

U.S.-Saudi Counterterrorism Cooperation in the Wake of the Riyadh Bombing

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson), [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/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.



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The recent bombings in Riyadh and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's remarks condemning them have raised expectations that U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation will improve so that such tragedies can be averted in the future. What internal dynamic will guide the Saudis' handling of this crisis? What sort of counterterrorism cooperation are they likely to provide in the aftermath of the bombings?

SIMON HENDERSON

Currently, tensions are apparent within the hierarchy of the Saudi royal family. As King Fahd approaches eighty-two years of age, most responsibilities have been shifted to Crown Prince Abdullah. Without the title of king, however, Abdullah lacks full authority and is frequently undercut by Princes Sultan and Nayef, full brothers of King Fahd. For example, after Crown Prince Abdullah's address to the nation following the bombings, Prince Nayef made several of his own public statements and held a press conference. In light of this internal dynamic, the Saudi response to the attacks has had a familiar tone of denial and non-cooperation, and both Nayef and Abdullah have been subject to criticism. Reports that the suicide bombers were wearing Saudi National Guard uniforms and that raids turned up weapons purchased from the Guard reflect poorly on Abdullah, who heads the Guard, while Nayef has drawn criticism for failing to react to U.S. ambassador Robert Jordan's pleas for increased security for American emigrants prior to the attacks.

The current situation is made novel, however, by the fact that al-Qaeda seems to have targeted the royal family, Princes Sultan and Nayef in particular. Following the 1995 attack in Riyadh in which five Americans were killed, the royal family came to an agreement with al-Qaeda that attacks on Americans would no longer be carried out in the kingdom. According to the pact, which was reached with Sultan and Nayef as the representatives of the royal family,

the Saudis paid Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda to conduct their attacks elsewhere. Washington likely knew about this pay-off before the September 11 attacks and, as a result, placed some pressure on the Saudis. This pressure has probably intensified over time, and the Saudis may in turn have halted their funding to al-Qaeda, which would explain why they are now being targeted. Indeed, the royal family is directly threatened by the recent attacks, and ignoring the problem or trying to buy it off will no longer work. Washington should approach the Saudis as a friend and advise them that any trace of al-Qaeda in the kingdom must be extinguished. Saudi actions along this line could be similar to those taken in the 1920s by Ibn Saud, who used the radical Ikhwan as shock troops during his conquests for territory, then slaughtered them when they ran out of control after the founding of the kingdom.

MATTHEW LEVITT

Saudi Arabia's al-Qaeda problem did not begin last week, nor will it be resolved when the cell responsible for the recent attacks is dismantled. Connections have been discovered between this cell and others abroad, and some have speculated that members of the cell fled Saudi Arabia prior to the attacks and might be on their way to the United States. As the investigation continues, the odds are strong that the cell's financial links will lead back to Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have a good track record of cracking down on cells within the kingdom, and they have provided intelligence that has prevented specific terrorist attacks since September 11. Yet, the royal family has a tendency to close the doors when the trail leads back home and threatens to expose fault lines within Saudi society.

Nevertheless, the recent attacks might be a turning point in U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation. First, the international community is more focused than ever on international terrorism and links between terrorist groups, cells, individuals, and fronts. The Saudis must recognize that, with or without their cooperation, more evidence will emerge now than during any investigation prior to September 11. Second, the terrorists crossed a critical red line by targeting members of the royal family and government ministries. The Saudis have stated, but not yet demonstrated, that they realize the dagger is pointed as much at their throat as at the United States. Third, this is an ongoing threat. Intelligence indicates that members of the cell in Saudi Arabia are involved with additional threats in and outside of the kingdom. The recent closure of U.S. embassies in Saudi Arabia will pressure the royal family to be forthcoming on any information they uncover regarding this cell. Their trend of denying radicalism and looking the other way will not be an option when it comes to the current investigation.

Yet, U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation must go beyond this investigation. The latest attacks present an opportunity for the Saudi government to turn a corner in cracking down on international terrorism financing. As early as 1994, Washington suspected that some \$150 million in terrorism financing originated in Saudi Arabia, and this trend continues today. For example, Italian authorities recently disclosed wiretaps collected as part of their investigation of al-Qaeda recruiters in Europe in which a senior operative tells his underlings not to worry about funding because, in his words, "Saudi Arabia's money is your money." During a December 2002 press conference, Saudi spokesman Adel al-Jubier made several positive suggestions concerning the kingdom's next steps toward combating terrorism financing. Yet, there is little indication that these steps were pursued. For example, al-Jubeir pledged that Saudi Arabia would establish a Financial Intelligence Unit, but the kingdom has either not developed such a unit or has not used shared its findings with the international community. Besides being more forthcoming with their assistance, Saudi officials must also stop thwarting international terrorism investigations. For example, suspected terrorist Christian Ganczarski used a Saudi visa to elude German officials investigating him for his role in the Djerba synagogue bombing. Moreover, suspect Ali Mari's wife was secretly taken from the United States to Saudi Arabia after being sought for questioning regarding charges that her husband lied to FBI officials about phone conversations he had with Mustapha al-Hawsawi, al-Qaeda's primary money man.

It is critical for the Saudis to be more open about delegitimizing terrorism. The international community will no longer tolerate Saudi denial, not just because Americans were killed in the recent attacks, but also because, in a few

months time, neither the extremists nor the Saudis will be able to point to a massive U.S. presence on Saudi soil as the reason for continued attacks.

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