliyya*,” likening current Muslim governments to the oppressive pagan rulers whom the Prophet Muhammad fought, and thus justifying revolution against them.¹ The American military deployment to the Gulf in 1990–91 convinced bin Laden that the United States was now seeking to dominate the Muslim world, and that the Saudi regime was complicit in this American plan.

The Gulf War opened a small window of greater political freedom in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Islamist activists began to press the regime for political change, through petitions submitted to the rulers, speeches in mosques, and even a few political demonstrations—a very unusual phenomenon in tightly controlled Saudi Arabia. By 1994, the very narrow limits of the regime’s tolerance for this kind of activity had been breached. Bin Laden, who had earlier been “encouraged” to leave the country, had his citizenship stripped. Islamist activists were arrested and the Saudi government estab-

lished new committees to monitor more closely the religious bureaucracies and the activities of Islamic charities and fundraisers in the country.²

The response to this crackdown was violent, with attacks on American personnel in Riyadh (November 1995) and Dhahran (June 1996), the first attributed to Sunni radicals of the bin Laden line and the second to Shi‘i dissidents allied with elements of the Iranian regime. (Shi‘i make up about 10 percent of the Saudi population and are concentrated in the oil-producing Eastern Province.) Bin Laden, from his exile in Sudan and, later, Afghanistan, openly called for the overthrow of the Al Saud government and for attacks on Americans anywhere in the kingdom. In February 1998, he issued his “fatwa” establishing the “International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders,” and directed the attacks on American interests around the world.³

Within Saudi Arabia, the domestic violence of 1995 and 1996 led to even harsher repressive measures against regime opponents. Since that time, there have been no attacks in the kingdom on American military personnel or assets. The Saudi government even felt confident enough in June 1999 to release from prison a number of the leaders of the Islamist agitation of the early 1990s. Sympathy for, and sympathizers with, bin Laden had certainly not been eradicated from the kingdom, something recognized publicly by Prince Naif ibn Abd al-Aziz, the interior minister of Saudi Arabia.⁴ Bin Laden was able to recruit 15 Saudis into the September 11 operation, evidence that his message still has resonance in the darker corners of the kingdom. However, those sympathizers were unable to act inside the kingdom. Bin Laden’s violent campaign against targets outside of Saudi Arabia was, indirectly, proof of the Saudi government’s success against him domestically. Bin Laden was a problem, and the Saudis would like to see him disappear as quickly and as quietly

as possible, but he was a manageable problem. He was not an *immediate* threat to regime security. The attacks of September 11 did not change the Saudi calculus.

Saudi Public Opinion after September 11

The American military campaign against bin Laden, his infrastructure in Afghanistan, and the Taliban regime that hosted him—a perfectly understandable and necessary American response—placed the Saudis in a difficult position. It further heightened the profile of bin Laden in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world in general. It implicated the Saudi regime in an attack on a fellow Muslim country. Riyadh had soured on the Taliban government even before it formally broke relations with it after the September 11 attacks, having withdrawn its ambassador from Kabul years earlier. However, the image of Afghanistan in the Saudi public mind—that is, a poor country that has suffered greatly but, by staying true to the faith, was able to liberate itself from superpower occupation—is a positive one. Coverage of the war in Saudi newspapers played to that sympathy, emphasizing the civilian casualties that resulted from the American attacks.

The success of the military campaign in Afghanistan lowered the Taliban's standing in the Muslim world, and in Saudi Arabia itself. Bin Laden looks increasingly like a loser, and people in the Arab and Muslim worlds (like people everywhere) do not back losers. This relieved some of the pressures felt by Saudi leaders at the outset of the campaign and made it easier for those in Saudi Arabia opposed to bin Laden to voice that opposition publicly. But at the outset, success was not assured, and the Saudis feared that being linked to a difficult and bloody American military campaign in Afghanistan would only fuel domestic discontent. While defeat in Afghanistan, or passivity in the face of the attacks of September 11, would have been much worse for America's standing in Saudi Arabia, even

victory was a mixed blessing on the public relations front. Saudi popular discourse shifted from rejection of the American military attack on fellow Muslims to accusations of American desires for hegemony over the Muslim world.

This strain of anti-Americanism in the Saudi press manifested itself in a number of ways. Hostile articles reacting to American press criticism of Saudi Arabia appeared. Saudi writers took their cue from top Saudi officials, who regularly criticized what they termed the “media campaign” against the kingdom in the United States. The Saudi press also highlighted the stories of Saudis and other Arabs who were detained in the United States after September 11. As detainees began to be released in late 2001 and early 2002, Saudi newspapers reported accusations of mistreatment by American authorities. I was asked by one young Saudi reporter this past January, when I was visiting the country, why the United States had a deliberate policy of mistreating Saudis in custody. When I questioned both the logic and the evidence underlying that assumption, he responded, “This is what is being said in the streets.” While discussion of the American military presence in Saudi Arabia is not common in the Saudi press, the salience of this issue among Saudis has risen since September 11, contributing to the sour public mood toward the United States.

These complaints about American treatment of Saudis and Saudi Arabia, combined with the fears of American military power and American intentions toward the Muslim world in general in the wake of September 11, have generated among many in Saudi Arabia a belief that American policy is directed not against terrorism but against Muslim countries. This feeling builds upon the negative images of the United States that were spreading in Saudi Arabia, and throughout the Arab world in general, before September 11. Two issues, both emphasized by bin Laden's propaganda, have led to the erosion of the generally positive image

of the United States that emerged from our victory in the Gulf War of 1990–91.

The first is the Palestinian question. The resumption of violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the fall of 2000 had a profound impact on Arab public opinion. Unfortunately, the important issues of why the peace process broke down and what responsibility Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat himself must bear for that have been lost among the images of violence and death in the Palestinian community broadcast by Arab satellite television stations. Once again, the Palestinian issue is the central issue among Arab publics. Because of its close relations with Israel, and the “hands-off” stance toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict adopted by the Bush administration until recently, the United States is inevitably implicated in the Sharon government’s military response to this second Palestinian “intifada” (uprising). It is no coincidence that Saudi crown prince Abdullah, who is the effective ruler, has emphasized to his domestic audiences that, even before September 11, he had strongly warned the Bush administration of the consequences of continued inaction on the Palestinian issue. (His foray into the Arab-Israeli diplomatic thicket will be discussed below.)

The second issue besmirching the American image in the Arab world is Iraq. The United States has lost the propaganda war on the question of economic sanctions against Iraq even in those countries that felt most threatened by Saddam Hussein in 1990. The vast majority of Arabs see the sanctions as aimed not against Saddam’s regime, which has withstood them for ten years, but against the Iraqi people. The sanctions policy only strengthens the belief that the United States is not opposed to Arab dictators per se, but to Arabs and Muslims in general.

Public Opinion and the Saudi Calculus

That Saudi Arabia, a monarchy with no elections and a tightly controlled political

system, would be subject to the constraints of public opinion is puzzling on the surface. However, a look at the important social and economic changes the country has undergone over the past 40 years sheds light on why the Al Saud think they have to be as responsive to public opinion as leaders elsewhere. Rising education and literacy levels, increasing urbanization, and high population growth rates have increased the audience for anti-regime sentiment—and the potential recruiting base for opposition movements—in the country. All three trends have been associated with increased political activity and public demands in other countries.

Education levels in the kingdom have surged upward. In 1966, only 7 percent of Saudi children of primary- and secondary-school age were in school; by 1996, the figure was 69 percent. In the 1980/81 school year, there were almost 350,000 students enrolled in secondary schools; by the 1996/97 school year, the number enrolled had risen to over 1.5 million. Between 1980 and 1997, the number of students in Saudi institutions of higher learning more than quadrupled, from just over 62,000 to nearly 274,000.³ Higher education does not push Saudis in a single political direction, either liberal or Islamist. But high school and college graduates are more likely than the general population to be informed about national political issues and to express themselves on those issues. They have developed personal networks that cut across family and tribal lines, and can draw on those contacts for mobilizing others. The prominence in Saudi Arabia of petitions as a method of expressing political demands in the “Riyadh spring” period immediately after the Gulf War testified to the impact of these educational changes on the Saudi body politic.

Rapid urbanization also contributes to the increased potential for politicization in Saudi Arabia. It is estimated that in 1950, 16 percent of the Saudi population was urban. By 1970, this number had risen to

49 percent, and today it stands at 83 percent. The population of Riyadh was under 200,000 in 1962; it is now approximately 4 million.⁶ Urban dwellers have access to more sources of information than nonurban populations, and a broader range of personal contacts that are more likely to cut across ties of family, tribe, and region of origin. Urbanization also makes for sheer concentrated numbers, an essential element of mass-based politics. As with educational levels, urbanization does not necessarily lead to the prominence of particular political beliefs. However, in the last 20 years, the correlation between urbanization and the growth of Islamist political movements has been very strong throughout the Middle East.

The extremely high population growth rate in Saudi Arabia (which ranges from over 3 percent to over 4 percent annually and has been among the highest in the world for most of the past two decades) is placing a serious burden on the Saudi welfare state. The Saudi infrastructure is now severely strained. Brownouts are common in Saudi cities; demand for water is outstripping desalinization capacities. In the year 2000, 42 percent of the Saudi population was 15 years of age or younger.⁷ It is no longer possible to provide every (male) Saudi graduate a job in the government, so unemployment is becoming a more serious social issue. (How unemployment can be an issue when there are at least 5 million foreign workers in the kingdom is a question the Saudi government will have to face at some point.) As the Saudi state has begun to default on its part of the social bargain—a comfortable life for all—that oil riches permitted it to make with its citizens, people are now increasingly questioning *their* part of the bargain—political quiescence.

The rising educational levels, increased urbanization, and economic problems all point to an increasingly politicized and potentially restive Saudi population. These factors help to explain why the Saudi regime is

more concerned about its own public opinion than it has been in the past, and why it has allowed the Saudi press more freedom in recent years than at any time in the past. If the Saudi rulers believe that their own regime security is directly threatened, they will take steps to protect themselves, even if those steps were to run afoul of Saudi public opinion. Such was the case in 1990. However, when regime security is *not* directly threatened—as was the case after September 11—the Saudis will be loathe to take positions that provide fodder for public discontent.

Saudi Stability

The Saudi regime walks a tightrope between an American ally it needs for its protection and public opinion that is both increasingly important to it and leery of the American connection. This is a balancing act the Saudis have successfully performed in the past. There is no sign that the regime's real domestic problems have pushed it to the brink of instability. On the contrary, the Al Saud appear better positioned to handle their problems now than they have been at any time in the last five years. After two years of relatively high oil prices, the Saudi fiscal situation is much healthier than it has been. The uncertainties surrounding decision making within the ruling family, which led in the latter part of the 1990s to decisional paralysis and tension among factions in the royal family, seem to have been worked out. The domestic Islamist movements that dominated the politics of the post-Gulf War period have been suppressed. Thus, the short- and medium-term prognosis for the regime's stability is quite good.

Since 1983, Saudi Arabia has run a budget deficit (the government ran a surplus in 2000, the first since 1982), funded in the 1980s by drawing down financial reserves and in the 1990s by borrowing on the domestic market. Combined with the expenses of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88

(Saudi Arabia's support for Iraq amounted to nearly \$25 billion, according to official Saudi figures) and the Gulf War (nearly \$55 billion, again according to Saudi figures), the Saudis found themselves by the mid-1990s facing difficult budgetary choices. Living off reserves was no longer possible. Domestic borrowing had risen to over 100 percent of gross domestic product, making more domestic borrowing irresponsible.⁸ When oil prices fell to \$10 a barrel in 1998, speculators began to pressure the riyal. Rather than risk the domestic consequences of serious budget cuts, the Saudis worked with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and other oil producers (their rapprochement with Iran was largely directed at oil cooperation) to push up the price of oil. They were very successful, with oil prices more than doubling over the course of two years. Their increased income allowed the Saudis to pay overdue bills to domestic contractors and farmers, inject more liquidity into the domestic economy, and in general set their fiscal house in order. They are therefore in a much better economic and fiscal position to face the political fallout of the post-September 11 crisis than they would have been just three years ago. With oil prices declining, this issue bears careful watching.

Family politics among the Al Saud is difficult for outside observers to assess. In general, "Those who know don't talk, and those who talk don't know." Court gossip is the coin of the realm in Saudi Arabia, but its reliability is always suspect. Most Saudi-watchers believe that in the last six years effective rule has passed from the increasingly frail King Fahd to Crown Prince Abdullah. Abdullah is not king, however, and his authority is circumscribed by his need to maintain consensus among the senior princes of the Al Saud. That group certainly includes, though might not be limited to, defense minister Prince Sultan, interior minister Prince Naif, and Prince Salman, governor of Riyadh Province.

There are always policy differences among the leading family members. Sometimes, hints of those differences become public, as they did during the extensive debate in 2000 and the beginning of 2001 over the role of women in Saudi society. A number of princes, including Abdullah, weighed into the debate with public comments. However, in the mid-1990s, as King Fahd's illness was beginning to affect his capacity to rule, the top echelons of the Al Saud seemed to be in disarray. Abdullah was named acting ruler by Fahd in January 1996, but within two months Fahd resumed his duties, despite his illness, amid rumors that other senior princes thought Abdullah was trying to centralize power in his hands. Important policy decisions, particularly in the economic realm, were postponed. By 1998, the Al Saud appeared to have put their house in order. Abdullah's primacy in policy matters since then has not been challenged as it had been just a few years earlier. A number of important decisions have been taken since 1998 with no public sign of division at the top: the application to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), opening the Saudi natural gas fields to foreign investment, rapprochement with Iran, the OPEC production cuts of 1999–2001, and Saudi policy since September 11. There are also no public indications that any other members of the family are gearing up to challenge Abdullah's succession to the throne when Fahd dies.

Perhaps most importantly, the Al Saud remain firmly in control of the organizational structures through which popular discontent could be mobilized and organized into real political opposition: the domestic economy, the media, the armed forces, "civil society." This control makes Saudi Arabia a particularly dull place, lacking in the innovation that characterizes politically and economically vibrant societies. In the longer term, this will create serious problems for Saudi Arabia. But for the immediate future, the regime is in charge.

Its control holds even for the religious institutions, the largest and most powerful organized force in Saudi society. Their funding comes directly from the government. Everyone in the religious sector, from the grand mufti through the members of the Higher Council of Ulama and the officials in the religious ministries to the teachers in the religious colleges and the prayer leaders of the local mosques, is an employee of the Saudi state. Those who hold the top positions are all appointed directly by the king. The rulers are not afraid to fire religious leaders who do not maintain control over their institutions (as they did in the mid-1990s, forcing the “retirement” of a number of senior religious figures) or to arrest religious scholars who transgress the boundaries of acceptable criticism. Crown Prince Abdullah called in the leading figures of the religious sector on November 14, 2001, and publicly warned them to take great care with the words they use during this difficult time: “There should be no exceeding the proper boundaries in religion.”⁹ In January 2002, two senior members of the ruling family, Prince Talal bin Abd al-Aziz and Prince Turki Al Faysal, both known for their liberal views, independently took to task in newspaper articles the secretary general of the Muslim World League, who had earlier said publicly that the ulama shared with the Al Saud family the responsibilities of rulership. The princes forcefully reiterated the fact that the rulers ruled, and the ulama advised the rulers.¹⁰

The religious sector is so vast that it is not hard to find a niche in it from which to say and write critical things about the Al Saud. One religious scholar, Shaykh Humud bin Uqla al-Shuaybi, published an incendiary fatwa early in the crisis condemning any Muslim government that cooperated in any way with the United States.¹¹ However, what is more noticeable has been the silence, and even the grudging support, of past critics of the regime in the religious sector. Shaykh Salman al-Awda is

a good example. A fiery critic of Saudi policy in the Gulf War, he was jailed in 1994. He was released in 1999, after the Islamist ferment of the post-Gulf War period appeared to have died down. Since September 11, he has condemned extremism in the Islamic world, in both Arabic and in English, calling it a “deviant understanding” of Islam, or a “deviant application of legitimate teachings.”¹²

Another example is Shaykh Ayd al-Qarni. Al-Qarni had been banned by the government from conducting religious and proselytizing activities for some time, but after September 11 he returned to the field. He asserted in an interview that his return was with the permission of the Saudi rulers, with whom he shared the view that they had to “unite ranks, unify Muslim discourse, call to God, and avoid exaggeration” in religion (using the same words that Crown Prince Abdullah had earlier used in his November 14 meeting with the ulama). Al-Qarni criticized the rush to jihadist activities among Muslim youth, cautioned against anything that would threaten national unity in Saudi Arabia, and reminded Saudis of their obligation to loyalty to their rulers.¹³

This coming together of the Saudi leadership and its former Islamist critics is the most interesting development in Saudi politics since September 11. To some extent, it could signal a decline in the credibility of the official ulama, as the regime clearly has seen the necessity of reinforcing the official condemnations of bin Laden with support from religious figures who have more credibility in Islamist circles. It also could indicate that Saudi Islamist thinkers and activists realize that, in the new world atmosphere of rejection of religious extremism, they need to trim their sails and to seek the protection of the Saudi rulers. It could simply be that these activists disagree with bin Laden. But one thing that this phenomenon does prove is the continuing ability of the Al Saud to rally support around them in a time of crisis.

The future of this entente between the Saudi rulers and their religious critics bears careful watching because while these critics are supportive of the Al Saud in the crisis, they are no friends of the United States. Al-Awda, while calling for mutual respect between Islam and the West, is extremely critical of Western society, in general, and of American policy in the Middle East, specifically.¹⁴ Al-Qarni calls the United States “an oppressor in the guise of an oppressed” and accuses it of using the pretext of September 11 to initiate wars it had previously planned. He calls Israel “a cancer in the body of the Islamic world, which will not be healed except by tearing it out from its roots.”¹⁵ The Saudi regime has been able to garner support from its Islamist critics because of the public perception that the United States has been conducting a campaign of criticism and pressure against the Saudi rulers since September 11. It is tempting for Arab leaders to use foreign policy, particularly anti-Americanism, to manufacture short-term popular support. The Al Saud have avoided that trap in the past and do not seem to want to play that game in any serious way now. If people like al-Awda and al-Qarni continue to play a prominent role in the kingdom’s politics, with the blessings of the Saudi rulers, that cannot be a good sign for future U.S.-Saudi cooperation.

It is undoubtedly true that the extremely strict, intolerant version of Islam that is taught and practiced in Saudi Arabia created the milieu from which Osama bin Laden and his recruits emerged. But from the Saudi regime’s point of view, they are an aberration from the Saudi religious norm, which has been overwhelmingly supportive of Al Saud rule. The support provided by both the religious establishment and Islamist critics to the Saudi government since September 11 has solidified that historic alliance. Bin Laden’s organization might have been able to recruit individuals within Saudi Arabia, but it could not organize activities

in Saudi Arabia. Such individuals are a security problem, not an ideological or political problem, and one that the Saudi regime has successfully driven out of the country (although, it is clear now, with disastrous consequences for the United States).

The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations

In the aftermath of September 11, every major American newspaper has called for a fundamental reassessment of U.S.-Saudi relations. The *New York Times* (October 14) and the *Washington Post* (November 11) used the same title in their editorials: “Reconsidering Saudi Arabia.” The *Times* says those relations are in an “untenable and unreliable state” because of “Saudi Arabia’s tolerance for terrorism.” The *Post* says that Saudi Arabia’s “autocratic system...is itself one of the root causes of Islamic extremism.” Both call for the United States to press Riyadh for major domestic political reforms toward greater political openness as the antidote to the problems in the relationship.

Saudi Arabia is accused of promoting terrorism in a number of ways. The journalist Seymour Hersh says that the Saudi government directly funds terrorist groups to buy protection.¹⁶ Hersh provides no evidence to substantiate that claim, and it runs against what we know of Saudi policy domestically in the 1990s, and what we know about the Saudi government’s dealings with the Taliban. In 1998, after the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the head of Saudi foreign intelligence, Prince Turki Al Faysal, visited Kandahar to convince the Taliban to turn over bin Laden to international justice. They refused, and the Saudi ambassador to Kabul was shortly thereafter recalled.¹⁷ If the U.S. government has information that the Saudi government, or senior Saudi princes, have knowingly and directly funded anti-American terrorists, it should have no doubt about what to do: demand an immediate end to the practice, publicly identify those who engage in such practices, and bring them to justice.

The more common accusation regarding Saudi Arabia as a source for terrorist funding is that the Saudi government has been less than vigilant in preventing financial contributions by Saudi citizens to bin Laden's al-Qaeda and groups like it, in allowing front groups for violent Islamist extremists to collect contributions from Saudi citizens under the pretext of soliciting for charity, and in not properly monitoring the overseas activities of branches of what are otherwise legitimate charities. I have no doubt that these charges contain some truth, and the United States is pushing the Saudis very strongly to get a better handle on these issues. After some initial hesitation, the Saudis seem to be cooperating more fully in this regard, announcing this past February the freezing of a number of accounts. No government can completely police where the private funds of its citizens go, but the Saudis can certainly do a better job. The United States should continue to push for greater transparency in the Saudi financial system. Economic reformers in Saudi Arabia want it; membership in the WTO, which Saudi Arabia seeks, requires it.

The other way the Saudis have been accused of promoting terrorism abroad is by funding—through Saudi-sanctioned charities and international Muslim organizations—Muslim schools and institutions, from Pakistan to Europe to the United States, that have become recruiting stations and training grounds for terrorists. A comprehensive accounting of just what kinds of official Saudi support go to which schools, and where, is lacking, which has allowed all sorts of charges to be leveled against Riyadh. There is certainly no evidence that the Saudi government encourages institutions abroad to preach hatred against the United States. The Saudis have a responsibility to monitor carefully the educational institutions they support and that solicit contributions from their citizens. They should be pressed to do so, if they prove hesitant. The countries in which these insti-

tutions operate also have an obligation to make sure that what occurs in them is consistent with their laws and traditions.

All of these accusations relate to what the Saudi government and Saudi citizens do, or support, outside their borders. The United States can and should press the Saudis on all these questions, when the evidence justifies it. What happens within Saudi Arabia is a different story. Washington needs to tread very carefully regarding internal Saudi educational and religious practices to avoid a damaging backlash against reform efforts already advocated by Saudi reformers, both inside and outside the government.

It has been widely reported in the United States that the Saudi educational system and cultural milieu foster a narrow interpretation of Islam that either intentionally or directly encourages hostility toward non-Muslims and other Muslims who do not accept the Wahhabi doctrine, or creates an atmosphere in which impressionable youths can be recruited by groups who profess such hostility. There is some evidence to support this contention, but arguing that this implicates the Saudi government in the attacks of September 11 makes no sense. Bin Laden, who was responsible for the attacks, had been expelled from Saudi Arabia years before. Those Saudis recruited into his operation were, for the most part, indoctrinated and trained abroad, not in Saudi Arabia. The recruitment process in Saudi Arabia emphasized work for Muslim charitable organizations. Only when the recruits arrived abroad, in Pakistan or Chechnya, did al-Qaeda recruit those willing to engage in violent acts. Moreover, the Saudi educational system, and the kind of religious instruction it provides, has been a constant for decades. The particular mix of factors that produced the terrorism of September 11 has more varied and recent roots; it cannot be reduced to the flaws in the Saudi curriculum.

The Saudi government's responsibility for terrorism is, at best, indirect and not at all intentional. Why, then, the harshness of

the American media reaction against it? I think it has more to do with harm to American feelings than to American interests. We expected our friends to stand with us after September 11, without question and without hesitation. Since the Gulf War, we have counted Saudi Arabia in the camp of our friends. At a minimum, the Saudis were supposed to be grateful to us for saving them in 1990–91 from Saddam Hussein. But they are not friends in the way that the Canadians or the British, who share our domestic values and our overall worldview, are. Moreover, “gratitude” is not a convertible currency in international relations. Rather, the Saudis are strategic partners who share a number of common interests with us. We can work with them when those interests coincide, as they frequently do. The Saudis’ first reaction to any policy choice is not, How can we help the Americans on this? but, How can we help, or at least not hurt, ourselves? In this, Saudi Arabia is like almost every other country in the world. Those who thought otherwise, who put the Saudis in the “friends” category, have swung to the other extreme and now come close to labeling them as “enemies.” That is equally mistaken.

While Saudi public statements on the recent crisis have frequently been infuriating to Americans (like the frequent denials by Prince Naif, the interior minister, that Saudis were involved in the September 11 attacks), we need to remember that the successful American air campaign over Afghanistan was directed from the command center at the Prince Sultan Airbase, south of Riyadh. Saudi political and religious leaders have unanimously and frequently condemned the attacks, and have quietly used their leadership role in the Arab and Muslim worlds to have organizations like the Arab League and the Islamic Conference forthrightly condemn them as well. For example, the Islamic Jurisprudence Group of the Muslim World League, meeting in Mecca in January of this year, adopted a direc-

tive on jihad and terrorism that could have been written by the Bush administration. It limited jihad to certain very specific circumstances and forbade the killing of innocents and the destruction of property not directly linked to battle.¹⁸ We have pressed the Saudis for more open intelligence sharing, with some positive results, and we should continue to press them on that score. In short, we have gotten what we need even if we have not gotten all that we want from the Saudis during the first phase of the war against terrorism.

As we approach the second phase of this new war, the Saudi-American relationship is in for a bumpy ride. If the Bush administration chooses to attack Iraq, it will need and expect logistical support and access to bases from Saudi Arabia. Given the Saudi reluctance to be identified publicly with the Afghanistan campaign, it is unlikely that Riyadh will sign on for a campaign against Saddam Hussein without some very explicit promises from the United States about how long the campaign will last, the absolute certainty of Saddam’s removal, and the composition of a successor government, if it will sign on at all. Oil issues might also create frictions. When Saudi Arabia mobilized OPEC and non-OPEC producers in 1999 and 2000 to limit oil production and push prices up, the United States was enjoying unprecedented economic prosperity. Americans could afford to pay a bit more for gas. With the more uncertain current economic situation, we will look to the Saudis to play a restraining role in the oil markets, as they have so far. However, their need for revenue at some point could come into conflict with our desire to keep oil prices low.

These thorny international issues on the Saudi-American agenda will be even more difficult to handle if Washington chooses to follow the advice of our leading editorial writers and make Saudi domestic politics a focal point of the relationship. Those who call for American pressure on the Al Saud to open up their political process should be

careful what they wish for. Saudi cooperation on Iraqi and Arab-Israeli issues will be more, not less, difficult to achieve if the Saudi public has a greater say in the country's foreign policy. If you are worried about the level of anti-Israeli rhetoric in the Saudi press, permitting more press freedom will not solve your problem. The kinds of economic change that Saudi Arabia needs to maintain its long-term stability—more rational pricing of public services, limits on the size of the government's budget, more efficient management of public sector enterprises, integration into the WTO—will, in the short run, increase public dissatisfaction with the government. In short, some hard choices that the United States wants the Saudi leadership to take will require *more*, not less, insulation from immediate public opinion pressures.

Moreover, any elections in Saudi Arabia now would be won by people closer to bin Laden's point of view than to that of liberal democrats. They have the organizational resources through the vast religious bureaucracies to mobilize support; they also have the vocabulary of Islamist activism that can motivate supporters. If we press the Saudis about their domestic political system, it should be to do things that will give more moderate voices greater access to the decision-making system: to increase the public role of the current Consultative Council, where American-educated technocrats and merchants are heavily represented, and to adopt legislation to encourage private schools, not subject to the oversight of the religious bureaucracy, to operate. There is an active debate in Saudi Arabia, predating September 11, about the need to reassess the educational system in light of the changing world economy. Pressure from the United States on this issue will only work against those in Saudi Arabia who seek reform. Americans can offer advice if asked. In general, however, Washington ought to resist suggesting that it knows better than the Saudis themselves how to manage their soci-

ety. What would come after Al Saud rule, if reformist openings lead to revolutionary fervor, would not be an improvement from the point of view of either American interests or American values.

What do the Saudis want from the United States? Since the Gulf War, what had been a close relationship has become even more intimately intertwined. This has undoubtedly created tensions in Saudi Arabia and misgivings among the Saudi rulers, who were very comfortable with the pre-1990 political distance that having the United States "over the horizon" provided. The current crisis has crystallized the Saudi leadership's desire to put some daylight between itself and Washington. This was most noticeable in Crown Prince Abdullah's statements to groups of leading citizens called together in late October and early November about the difficulties that the Palestinian issue had introduced into the bilateral U.S.-Saudi relationship. He told his listeners about a letter that he had sent to President Bush in late August last year that included the admonition that "from now on you have your interests and the kingdom has its interests, and you have your road and we have our road."¹⁹

But it is equally clear that the Saudis do not want a divorce. When Abdullah revealed his harsh letter to President Bush, it was to demonstrate to his listeners how useful Saudi-American ties are to the Palestinians. Shortly after he sent the letter, he reminded his audiences, President Bush publicly supported the establishment of a Palestinian state. Abdullah's comments this past February to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman about a possible Saudi initiative in the Arab League to restart the Arab-Israeli peace process are another indication that Riyadh still wants to be useful, and wants to be seen as being useful, to Washington.²⁰ The Al Saud realize that any public step away from the United States could backfire on them, decreasing their security in the long term. The Bush

administration, with its constant reiteration of satisfaction with the Saudi role in the current crisis, seems eager to accommodate Riyadh.

However, it would be in the interest of both sides to seek a return to the kind of relationship the kingdom had with the United States before 1990—close, but “over the horizon.” The most tangible symbol of the post-1990s Saudi-American relationship is the deployment of approximately 4,000 to 5,000 U.S. military personnel in the kingdom, an air force air wing that patrols the skies over southern Iraq. It is those forces that bin Laden has railed against as defiling the holy places of Islam for nearly a decade. Though denied officially by both Washington and Riyadh, the *Washington Post* reported in January that the Saudi government is on the verge of asking for the redeployment of those forces out of the kingdom.²¹ Once bin Laden is no longer around to claim a victory were those forces to leave, it could be in our mutual interest to decide with the Saudis if their presence were still necessary. This could only be done in the context of a U.S.-Saudi agreement on how to proceed on the Iraqi issue, which is the most immediate and difficult issue on the agenda between Washington and Riyadh.

The tensions between the United States and Saudi Arabia since September 11 have highlighted an uncomfortable truth about the relationship that dates back to its very beginnings. On neither side is there a strong public constituency for the relationship. It is a relationship between elites, based on very clear understandings of mutual interest. There is no sentiment in it. The myths propagated by those on both sides whose business it is to maintain the relationship ring hollow. Americans look at the kingdom and see social practices that they find intolerable. The Saudis—officials and the general public—cannot comprehend that outsiders have honest criticisms of the way their system works, and thus attribute such criticism to pro-Israeli forces. Ameri-

cans cannot understand why the Saudis cling to their “traditional” (read “un-American”) relationship between religion and politics. Saudis cannot understand why the United States is so supportive of Israel. Each is the perfect foil for journalists and propagandists in the other country.

In the end, after the media in both countries have found other issues upon which to concentrate their energies, and the bitterness of the post-September 11 environment has dissipated, there will remain the compelling fact that every American president since Franklin D. Roosevelt has recognized: oil is a strategic commodity, and there is more of it in Saudi Arabia than anywhere else in the world. We ignore that fact at our peril. It is better for the citizens of the United States, and for the stability of the world economy, that the government that controls all that oil have a cooperative relationship with Washington. The Al Saud, for all their faults, have maintained such a relationship with the United States for more than half a century. This might not be a very idealistic basis for a foreign policy. But those who seek a fundamental change in Saudi Arabia and in the U.S.-Saudi relationship bear a heavy burden of proof to demonstrate that any realistic alternative to that regime and that relationship would be more beneficial for the United States, for the people of Arabia, and for the world economy. ●

Notes

1. On Qutb's idea of the modern *jahiliyya*, see Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Ahmad S. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideology and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992).

2. For a detailed account of the official Saudi reaction, see Joshua Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition*, policy paper no. 52, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2000), chap. 7.

3. For a discussion of the development of bin Laden's political thought, particularly in the Saudi

context, see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), chap. 6.

4. See the report of the prince's speech to police officials in which he said, "Unfortunately, we find in our country those who sympathize with them," referring to bin Laden and al-Qaeda, in *Al-Hayat*, October 19, 2001, pp. 1, 6.

5. *Statistical Yearbook*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), various years.

6. Earlier figures can be found in Michael E. Bonine, "Population, Poverty and Politics: Contemporary Middle Eastern Cities in Crisis," in *Population, Poverty and Politics in Middle East Cities*, ed. Michael E. Bonine (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); and Rayed K. Krimly, "The Political Economy of Rentier States: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia in the Oil Era, 1950–1990," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1993. Recent figures are from Population Reference Bureau, "2001 World Population Data Sheet," available at www.prb.org.

7. Population Reference Bureau, "2001 World Population Data Sheet."

8. For an extensive discussion of the Saudi economic and fiscal situation, see the recent analysis by Brad Borland, chief economist of the Saudi American Bank, available at www.samba.com.sa/investment/economywatch/pdf/2001Budget.pdf.

9. As reported in *Al-Hayat*, November 15, 2001, p. 8.

10. Turki Al Faysal's article appeared in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* on January 20, 2002 in the religion section. See www.asharqal-awsat.com/pcdaily/2001-2002/religion/religion.html. The article by Talal ibn Abd al-Aziz was referred to in *Al-Hayat*, February 6, 2002, p. 2.

11. For that fatwa, see www.aloqla.com/mag. On al-Shuaybi, see Douglas Jehl, "For Saudi Cleric, Battle Shapes Up as Infidel vs. Islam," *New York Times*, December 5, 2001.

12. See, in particular, his article on "al-tatarruf wa al-tatarruf al-mudad" (Extremism and counter-ex-

tremism), December 12, 2001, www.islamtoday.net. On that same website one can find in English his condemnation of the September 11 attacks and the full text of his interview with *New York Times* correspondent Douglas Jehl, which was the basis for the article, "After Prison, A Saudi Sheik Tempers His Words," which appeared on December 27, 2001.

13. See his interview in *Al-Hayat*, February 4, 2002, p. 15.

14. For his criticisms of the philosophical underpinnings of Western notions of freedom, see *Al-Hayat*, January 18, 2002, p. 10. For his specific criticisms of American policy, see his English-language statements at www.islamtoday.net. For example, while he condemns the attacks of September 11 as "a horrible thing born of arrogance," he goes on to say that they were "the bitter fruit of a tree planted by America, for America has succeeded brilliantly in making enemies for itself."

15. *Al-Hayat*, February 4, 2002, p. 15.

16. Seymour M. Hersh, "King's Ransom," *New Yorker*, October 22, 2001.

17. This version of events, put forward in press interviews by Prince Turki Al Faysal, former head of Saudi foreign intelligence (see the series of articles in *Arab News*, November 4–8, 2001, which provide the transcript of an extended interview given by Prince Turki to the Middle East Broadcasting Company, an Arabic-language satellite television station), is confirmed by Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 138–39.

18. The text of the directive may be found in *Al-Hayat*, January 11, 2002, p. 2.

19. As reported in *Al-Hayat*, November 6, 2001, p. 7.

20. Thomas L. Friedman, "An Intriguing Signal from the Saudi Crown Prince," *New York Times*, February 17, 2002.

21. David B. Ottaway and Robert G. Kaiser, "Saudis May Seek U.S. Exit: Military Presence Seen as Political Liability in Arab World," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2002.