

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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Saudi Suicide Bombings Work Against Al Qaeda

By Wyche Fowler & Edward S. Walker

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As in Egypt in 1997, the killings will fuel a backlash against extremists.

The brutality of the crime will not soon be forgotten. Gunmen stepped out of their vehicles, quickly approached the site, shot the security guards patrolling the area and then indiscriminately murdered anyone in their path. Foreigners began evacuating the country immediately. The government, having battled the same extremists for more than a decade, engaged forcefully in a wide-scale crackdown on radical Islamic groups.

The country was Egypt. The city was Luxor. The date was Nov. 17, 1997.

This particular act of terrorism claimed the lives of 58 tourists. Gamaa al Islamiya, headed by an Egyptian, Ayman Zawahiri, who would become Osama bin Laden's top deputy, claimed responsibility for the largest massacre of foreigners in recent Egyptian history.

Despite the difference in time and place, there are a number of factors linking Luxor and Monday's suicide attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. First, compelling evidence indicates that both incidents bear the Zawahiri signature, one that has come to identify Al Qaeda attacks. Although intelligence officials in the U.S. are just now being dispatched to the kingdom to investigate, Saudi officials have already announced what we believe to be true: Al Qaeda masterminded the well-coordinated and near-simultaneous strikes on civilian targets - its terrorist trademark.

Second, the attacks had a common agenda: to undermine leaders in Cairo and Riyadh, respectively. This week's bombing was not a stab at the Middle East peace process, nor was it aimed primarily at the United States. There are scores of other installations in the kingdom and elsewhere that would have been better proxies for Washington and led to greater American casualties.

This was an attack aimed at U.S. support for Saudi Arabia, at the Saudi government itself and particularly at Crown Prince Abdullah. Vinnell Corp. was targeted not because it was American but because of its long-standing contract to train the Saudi National Guard, headed by Abdullah. And this is not the first attack on Vinnell and the Saudi National Guard.

In November 1995, a bomb blast at a Saudi National Guard training base left seven people dead, including several Americans.

One final similarity: in Egypt, the excess and savagery deprived the terrorists of popular support and places to hide. As millions of tourists traveled elsewhere, the precipitous decline in foreign revenues caused widespread economic hardship.

The Luxor violence rallied Egyptians behind their government and marked the beginning of the end for Gamaa Al Islamiya. The Egyptian government cracked down unequivocally; most of the group's leaders were jailed or fled to Afghanistan, and they were publicly reviled.

A similar popular revulsion is beginning to take hold in Saudi Arabia. After all, a substantial number of this week's victims - not counting the bombers - were Saudis. Already our conversations with people in the region indicate that the devastation caused by these terrorists has fomented a backlash against religious extremists. Ordinary Saudis are saying khalas! - "enough!" - as the death toll mounts.

For the crown prince, terrorism is a clear and present danger. In the next few weeks, he will seek to turn the tide against Al Qaeda. Given the respect and support he commands among ordinary Saudis, he has a good chance of succeeding. On Tuesday, he said: "There can be no acceptance or justification for terrorism. Nor is there a place for any ideology which promotes it." These are tough words that are likely to be matched with tough actions.

At the same time, by linking arms with the Saudis just hours after the blasts, President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell hope to thwart Bin Laden in his efforts to destroy the long-standing bilateral relationship and bring down the House of Saud.

Uniting with our allies to fight our common enemy - the terrorists - is the right thing to do. It should have been a lesson learned after 9/11. Regrettably, it was not. Instead, self-described "experts" on Saudi Arabia, many of whom have never spent more than a few days in the kingdom, engaged in an orgy of stereotypes and half-truths. Too often, their voices dominate the airwaves with pithy but grossly distorted sound bites. Their verbal lynching of Islam, Arabs and Saudis undermines every one of us who seeks to isolate and destroy terrorists.

After all the inroads this administration has made against the forces of international terrorism, we cannot gratify Bin Laden by letting him believe that terrorism will accomplish his aims. Saudi-bashing gives aid and comfort to Bin Laden and his followers while undercutting Bush. That is not the way to fight the war on terrorism.

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Ambassador Fowler, a former U.S. Senator (D-Ga.), was ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 1996 to 2001. He previously served in the U.S. Senate, 1986-1993, as a member of the Senate Appropriations, Budget, Energy and Agriculture Committees. Fowler was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1977; member of the Ways and Means and Foreign Affairs Committees, the Committee of Intelligence, and the Congressional Arts Caucus. He practiced law in Atlanta for eight years prior to election. Fowler is an expert on Saudi Arabia and Middle East affairs.

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Ambassador Edward S. Walker was the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs from 1999-2001. He previously served as Ambassador to Israel, the Arab Republic of Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, and Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Walker also served as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Saudi Arabia and in political and economic and training functions in Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia. He developed the Economic Reform program for Egypt with the Vice President's office while serving as US Ambassador to Egypt. He also managed the build-up of US forces in the United Arab Emirates and directed coordination with the UAE armed forces during the Gulf war. Walker negotiated the Western Sahara issue with the Moroccan King and Algerian President in coordination with former Secretary of State James Baker. Walker's background includes extensive travel, study and working experience since 1969 in Middle East and North African political, military, energy, economic reform and trade issues.

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