

Saudi Monarchy:

Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

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Brief Analysis

While the Bush administration's Middle East agenda focuses on promoting democracy and freedom throughout the region, Saudi Arabia follows a contrary agenda whose sole avowed focus is counterterrorism. Riyadh's fight against terrorism and repeated calls for national unity have provided a facade under which the monarchy has abandoned the few reform initiatives previously in place and reversed any movement toward democratic change.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the Saudi royal family took a religious approach to the ensuing domestic crisis. By appealing to the kingdom's hardcore Wahhabi constituency—specifically, by arguing that the royal family endorsed a “truer” version of Islam than the terrorist organizations—the regime tightened its grip on the population. This agenda became clearer as subsequent developments unfolded, including the ouster of Muhammad al-Rashid, a reform-minded education minister; an increase in mass arrests of Christians living in Saudi Arabia; and a drastic increase in the number of beheadings.

Despite these realities, Riyadh continues to promote the illusion that it is pursuing reform-minded policies. For example, the February 2005 municipal elections were virtually meaningless in practice, with women denied the right to vote and Wahhabi hardliners emerging victorious; not even the royal family bothered to participate. Indeed, the elections symbolized a longstanding historical contradiction with regard to Saudi foreign policy: the royal family must appease both its Wahhabi constituents and the United States, even though the two parties are inherent enemies. This contradiction has created an unstable foundation for U.S.-Saudi relations, a point amply demonstrated by both the September 11 attacks and the Iraq war. After all, even as it has tried to appease Washington on some Iraq-related issues, Riyadh has failed to stop more than 2,500 Saudi citizens from traveling to Iraq to organize or carry out acts of terrorism that undermine the nascent Shiite-dominated government. Through this tactic, the royal family ensures that Saudi radicals carry out attacks abroad rather than within the kingdom.

Given that the Saudi regime has accrued a \$60 billion surplus as a result of the war, it has the financial means to win the hearts and minds of Saudi citizens on its own, without relying on the imposition of hardcore Wahhabi rule. Although such an approach suggests a more sound policy for Saudi Arabia as well as the United States, the regime views any such measures as a threat to its survival. Rather than initiating democratic change, then, the royal family has endorsed huge public projects that emphasize the importance and superiority of the monarchy and its exorbitant surplus.

True Saudi reform efforts will come from the citizens themselves, and the United States should have confidence in the Saudi people in this regard. Most Saudis do not support Wahhabism. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, when the royal family was imposing Wahhabism in an area that was traditionally quite diverse, twenty-six major revolts broke out, killing an estimated 400,000 people. Clearly, then, change will come from the bottom up. At the same time, reform cannot be successful unless the royal family is incorporated in some manner. Unfortunately, current trends do not favor any such development; those prominent Saudis who do promote reform (e.g., the al-Faisal family

and their allies in liberal Hijazi families) have been wholly marginalized by the regime.

In sum, while the United States is dependent on Saudi oil, the Saudi regime is dependent on the United States for its legitimacy and survival, given that it has failed to earn such legitimacy from the Arab community, the Muslim world, or its own citizens. Current U.S. policy toward the kingdom may help keep terrorists at bay in the short term. Yet, by remaining complicit with the regime—particularly at a time when Saudi citizens remain oppressed, unemployed, and, in some cases, even impoverished—Washington is essentially allowing the kingdom to become a recruiting ground for al-Qaeda. If the United States does not look beyond the short-term benefits of its relationship with the regime, it can expect to face severe consequences in the future.

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Given the sheer size of the Saudi royal family, one can find a multitude of ideologies among its members. Washington should identify and support those in the regime whose share its goals are aligned with those of the United States—that is, those who will commit to reforming the government’s religious interpretation and intense sponsorship of proselytizing in the kingdom. By allying with such figures and calling for reform on these issues, the United States could reap significant benefits for itself, Saudi Arabia, and the war on terror.

The role of religion has been one of the most important features of U.S.-Saudi relations for some time. During the Cold War, Saudi religiosity played a crucial role in keeping the kingdom on the U.S. side of the fight against “godless” communism. Regardless of the messages that Saudi clerics preached, the fact of preaching was enough to solidify the U.S.-Saudi alliance. Yet, even as the world dynamic and international policies shifted following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Saudi policy did not change. The result of this inertia proved disastrous. Accordingly, the Bush administration has paid close heed to what religious messages are being spread since the September 11 attacks.

The Saudi regime faces a dilemma in which it must decide whether funding radical jihadists is truly in its best interests, and whether it can derive sufficient legitimacy from its religiosity. Many critics argue that any change in the Saudi system is politically impossible due to its tradition of proselytizing, which has served both political and religious purposes since the kingdom’s inception. Yet, history shows that the regime has often realigned its political and religious agenda to strengthen its position. The ongoing effects of September 11 have the potential to produce a similar shift. In response to the attacks, the regime took several measures suggestive of a top-down reform movement. One particularly significant development was Crown Prince Abdullah’s establishment of the “National Dialogue.” Initiated in 2003, this series of forums brought together several minority groups to discuss educational reform, socioeconomic challenges, and radicalism, among other key topics. Although Western observers expressed cynicism about the event, many Saudi citizens viewed it optimistically. Other reform initiatives, such as the introduction of private universities, also received a positive response from the Saudi people.

More difficult to determine is whether the kingdom’s overall religious context has changed—that is, whether radical groups are being nurtured to the same extent as before September 11. In light of this factor, predicting the resilience of Saudi Arabia’s historical trend toward reform is problematic. In the meantime, Washington and Riyadh need to reformulate their policies in order to accommodate current and future challenges. Specific issues that should be discussed include international monitoring and auditing for Islamic nongovernmental organizations, which are not subject to post-September 11 regulations; Saudi inclusion in the World Trade Organization, which would promote global integration and reform; and U.S. funding for Saudi schools that adopt a reform agenda. Most important, the two countries should discuss the role of religion in strategic issues, given its impact on global security.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Sarah Dabby.



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