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Saudi Arabia and the War on Terrorism

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The starting point for an effective approach toward Saudi Arabia in the war on terrorism is an accurate diagnosis of just what role the country has played in the growth of al Qaeda and Sunni Muslim extremism. Exaggeration of that role has become so common in the United States that it threatens to destroy a relationship that, though troubled, is essential to American national interests in the Middle East, in the fight against terrorism, and in the world oil market.

The next step is a realistic policy prescription that deals with the problems emanating from Saudi Arabia. The policy prescription must emphasize those areas where tangible progress can be made and must avoid, to the greatest extent possible, unintended consequences that would damage American interests.

Diagnosis

An accurate understanding of Wahhabism is the crucial first step in diagnosing the Saudi role in the global war on terrorism. This is not simply a semantic issue or an arcane exegesis of Islamic texts. Many in the United States contend that Wahhabism is itself the root of Sunni Muslim violence and terrorism.¹ In their appendix to the Congressional Joint Committee report on the September 11 attacks, Senators Jon Kyl and Pat Roberts refer to Wahhabism as “a radical, anti-American variant of Islam.”² Senators Kyl and Charles Schumer later wrote that Wahhabism “seeks our society’s destruction.”³

If this were true, then we would have no choice but to treat Saudi Arabia as we treated the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, because Saudi Arabia is certainly a Wahhabi state. However, these views misunderstand both Wahhabism itself and its centrality in the growth of violent Sunni Muslim extremist groups.

The puritanical version of Islam preached by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in central Arabia in the eighteenth century, which served as the animating ideology for the Al-Saud family’s efforts to build a state in Arabia, is not very attractive to most outside observers. It is literalist in its desire to replicate the milieu of the Prophet Muhammad in every possible way. It is extremely intolerant of other interpretations of Islam, particularly Shiism. It is wary and suspicious of non-Muslims. Its views on the role of women in society run counter to inter-

1. The first and most influential post-September 11 book to make this claim is Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa’ud from Tradition to Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

2. “Additional Views—Senator Jon Kyl, Senator Pat Roberts,” <http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/911rpt/addviewsmem.pdf>, p. 20.

3. Jon Kyl and Charles Schumer, “Saudi Arabia’s Teachers of Terror,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2003.

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national norms, to say the least. It is also hostile to the canons of modern science with some Saudi clerics holding, to this day, that the world is flat and at the center of the solar system.

But none of this is new. Wahhabism has been the official interpretation of Islam in the Saudi domain since the founding of the modern state at the outset of the twentieth century. It has not been a barrier to a very close Saudi-American relationship over the past decades. The phenomenon of anti-American terror in the Sunni Muslim community is much more recent. If this terror were grounded solely in Wahhabism, it should have manifested itself much earlier and should have prevented the historically close Saudi-American relationship.

Wahhabism, as it has developed in Saudi Arabia, is a state ideology, not a revolutionary creed. As retrograde as it might be on social issues, Wahhabism's official arbiters counsel loyalty to the ruler, not revolution. They accord the ruler wide latitude to conduct foreign affairs. Leading Wahhabi scholars and clerics, for example, publicly gave their seal of approval to both the invitation of American forces to Saudi Arabia in 1990 and the use of Saudi Arabia as a base for the 1991 attack on Iraq. They have vehemently rejected the bin Ladenist logic of violence, condemning the attacks of September 11, the bombings in Riyadh in May and November 2003, and the surge of terrorist violence thereafter. Even Wahhabi clerics deeply critical of American policy in the Middle East and of the Saudi-American relationship have spoken out against bin Laden and the violence that he and his followers have perpetrated.⁴

One reason that many have equated "bin Ladenism" with Wahhabism is that bin Laden himself claims to follow the "true" Wahhabi line. He calls for the overthrow of the Saudi

4. See F. Gregory Gause III, "Be Careful What You Wish For: The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations," *World Policy Journal* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2002).

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regime and condemns the official clerics for deviating from that line. But allowing bin Laden to define Wahhabism is like allowing the militia movement in the United States to define what it means to be a patriotic American. We should not be taken in by such claims.

Violent anti-American Sunni extremism, personified by bin Laden, is the product of a much more contemporary and complicated set of ideological trends and political experiences. Wahhabism is a part of that mix, but only a part. The crucible of the development of bin Ladenism was the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Among the Arab volunteers there, the retrograde social views and theological intolerance of Saudi Wahhabism came to be blended with the revolutionary political doctrines developed in the 1960s by Muslim Brotherhood thinkers, particularly in Egypt. It is no accident that bin Laden's chief lieutenant in al Qaeda is an Egyptian, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was prominent in the violent fringes of Egyptian Islamist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. This ideological *mélange* was filtered through the jihad's success, which was taken as no less than a divine sanction for the political message that developed out of it. Imbued with this confidence, the "Arab Afghans" returned to continue the jihad against their "insufficiently Muslim" governments in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia. It is only with their failure to remake the politics of the region that, in the mid-1990s, bin Laden began to focus his jihad explicitly against the United States.

Meanwhile, the success in Afghanistan brought a new luster to the concept of jihad in Saudi Arabia (and many other Muslim countries). The Saudi government had encouraged public support for the Afghan jihad (as had the American government). Jihad became a more prominent part of many Saudis' understanding of Islam. Muslims were also "oppressed,"

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as Saudis saw it, by non-Muslims in places like Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, and the West Bank and Gaza. If jihad worked in Afghanistan to free a Muslim population from non-Muslim rule, why should it not work in these other places?

Some of these causes received more official support in Saudi Arabia than others. Bosnian and Palestinian Muslims received much largesse. Saudi diplomatic relations with Russia and India, however, put limits on official support for the Chechen and Kashmiri jihads. But it is undeniable that the Saudi government not only did not oppose the developing jihadist subculture in the country but in some ways encouraged it.

Here is the true intersection in the 1990s between the bin Ladenist movement and Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden himself had been expelled from the country and stripped of his citizenship in 1994. His movement in the country seemed to be rolled up in the mid-1990s, after large-scale arrests. But al Qaeda was active in these other jihadi movements and, in time, was able to make common cause with, or take over, Saudi-funded organizations active in these causes.⁵

5. There are persistent charges that members of the Saudi ruling family either directly or indirectly cut a deal with bin Laden, at minimum promising not to impede his fund-raising and recruiting in Saudi Arabia, perhaps even supporting him financially, in exchange for al Qaeda refraining from targeting Saudi Arabia. The major published source to raise this charge is Gerald Posner, *Why America Slept: The Failure to Prevent 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2003). Nothing in the public record supports this charge. The car bomb attack on the American training mission to the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh in November 1995, which killed seven and wounded sixty, was perpetrated by Saudis who, before their execution, publicly identified bin Laden as their inspiration. However, it is impossible to disprove the charge as well. In the past, Saudi leaders have attempted to buy off foreign opponents, and the ruling family is large enough that it is possible that some prince or group of princes took it upon themselves to explore this option. The most that can be said with certainty is that, if there ever were such an agreement, it did not work very well for the Al-Saud.

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It is this intersection that highlights the most important role of Saudi Arabia in the spread of Sunni Islamist extremism. Saudi funding sources, developed during the Afghan jihad and maintained through the 1990s, either wittingly or unwittingly came to support al Qaeda and groups like it. The new prominence of jihad in Saudi Arabia came to be transmitted through Saudi-supported Islamic international organizations (like the Islamic Conference Organization) and nongovernmental organizations (like the World Muslim League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth) to the rest of the Muslim world. The spread of the jihadist subculture clearly facilitated al Qaeda recruitment and created an atmosphere in which sympathy for al Qaeda could grow. Saudi recruitment channels for jihadis at home, developed in the 1980s to send young Saudis to Afghanistan and continuing in the 1990s to other areas, came to be exploited by al Qaeda to recruit Saudis directly into the organization.

Funding, ideological legitimation, and recruitment are the areas where Saudi Arabia played a key role in developing Sunni Muslim extremism. But that is a far cry from claiming that the Saudi government itself, directly and wittingly, boosted bin Laden and his views. It is even a farther cry from the theories that the Al-Saud were behind September 11, theories on a par with those holding the CIA or the Israeli Mossad responsible for those atrocities. The reality is challenge enough; no good purpose is served by marketing error and delusion.

Prescription

Funding, ideological legitimation, and recruitment are precisely the areas that American foreign policy should target in its policy toward Saudi Arabia in the war on terrorism. In all

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of these areas, the United States is today dealing with a Saudi government that is usually, though not always, willing to cooperate. The level of cooperation has varied, in part because not all elements of the Saudi regime have been equally committed to that cooperation.

A number of factors contribute to that reluctance, including tensions over the direction of American Middle East policy in general and very clear differences between the two countries regarding the definition of *terrorism* as it relates to the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the key to Saudi reluctance is the domestic political costs of confronting a movement that had considerable sympathy within Saudi Arabia for many of its goals if not its tactics. Being against Islam is not a winning position in Saudi politics. The fact that any cooperation with the United States would be seen by many as bowing to American pressure, when (from the late 1990s) the United States has been profoundly unpopular in Saudi Arabia, has furnished further disincentive.

However, the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and on the housing compounds in Riyadh on May 12 and November 9, 2003, led to new levels of seriousness on the part of the Saudi authorities in addressing the problem of Sunni extremism that they had, however unwittingly, helped to create. These events brought home to the Saudi leadership, more quickly to some than to others, the threat posed by Sunni Muslim extremism to the domestic stability of their own regime.

On the funding issue, American pressure and the Saudi realization of the seriousness of the threat have led to important steps by Riyadh to exercise more control over Saudi-supported charities and to monitor financial transactions from the kingdom. During 2002, the Saudi government took several steps in this direction, including requiring Foreign Ministry

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approval of any charitable project undertaken outside the country, ordering audits of Saudi charities, and establishing new oversight bodies in the government to monitor charities.⁶ After the May 2003 bombings Riyadh moved to close ten of the foreign offices of the al-Haramain Foundation, frequently cited as a conduit of funds for extremist groups, after earlier closing the foundation's offices in Bosnia and Somalia.⁷

The task for American foreign policy is to hold the Saudi government's feet to the fire on this issue, pushing it to follow up on its own declared policy. The Bush administration has been doing so, dispatching in August 2003 a team of senior counterterrorist officials to press the Saudis.⁸ Just a few weeks later, the Saudi cabinet adopted new regulations against money laundering, and the Saudi government allowed the IRS and FBI to establish a permanent liaison office in Riyadh to coordinate with Saudi counterparts.⁹ A practical step in this direction would be to press the Saudis to actually create the Saudi Higher Authority for Relief and Charity Work, a step that had been announced but not implemented, to serve as the oversight body for all charitable organizations and associations offering services outside the country.¹⁰

In December 2003, Saudi sources at the embassy in Wash-

6. *Al-Hayat*, March 21, 2002, 1, 6; John Mintz, "Saudis Deny Dragging Feet on Terrorism," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2002.

7. John Mintz, "Wahhabi Strain of Islam Faulted," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2003.

8. Susan Schmidt, "U.S. Officials Press Saudis on Aiding Terror," *Washington Post*, August 6, 2003.

9. "Cabinet OK's anti-money laundering legislation," *Arab News*, August 19, 2003; "U.S. and Saudis Join in Anti-Terror Effort," *New York Times*, August 26, 2003.

10. As of late May 2003, the body had yet to be established, according to the Saudi response to questions posed by the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the UN Security Council. The reference to the body is on page 11 of the response, Counter-Terrorism Committee document S/2003/583.

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ington revealed that the Saudi government intends to stop providing diplomatic status for Islamic clerics and educators preaching and teaching overseas. These sources also claimed an intent to "shut down the Islamic affairs section in every embassy."¹¹ If this actually occurs, it will be a significant step and a major signal of change in Saudi policy.

While many in Washington remain skeptical of the Saudi commitment in this area, some appear to have become too complacent. It still makes sense to pressure Riyadh to demonstrate its good intentions rather than to assume they either will or will not follow through on recent initiatives. If further cooperation is not forthcoming, the United States should not hesitate to "name and shame" Saudi individuals and organizations involved in the deliberate financing of al Qaeda and affiliate groups.

One area of particular sensitivity in the issue of funding is Saudi support, official and private, for Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group officially designated as a terrorist organization by the United States. There is no question that Saudi money goes to Hamas organizations and projects.¹² Pushing the Saudis to end as much of that support as they can would be valuable, but the negative consequences of making the Hamas issue a very high-profile public part of Saudi-American relations are considerable. In terms of Saudi public opinion, equating al Qaeda and Hamas does not delegitimize the latter; it legitimates the former. Better for Washington to separate the al Qaeda issue from the Hamas issue by pushing publicly and privately for absolute cooperation on the former and

11. See Susan Schmidt and Caryle Murphy, "U.S. Revokes Visa of Cleric at Saudi Embassy," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2003.

12. Adil al-Jubeir, foreign affairs adviser to Crown Prince Abdallah, has admitted as much. David R. Sands, "Kingdom Moves Against Terrorism," *Washington Times*, June 13, 2003. See also Matthew Levitt, "Who Pays for Palestinian Terror?" *The Weekly Standard*, August 25, 2003.

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keeping the latter in the realm of private diplomacy, at least while al Qaeda remains America's foremost priority.

On legitimation, Washington has a less public role to play than on funding. The U.S. government will not be successful in telling Muslims what Islam is, and it should not try to do so. Here, the key is to press the Saudis to use their considerable ideological resources, both at home and in the Muslim world in general, to place bin Laden, his actions, and his interpretation of Islam outside the pale of acceptable Muslim discourse. This requires the Saudis to confront head-on the jihadist subculture that they indirectly nurtured during the past two decades.

As in the funding area, the Saudis have recently demonstrated a willingness to take on this task. In late May 2003, after the bombings in Riyadh, the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs announced the removal of 353 religious officials from their positions (because they lacked the "qualifications" to work in mosques) and the requirement that 1,357 religious officials undergo further training.¹³ Immediately after September 11, leading Saudi religious officials condemned the attacks and, since then, have consistently and publicly rejected bin Laden's interpretation of jihad. A recent example was the statement of the Higher Council of Ulama in August 2003, reaffirming that violent attacks on innocents "are criminal acts . . . not jihad in the path of God." The council called on the Saudi authorities to bring before the courts any scholar who issues a fatwa ("religious judgment") approving of such acts.¹⁴ Continuing efforts by the Saudis in this direction, not only at home but also through the Islamic intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations that they fund, are essential.

13. *Al-Hayat*, May 28, 2003, 1, 6.

14. *Al-Hayat*, August 17, 2003, 1, 6.

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On recruitment, the Saudis need to police much more stringently the networks of al Qaeda members and sympathizers that have developed within the kingdom itself. For too long, even after September 11, Riyadh refused to face up to this issue. Just days before the May 2003 bombing, the country's chief security official, Interior Minister Prince Na'if, termed the al Qaeda presence in the country as "weak and almost nonexistent."¹⁵ Since the bombing, Saudi security forces have been much more aggressive in efforts to root out al Qaeda. In the aftermath of the May and November 2003 bombings, more than six hundred Saudis were arrested. There have been a number of shootouts between Saudi police and suspected al Qaeda sympathizers, with tens killed on each side, and Saudi security services have discovered a number of substantial arms caches.¹⁶ The United States should urge the Saudis to make a special effort to prevent infiltration by al Qaeda sympathizers and other Islamist militants across the long and largely unguarded Saudi-Iraqi border.

The Saudis could do more on all of these issues, and the United States should monitor Saudi government actions carefully. There is also the larger issue, beyond the scope of this essay, of the consequences of Wahhabi proselytizing in the Muslim world. Even if the official Saudi interpretation of Islam is not, in and of itself, the wellspring of anti-American terror, its retrograde views on social tolerance, gender issues, and democracy place it at variance with American goals throughout the Muslim world, including in the United States itself. Helping other Muslim countries promote more tolerant and inclusive interpretations of Islam should be part of the

15. Glenn Kessler and Alan Sipress, "Western Targets Bombed in Riyadh," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2003.

16. Neil MacFarquhar, "Al Qaeda Blamed in Deadly Attack on Saudi Homes," *New York Times*, November 10, 2003.

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American foreign policy agenda, to the extent that Washington can help on these issues. But on the specific issue of anti-American terrorism, there is a clear willingness, more pronounced since the May 2003 bombings, on the part of the Saudi government to cooperate with Washington. That is a basis upon which to build.

Do No Harm

The United States should avoid superficially appealing policies toward Saudi Arabia that will redound to our disadvantage. In particular, Washington should suppress its natural tendency to believe that more democracy will make things better in foreign countries.

Democratic elections in Saudi Arabia would reflect the very strong anti-Americanism now prevalent in the country. A Gallup poll, conducted in late January–early February 2002, reported that 64 percent of Saudi respondents viewed the United States either very unfavorably or most unfavorably. Majorities in the poll associated America with the adjectives “conceited, ruthless and arrogant.” Fewer than 10 percent saw the United States as either friendly or trustworthy.¹⁷ A Zogby International poll, conducted in March 2002, reported similar results. Only 30 percent of the Saudis polled supported American-led efforts to fight terrorism, while 57 percent opposed them.¹⁸ A subsequent Zogby poll, conducted in July 2003, found that 70 percent of the Saudis polled had an unfavorable impression of the United States, with only 24 percent having a favorable impression.¹⁹ An elected Saudi legislature, for

17. Richard Burkholder, “The U.S. and the West—Through Saudi Eyes,” *Gallup Tuesday Briefing*, August 6, 2002.

18. “The 10 Nation ‘Impressions of America’ Poll Report,” Zogby International, August 7, 2002.

19. www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=725.

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example, would put pressure on the Saudi government to cooperate *less*, not more, with the United States in the war on terrorism and on general Middle East issues.

Saudi anti-Americanism is not an immutable fact. It reflects the tensions in the relationship since September 11, the negative reactions to American attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, and the collapse of the Arab-Israeli peace process. But it can change with time, as regional realities change. However, a push for democracy in Saudi Arabia now would not serve American interests. President Bush cannot take back what he said at the National Endowment for Democracy on November 6, 2003, but he can selectively implement his vision. And he should. Cautious steps from the Saudis themselves to broaden the scope of political participation in their society, such as the October 2003 announcement of plans for municipal elections to fill half the seats of the proposed municipal councils, should be welcomed. Washington should not push for countrywide elections to national institutions, such as the Consultative Council (an appointed body).

The United States must also avoid the temptation to simply throw up its hands and declare the Saudis an enemy. This impulse is based on a faulty reading of the role of Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia in the development of Sunni Islamist extremism, as discussed earlier. Beyond that, the temptation seems to be an emotionally satisfying thought for many who see Wahhabism, the monarchy, the treatment of women, the Saudi stance on Arab-Israeli issues, and various other elements of Saudi society and governance as so antithetical to American principles that our country should have no truck with the House of Saud. As in so many things in life, however, what temporarily satisfies our emotional needs would not be good for us in the long run.

Those who urge such a policy fail the basic test of practical

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politics: They offer no alternative to the Saudi-American relationship.²⁰ They are extremely fuzzy on what Washington should do the day after it declares Saudi Arabia an enemy. Military invasion and occupation of the oil fields? Given how difficult and expensive U.S. occupation of Iraq has become, this cannot be a serious option. Those who advocate “regime change” in Riyadh, through greater democracy or direct U.S. action, can offer no assurances that a new regime would be any friendlier to the United States, harder on Islamist extremists, or more in tune with global human rights norms than the incumbents.

The plain fact is that not only do the rulers of Riyadh sit on 25 percent of all the world’s known conventional oil reserves, but they also control the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the focal point of faith for 1.4 billion Muslims in the world. Surely having a government there that, despite its problems, responds to American pressures on oil questions and the war on terrorism is better for American interests than the leap into the dark that military occupation or regime change would represent. Looking around the region, it is better than several other easily imaginable alternatives as well.

20. Argued in Adam Garfinkle, “Weak Realpolitik: The Vicissitudes of Saudi Bashing,” *The National Interest*, no. 67 (Spring 2002).