

# Bin Laden Increases His Challenge to the House of Saud

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**T**he implications of the assault on al-Khobar are huge. It confirms that there has been a significant shift in the pattern of terror attacks in Saudi Arabia; the battle between Osama bin Laden and the royal House of Saud is shifting gear.

Although the casualties are far fewer than those who died in the attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, the consequences may yet prove to be as important. Like that fateful day, when 15 of the 19 hijackers were from the kingdom, the problem is particularly Saudi in character. And, despite the rhetoric, the causes are being tackled only obliquely by the Saudi Government so as to cling to power.

Bin Laden wants to remove all foreign and non-Muslim influence from Arabia. He also wants to stop it being Saudi Arabia. His ultimate aim is to overthrow the royal family, the House of Saud, which he regards as politically and religiously illegitimate.

The latest attack shows that foreigners are now being targeted successfully in Saudi Arabia, a country that is hugely dependent on hard-working expatriates merely to function on a day-by-day basis. Although an exodus of expatriates might dislocate the Saudi economy, the tactic resonates with large parts of the mainly conservative Saudi society, who are inward-looking and contemptuous of foreigners, particularly non-Muslims.

Despite the wish of Washington that Saudi society should be reformed, with elections, freedom of expression and the like, the Saudi Government is instead looking in the other direction -- becoming more conservative. Worried about religious legitimacy and their claim to guard the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (the ailing King Fahd's official title is "Custodian of the Two Holy Places"), Saudi princes are burnishing their Islamic credentials and trying to undermine bin Laden's.

Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler, blamed the terrorists for being "anti-Islamic". In an attempt to curry favour with the hardliners, he blamed an attack in Yanbu this month, in which six Westerners were killed, on "Zionists".

Condemnation can also be expected from Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Asheikh, the Grand Mufti and head of the tame religious Establishment.

For the Western media, the Saudi line, the spin, will be exactly opposite. The footage suggesting a successful helicopter assault to end the hostage-taking will be replayed many times. But instead of competence, the Saudi security forces are noted more for their ineffectiveness. Despite months of reports of growing threats, the Saudis were unable to stop the attacks happening.

Worried about their own necks, the Saudi royal family tolerates a political fudge, hoping that it can reduce support for al-Qaeda from among its citizens and win the battle for Islamic legitimacy. Al-Qaeda recognises the basic rules, targeting foreigners. Hence, no direct attacks on members of the House of Saud itself.

Before 9/11, Western officials say that senior princes were paying off bin Laden to avoid targeting the kingdom altogether. That changed when Western pressure stopped the payments. For the West, this means more terrorism and high oil prices.

The House of Saud considers its policy is ultimately workable. For expatriates, it could be a matter of life or death.

Simon Henderson, the author of *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*, is an associate of The Washington Institute for Near-East Policy. ❖

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