Khobar Towers' Lessons for Counterterrorism and Gulf Policy

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Brief Analysis

Two years after the death of 19 Americans in the June 25, 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, it is appropriate to consider the quandaries for U.S. terrorism policy that the bombing exposed.

The hope that U.S. investigators could identify the perpetrators of bombings overseas as readily as happened at home (for the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City) has so far proven misplaced. Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef announced on March 30, 1998 that the Saudi investigation was complete and the results would be revealed soon; on May 22, he explained that the bombing was done by "Saudi hands... with the support of others," which most observers took to mean Iran. While the U.S. investigation continues in theory, the FBI has disbanded most of its investigating team; a single agent remains in Saudi Arabia.

Pluses and Minuses of Treating Terrorism as a Law Enforcement Matter U.S. policy treats terrorism as essentially a legal, not a political, issue. The advantage of emphasizing the illegality of violence against innocents -- and of stressing that the opposition to violence is irrespective of the cause in whose name terrorists act -- is that the United States has been able to depoliticize counterterrorism. Also, it can gain the cooperation from states that don't mind police-to-police relationships but balk at more political ties with Washington. By contrast, when the U.S. government speaks about terrorism as low-intensity conflict, that immediately politicizes counterterrorism. If state sponsorship of terrorism is a form of war, then governments that cooperate with the U.S. are de facto U.S. allies in the struggle against the cause championed by the terrorists. That is an uncomfortable position for many governments whose peoples are sympathetic to the cause in whose name the terrorists fight.

At the same time, the law enforcement approach to counterterrorism has significant disadvantages that terrorists are learning to exploit. Trial in U.S. courts requires collecting evidence which can be revealed in open court, using strict rules about admissibility which generally rule out intelligence information. Plus it requires proof beyond a reasonable doubt, not just a preponderance of evidence. And it focuses on determining who are the culpable individuals, not on what institutions sponsored them. Under these rules, a clever state sponsor can avoid being assigned responsibility. By contrast, an approach which emphasizes that state-sponsored terrorism is a form of unconventional war provides the rationale for use of military force against the sponsoring state when intelligence information confirms the state sponsor's role.

> In short, both the law enforcement and the unconventional warfare approaches to terrorism have their merits. It is

wrong to automatically assume that terrorism is a law enforcement issue, not a matter for the military. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon was wrong to say about Khobar, "This is the FBI's job. We don't ask the FBI to fly F-16's over Iraq and they don't ask us to take over their investigations."

Accommodating Iran: Saudis Follow the U.S. Lead While terrorism has historically not been viewed as a strategic threat, it can have strategic consequences. In the Khobar case, terrorism appears to be a major factor in the Saudi decision to change its policy toward Iran. Before the bombing, Saudi attitudes towards Iran were cool to frigid; since then, the Saudi government has been eager for good public relations. It is hard to see that change in attitude as an accident, especially since the same man -- Crown Prince Abdullah (who effectively runs the Saudi government, in light of the King's ill health) -- has been the key figure on both fronts. To be sure, Abdullah's approach is partly based on his long-standing conviction that Saudi Arabia should be closer to Muslim countries and less reliant on the United States, but Khobar seems to have tipped the balance in the Saudi ruling family in his direction. For instance, in fall 1997, he invited Iranian President Rafsanjani to come on hajj, knowing full well that this effectively forestalled any Saudi announcement of Iranian culpability. In his December 1997 visit to Tehran for the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit, he apparently did not raise the issue of the key suspect, Ahmed al-Mughassil, said to be in Iran.

> Not that Abdullah loves the Iranians. Indeed, Saudi leaders continue to tell U.S. officials that Iran is the greatest long-term danger in the Gulf. The Saudi action is in many ways a defensive response to their perceptions about U.S. policy towards Iran. From the U.S. reluctance to consider retaliation against Iran over Khobar Towers -- including insisting action would be taken against Iran only if there were extraordinarily specific evidence of involvement by the highest levels of the Iranian government -- the Saudis accurately read the tea leaves about how far the United States was prepared to go in responding to Iran's aggressive international behavior. Initially, the Saudis were concerned that the United States might launch limited strikes against Iran over Khobar -- just enough to stir the hornets' nest without getting rid of the hornets. The Saudi response was to ensure the U.S. lacked sufficient evidence to act at all. Now, the Saudis see that America may reconcile with Iran, and they do not want to be left behind. After all, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has joined those who take Iran's pleasant words (its denunciation of terrorism) as indication of change, even when its behavior continues to be unacceptable (State Department experts acknowledge that Iran remained in 1997 the principal state sponsor of terrorism). It is only natural that a small power, like Saudi Arabia, will seek accommodation with a large and largely hostile neighbor, like Iran, when worried about how sure and lasting is the protection provided by allies.

In short, smaller states vulnerable to terrorism can be expected to be strongly influenced by U.S. policy: if they worry America is wavering, they cannot be expected to stand strong.

Force Protection or Protecting American Interests? In response to the Khobar Towers explosion, most U.S. Air Force personnel in Saudi Arabia were moved to Prince Sultan Air Base, which is both remote (in the desert south of Riyadh) and so large that U.S. forces are dozens of miles from the base perimeter. The move raises the question of the best way to protect U.S. forces overseas. Proponents of the relocation argue that placing U.S. forces in isolated locations makes protection easier. It also reduces their visibility and hence their symbolic value to terrorists.

But the "hunker in the bunker" strategy has several problems. First, isolating U.S. forces in the desert may adversely affect their ability to carry out their larger mission, i.e., to deter aggression. This approach may suggest to would-be aggressors that the fear of high casualties may be more powerful that the desire to fight to protect interests in the Gulf. Furthermore, isolating U.S. troops runs counter to the objective of deepening cooperation between U.S. and Saudi troops (or at least making U.S. forces familiar with all the military facilities in Saudi Arabia), especially as the two sides prepare for a crisis.

> Second, the "isolate the forces" strategy leaves exposed the 60,000 other Americans living in Saudi Arabia. Protecting the forces can hurt American interests if it leads terrorists to shift their sights from U.S. troops to U.S.

civilians, who are inherently more vulnerable because they lack the training and equipment for counterterrorism. In the immediate aftermath of the relocation of U.S. forces to the desert and the withdrawal of Defense Department dependents from Saudi Arabia, U.S. companies experienced considerable difficulties keeping personnel in the kingdom.

In short, moving the troops to the desert may have solved one problem (protecting U.S. forces), but it did not help the larger problem of protecting Americans and may have hurt the primary mission of deterring conflict in the Gulf. Emphasizing force protection cannot be a substitute for swift and sure U.S. retaliation against those who sponsor terrorism, with military force against state sponsors and jail time for individuals.

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