Lights, Camera, Inaction?

Saudi Arabia's Counterterrorism Conference

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Beginning on February 5, Riyadh hosted a four-day international counterterrorism conference. Amid extraordinary splendor in palatial conference facilities, delegates from several international organizations and a reported fifty countries (including the United States) listened to speeches by the Saudi leadership and then discussed initiatives in breakout workshops. The conference served as a showcase for the purported success of Saudi counterterrorism efforts, which have been criticized often since September 11. Counterterrorism failures, such as the December 2004 al-Qaeda attacks on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah and the Saudi interior ministry headquarters in Riyadh, were skated over. More worrying, the conference lent authenticity to Saudi perceptions and definitions of terrorism that are likely to impede U.S. policy initiatives in the Middle East.

Israel's Conspicuous Absence

The Saudi government stated that it invited all countries that had suffered from terrorism to attend the conference. Yet, one obvious candidate—Israel—did not receive an invitation. Comments by Saudi officials made it clear that, apart from the absence of diplomatic ties between the two countries, a major stumbling block to inviting Israel was the fact that the kingdom does not regard as terrorism any actions that might be defined as "resistance to occupation," however imprecisely. The issue reportedly flared up in at least one closed session, when members of the U.S. delegation argued fiercely with delegates from Iran and Syria, two states designated by the United States as supporters of international terrorism. None of the other delegations—which included the UN, the European Union, Interpol, the Arab League, and Organization of the Islamic Conference—appeared troubled by Israel's absence. An unnamed member of the Japanese delegation reportedly stated that rushing to clash on the definition of terrorism would be useless.

Saudi sensibilities regarding Israel and terrorism are intense. Shortly after the September 11 attacks, Interior Minister Prince Nayef—who served as conference chairman—opined to an Arab magazine that the Israeli intelligence service had been responsible for the plot. In 2004, de facto head of state Crown Prince Abdullah—who delivered the conference's opening address—declared that Zionists might be backing al-Qaeda. Similarly, a Saudi television program broadcast a week before the conference included the reading of a poem claiming that Osama bin Laden

“was sent by the Jews.”

Results of the Conference

Conference workshops organized by the Saudis included sessions on the roots of terrorism, money laundering, strengthening international cooperation in the war on terror, learning from other countries’ experiences in dealing with terrorism, and sharing information and intelligence. Regarding the latter goal, Crown Prince Abdullah proposed the establishment of an antiterrorism intelligence exchange center in his opening address. The proposal was eventually adopted by the conference, but how it would be implemented was not discussed. Switzerland was considered as a base for the center, although no Swiss delegation attended the conference.

The unstated attitude of at least several of the delegations appeared to be that the conference was a good venue for meeting with other practitioners on the sidelines and gaining additional insight into Saudi successes in dealing with al-Qaeda. The leader of the U.S. delegation—Frances Townsend, a senior White House official who has visited the kingdom several times, usually to meet with Crown Prince Abdullah—commented on the proposed antiterrorism center, stating, “[It] would not end the need for bilateral exchange of information. Nothing would.” Yet, she also reportedly stated that any measure that increases the sharing of intelligence “is a net gain” in the fight against terrorism. And, in a remark that the local media interpreted as praise for the performance of the Saudi security forces, she stated that “the world cannot defeat terrorism without Saudi Arabia defeating terrorism on its own grounds.”

Implications for the War on Terrorist Financing

Intelligence specialists continue to assert that Saudi Arabia has a long way to go on the domestic front before it can meet its promises to Washington. Many remain concerned that Saudi authorities lack proper control over the international activities of the kingdom’s Islamic charities. Recently, such concerns have included the work of Saudi charities in the areas of Indonesia hit by the tsunami. Moreover, the kingdom has yet to establish a fully functioning financial intelligence unit. (After attending the Saudi conference, Townsend traveled to Dubai, the regional center for the hawala—an informal but highly efficient money transfer system—in order to review local efforts to regulate it. She also surveyed efforts to prevent misuse of the internet for terrorist activities.)

In addition, immediately after the conference ended, diplomats in Riyadh were shocked by the announcement that the former head of an Islamic charity had been appointed as the kingdom’s new education minister. Described by the Wall Street Journal as “an official enmeshed in a terror financing controversy,” Abdullah al-Obeid is a former director of the Muslim World League, branches of which are being investigated by the U.S. government on suspicion that they have financial ties to al-Qaeda. According to the Journal, al-Obeid was head of the organization from 1995 to 2002, a period during which the charity spent tens of millions of dollars to finance the spread of Saudi Arabia’s austere brand of fundamentalist Islam. The newspaper quoted an essay by al-Obeid in which he blamed “some mass media centers that are managed and run by Jews in the West” for reports linking terrorism and Islam. He also claimed credit for organizing symposia to explain that Palestinian attacks on Israelis “are conducted in self-defense” and “are lawful and approved by all religious standards, international treaties, norms, and announcements.”

Conclusion

Saudi policy on terrorism has to be analyzed within the usual template—namely, that the kingdom tries to balance its relations with the West against its leadership role in the Islamic world and its rivals in the Middle East (e.g., Egypt and Iran). From this point of view, Riyadh likely regarded the conference as a notable diplomatic and public relations success. For the United States, whatever practical advantages were reaped by attending have to be balanced against Washington’s policy concerns in the region and the broader war on terror. Comparing the tenor of the conference with the agreements reached between Israel and the Palestinians at the Sharm al-Sheikh summit on February 8 is

telling. The Saudi position regarding attacks on Israelis would seem to support Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, terrorist groups that have refused to be circumscribed by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's agreement with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. In fact, contrary to Washington's objectives, the rhetoric and initiatives brought up at the Riyadh conference may come to dominate international discussions on terrorism. This would help neither the Middle East peace process nor efforts to destroy al-Qaeda.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute. ❖

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