



Bilateral Counterterrorism Cooperation and Changes in Saudi Leadership

Simon Henderson

Baker Fellow and Director, Gulf and Energy Policy Program,
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism,
Nonproliferation, and Trade

May 24, 2016

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor and privilege to appear before you today. I have written about Saudi Arabia, particularly the royal family known as the House of Saud, for more than twenty years. Arguably, I publish more about Saudi Arabia -- ten analyses so far this year -- than anyone else. I also have a reputation for detailed reporting, which probably explains why I have never been given a visa to visit Saudi Arabia, though I have traveled widely in the rest of the Middle East.

I would like to offer you several ways, templates if you like, with which to view the kingdom:

Firstly, Saudi Arabia sees itself as the leader of the Islamic world; a leader, if not the leader, of the Arab world; and, by virtue of it being the world's largest oil exporter, a leader of the energy world. Of these leadership roles, it is the Islamic one which is, from a Saudi perspective, by far the most important. Within the kingdom are Islam's two holiest places, Mecca and Medina. Ensuring the safety of Muslim pilgrims -- who thereby recognize Saudi leadership -- is a paramount concern.

Secondly, within the kingdom, the three main components of power are the House of Saud, the Islamic clerical establishment (known as the *ulama*), and the commercial/technocratic elite. The latter two -- the *ulama* and the business community -- are rivals. The royal family has to balance concessions to one with concessions to the other. Figuratively, it is like a triangle. Each group has its own corner but the triangle is in constant tension, twisting backwards and forwards as one group or another seeks advantage.

Thirdly, in 1984, a departing British ambassador memorably encapsulated his tour of duty by identifying the principal features of the kingdom as being "incompetence, insularity, and Islam."¹ The ambassador liked the Saudis but found them "feckless, disorganized, and unconscientious." Additionally, he noted that Saudis consider themselves as different from other Arabs, a view reciprocated by non-Saudi Arabs. Referring to non-Arabs in the kingdom, the ambassador wrote: "They really cannot be bothered with foreigners." Instead the Saudis look inward to their family and extended family, which also makes them tend to be conservative. The ambassador concluded that Islam is the central feature of the kingdom and is also a source of social strength.

¹ British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Diplomatic Report No. 51/84, "Valedictory Number Two: The Saudi Arabians," Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, June 24, 1984.

Much has happened in the thirty-plus years since the ambassador wrote those words. I regularly inquire of friends who go to the kingdom whether his fundamental judgment is now wrong. My understanding is that the essence of his remarks remains valid.

Apart from Islam, a further major influence on Saudi thinking is history, particularly recent history. The two most important events in Saudi minds date back to 1979.

In February of that year the Islamic Revolution in Iran overthrew the Shah and brought to power a clerical regime of Shiite Muslims, the majority faith in Iran. As Shiites, they are historical rivals of Sunni Muslims such as Saudis. Their victory empowered Shiite minorities across the Middle East, in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and also Saudi Arabia, places where traditionally Shiites had effectively been second-class citizens. The ethnic difference of Iranians mostly being Persians rather than Arabs is also significant.

Later the same year, in November 1979, the Grand Mosque in Mecca was seized by Sunni militants, contesting the legitimacy of the House of Saud. It was two weeks before Saudi soldiers, with the embarrassingly necessary assistance of French special forces, regained control.

Since then, the House of Saud has had to fight on two contradictory fronts: countering regional Iranian mischief, including support for the kingdom's own minority Shiite community, while also dealing with Sunni extremists -- including potential jihadists -- at home.

Further events are at least a partial consequence of Saudi action or inaction: the attack on a U.S. military housing compound in al-Khobar in 1996 (by Shiite militants); the terror attacks of 9/11 (conducted by Sunni militants); the attacks on housing compounds for foreigners in Riyadh in 2003 (again by Sunni militants); and the chaos of the "Arab Spring," where Riyadh wanted regime changes in Syria and Yemen but was upset when President Mubarak of Egypt was overthrown. The kingdom also remains almost paranoid about Iran, deeply fearful about the regional consequences of the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, and disappointed by President Obama's style of leadership.

These Saudi attitudes are of immense consequence for U.S. policy. Saudi Arabia and the United States have been allies for decades, and the U.S. is the kingdom's most valued non-Arab ally, particularly in deterring external threats against the House of Saud. Washington's motivations are various but they come down to the need for stability in an area that is the center of the energy world and also the Islamic world -- two issues which have dominated news headlines for decades because of disruption and strife. The region's very instability also endangers other U.S. allies and interests. And the U.S. homeland continues to be a potential target of terrorists and plots emanating from the Middle East.

The principal challenge for the U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism relationship is that there is more than the usual amount of differences on emphasis and direction, which can apply to even close allies. On Yemen, Washington thinks the Saudi-led military action, now more than a year old, was misconceived and is going nowhere. Additionally, Iran's role in supporting the Houthi rebels has been exaggerated by Riyadh. Furthermore, the U.S. view is that, instead of heading in the direction of calming the tension between Tehran and Riyadh, there is a danger of escalation. It has to be significant that in the recent profile of President Obama in the *Atlantic*, Saudi Arabia was criticized more severely and more often than any other country, ally or not.²

One major issue for the U.S., along with other countries, is that in Saudi perceptions of domestic security, threats are so broadly defined -- effectively from terrorism to texting. Advocates of what would be regarded elsewhere as freedom of speech are dealt with in the same manner and the same special courts as those using violence against the government. Punishment can be draconian and almost random. International opinion was profoundly

² Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, April 2016.

disturbed by the execution on January 2 this year of no less than forty-seven men accused of various terrorist offenses, some of whom had been on death row for many years. The vast majority were Sunnis with links to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, but four of those executed were Shiites, including a firebrand preacher by the name of Nimr al-Nimr. In an apparent gesture of fairness, the ratio of forty-three to four is roughly the estimated proportion of Sunnis to Shiites living in Saudi Arabia.

The timing of the executions was seen as sending a message to Shiite extremists supported by Iran, as well as Sunni jihadists, that the kingdom was going to be tough on terrorism. But Riyadh probably did not expect the strength of the reaction. An Iranian mob, almost certainly encouraged by the authorities, sacked and burned the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Riyadh promptly broke off diplomatic relations with Iran, encouraging its Arab allies to do likewise, though most only withdrew their ambassadors -- a lack of unity surely noticed by Iran.

In recent years, the public description of the state of U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation has been platitudinous, as if any hint of open criticism is counterproductive. But a new and challenging dimension has been introduced in Saudi Arabia since the change of leadership brought about in January 2015, when King Abdullah died. He had been the effective leader for twenty years, though the actual monarch only from 2005. Abdullah was succeeded by his half-brother, Salman, who initially named another half-brother, Muqrin, as his crown prince, and a nephew, Muhammad bin Nayef (MbN), as deputy crown prince. MbN has been a Washington favorite, dubbed "Mr. Counterterrorism" and admired for surviving, at least physically almost unscathed, a suicide bomb attack in 2009.

But in April 2015, three months after Salman's accession, the line of succession changed. Muqrin was sacked. Although he was replaced as heir apparent by MbN, more significantly the number three slot was taken by one of King Salman's younger sons, Muhammad bin Salman (MbS), who is just thirty years old.

At eighty this year, King Salman remains very visible, though reportedly with a range of health issues. There is now little doubt that the monarch wants his son, MbS, to be the next king rather than MbN. How that happens, when it happens, and the consequences of it happening are a matter of conjecture. In the meantime, MbS is in charge of economic policy, including oil policy, and he is the minister of defense running the war in Yemen. MbN, who is reportedly fifty-six years old, is still the minister of interior and chairs the weekly cabinet meetings when the king is absent, but his power and influence appear to be waning. His much younger cousin MbS is the person of consequence for all major issues in Riyadh. MbN, Washington's man, has been sidelined.

At this time, tried and tested ways of understanding the power politics of the Saudi royal family need to be discarded. The House of Saud has traditionally valued age (meaning seniority) and experience for its leadership positions. Disagreement and rivalry has been countered by the perceived need for consensus and a common public front to be displayed to the nation as well as the world. At just thirty years old, Muhammad bin Salman lacks age as well as experience. Furthermore, since his father became crown prince in 2012 and MbS became the head of his court, there have been a profusion of tales about MbS's high-handed tactics with royal cousins, so it is doubtful whether his further promotion has much support within the wider royal family.

So we are facing an uncertain future. Washington's principal partner on counterterrorism issues for the last decade or so, Muhammad bin Nayef, has been marginalized, but the need for an effective counterterrorism partnership is as great as ever. Also, Riyadh is distrustful of Washington's approach to what the Saudi side sees as at least half of its terrorism problem -- Iran.

In these circumstances, the United States cannot take for granted its current counterterrorism partnership with Saudi Arabia. Despite differences and public insults, the relationship needs to adapt so that the substance of it can be sustained during the continuing period of political uncertainty about real power in the House of Saud.