

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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Saudi Arabia and the United States: Terrorists seek to drive wedge between two long-time allies

By William Tracy

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Saudi Arabia has been widely discussed in the U.S. press in recent months, and not always in a positive light.

Soon after the tragic events of September 11 last year, when it was discovered that 15 of the al-Qaeda terrorists aboard the four airliners transformed into flying bombs were Saudi citizens, many in the U.S. asked, "What kind of society could produce such evil men?" Later, Crown Prince Abdullah, Saudi Arabia's virtual leader during the prolonged illness of his brother King Fahd, put forward a proposal for a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli peace that would give Israel full recognition by its Arab neighbors for the first time. Many commentators in the U.S. press were skeptical, questioning his sincerity, some dismissing his offer as a public relations gambit.

I follow the news from Saudi Arabia with perhaps more than usual interest because of my personal history. In 1946, on my 11th birthday, with my mother and a younger brother and sister, I boarded the Baltimore and Ohio train in Lawrenceville, Illinois, on the first stage of a journey by land, sea and air to join my father in the far-off kingdom. He had traveled there a year earlier on a U.S. troop transport to work for the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco). At the time Aramco was a joint venture of Standard Oil of California (later Chevron), The Texas Company (Texaco), Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon) and Socony Vacuum (Mobil).

When my father went to Saudi Arabia in 1945, world oil consumption was about 7 million barrels a day. The United States was producing 60 percent of the world's petroleum needs, and half of that came from Texas. Saudi Arabia was then producing only 58,000 barrels of oil a day; half of one percent of world production.

Today world oil consumption is more than 76 million barrels a day. Saudi Arabia's production

capacity is more than 10 million barrels a day and its reserves are estimated at 262 billion barrels, about 25 percent of world reserves. Its current share of actual global production is 12 percent. In 1933, just two years before I was born in southern Illinois, Saudi Arabia's unifier and first ruler, King 'Abd al-'Aziz (known in the West as Ibn Saud) had invited Standard Oil of California (Socal) to search for oil in what was then a remote desert kingdom. The oasis dwellers and Bedouin herdsmen who inhabited the interior of the Arabian Peninsula were fiercely independent. In ancient times only the coastal towns of the Peninsula had ever felt the impact of Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Persian or Ottoman invaders. And in more modern times interior Arabia had escaped the 19th and early 20th-century colonialism, which brought much of North Africa and the Middle East under the rule of the British, French and Italians.

Compared to that of the Europeans, America's foreign-affairs record in the early part of the 20th century was relatively benign. So it is not surprising that when King 'Abd al-'Aziz was weighing offers from competing European oil companies and California's Socal, the story goes that he remarked to his chief financial advisor, "I've decided to go with the Americans. They're further away."

My journey to Saudi Arabia as a boy was the beginning of a lifelong connection with the lands and peoples of the Middle East. The first and perhaps the most important thing I learned about Arabs and Muslims as I was growing up on the shores of the Persian Gulf would be too simplistic to write about if it were not for the deep mistrust of Arabs being expressed so widely in the U.S. press during these troubled times, a mistrust apparently shared by many Americans.

What I learned, in short, is that Saudi Arabs, like we Americans, do not all fall into simple categories. Of course Arabs are different. They are the product of a different history, a different climate and geography. But different does not mean evil -- or even bad. Just different. Saudi Arabs are not either all bad or all good, not all hard working or lazy, all devout or all hypocritical. In their country of some 20 million persons, just as in America, one finds a spectrum of attitudes, life-styles and levels of sophistication. There are clear differences between urban and rural societies, and among persons with varying of levels of wealth, education, travel or exposure to peoples and ideas different from their own.

But having said that Saudis should not be categorized, I must add that over the years I found that in many towns and villages of the country, people I've met share many of the same Mid-American small-town values that I learned as a boy in southern Illinois. These are values such as generosity and hospitality, devotion and loyalty to family and friends, pride in accomplishment, a desire for justice and for peace, and an enduring quest for faith and spirituality.

Thanks to the years I lived and worked abroad, I have learned to value those special qualities with which our country is particularly blessed, qualities such as freedom of belief and expression, equality under the law and tolerance for diversity. But I have also come to understand how America's actions can sometimes look through others' eyes.

So let us return to the recent disturbing questions about Saudi Arabia in the U.S. press mentioned in the opening paragraph above. What kind of society could produce 15 such evil men? A Saudi who was asked this question might reply, "Did you think to ask this question

when the former American soldier Timothy McVeigh blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City? Or when the still unidentified but probably domestic terrorist sent deadly anthrax spores through the U.S. mail? Is that the question you asked when American college student Luke Helder was apprehended by police after placing pipe bombs in rural mailboxes across the U.S. Middle West? What is it in American society that produces the Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazi skinheads?

But what about the question raised by American cynics who ask how Saudi Arabia's peace proposal can be taken seriously when it is reported that money raised by Saudi charities goes not just to hospitals or schools in Palestine, but to the families of suicide bombers? "We have given hundreds of millions of dollars to assist Palestinians," says Crown Prince Abdullah's foreign policy advisor, Adel al-Jubeir. "We do not promise assistance to the families of suicide bombers. We provide assistance to the families that need it." As a Saudi government spokesman said last week (May 8), "Saudi Arabia believes terrorism violates the tenets of our faith."

A Saudi might ask an American, "How can the United States claim to be a neutral mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle when U.S. taxpayers have provided many billions of dollars of economic aid to Israel over the years, part of which has helped to subsidize the occupation, confiscation and settlement of Palestinian lands? Does it make America a supporter of terrorism when this country has paid for the rockets fired from U.S.-built jet fighters, destroying the homes of innocents? Are we supporters of terrorism if we have provided the bulldozers that have crushed villages and uprooted orchards? In conversation with foreign friends, Saudis often say they wish America would play by the same rules it expects of others, and not rush to judge them on an unlevel playing field.

In an interview with U.S. correspondents reported from Cairo May 10, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said, "The Arab countries have to make clear that their pursuit of peace is unfettered. Violence has to stop on both sides." The following weekend Crown Prince Abdullah briefed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and Syrian President Bashar Assad on his talks with President Bush. The three Arab leaders reaffirmed their support for the peace offer to Israel approved at the Arab summit in Beirut and the Egyptian and Syrian presidents joined Abdullah in condemning terrorism and violence by either side as a means of resolving the conflict.

A Saudi friend in Houston made a point worth considering. When the Saudi exile Osama bin Laden made his plans to attack the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, he could have built his team of murderers from among hundreds, perhaps several thousand disaffected young zealots recruited by al-Qaeda from Muslim nations stretching from Morocco across North Africa, the Middle East and Asia to Indonesia and the Philippines. And yet, among the 20 selected for the scheme, bin Laden chose 15 from Saudi Arabia alone.

It is no secret that one of the al-Qaeda leader's long-expressed goals was to drive all U.S. military forces and bases remaining from the Gulf War period out of what he considered to be the Holy Land of Saudi Arabia. Might this not suggest that bin Laden's choice of 15 young Saudis as terrorists is less a reflection on Saudi society than an integral part of a two-part plan? Part one was to attack America directly; part two to drive a wedge between the peoples and governments of the two countries? If this is so, then by jumping so quickly to condemn Saudi

Arabia, U.S. pundits and commentators are playing bin Laden's own game.

Yes, Saudi Arabia has produced its fanatics and terrorists. And so, sadly and tragically, has the United States and, indeed, over the course of history, most other countries in the world. But we must never make the mistake of falling into the terrorists' trap.

When world leaders, international diplomats, dedicated peacemakers - even reluctant foot-dragging politicians - have worked months to bring the dreams and aspirations of thousands of decent, ordinary citizens on both sides of a conflict close to peaceful realization, we must not permit a suicide bomber, a trigger-happy sniper or an over-zealous platoon leader or tank commander to upset everything by a momentary act of madness. We must never allow either stereotypes or fanatics -- the lowest common denominators - to divert our purpose or to set our nation's peace-making agendas.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Tracy, whose roots are in southern Illinois, now writes and lectures about the Middle East from Eugene, Oregon.

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The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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