

Saudi Arabia, US-Saudi Relations and the War on Terrorism

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It is a great pleasure to be with you tonight, and a particular pleasure for me to be introduced by Mr. Ross, who is not only the sponsor of this lecture series but also a benefactor of mine. His generosity led the Council on Foreign Relations, shortly after the last Gulf War, to sponsor a study group on the Gulf monarchies. I wrote the book that came out of that study group, and I am very grateful for the opportunity that he afforded me to do that. He also supported a sabbatical year that I had last academic year. I had intended to complete a book on the international politics of the Gulf region during that year, but 9-11 intervened, and I spent most of that year, and since then, looking at the Saudi role in all of this. So the bad news is that Mr. Ross' investment in another book has not yet been realized – but I want to assure him that I am working on it. The good news, at least for this evening, is that I might have something informed to say about the topic.

Saudi Arabia and the Bin Laden Phenomenon

One of the most serious charges leveled against Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of 9-11 is that it has been the headquarters, so to speak, of the development of the bin Laden phenomenon. This charge stems from a number of factors: 1) that Saudi Arabia is the home of a particularly narrow and intolerant interpretation of Islam known as “Wahhabism;” 2) that Saudi Arabian money has been used to spread this version of Islam around the Muslim world, and that this has been the seed-bed for terrorism; and 3) that Usama bin Laden, and 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9-11, were from Saudi Arabia, which must indicate a particular political atmosphere which encourages terrorism.

There is something to at least one of these charges, which I will discuss shortly, but I think that any effort to explain the bin Laden phenomenon and 9-11 requires a much broader view. The bin Laden phenomenon is a region-wide one, not limited to Saudi Arabia. The fact that bin Laden's major assistant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is an Egyptian; that al-Qa'ida has recruited members from across the Muslim world, including Egyptians, Chechens, Pakistanis, and Indonesians; that it has been able to

conduct operations as far afield as North Africa, East Africa and Southeast Asia – all these facts point out that the bin Laden phenomenon is not limited to a single country.

I think that the origins of the bin Laden phenomenon begin with the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, back in the 1980's. Certainly for Usama bin Laden himself the jihad in Afghanistan was a transformative event. It was similarly transformative for Islamist political movements and ideology across the Muslim world. The success of that jihad did much to encourage the belief that a small number of militants, armed with an intense devotion to their faith and a willingness to use violence against their enemies, could change the world. For many of those who participated in that fight, their efforts not only defeated a superpower, the Soviet Union, but destroyed it. The commitment to jihad seemed not only a religious imperative, but a highly successful political strategy. If we realize this fact, the attacks of 9-11 become more understandable, though no less horrific and immoral.

The Afghani jihad of the 1980's also provided the raw material for the bin Laden movement: the development of bin Laden's own personal charisma in the movement, and his contacts across a range of Arab and other volunteers, from whom he could recruit. Afghanistan in the 1980's provided bin Laden with his Rolodex, and it was from that Rolodex that he recruited what was to become the core of al-Qa'ida.

The Saudi government was very publicly supportive of the Afghani jihad – as was our government, and many others, of course. That is understandable, and, given the circumstances of the time, hard to criticize. Where the Saudis might be faulted is not this sin of commission, it seems to me. It is more a sin of omission. Once it became clear – certainly after the Gulf War, if not somewhat before – that the bin Laden phenomenon was a threat to their own government, to other regimes, and to the United States, the Saudis should have aggressively challenged bin Laden's ideas, both at home and abroad. Instead, they wrapped up bin Laden's movement in Saudi Arabia – a much smaller task – and saw to it that bin Laden himself never would return to the Kingdom. But they were reluctant to directly take on his ideas of anti-Americanism, of *takfir* (declaring other Muslims apostates), of support for violence. The jihadist path had become a popular one, both in terms of young Saudis actually signing up for work abroad (much of it in perfectly legitimate Islamic charities, but some with al-Qa'ida and other such groups) and in terms of the general public perception. Jihad as a principle was, so to speak, "cool" in Saudi, as it had in many other parts of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Saudi government permitted private funding for radical Islamist schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Up to 1998, the Saudis were supporters of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. They confronted bin Laden, but not his ideas.

Since September 11, there has been a more open effort by the Saudi authorities to take on bin Laden's ideas directly. This has occurred in a few ways. First, international Islamic organizations sponsored by the Saudis have rejected the bin Laden

interpretation of jihad. One example is the Islamic Jurisprudence Group of the World Muslim League, meeting in Mecca in January 2002, adopted a directive on *jihad* and terrorism that could have been written by the Bush Administration. It limited *jihad* to certain very specific circumstances, and even in a legitimate *jihad* forbade the killing of innocents and the destruction of property not directly linked to the battle. It is in the U.S. interest that these international Islamic institutions directly take on bin Laden's ideas throughout the Muslim world. We should push the Saudi government to do more on this issue. But we should also recognize that it is our good relations with the Saudi government that allow us to do this kind of pushing. To write Riyadh off as an enemy would preclude this important kind of cooperation.

The official clergy in Saudi Arabia has also condemned bin Laden, in no uncertain terms. This condemnation was to be expected. What was more interesting, in the Saudi context was that the Saudis were able to mobilize the support of a number of past critics of the regime, notable *salafi* dissidents of the early 1990's who shared many ideological similarities with bin Laden, many of whom had spent time in Saudi prisons. These *salafi* dissidents condemned bin Laden and supported the government's handling of the post-9-11 crisis. Shaykh Salman al-'Awda is a good example. A fiery critic of Saudi policy in the Gulf War, he was jailed in 1994, and subsequently held under house arrest until 1999. Since September 11, he has condemned extremism in the Muslim world, calling it a "deviant understanding" of Islam, or a "deviant application of legitimate teachings." Another example is Shaykh 'Ayd al-Qarni. The Saudi government had banned Al-Qarni 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. 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.

This coming together of the Saudi leadership and its former Islamist critics is the most interesting development in Saudi politics since September 11. It certainly signals some 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 *salafi* 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 Sa'ud to rally support around them in a time of crisis.

However, this entente between the Saudi rulers and their former *salafi* critics does not imply any change in the views of those critics toward the United States. Al-

Awda, while calling for mutual respect between Islam and the West, is extremely critical of Western society philosophically and of American policy in the Middle East specifically. While he condemned the attacks of September 11 as "a horrible thing born of arrogance," he labeled them "the bitter fruit of a tree planted by America, for America has succeeded brilliantly in making enemies for itself." Al-Qarni called the United States after September 11 "an oppressor in the guise of an oppressed," and accused it of using the pretext of September 11 to initiate wars for which it had previously planned. He called Israel "a cancer in the body of the Islamic world, which will not be healed except by tearing it out from its roots." In some measure the regime has been able to garner support from its *salafi* critics because of the Saudi perception that the United States is conducting a campaign of criticism and pressure against the Saudi rulers since September 11. How long this entente will last, as the Saudi government now seeks to repair ties with the United States, remains an open question.

This ability of the Saudi regime to rally many of its Islamist critics to its side in the post-9/11 period is an indication that "Wahhabism" does not inevitably lead to bin Ladenism and anti-American terrorism. What the Saudis have yet to do, at least in any systematic way, is to address the question of why so many of their own people were involved in 9/11. This question is being asked by intelligent Saudis, and is beginning to be addressed in a low-key way at the top levels of the Saudi government. But as of yet there has been little official commentary on this question. It is one that the Saudis have to face up to sooner, rather than later.

Saudi Arabia and the 9-11 Aftermath

For many Americans, the Saudi reaction to 9-11 was frustrating, calling into question the value of Riyadh as an ally. The first response of officials in the Saudi government to the attacks of 9-11 was to deny any Saudi responsibility for them, even to deny any Saudis were involved (carefully noting that bin Ladin, stripped of his citizenship in 1994, was no longer a Saudi). The focus on Saudi Arabia in the American media led a number of Saudi officials, including Crown Prince Abdallah, to complain publicly that the Kingdom was being targeted in a "campaign" against it. The Saudi government very publicly denied American forces the right to use Saudi bases for the air campaign in Afghanistan, even while quietly allowing the U.S. to use the command and control center at Prince Sultan Airbase, south of Riyadh, to coordinate that campaign.

From the perspective of the Saudi rulers, this distance from the United States made perfect sense. Bin Laden was not an immediate threat to them (remember, they had rolled up his domestic operations in Saudi Arabia and banished him to the Hindu Kush). But, given the strong elements of anti-Americanism in their own public at this time, too close an identification with the United States could create domestic political problems for them.

Public opinion polling in Saudi Arabia after September 11 confirms the anecdotal evidence of widespread disagreement with, even hostility towards, the United States. A Gallup poll, conducted in late January-early February 2002, reported that 64% of Saudi respondents viewed the U.S. either very unfavorably or most unfavorably. Majorities in the poll associated America with the adjectives “conceited, ruthless and arrogant.” Fewer than 10% saw the U.S. as either friendly or trustworthy. A Zogby International poll, conducted in March 2002, reported similar results. Only 30% of the Saudis polled supported American-led efforts to fight terrorism, while 57% opposed it; and only 43% had a favorable opinion of the American people, and 51% an unfavorable opinion – the highest unfavorable rating of the eight Muslim countries in which the poll was conducted. The Zogby poll focused on specific sources of Saudi public antipathy toward Washington. Majorities looked favorably upon American science and technology (71%), American freedom and democracy (52%), American movies and television (54%), American education (58%). However, fewer than 10% viewed US policy in the Arab world or on the Palestinian issue in a favorably light. 64% of those polled said the Palestinian issue was either the most important or a very important political issue to them, and 79% said they would have a more favorable view toward the U.S. if it “would apply pressure to ensure the creation of an independent Palestinian state.”

Anecdotal evidence supports the general impression left by the polling data that Saudi public opinion has been distinctly anti-American in the period after 9-11. Prince Nawwaf ibn Abd al-Aziz, the head of the Saudi foreign intelligence bureau (al-‘istikhbarat), told the New York Times in January 2002 that the vast majority of Saudi young adults felt sympathy for bin Ladin’s cause (which parts of the bin Ladin agenda his “cause” included is not made clear), even though they rejected the attacks on New York and Washington. The paper reported that a Saudi intelligence survey conducted in October 2001 of educated Saudis between the ages of 25 and 41 concluded that 95 percent of them supported Mr. bin Ladin's cause. While it is difficult to judge their effectiveness, there have been a number of grassroots initiatives in Saudi Arabia urging the boycott of American products and American franchises since 9-11.

The upsurge of Israeli-Palestinian violence in April 2002, with Israel reoccupying major West Bank towns, saw popular demonstrations in the Kingdom, very unusual events in this tightly controlled political system, in support of the Palestinian cause and in protest of the strong American-Israeli relationship. One of the demonstrations was held in front of the American consulate in Dhahran. While a large part of the general anti-Americanism evident in Saudi public opinion comes from *salafi* and other Islamist political quarters, it is not restricted to the Islamist tendency. The April 2002 Israeli-Palestinian violence led about 70 Saudi public intellectuals, many identified with more liberal interpretations of politics and of Islam, to issue a very anti-American statement, including the following lines: "We consider the United States and the current American

administration to be the nursemaid of international terror. It forms with Israel the real axis of terror and evil in the world.”

Saudi public opinion anger towards the United States over the Palestinian issue is relatively easy to document, given the Saudi government’s willingness to allow its citizens to express themselves on this issue. It is harder to gauge how important other parts of bin Laden’s “cause” – his objection to the presence of American military forces in Saudi Arabia, to the American position on Iraq, to American support for undemocratic regimes in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia – are in accounting for anti-American sentiment in the Kingdom. Undoubtedly all play a role, but it is difficult to tell how much of a role. What is unquestionable, however, from both anecdotal and more scientific methods, is that anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia since September 11, 2001, has been a substantial public opinion force.

It is this public opinion turn against the United States that best explains Saudi Arabia’s unwillingness to back the U.S. publicly and completely in the post-9/11 period. To some extent, the Saudi authorities permitted more public displays of this anti-American feeling than they would normally allow, in response to what they saw as the “media campaign” against Saudi Arabia in the U.S. But what they have seen has certainly given them pause, and can help to explain why Riyadh is also keeping its distance from Washington concerning Iraq.

Saudi-U.S. Relations: Is There a Future?

Saudi public opinion antipathy toward the United States is matched by American public opinion antipathy toward Saudi Arabia. Major newspapers like the New York Times and the Washington Post have called in editorials for a major reassessment of the American relationship with the kingdom. Other commentators have gone further, terming Saudi Arabia an enemy. According to a poll by Zogby International, in January 2001 56% of Americans polled viewed Saudi Arabia favorably, 28% unfavorably. In December 2001, those numbers had basically reversed, with only 24% viewing Saudi Arabia favorably and 58% unfavorably. Is this marriage worth saving?

I think it is, and so do the Saudi rulers. Saudi officials from Crown Prince Abdallah down have emphasized repeatedly that they see the Saudi-American relationship as solid and unshakeable. The Saudi government has taken a number of steps aimed at improving the atmosphere in the relationship, from the Crown Prince’s peace initiative on the Arab-Israeli front (revealed to New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, a harsh critic of Saudi Arabia after 9-11) through his visit to President Bush’s ranch in Texas to his open letter to President Bush on the first anniversary of the attacks. While these steps are largely aimed at improving the public view of Saudi Arabia in the United States, they are also a signal to Saudi public opinion

that there are limits to the amount of anti-Americanism at home that the regime will tolerate. Elite intellectuals close to the regime have picked up on these signals, with a number of articles appearing in August 2002 arguing that a complete break with the world's only superpower will not serve Saudi, Arab or Muslim interests.

American interests in Saudi Arabia have always centered on oil, and the recent tensions in the relationship do not change the fact that Saudi Arabia has 25% of all the oil that we know exists in the world today in its territory. It has to be better for the United States to have a government in control of that oil that has a decent relationship with Washington. Alternative governments in this territory are unlikely to have anything like as cooperative a relationship with us. It also has to be in our interests to have a working relationship with the rulers who control the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Would the U.S. standing in the Muslim world be any better if an Iranian-style anti-American regime were in power in Arabia? We have problems with the Saudis, undoubtedly. But the alternatives to them could be considerably worse.

So, where do we go from here? The Saudis do not want a divorce, and neither should we. However, it could be in the interests 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-1990's Saudi-American relationship is the deployment of approximately 4,000 to 5,000 U.S. forces and an air wing in the Kingdom, patrolling the skies over southern Iraq. It is those forces that bin Laden has railed against for nearly a decade. Though denied officially by both Washington and Riyadh, the Washington Post reported January 2002 that the Saudi government is on the verge of asking for the redeployment of those forces out of the kingdom. Once bin Laden is no longer around to claim a victory if those forces do leave, it could be in our mutual interests to determine with the Saudis if their presence is still necessary. This can only be done in the context of a US-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 U.S. 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 whose business it is to maintain the relationship ring hollow once in the public square of both countries. Each is the perfect foil for publicists and propagandists in the other country.

In the end, however, after the bitterness of the post-September 11 environment has dissipated, there will remain the fact that all twelve American presidents since Franklin Roosevelt, Republicans and Democrats, have recognized: Oil is a strategic commodity, and there is more of it in Saudi Arabia than anywhere else in the world.

Better that the government that sits on all that oil be favorably disposed to the United States, as the Al Saud regime is, than not. This might not be a very romantic or idealistic basis for an international relationship. It is hard to pen any soaring rhetoric to it. But it is a fact. We ignore that fact at our peril.

***This lecture is based in part on an earlier article by the author, "Be Careful What You Wish For: The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations," World Policy Journal, Spring 2002.