The War against Terror:

Saudi Arabia's Crucial Role

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

The visit to Washington this week by Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al Faisal is an early test of Saudi Arabia's ability and willingness to work with U.S. authorities in meeting the threat of terrorism led by Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden. Although the United States is the kingdom's strongest ally and has historically helped make it the world's largest oil exporter, the recent past does not augur well.

Bin Ladin and the Saudi Regime

From the names of the suspects announced by the United States, it would appear that eleven of the nineteen hijackers were Saudis, and another four were linked with the kingdom. Although some identities were false or reportedly based on stolen documents, it is clear that several Saudis were involved, including some with family links to the Saudi establishment. The fact that Saudi nationals were involved in such tragic events is perhaps more significant for Saudi Arabia than the United States itself, because Riyadh has to worry about the potential for radical Islamist terrorism in the kingdom that could destabilize the Saudi government.

Included in Prince Saud Al Faisal's entourage are believed to be Saudi intelligence and security personnel with expert knowledge of Osama bin Laden. But Saudi priorities will be the kingdom's internal security -- wanting to learn more about the dead hijackers and suspects arrested since September 11.

Bin Laden's top priority has long been overthrowing the Saudi regime. His experience in recruiting and financing Islamic fighters against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s led him to suggest to the Saudi government that Islamic forces should be relied upon to meet the threat of Saddam Husayn when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. His advice was ignored. Now he despises the House of Saud for its dependence on the United States, regarding the presence of American forces in Arabia as an insult to Islam (even though U.S. personnel are banned from visiting or even flying over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina). Apart from bin Laden's potential to strike within the kingdom, a central Saudi concern is to stop him from becoming the focus -- for citizens increasingly discontented with failings in the provision of jobs, water, sewage, and electricity, along with the rampant corruption of the royal family.

The Saudi government is not well placed to respond to the radical Islamist threat. The kingdom's intelligence and

security organizations appear to be in flux. At the end of August, Prince Saud's brother, Turki, resigned as head of General Intelligence, the Saudi CIA. Western officials say Turki, who was responsible for links with the Taliban in Afghanistan, was sacked, but they are at a loss to explain why. The new head, Prince Nawaf, seems unqualified apart from being a half-brother and close confidant of Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto Saudi ruler since King Fahd's health declined in the late 1990s. But the crucial personality is the forceful Prince Nayef (a full brother of Fahd and rival of Abdullah), the Saudi minister of interior, responsible for internal security as well as border control. Beginning late last year the kingdom was afflicted by a series of bomb explosions aimed at mainly European expatriates -- there has only been one American casualty. Diplomats blamed Islamic extremists, but Nayef accused some expatriates of fighting turf wars in the illicit alcohol trade. Six people, including four Britons, have so far made apparently forced and unbelievable televised confessions, which could lead to their beheadings. Others have admitted to alcohol offenses and have been sentenced to floggings. The hypocrisy of the Saudi leadership in publicly blaming "alcoholists" rather than admitting to problems with Islamists (although exiled members of the opposition say many have quietly been rounded up) has left diplomats dumbfounded and angry.

Oil

The kingdom has also been deaf to U.S. concerns that the international price of oil is too high and, even before the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, was contributing to a slowing down in the world economy. Acting as a lead member of OPEC, the oil exporter's cartel, Saudi Arabia has cut production back by more than one million barrels per day in the last two years, a major factor in the world price increase to a peak of about $30 per barrel, compared with about $10 in early 1999. Despite Saudi denials, Western oil industry experts remain convinced that Washington has discreetly asked Riyadh to reduce its target price and to press an increase in the cartel's production at the next OPEC ministerial meeting in two weeks. Saudis worry that increasing output by one million barrels per day could reduce prices to around $20, whereas they would much prefer that prices stayed at their current levels of about $25.

United States-Saudi Relations Post-WTC

The Saudi leadership, in particular Crown Prince Abdullah -- the de facto head of government -- has been annoyed that the Bush administration has not pressured Israel to accommodate to Palestinian positions. Prince Abdullah has avoided a meeting with President Bush and allowed public criticism of the United States to reach unprecedented levels. In August, the Saudi ambassador in London published a scathing article in a Saudi-owned, pan-Arab newspaper, referring to President Bush's "past alcoholism" and accusing him of being self-satisfied.

Saudi Arabia remains an introverted society with an opaque government system headed by aged and ailing members of the royal family. Its links with the United States have so far stood the test of time despite its lack of democracy, accountability, and intense Islamic conservatism. But relations have been tested by terrorism. The FBI was frustrated by the lack of Saudi cooperation in its investigation of the 1996 Al-Khobar bombing in which nineteen American service personnel were killed. Given this background, the United States is likely to be displeased if Saudis want America to pay a price for sharing information about bin Laden, such as allowing Saudi suspects to return to the kingdom. The FBI will be wary of Saudi promises -- agents were denied access to detained members of the minority Saudi Shi'i community that were arrested after the Al Khobar bombing. The Saudi Sunni extremists, who probably had links with bin Laden, were executed after a 1995 bombing in Riyadh, in which four Americans died.

Whereas the United States should bounce back from the setbacks of September 11, the very survival of the essentially pro-Western Saudi regime is at stake. The United States should not need to offer inducements to an ally for its help. In this framework, Washington should not be deterred by Saudi sensitivity to criticism, even delivered privately. The United States should insist that Saudi Arabia make a full contribution to the counterterrorism alliance, rather than following the Saudi institutional preference for delay -- a preference exacerbated by the current diffuse

leadership structure in which Crown Prince Abdullah lacks full authority and anyway has a tendency toward procrastination. The Saudi contribution should include:

• Increasing oil production to lower the price, despite possible opposition from radical OPEC states like Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Venezuela;

• Full intelligence cooperation and the use of its bases for U.S. forces preparing for military action; and

• An end to caustic comments on U.S. actions in the government-controlled media.

Simon Henderson, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, authored its bestselling Policy Paper After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia. His next Policy Paper, The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy, will be published in 2002.

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