The Dhahran Bomb:

Testing the U.S.-Saudi Relationship

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

Jun 26, 1996

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Simon Henderson (/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Brief Analysis

Last night's truck bomb, which devastated an apartment block housing U.S. personnel near the Dhahran air base, is an horrific reminder of the potential vulnerability of the U.S.-Saudi Arabian security arrangement. The explosion in Riyadh last November which killed four Americans and then this latest outrage serve to focus public attention on ties which the two partners have traditionally preferred to keep away from the spotlight. Both sides will have to work hard to preserve the relationship, which is one of the most fundamental in U.S. foreign policy. Last night's telephone conversation between President Clinton and King Fahd is an early indication of a mutual determination to do so.

The fifty year U.S.-Saudi relationship has survived many strains. It is based on an American willingness to provide external security guarantees for Saudi Arabia in return for a free-flow of oil -- the kingdom has more than a quarter of the world's total reserves -- and general, if not specific, support for U.S. policy around the world. Despite the tension over the years of the Arab-Israeli dispute, the foundation of the relationship was tested and confirmed during Desert Storm. Since then, Saudi Arabia has provided backing for the peace process and has also served as a base from which American forces can contain Iran and Iraq. The subtleties of diplomacy allow for U.S. forces, including a 60-aircraft-strong composite airwing, to rotate through Saudi Arabia every few months, so evading the notion that any are actually "based" there. At the same time, disagreements have emerged between the two on regional threat perception, with Riyadh parting ways with Washington's assessment of Saddam Hussein's aggressive intent in October 1994.

Behind the Blast: In the absence of any firm evidence of who was responsible for the latest explosion, speculation on the most likely perpetrators centers on disaffected Saudis, perhaps previously trained to fight Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Thousands of these so-called "Afghanis" returned to the kingdom where some at least have found the Saudis' conservative version of Islam still insufficiently fundamentalist for them. They are reported also to disapprove of the royal family's reliance on the United States to safeguard the country's external security. It was people like this who were thought to be responsible for the earlier Riyadh blast. Four of the alleged attackers were executed several weeks ago, but it was always realized by both Saudi and U.S. officials that their associates were still

free and more bombs were possible.

There are other possibilities as well. The Dhahran air base is where U.S. and allied aircraft patrolling the no-fly zone of southern Iraq are based. Saddam Hussein will have been pleased by the bombing, even if he is not directly involved. A further alternative is Iran, which is also opposed to the U.S.-Saudi security relationship. A twist here is that the area around Dhahran is where Saudi Arabia's Shia Moslem citizens live. Although they comprise only 5 percent of the kingdom's total 12 million indigenous population, the Shias are a local majority and have been victims of social and economic discrimination. Also, across a few miles of water, lies the island state of Bahrain (the regional headquarters of U.S. Central Command) where the local majority Shias are in almost open rebellion. Last weekend's Arab summit implicitly condemned Iran for interfering in Bahrain's affairs and instigating the troubles, including firebombings and murders, which have gone on for more than a year.

Implications for Saudi Arabia: So far, questions about the stability of Saudi Arabia seem premature. Despite being affected by low oil prices for the last ten years, and the consequent cuts in government spending and subsidies, there appear to be only pockets of discontent in the kingdom, rather than incipient revolution. The Saudi authorities are notoriously sensitive to any sort of criticism and have been driven to distraction by the reports of alleged injustices and absurd behavior by members of the royal family produced by the London-based dissident, Muhammad al-Masari, over the last two years. But although he might be preaching to them (and others), al-Masari is not a leader of the Saudi "Afghanis," or indeed, any group with widespread support.

A particular difficulty of the moment is that 75-year old King Fahd is probably near the end of his reign. Reports of his failing health and mental ability appear to be wildly overstated. Although probably looking forward to a lengthy vacation, Fahd remains firmly and personally in control, with strong indications that he has tried to moderate the Arab reaction to the election of Binyamin Netanyahu in Israel. While the explosion is a serious blow for him and the other senior members of the royal family, it does not raise any questions about their unity of purpose and strength of authority.

In the imagination of the U.S. public, the scenes of devastation might seem reminiscent of the bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, which ultimately forced the United States to withdraw from Lebanon. But the U.S. involvement in Saudi Arabia is on a totally different level and cannot be so easily undermined. Those behind the explosion have an agenda which cannot be met by either the United States or Saudi Arabia: U.S. forces will not leave the Gulf and the Saudi royal family is not going to abdicate. The only response open to the Saudi authorities is to improve security at sensitive installations and put more effort into police and detective work. The United States is likely to endorse this view while at the same time seeking to find ways to diminish yet further the already low profile of the American presence on Saudi soil.

A further challenge -- and this might have been one of the principal motives of the bombers -- is the potential questioning about the American presence in Saudi Arabia in U.S. public opinion. Last November's bombing of the National Guard facility in Riyadh did not open a public debate inside the United States about the wisdom of the U.S. presence. Unless Washington and Riyadh work more closely to build a common security framework based on common perceptions of threat and response, then yesterday's outrage might provoke precisely the sort of debate that both parties want to avoid.

Simon Henderson, a former visiting fellow of the Washington Institute, is the author of The Middle East in the Year 2000: New Opportunities, New Dangers, from Financial Times Energy Publishing, London.

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

TOPICS

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)