



SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE SAUDI ARABIAN CONNECTION

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Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's visit to the Middle East and Central Asia last week -- in an attempt to shore up the coalition against anti-American terrorism -- brought him to Saudi Arabia as well. The Saudi government has neither openly acknowledged how they will allow the United States to use the space-age technology Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) that opened in June at Prince Sultan Air Base, near al-Kharj, southeast of Riyadh; nor has it said what landing or refueling rights will be granted. Amid conflicting statements by anonymous officials, the Saudi paper al-`Ukaz quoted Minister of Defense Sultan bin `Abd al-`Aziz: "We do not accept the presence in our country of a single soldier at war with Muslims or Arabs." History is not encouraging here -- the Saudi royal family did not allow the United States to use its air bases during 1998's Operation Desert Fox against Iraq.

The Saudi royal family has also not been especially helpful about the threat posed by Osama bin Ladin, who was a Saudi until he was stripped of his citizenship in 1994. According to the New York Times, the Saudi government has refused to cooperate in freezing the assets of bin Ladin and his associates.

The Roots of Saudi Reluctance. Saudi reluctance is most fundamentally rooted in the country's self-image: the exemplary Islamic state, founded in the mid-eighteenth century to further Islam via an alliance between the Saudi family and radical Muslim reformers. The Saudi royal family rules in the name of Islam, and its king prefers the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines" -- Mecca and Medina -- a title once the prerogative of the Caliph of Islam. To be perceived as joining non-Muslims against Muslims or Arabs is profoundly humiliating for Saudi Arabians and challenges the regime's legitimacy.

Moreover, in the 1990s, a radical Islamic movement seized on the Saudi family's agreement to allow U.S. troops onto Saudi Arabian soil to fight Iraq's Saddam Husayn, although their complaints were much broader. The royal family paid dearly for their bad governance. Dissidents called attention to corruption and abuse of the public purse, challenged the regime's Islamic credentials, and attacked its alliance with the "Crusader" West. That movement has since reached a tense accommodation with Crown Prince `Abdallah bin `Abd al-`Aziz, who has more or less run Saudi Arabian affairs since King Fahd fell ill in 1995.

There is an even more pressing reason for Saudi reluctance: according to a September 27 statement by the FBI, as many as a dozen of the plane hijackers may have been Saudi citizens. Although there is still confusion over the real identity of the perpetrators, the Saudi royal family must be concerned nonetheless. The main focus of bin Ladin's discourse has been the policies of the Saudi family. His image poses a direct threat to that family's rule. While the West has tended to believe that the Saudis can control their dissidents, their repressive apparatus looks much less efficient than it did before September 11, or has been sufficient enough only to deflect the movement's activities to U.S. targets overseas. `Abdallah may have reached an accommodation with the radical opposition, but not everyone is on board.

Saudi Arabia is a closed society, which makes an accurate estimate of opposition supporters quite difficult to achieve. Opposition sources claim that many ordinary Saudi Arabians are fed up with what the opposition calls "American arrogance"-that is, its wealth and military prowess. The opposition's complaints, as formulated by the London-based Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA), are that the United States lays siege to the Iraqi people, supports Israel, and has "made common cause with the [Arab] rulers to rob the wealth of the Muslims and the resources in the earth [i.e., oil] in order to transfer them to American and Western banks." MIRA writes that Arab leaders have behaved treacherously toward religion and are no more than American satellite regimes throwing Muslims into despair and causing them to thirst for operations that challenge American hegemony.

The Violent Opposition. When the Afghan jihad ended, approximately 5,000 Saudi mujahideen returned to their country. Their burning Islamic zeal found no outlet in a land that purported to be furthering Islam; in fact, their brand of Islam was seen by many as corrupt and actually subverting a truer form of the religion. In November 1995, a group of these returnees blew up the Riyadh headquarters of the Office of the Program Manager for the Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM/SANG), a U.S. training mission. This attack killed five Americans and two Indians, and it injured nearly sixty others. Under interrogation by the Saudis, the perpetrators admitted that bin Ladin had influenced them.

On October 6, a bomb attack in the eastern Saudi city of Al Khobar killed two Americans, raising serious questions about the internal situation of the kingdom. The country has been plagued over the past year by attacks on Westerners, although Saudi authorities have said that those attacks were related to illegal alcohol dealing. On October 8, the United States was worried enough to close its embassy in Riyadh.

For many Saudis, bin Ladin stands in sharp contrast to the reigning Saudi leadership in that he is uncorrupt and a militant defender of Muslims. The son of a fabulously wealthy contractor, he selflessly left the good life for jihad. MIRA claims that bin Ladin has widespread support in Saudi Arabia, though in fact his support is concentrated in two regions in the Saudi west-the Asir and Hejaz. MIRA maintains that close to 80 percent of bin Ladin's followers are Saudi Arabian. While perhaps only the hard core will carry out acts like that of September 11, that group developed out of an anti-regime movement that continues to admire bin Ladin and challenge the kingdom.

The Saudi regime has tried to ignore or hide its bin Ladin problem. According to the New York Times, the Saudi government appears to have closed down a bin Ladin operation last year without informing the United States that it had done so. It has also downplayed the fact that so many of the September 11 perpetrators were Saudi citizens. Meanwhile, the Saudi government spirited out of the United States more than a dozen members of the extended bin Ladin family immediately after September 11 without allowing the FBI to pump them for information.

Saudi clerics have ignored bin Ladin's pronouncements against the United States, although the chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council, Shaykh Salih al-Luhaydan, strongly condemned the September 11 attacks. In fact, many members of the conservative clerical establishment share bin Ladin's antipathy toward the West, and are themselves ambivalent about the regime's Islamic credentials. Unlike their silence about bin Ladin, they have been active critics of other Muslims' views about religious matters: Saudi clerics are well known for their blistering criticism of Shi'ism as shirk, or polytheism.

Conclusions. Strong anti-American sentiment is rife in Saudi Arabia. Western diplomats and other observers often receive their assessments from Westernized Saudis and government officials who tell them what they want to hear-that most Saudis support the royal family. Saudi society is indeed very difficult to understand, but too

much Western knowledge is being filtered in this manner. A great deal has been said since September 11 about the lack of HUMINT (human intelligence) in the war against terror, and the West would be well served by the development of HUMINT in Saudi Arabia as well.

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