Promoting Saudi Civil Society:

What Role for the United States?

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

Mar 13, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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.

Brief Analysis

Last week the Bush administration decided to reject the recommendation of an independent federal agency to designate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern" under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom had heard evidence that the Saudi religious police raided the homes of foreign workers who practiced Christianity and held them in squalid, overcrowded prisons. Washington's dilemma lies in dealing with such evidence without upsetting Riyadh at a time when the United States is trying to secure optimal Saudi cooperation on military action against Iraq. The administration's reluctance is at odds with President George W. Bush's National Security Strategy announced in September 2002, which defined "a single, sustainable model for national success [in the world]: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise." It also obscures an opportunity to bolster emerging trends in Saudi Arabia that hint at potential political change.

New Movement toward Reform?

Historically, U.S. support for, or even monitoring of, political change in Saudi Arabia has generated controversy. For example, in 1988, the Saudis reportedly insisted that then-U.S. ambassador Hume Horan be replaced because he had paid a call on the kingdom's most senior Muslim cleric. Official anger also reportedly emerged in 1993 when U.S. diplomats met a leader of a nascent Islamic fundamentalist movement that was publicly demanding greater rights. Yet, in a February 26, 2003, speech to the American Enterprise Institute, President Bush appeared to applaud Crown Prince Abdullah's launching of an initiative in January calling for "the promotion of political participation in Arab countries"; Bush said that "leaders in the region speak of a new Arab charter that champions internal reform, greater politics participation, economic openness, and free trade." (Abdullah's initiative was discussed in PolicyWatch no. 703, "Reforming the Arab Stand: A Saudi Initiative on Iraq and the Wider Arab World," January 24, 2003.)

Potentially more significant for the kingdom was the January internet publication of an open letter to Crown Prince Abdullah entitled "Vision for the Country's Present and Future," calling for an elected national assembly, an independent judiciary, and a crackdown on corruption. Over 100 intellectuals, former government officials, and university professors reportedly signed the letter before it was removed. News of it emerged when the Saudi media reported in early February that Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto leader of the kingdom due to King Fahd's

infirmity, had met a group of those involved with the document. According to the Arabic newspaper al-Riyadh, "[the discussion] aimed at promoting transparency, expanding freedom of expression, increasing channels of dialogue, deepening Islamic culture and values in Saudi society, and developing civilian institutions." A number of the reformists who met with the prince described the discussions as "constructive".

Although Washington might see political reform as a way of negating the extremist trends that led fifteen Saudi citizens to participate in the September 11 attacks, it is far from clear whether the latest group of reformists is worthy of U.S. support. A recent Washington Post article described those signing the open letter as Islamic traditionalists and conservatives. Although some self-described liberals signed as well, the Post reported that the letter was "largely shunned by the pro-western Saudis cultivated by the U.S. embassy [in Riyadh] as the most progressive elements in the kingdom." Moreover, one of the drafters of the petition was especially critical of the United States in an op-ed that appeared in today's International Herald Tribune. Mohammed al-Mohaissen, a Riyadh professor, wrote: "As Washington attempts to appropriate the goals and language of our grassroots efforts, it has set us back considerably by risking the perception that ours is a movement being imposed from the outside." He concluded: "The United States has been active in the region since the late 1950s, becoming the primary player after the 1991 Gulf War. Yet, it has never before chosen to foster democracy or protect human rights in the area, least of all in Saudi Arabia. The sole interest of the United States in the region is oil, and launching a war on Iraq has no other objective."

Such public comments, even if critical of the United States, reinforce the impression of an emerging period of glasnost in the kingdom, comparable to the opening up of the old Soviet Union. Last month, Saudi television covered the story of a British expatriate shot dead in his car while at a stop sign in Riyadh before the official version of the incident was released by the government-controlled Saudi Press Agency. (The U.S. embassy quickly and publicly named a man arrested for the shooting as a known al-Qaeda suspect, preventing the Saudi Interior Ministry from blaming the incident on expatriate alcohol bootleggers, as has happened after previous incidents.) This week, a Saudi newspaper published a long story about the Kerantina slum in southern Jeddah reporting on drugs, alcohol, and prostitution, previously taboo subjects for the Saudi press.

Mixed Messages from the Royal Family

Yet, the apparent glasnost might instead be a weakening of the royal family's previously total control, brought about by the societal strains of broad public sympathy for the Saudi-born terrorist Osama bin Laden and what appears to be increasingly dysfunctional national leadership. King Fahd is still wheeled out (literally: he is confined to a wheelchair) for important public occasions and diplomatic visitors. But day-to-day governing is handled by Crown Prince Abdullah with the support (or hindrance, depending on one's views) of his two older half-brothers, Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz and Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz.

The Bush administration, which hopes for Saudi support in pursuing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations after a war in Iraq, may well have been perplexed by comments made during a long press conference last weekend by Prince Sultan, the key figure behind the decision allowing U.S. forces to use three air bases in the kingdom for operations against Iraq. Referring to religious freedom because of local concern that U.S. troops had built churches in Saudi Arabia, he addressed Christians as follows: "Do whatever you want, you and your family in your home, worship whatever you want, but there had not been, or will be a church [in the kingdom]." Moreover, referring to the Tabuk airbase in northwestern Saudi Arabia, located only a few miles from Israel (one of the three reportedly being used by U.S. forces, probably to target any Iraqi Scud missiles threatening Israel), Prince Sultan said "I do not forget we have 100 percent enmity with Israel."

Such comments may reflect the royal family's traditional ambivalence toward any pressure for change that might affect its own position in the often very conservative, fundamentalist, and historically tribal society of Saudi Arabia.

In this context, Crown Prince Abdullah's willingness to hold a belatedly reported meeting with reform activists was a way of killing any threat they might pose by absorbing them into the Saudi system. U.S. policymakers should expect progress toward freedom and democracy in Saudi Arabia to remain slow and elusive.

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

Policy #724

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)