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Saudi Arabia Challenged

F. GREGORY GAUSE III

Terrorist violence carried out by Sunni Muslim extremists finally hit home in Saudi Arabia last year. Osama bin Laden's Saudi roots, the involvement of 15 Saudis in the 9-11 attacks, and Saudi Arabia's high-profile sponsorship around the world of its puritanical and intolerant version of Islam all combined to focus US and international attention on this Gulf state in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

Until 2003, however, most Saudis—including the Saudi government—had regarded Sunni Islamist extremism as something foreign. The Saudis who were involved in terrorist attacks, including bin Laden, operated outside the country. The combination of strong police and intelligence services and the institutionalized relationship between the state and the religious establishment seemed adequate to protect Saudi Arabia from the kind of violence America witnessed that terrible day in 2001, and that other Arab countries had seen at various times over the past 20 years. Earlier hints of Islamist opposition, which arose after the 1990–1991 Gulf War, were quickly squelched. Even the Khobar Towers bombing of 1996 in eastern Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 American servicemen, could be explained away as an attack on foreign troops, not on the Saudi system.

This sense that violent Sunni Islamist extremism was something foreign to Saudi politics gave rise in the immediate aftermath of 9-11 to a defensiveness, even truculence, among Saudis about their country's role in the growth of this phenomenon. While some in the country called for reflection on how the Saudi political and social system produced 15 of the 19 September 11 hijackers, others wondered why Americans were “targeting” their country for criticism.

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Saudis argued, with some justification but no sense of self-criticism, that their kingdom's interpretation of Islam (known as Wahhabism) was not the same thing as bin Laden's toxic mix of revolutionary violence and Islam. Prince Naef bin Abd al-Aziz, the Saudi interior minister, said just before the crisis hit home in May 2003 that the Al Qaeda presence in his country was “weak and almost non-existent.”

With deadly bombings in Riyadh in May and November 2003, perpetrated on Saudi soil by Saudi militants politically aligned with (if not organizationally linked to) Al Qaeda, Saudis can no longer deny the reality of the challenge or the fact that it is homegrown. The government initiated a wide-ranging security crackdown and mobilized a broad spectrum of Saudi religious figures to condemn the violence.

But this was not the only challenge facing the Saudi rulers. Calls for political reform gained strength last year, some echoed by leading government figures. Islamist activists, while rallying to support the regime, also warned against political changes that would call into question the privileged place enjoyed by the religious establishment and the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Economic problems, particularly unemployment, festered. And as the regime walked a political tightrope at home, it had to deal with a newly complicated and changing relationship with the United States.

AL QAEDA HITS HOME

On May 12, 2003, suicide bombers attacked three residential housing compounds in Riyadh, killing 34 people, including 8 Americans. The strikes came just days after Saudi security forces had uncovered a large weapons cache in the Riyadh area. A number of suspects fled the scene. The Saudis, in an unusual step for a very secretive government, published in the local media the names and pictures of 19 men wanted in the incident. Both Saudi and US authorities linked the attackers to Al Qaeda.

The bombings led to an intensified Saudi security campaign aimed at rooting out Al Qaeda cells in the country. Clashes between Saudi police and suspected militants occurred frequently in cities throughout the country, including Mecca and Medina. Numerous hidden weapons caches were found, including large supplies of plastic explosives, homemade bombs, and assault rifles. Eighteen Saudi security personnel were killed between May and November 2003, as were a larger number of suspects. While the Saudi government has not officially acknowledged the number of those arrested in sweeps, it is estimated at 600.

The security crackdown did not prevent another devastating attack on November 9, 2003. Seventeen people, mostly Arabs from other countries but also a number of Saudis, were killed and 122 wounded in an assault on a residential compound in Riyadh. Once again, Saudi and US officials linked the attackers to Al Qaeda.

In the wake of these attacks, the Saudi rulers rallied the official religious establishment and a number of independent Islamist thinkers who in the past had been critical of the regime. They unanimously condemned the bombings. The London-based Arabic newspaper *al-Hayat* published a statement by 47 prominent Islamist figures in Saudi Arabia, some of whom had earlier been jailed by the regime, condemning the May bombing. After the November bombing, two dissident clerics, Shaykh Ali al-Khudayr and Shaykh Nasir al-Fahad, who had been arrested for encouraging violent opposition to the regime, publicly recanted their positions. The religious establishment conducted a public campaign against what it termed “excessiveness” (*al-ghulu* in Arabic) in religion and against “deviant” understandings of Islamic teachings concerning jihad. Shortly after the May bombings, religious authorities removed 343 religious officials from their positions in mosques around the country, and required 1,347 to undergo retraining. Religious textbooks that had encouraged hostility toward non-Muslims were altered, though with new warnings against adopting Western systems of government.

This support from the religious establishment and independent Islamists came with a price: they demanded that the regime rein in leading Saudi critics of their power in the country. Three prominent Saudi writers who had criticized the religious estab-

lishment and called for an open debate about the interpretation of Islam in their country—Jamal Khashoggi, editor of the Saudi newspaper *al-Watan*; Daud al-Shiryar, a Saudi journalist who had a daily column in *al-Hayat*; and Hussein Shobokshi, a writer for the Saudi newspaper *Okaz*—lost their positions after the May bombings. The defensiveness of the Islamists, official and independent, is testament to stirrings of political activism elsewhere in Saudi society. The regime’s response in firing the journalists indicates the religious establishment’s continuing power. And the November bombing demonstrates that the Saudis still have a considerable way to go before the threat of violent Sunni Muslim extremism is neutralized.

POLITICAL STIRRINGS

On October 14, 2003, Riyadh experienced an unusual event: hundreds of Saudis gathered in front of one of the city’s major shopping centers in a political protest. They were quickly dispersed by

police, who arrested, according to unofficial estimates, anywhere from 50 to 270 protesters. The demonstration appeared to have been organized by

a Saudi dissident living in London, Saad al-Faqih, whose Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia uses the Internet and satellite television to urge opposition to the regime on an Islamist platform. An effort by al-Faqih to organize other protests around the country a week later fizzled when Saudi policemen, forewarned by al-Faqih’s Internet postings, managed to prevent the gatherings. It is not clear that those who protested on October 14 all shared al-Faqih’s Islamist critique of the regime. One protester was quoted as saying, “I am an unemployed youth. I came to join the protest to express my inability to obtain work.” But the demonstration was evidence that something is happening on the political front in Saudi Arabia.

Demands for political reform also were voiced by a coalition of Saudi liberals and moderate Islamists in a petition January 2003 to Crown Prince Abdullah. (King Fahd is largely incapacitated by a stroke; Abdullah has day-to-day governing responsibilities.) While couching their demands in respectful and supportive language, the petition—entitled “The Present and Future of the Country”—called for a number of significant

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changes in the Saudi political system, including a directly elected Consultative Council with real legislative powers (the current council is appointed and has only advisory powers), directly elected provincial assemblies, royal guarantees of political freedoms such as freedom of expression and political organization, and greater rights for women.

In their plea for a wide-ranging national dialogue based on mutual respect and tolerance, the signatories implicitly criticized the religious establishment's dominant role in Saudi society. In late April, 450 Saudi Shiites also presented a petition to the crown prince that called for citizen equality and an end to discrimination based on sectarianism in the kingdom. This was an explicit challenge to the hostility toward Shiism long held by the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, and to the history of the Saudi state's treatment of the Shiite minority as second-class citizens.

In the wake of the May bombings and the regime's subsequent security crackdown, a number of those involved in the January 2003 petition addressed a shorter, sharper petition entitled "Defending the Nation" to the crown prince in September 2003, signed by 306 Saudis. The signatories argued that the lack of political freedoms and the dominant position in society held by "those who are fundamentally unable to engage in dialogue with others" (a not so veiled reference to the religious establishment and hard-line independent Wahhabis) had created the atmosphere from which terrorism in Saudi Arabia had emerged. The petition called for immediate application of the political reforms urged on the crown prince in the January petition.

The regime made a number of gestures in response to those calling for political reform. Crown Prince Abdullah received the organizers of the January petition and expressed his support for some of their recommendations. Abdullah had, earlier that month, submitted to the Arab League a "new Arab covenant" for consideration by the Arab rulers, which called for economic reform and "developing political participation." After the May 2003 bombings, the crown prince convened a "national dialogue meeting" in June that included, along with members of the official Wahhabi religious establishment, representatives of other Sunni law schools and of the Shiite community. The meeting ended with a call to respect differences of opinion within Islam and to strengthen national unity. Participants also cautioned that the central role of the religious establishment in national life should not be questioned.

In October the government announced a plan to organize elections within a year for half the seats on proposed municipal councils in cities throughout the country.

"Petition fever" and government moves to accommodate or co-opt it are not new in Saudi Arabia. Similar ferment appeared in the kingdom after the first Gulf War, the last major regional upheaval. The regime responded with a series of minor reforms, most notably the appointment of the Consultative Council. While the crown prince's steps in 2003 are important in the Saudi context, and have earned him his reputation as an advocate of reform within the ruling family, they accomplish little in moving toward the comprehensive reform agenda suggested by the various petitions. Part of the Saudi reluctance to embrace more thoroughgoing reform stems simply from the ruling family's desire to hold on to its monopoly of power. But it also reflects the rulers' need to placate their more hard-line religious constituency, which distrusts the talk of reforms and sees them—not without cause—as directed against Wahhabi hegemony in the kingdom's social, political, and intellectual life.

The Wahhabi establishment in both its official and unofficial elements has supported the regime in its confrontation with the domestic and international repercussions of 9-11. It has been for decades the regime's ally and the core of its social base. The Al-Saud ruling family is unlikely to jettison that historic alliance to placate "liberal" forces whose strength in Saudi society remains uncertain. Maintaining this political balance between the core religious constituency and other forces in society, at a time when the regime faces a violent domestic opposition and a growing consensus that reform must come sooner rather than later, is the tightrope the Saudi rulers must walk.

A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH THE US

Even as the Saudis face these problems at home, they also are in the midst of redefining their relationship with their most important foreign ally, the United States. It has become increasingly clear since 9-11 that the very close relationship between the two countries, symbolized by their cooperation in the first Gulf War, cannot be sustained. Public and congressional opinion in the United States has turned hostile toward Saudi Arabia. Accusations of Saudi complicity in the September 11 attacks—either directly or indirectly through support for Islamic organizations with ties to bin Laden—continue to be raised in the United States. The Bush

administration's refusal to declassify parts of a July 2003 congressional report on 9-11 that discussed Saudi Arabia fueled more accusations. In November, the chairman of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, established by Congress and administered by the State Department, called Saudi Arabia a "strategic threat" to the United States because it continues to fund and export the Wahhabi brand of Islam.

Likewise, public opinion in Saudi Arabia is probably now more anti-American than at any time in recent history. In a poll conducted for Zogby International in July, 94 percent of Saudis held an unfavorable impression of US policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict and 81 percent opposed US policy in Iraq. Seventy percent of the respondents had an unfavorable impression not just of the American government but of the American people.

These trends in public opinion come as both Washington and Riyadh have put some distance into their previously close relations. The Saudi government publicly opposed the US war against Iraq. A multibillion-dollar energy project, aimed at developing Saudi natural gas reserves and headed by American energy firms, collapsed in June 2003. In September, after the war to topple Saddam Hussein had concluded, US forces left the Saudi base that they had used since the end of the first Gulf War for air patrols over Iraq. The withdrawal of American forces from the kingdom, a demand of bin Laden's since he launched his campaign against the United States and the Saudi rulers, removes an irritant in Saudi-American relations, but it also symbolizes the end of an extremely tight relationship between the two capitals (which is one reason why neither government trumpeted the withdrawal). And it is accompanied by President George W. Bush's attempt to make democracy promotion a centerpiece of US policy in the Middle East, a focus that will not be welcomed in Riyadh.

Both the Bush administration and the Saudis have emphasized that they want to maintain a cooperative relationship. Washington has publicly praised Saudi cooperation in the war on terrorism, particularly after the May bombings, even as it has pressed the Saudis for greater efforts. Despite public opposition to the war against Iraq, the Saudis quietly allowed US access to Saudi military bases during the war. Oil, the basis of the US-Saudi relationship since the 1930s, remains

a key interest for Washington; Saudi Arabia still has 25 percent of the world's known oil reserves and exports more oil than any other country in the world. Still, because of public opinion on both sides, the relationship cannot be as close as it once was. Riyadh and Washington are groping toward some new equilibrium, as yet undefined.

THE RESILIENT KINGDOM

Saudi rulers face the dual challenges of domestic unease and redefined US relations with a number of resources still at their disposal. Oil prices, the driving force of the Saudi economy and the lubricant of Saudi patronage networks, have been strong for nearly two years. Although Riyadh faces structural economic problems, most notably an infrastructure that lags behind its high population growth rate and an increasingly serious unemployment problem among Saudi youth, it has the resources, if used wisely, to tackle these problems. The changes required include efforts to attract local and foreign capital, legal reforms to protect those investments from political interference, educational reforms to better prepare Saudi youth for the job market, and public-private Saudi cooperation to reduce dependence on foreign labor.

Much as the case with political reform, on the economic side the Saudi rulers know the direction in which they need to move—they are simply slow and cautious in proceeding. The ruling family faces the difficult issue of how to deal with a king who, while still formally ruling, has never fully recovered from the stroke he suffered in 1995. This problem complicates decision making and introduces even more caution into the process. However, there are no signs of overt struggles among the leading princes, as there have been before, which could call into question the family's stability.

The Saudi rulers have faced significant challenges in the past: from Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, the Iranian Revolution in the 1980s, and Saddam Hussein and internal ferment during and after the first Gulf War. They weathered each challenge. The current threats they face could be the most serious, because they question the religious legitimacy that has underpinned the monarchy since its founding. It would be unwise to bet against the Saudi monarchy, based on its track record of staying in power. But the odds are getting shorter. ■