'Lag' or 'Gap'?

Criticisms of Saudi Counterterrorism Actions

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

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Brief Analysis

The second meeting in a new round of twice-yearly strategic dialogues between the United States and Saudi Arabia will be held May 18 in Washington. Established at the Crawford summit between President George W. Bush and then Crown Prince Abdullah in April 2005, the first meeting was held in the Saudi city of Jeddah last November. The meetings were instituted because of the bilateral problems highlighted at the Crawford talks. The issues then were discussed "frankly and plainly" (the Saudi description) and the talks were "candid" (the American official description) -- diplomatic codes for little agreement. This time the Saudi side is spinning "the prospects of expanding cooperation," though the United States is still concerned about the "lag" it sees between official Saudi statements and action.

Six working groups were established at the Jeddah meeting in November: counterterrorism; military affairs; energy; economic and financial affairs; consular affairs and partnership; and education exchange and human development. The generic titles obscure some major differences. As the labels suggest, the Saudis have successfully avoided any direct reference to political reform and human rights, areas that have been particularly criticized by a succession of U.S. officials and congressional figures. Even when such issues were raised, reports say that in the case of human rights, the Saudi side immediately riposted with concern about the circumstances of Saudi detainees at Guantanamo Bay, where they are said to form the single largest national contingent.

Counterterrorism and Visas

Of the categories for discussion there is little doubt that counterterrorism efforts are the most important subject. U.S. officials have spoken of "improved cooperation" and "cooperation being at an all-time high," both probably true, but the misleading nature of such remarks was underlined in congressional testimony on April 4. Testifying to the Senate Banking Committee, Stuart Levey, undersecretary of the treasury, said, "What needs to happen is [the Saudis] need to do financial investigations in a serious way in order to locate those deep-pocket donors that are still funding terrorism abroad. And that's something which is a concern that it hasn't happened as robustly as it needs to happen." Challenged by committee chairman Richard Selby whether there was a gap between Saudi government rhetoric and the implementation of policy, Levey replied, "I've got to say there's a lag. And we'll see if there's a gap."

For their part, the Saudis emphasize the difficulties of obtaining U.S. visas -- applicants have to be interviewed in person at the U.S. embassy in Riyadh -- and the need to rebuild the number of Saudi students studying in the United States. In an interview with the official Saudi Press Agency, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, spoke of a proposed scholarship program named after King Abdul Aziz (the founder of Saudi Arabia) and President Franklin Roosevelt. A Saudi newspaper on May 16 reported a new difficulty. It claimed the FBI monitors Saudi students in the U.S. and those with poor school attendance are considered to have committed visa violations and are deported.

In the past, elements in the Saudi ruling elite encouraged Saudi Islamist fighters to go to Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia. Such encouragement seems to have ended. Riyadh says it is countering efforts by Saudi young men to join the insurgency in Iraq, but the evidence of success is slight; many suicide bombers there are said to be Saudis. The United States has every reason to encourage more Saudi efforts in this regard.

Rising Islamism?

Washington remains concerned that Saudi Arabia is not only allowing the financing of Islamist terrorism via charitable donations from rich Saudi individuals, but, despite its denials, encouraging the financing of Islamic extremists as part of state policy. Saudi officials claim that the kingdom -- where Wahhabism is the official version of Islam -- is actively countering extremist Islamist thought at home. Saudi religious scholars are reported to be debating with the detained "deviants," as Islamist terrorists are known, challenging them on the meaning of jihad (holy war) and the doctrine of takfir, which holds that Muslims the terrorists disagree with can be declared infidels (unbelievers) and killed. Correcting such deviant thought is considered a low bar by some: the celebrated Islamic scholar Bernard Lewis, speaking in April at a luncheon sponsored by the Pew Forum, noted that "Wahhabism is to Islam as the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity."

Since the last meeting of the strategic dialogue, Hamas has won an electoral victory from the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The Islamists of Hamas are probably more ideologically congenial to many Saudis than the secularists of the Fatah political movement. Washington has already been pressuring Riyadh to stop monies going to finance Hamas's terrorist activities or to make up for aid being held back by the West. The Saudis, according to a May 10 speech by Prince Turki, have told Hamas leaders that, if they want to be a viable governing party, they should abide by existing agreements, accept the 2002 Beirut Arab Summit initiative and the Quartet Roadmap, and abandon violence. Whether Riyadh will pressure Hamas on this is unclear. Under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia seems to be putting its own interests very much first. Support for the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority could be an opportunity to show that Riyadh does not always do what Washington would like. Abdullah is said by those close to him to think that the United States may be less able to lead the world in the future, as other power centers gain strength.

The May 18 meeting, chaired jointly by U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, takes place less than a week after a passing Saudi motorist fired pistol shots at the U.S. consulate general in Jeddah. After a chase, the man was wounded in a shootout and arrested; a Saudi policeman was also hurt. After interrogation, Saudi officials named the man as Mohammed Abdul Razak al-Ghamdi and said he was a psychiatric patient. No mention was made in the Saudi media that three of the fifteen Saudi hijackers involved in the September 11 attacks also had the name al-Ghamdi, a tribal appellation. (The 9-11 Commission also noted in its report that two other Saudis bearing the name al-Ghamdi were candidate hijackers.)

A Saudi newspaper reported there were religious books in the attacker's car, but the Saudi Interior Ministry announced that he appeared to be acting on his own and was not linked to any group. Whatever the full story, the incident has only served to emphasize the vulnerability of the consulate site, which was attacked by al-Qaeda in 2004 when five local employees were killed, probably accelerating the plan to move the facility to a more defensible

area near Jeddah airport.

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