



WHY RIYADH STIFFS AMERICA

By Joshua Teitelbaum

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When American and British bombs began falling on Kabul and Kandahar the night of October 7, Iraq's response was predictable. "Every true believer denounces this action," declared Saddam Hussein. Iran was similarly displeased: "This attack which would result in the loss of life among civilians, and, therefore, they are not acceptable," explained the Foreign Ministry. And in Egypt 20,000 student demonstrators put it even more succinctly: "U.S. go to hell." Fortunately America's longtime ally Saudi Arabia, with whom it fought a war ten years ago, rushed to its defense--with absolute silence.

Needless to say this was not what most Americans expected. But that's because most Americans haven't been paying close attention to the shift in Riyadh over the last decade. Since Colin Powell and Dick Cheney cobbled together their last international coalition, Saudi Arabia's role in the Islamic world has changed, and so has Islam's role within Saudi Arabia. And, as a result, the partner that depended on the United States to remove an expansionist Saddam from its doorstep ten years ago is unlikely to be much help in America's hour of need.

The first thing that has changed for Saudi Arabia since the Gulf war is its relationship with its Muslim neighbors. In 1990 the hostility between Tehran and Riyadh that began with Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution had still not abated. The two governments insulted each other almost daily, clashes had broken out between Iranians and Saudis during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, and there were no direct flights between the two countries. Between 1980 and 1988, the Saudis even aided Saddam's war against Tehran. And so Saddam's subsequent invasion of Kuwait not only posed a military threat to the Saudis, but it was also seen as a terrible betrayal. With its former ally suddenly menacing its border, Saudi Arabia was desperate for help. King Fahd, the Saudi ruler, was personally inclined toward the United States, regularly vacationing in the West and presiding over large arms purchases from America. And so, finding itself at odds with both Iran and Iraq--the two other most powerful states in the region--Riyadh called in the Yanks.

Since then, however, Saudi Arabia's position in the neighborhood has improved. While Saddam remains in power, he now poses no immediate threat to the Saudis, thanks to his defeat in the Gulf war and the U.S. military's ongoing intervention in Iraq. Meanwhile the Saudi leadership has changed--and with it the kingdom's relationship to Iran. In 1995 a stroke debilitated Fahd, and his half brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, essentially took charge of the kingdom. Abdullah, who is less comfortable among non-Muslims and does not vacation outside the Arab world, has a decidedly less pro-Western perspective. And, almost immediately, that included an aggressive effort to repair relations with Iran.

This rapprochement occurred over the objections of the U.S. government, and its implications became clear after the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, which housed U.S. Air Force personnel. Both the Saudis and the United States are convinced that Saudi Shi'is, operating with the support of people in the Iranian government, carried out the bombing, which killed 19 American servicemen. In June of this year a federal grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia, returned indictments against 13 members of Saudi Hezbollah, whom it said had been

"inspired, supported and directed by elements of the Iranian government." But rather than assist the United States in its investigation of the bombing, Saudi officials stonewalled, decrying the Khobar Towers indictments as interference in their internal affairs. This severely hampered the U.S. investigation, FBI officials complained. But Abdullah had made his choice: With the United States unable or unwilling to take out Saddam, he deemed it wiser to balance power in the Gulf by repairing relations with Tehran, even at America's expense.

But if changes in Saudi Arabia's external politics have contributed to the country's anti-American tilt, they have been secondary to changes in its internal politics. The presence of American troops in the kingdom following the Gulf war has sparked the largest Islamic opposition movement in Saudi Arabia since the late 1920s. And, in the eyes of the Saudi regime, this movement constitutes a far greater danger than external threats such as terrorism or Saddam.

Islamic opposition movements are common throughout the Muslim world, from Algeria to Uzbekistan. But they present a particular problem for Saudi Arabia since it is the only Arab state whose legitimacy is explicitly linked to its claim to serve Islam. The link dates to an eighteenth century alliance between the Saudi family and a Muslim reformer (we would now call him a radical Islamist) named Mohammad bin Abd al-Wahhab. The Saudi family agreed to enforce bin Abd al-Wahhab's austere form of Islam, and the cleric and his successors lent their support to the expansion of the Saudi state.

Since the Saudi family purports to rule in the name of Islam, it has throughout its history sought the approbation of the Wahhabi clerics. (It is as if the Bush family had been designated by Billy Graham to rule the United States in order to further Christianity, and based its legitimacy on this mandate rather than a popular vote.) In the 1920s the founder of the modern kingdom, Ibn Saud, needed the clerics' approval to suppress a rebellion by his own fanatic followers, the Ikhwan. When radio was first introduced in the late 1920s, Ibn Saud had to show the clerics that one could broadcast the Koran before they would approve it. When a band of fanatics took over Mecca's Grand Mosque in November 1979, King Khalid needed clerical backing before he sent troops in after them. And when Fahd took power in 1982, he sought to increase his Islamic authority by according himself the title "Servant of the Two Holy Places" (i.e., Mecca and Medina). In return for these pledges of allegiance to Islam, the Wahhabi clerics have supported the Saudi royal family, publicly describing them as good Muslims (despite reports of behavior unbecoming to Muslims, such as drinking alcohol) and declaring that dissent against the regime constitutes dissent against Islam. (The clerics' loyalty has, in turn, been rewarded with jobs, prestige, and financial compensation.)

In 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened the Saudi state, King Fahd once again turned to the Wahhabi clerics for approbation--this time to allow American-led Christian troops to defend the kingdom. (For devout Wahhabi Muslims, Christian and Jewish unbelievers, or kuffar, must be kept off Islamic holy land.) Faced with so immediate a threat, Saudi Arabia's clerical establishment grudgingly gave its blessing. But although the threat was quickly removed, the American troops were not. This extended kuffar presence roused the ire of Islamic fundamentalists. At first they simply condemned the U.S. troops. But they quickly turned on the regime--accusing it of corruption, nepotism, and a lack of commitment to Islam. And there were also signs that establishment clerics were beginning to support the agenda of the opposition. The result in 1994 was a series of anti-government demonstrations (far from a normal occurrence in Saudi Arabia) and the eventual jailing of opposition clerics. One of them, Safar al-Hawali, declared before his 1994 arrest, "The real enemy is not Iraq. It is the West."

As he has with Iran, Crown Prince Abdullah has responded to this internal threat by appeasing it--making peace

with the Islamic radicals at the expense of Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States. A sustained crackdown on radical Islamists, such as Hosni Mubarak carried out in Egypt, would have been dangerous for a regime so reliant on clerical authority for its legitimacy. And so, in 1999, Abdullah reached an accommodation with the opposition and released the imprisoned clerics. (Although it has never been publicized, it appears that in return they agreed not to openly criticize the royal family.) Moreover, in contrast to King Fahd, Abdullah has worked hard to project the image of a pious Muslim (which he may in fact be) who puts Muslim and Arab relationships before Riyadh's more distant one with the United States. The strategy has worked: Opposition activity has dramatically decreased since the early 1990s. And Abdullah does not want to do anything to bring it back.

Abdullah's rapprochement with his country's Islamic militants is particularly injurious to America's hunt for Osama bin Laden. There is no love for bin Laden--who would like to see the monarchy overthrown--in the House of Saud. But bin Laden's brand of Wahhabism, while far more militant than Abdullah's, is nonetheless closely related. And the Saudi-born bin Laden's primary grievance against the United States is the same as that of the Saudi opposition--the continued presence of American troops in Islamic holy land. All of which means that publicly joining an American-led war against bin Laden could destabilize the delicate political-theological truce that Abdullah has labored to construct.

The Saudis' ambivalence about bin Laden has been evident for years. Although stripped of his citizenship in 1994, he continues to receive funds from wealthy Saudis. And, as with Iranian connections to the Khobar Towers bombing, the Saudis have been reluctant to aid the United States in investigating bin Laden's terrorist acts. Following the November 1995 bombing of the U.S. mission to the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh that killed five Americans, four Saudis claiming to have acted under bin Laden's influence were arrested. But the United States was able to learn from them only what they said in their brief, televised confessions; despite American requests the suspects were beheaded before the FBI could question them.

According to a recent article in The Washington Post, Saudi intransigence also derailed an effort to arrest bin Laden beginning in March 1996. The government of Sudan, where bin Laden was residing at the time, had reportedly contacted the Clinton administration with an offer to arrest bin Laden and place him in Saudi custody. But despite American entreaties the Saudis declined, and when bin Laden was expelled from Sudan in May, he made it to safety in Afghanistan.

And it wasn't the first time the Saudis had declined an opportunity to capture a terrorist badly wanted by the United States. In April 1995 the FBI received word that Imad Mughniyah, a Hezbollah operative (who has reportedly met with bin Laden associates in the recent past) was on a flight from Khartoum to Beirut, with a scheduled stopover in Jeddah. The United States asked the Saudis to hold Mughniyah--who was responsible for the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985, during which a U.S. Navy diver was killed, as well as for the bombing of the Marines barracks in Beirut in 1983, which killed 241. FBI agents rushed to Jeddah, where they hoped to pick up their man. But instead of cooperating, the Saudis simply prevented the plane from landing on their soil. Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry summed up U.S. government sentiment at the time: "I cannot express ... how disappointed and how unhappy I am with that result."

As the war against anti-American terrorism heats up, the United States should anticipate more such disappointments. For a decade America has considered its difficulties with the Saudi government to be occasional lapses in an otherwise solid relationship. But the truth is that the relationship between the two nations was never that solid to begin with. After all, the Wahhabist Saudi government--certainly the most conservative

Islamic government this side of the Taliban--may have more in common culturally and politically with America's foes in the current fight than it has with America. Thanks to the decline of external threats to the Saudi regime and the rise of internal Islamist dissent, Saudi Arabia's long-standing alliance with the United States has increasingly been revealed as a marriage of convenience. And it is growing less convenient for the Saudis all the time.

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