The Saudi Way

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

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Articles & Testimony

The recent statement by Saudi Arabia's foreign minister that the U.S. will not be allowed to use Saudi soil to launch an attack on Iraq is further proof that the House of Saud is not our "ally" in the war on terror. Last month's Defense Policy Board briefing (as reported in the Washington Post) made a good point when it described Saudi Arabia as "active at every level of the terror chain." The Bush administration's attempts to distance itself from such statements will prove increasingly difficult as the truth about the Saudi kingdom becomes better known.

Despite the handshakes and diplomatic niceties, it is clear that the "American way" is very different from the "Saudi way." Under the House of Saud, the people of Saudi Arabia -- including foreign workers and visitors -- are subjected to juryless trials, lashings and public beheadings. These actions bear no resemblance to American concepts of "unalienable" and constitutional rights. Instead, they reflect what the House of Saud calls "Islamic values."

Before Sept. 11, the U.S.-Saudi relationship hid behind a veil of obscurity with public attention focused on the simple trade-off of reliable supplies of reasonably priced oil in return for protection against external threats. Most people accepted this bargain.

Since Sept. 11, and the preponderance of Saudis among the hijackers and those detained at Guantanamo Bay, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has assumed a new, more sinister aspect. Even in the past, it was not a liaison that stood up well to public scrutiny. Now it certainly does not.

The Saudi way of public diplomacy is to deny everything; for months Interior Minister Prince Nayef simply said the Sept. 11 hijackers had stolen Saudi identities. For the less gullible, the Saudi style is to spin, and if that doesn't work, spin some more. The Saudi line on why so many Saudis were involved in the attacks is that Osama bin Laden wanted to strain the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Nice spin. Anyone questioning Saudi involvement in Sept. 11 can be accused of doing bin Laden's bidding.

But there is much more to the links between the hijackers and the House of Saud than many are willing to admit. A Jan. 9 story in U.S. News & World Report, entitled "Princely Payments," provided a lead which few have followed up. Two unidentified Clinton administration officials told the magazine that two senior Saudi princes had been paying off Osama bin Laden since a 1995 bombing in Riyadh, which killed five American military advisers. A Saudi official was quoted as saying, "Where's the evidence? Nobody offers proof. There's no paper trail."

I followed the lead and quickly found U.S. and British officials to tell me the names of the two senior princes. They were using Saudi official money -- not their own -- to pay off bin Laden to cause trouble elsewhere but not in the kingdom. That is "the Saudi way." The amounts involved were "hundreds of millions of dollars," and it continued after Sept. 11. I asked a British official recently whether the payments had stopped. He said he hoped they had, but was not sure.

There is a logic to this "Saudi way," at least from a Saudi point of view. It will offer little comfort to those who lost loved ones on Sept. 11. Paying off bin Laden might be the simplest and least bloody way of dealing with the threat of Islamic extremism, at least in Saudi Arabia.

Does this make Saudi Arabia an enemy or an ally? Again, our logic says an enemy. But the fuss over Foreign Minister Prince Saud's statement and the Defense Policy Board briefing actually works in the Saudis' favor. By inching closer towards conservative Islam, the House of Saud hopes it will find support from the majority of the kingdom's population, which, according to reports as recently as a few months ago, overwhelmingly supports bin Laden.

Why doesn't the Bush administration admit the difficulties with the Saudis and complain about the complicity between senior princes and bin Laden? Diplomacy, like politics, is the art of the possible. There is perhaps no point in having more enemies than you already have. But the split is not something that can be hidden forever. A major problem is that Washington is no longer sure who within the House of Saud to deal with.

Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler, who met President Bush in Crawford, Texas, in April, was not one of the princes who was paying off bin Laden. The ailing King Fahd is in Geneva, dying according to some, having last-gasp medical attention according to others. But while he is there, Abdullah lacks complete authority. Two weeks ago President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt went to visit Fahd in what was interpreted by some observers as a slight to Abdullah.

Rumors of schisms within the royal family abound. King Fahd, along with his fellow full brothers in the "Sudairi Seven," including Defense Minister Prince Sultan and Interior Minister Prince Nayef, are now said to be more wary of the U.S. relationship than Abdullah is. Sultan is in line to be king after Abdullah; Nayef would follow afterwards. Often it seems that the Sudairis are keeping Fahd alive in order to deny the 79-year-old Abdullah the throne. The Saudi system is such that if Abdullah becomes feeble or ill, he will be passed over.

Some reports suggest that the royal family infighting has become vicious. A junior prince died in a car accident in the desert, another had a heart attack, a third lost a long struggle against drug and alcohol abuse. It is hard to tell whether this is just normal attrition among the cadre of 5,000-plus princes or something else.

Will "the Saudi way" cope with the strains in the U.S. relationship and the apparent gridlock in decision-making in the kingdom? We are in new territory. Already the kingdom has allowed itself to lose its position as principal supplier of imported oil to the U.S. (That position was lost in the last quarter of 2001, despite Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Prince Bandar spinning the line that the kingdom was sending extra oil as a gesture of support following Sept. 11.)

In the last two weeks, it has become apparent that talks on the opening of Saudi gas fields to energy majors like ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch/Shell and BP were deadlocked. The kingdom apparently did not want to give the impression that it needed foreigners to build the desalination plants and power generation units that the Saudi people so desperately need. Brownouts often occur in major cities and a stink of sewage pervades many residential areas of the capital.

While putting up barriers for U.S. action against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Riyadh is taking a calculated risk that it no longer needs U.S. security guarantees. The other traditional part of the oil relationship has changed also. In the preliminary talks before the Crawford summit, the Saudis threatened to cut off oil exports for two months unless U.S.

policy supporting Israel was changed. (This did not, of course, stop Saudi officials from claiming they would never use oil as a political weapon. More spin.)

Saudi Arabia appears to be heading in the direction of fundamentalist Iran, deliberately distancing itself from foreigners and being a hindrance rather than a help to the U.S. The royal family no doubt hopes this will enable them to continue to rule -- they have no interest in Arabia becoming a republic.

For Washington, the assumption must be that Saudi Arabia will continue to fund radical Islam. It is what the Saudis believe in, and what the royal family must allow or risk having its credentials to rule questioned. So money will continue to flow to Hamas and other groups across the Muslim world. The key test will be what is good for Saudi Arabia rather than what might upset the U.S. It is "the Saudi way." ❖

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