

# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

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## **On Terrorism, Methodism, Saudi "Wahhabism," and the Censored 9-11 Report**

By Gary Leupp

### **Editor's Note:**

This Saudi-American Forum Item of Interest provides an essay by Gary Leupp, Associate Professor of History at Tufts University, originally published August 8, 2003 in *CounterPunch*, an on-line political newsletter. Many of the issues discussed in "On Terrorism, Methodism, Saudi "Wahhabism," and the Censored 9-11 Report" are of interest to the members of the Saudi-American Forum. We would like to thank Dr. Leupp for permission to share this article with our readers.

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### **"Kernel of Evil"**

Two scandals unfold simultaneously: the larger, centering on administration lies concerning the threat posed by Iraq, and Baghdad's supposed connections to al-Qaeda; the smaller (which might be a tempest in a teapot) on alleged connections between al-Qaeda and Saudi officialdom. They may well impact one another as Congress resumes its investigations next month. While it seems implausible that Riyadh would deliberately support terrorist attacks on the U.S., the *neocons* running the show in Washington have asserted propositions equally improbable, and (so far) gotten away with it; and they would very much like to see regime change in Saudi Arabia. Conceivably, as they feel the heat of investigations and mounting public concern about the results of the war on Iraq, they will feel the need to create a distraction. What better way to do that than to whip up fears about Saudi Arabia, which some of them consider the real "kernel of evil" in the Middle East?

### **Saudis on the Defensive**

These must be uneasy times for the House of Saud. Since the meeting between King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in February 1945, the regime in Riyadh has been closely allied to the U.S. and extremely friendly to U.S. oil companies. The U.S. is Saudi Arabia's leading trading partner, and a key military supplier; it has, since the first Gulf War, and with huge political risk to itself, hosted U.S. military bases on Saudi soil. President Bush has referred to the "eternal friendship between the two countries." On the other hand, powerful figures in and around the Bush administration have made no secret of

their hostility to Riyadh, and their desire for "regime change" there as throughout the Arab world. The royal family is under pressure, and receiving conflicting signals from Washington. Meanwhile the American people are being told alternately, "These are our friends," and "These are the real terrorists."

Last week, Congress released its 9-11 report, with 27 or 28 (out of 858) blacked-out pages purporting to damn the Arab kingdom for high-level complicity in global terror. The study has led some in the Senate to demand anti-Saudi sanctions. A key article covering the report, by Josh Meyer, was published in the *Los Angeles Times* August 1. Its gist is that the report implicates the Saudi regime itself in financial support for al-Qaeda; a U.S. official quoted by Meyer says, "not only Saudi entities or nationals are implicated in 9/11, but the [Saudi] Government." More on this below, but let's place the Congressional report in context.

Although the White House has not hyped the fact (given its politically useful if rationally indefensible decision to impute more blame for the tragedy on Iraq than on the Saudis), 9-11 was essentially an enterprise undertaken by Saudi nationals. The U.S. government has identified fifteen of the nineteen hijackers as Saudis. (Washington of course has huge credibility problems, and some identifications have been questioned. But it looks as though, in fact, most of those who executed the crimes were from the kingdom.) So at the official level, although Riyadh denied any involvement, the attacks were a terrible Saudi embarrassment. But it's very difficult to imagine that the government of a U.S. client state, with a history of close cooperation with U.S. foreign policy (in the joint anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, for example), and with a security apparatus trained and equipped by the Pentagon, would willfully involve itself in a terror attack on its longtime friend and benefactor. It just doesn't make sense. Yet however implausible this scenario might be, some among Washington's Straussian policy wonks have been peddling this line for some time. (It will surely serve their interests if a faction of those disillusioned with the disastrous Iraq project concludes, "Iraq was the wrong target! The *real* problem's those *Saudis!*") They apparently intend to exploit the widespread tendency among Americans to conflate all Arabs, to construct enemies in simple racial terms, and to view Islam (which originated in what is now Saudi Arabia) with suspicion or disdain, as they proceed with their world-changing agenda.

## **The Neocons' Anti-Saudi Campaign**

*Operation Vilify the Saudis* began in earnest last summer. As usual, official thinking was first articulated in non-official think tanks. On June 6, 2002 the Hudson Institute (its mission: "to be America's premier source of applied research on enduring policy challenges"), which includes on its Board of Trustees such well-connected figures as Richard Perle, Max Singer, Donald Kagan, and Dan Quayle, sponsored a seminar entitled, "Discourses on Democracy: Saudi Arabia, Friend or Foe?" Among the participants was one Laurent Murawiec, RAND policy analyst, and Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. On June 19, the Institute hosted a discussion of *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism* by former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations Dore Gold which has subsequently become a best seller. On July 10, at the invitation of Perle (fervent Likudist and then chair of that mysterious, unaccountable "advisory" Defense Policy Board at the Pentagon), Murawiec spoke to the DPB as well. Saudi Arabia, he told the illustrious body in his talk "Taking Saudi Out of Arabia," is the

"kernel of evil" in the Middle East. In both his presentations he averred that Saudi nationals, with regime support, served in capacities "from planners to financiers, from cadre to foot-soldier, from ideologist to cheerleader" in global terrorist activities. Murawiec's DPB talk, summarized on the front page of the *Washington Post* August 6, produced a political firestorm and official disclaimers. Colin Powell (irked by the episode) told the Saudi foreign minister that Murawiec's opinions had no bearing on U.S. policy (but of course, there was already a big and obvious disconnect between Powell-policy and Rumsfeld/Wolfowitz-policy.)

Also in August, Hudson Institute's co-founder Max Singer presented a paper to the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, in which ("thinking outside the box" as Rumsfeld likes to say), he urged the *dismemberment* of Saudi Arabia, in the spirit of the post-World War I reconfiguration of what had been Ottoman Arab territory. The Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia could, Singer argued, constitute a new "Muslim Republic of East Arabia," peopled primarily by Shiite Muslims unsympathetic to the dominant "Wahhabi" (more properly, Muwahhidun) school of Islam in Saudi Arabia, leaving Mecca and Medina in the hands of the "Wahhabis" while placing the oil fields, concentrated in the east, in the hands of western oil companies. The British MP George Galloway, Vice-Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party Foreign Affairs Committee (and passionate antiwar activist) says that in British government circles some are saying: "Saudi Arabia could easily be two if not three countries, which would have the helpful bonus of avoiding foreign forces having to occupy the holiest places in Islam, when they're only interested really in oil wells in the eastern part of the country."

Meanwhile the Saudi regime was hit, that same August, with a one trillion dollar lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia by 9-11 family members, firefighters and rescue workers. Not good times at all for Washington-Riyadh ties. True, President Bush soon hosted Saudi Arabian ambassador Bandar bin Sultan at a lunch at his Texas ranch, and called Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah to assure him that these recent controversial presentations would not "affect the eternal friendship between the two countries." But in fact the relationship was fraying. The Saudis firmly opposed (in words) the U.S. invasion of Iraq and refused to participate in it. They were quietly requesting that U.S. troops be withdrawn from their country, where they'd been stationed since 1990 as a "temporary" measure preparatory to the Gulf War, their presence producing mounting anger among the citizenry. (The troops are now being redeployed to Qatar and Bahrain.) The Saudis are currently purchasing more weaponry from France, Russia, even China, than from the U.S.

## **The 9-11 Report**

In this context, Congress released the above-mentioned report, with its censored pages that constitute the chapter spookily entitled (as if to legitimate in advance its withholding) "Certain Sensitive National Security Matters." The content of those pages has of course been leaked; they charge that Saudi nationals with known contacts to two of the 9-11 hijackers are also known to have received money and had contact with Saudi officials, and that Saudis have willfully provided al-Qaeda with assistance through Muslim charities. Josh Meyer's piece makes the case look really damning. He quotes an unnamed source "familiar with the report" as alleging, "If this comes out, it will blow the top off the relations with [the Saudi] government because the American people will just be outraged." (Imagine how anti-Saudi outrage would advantage the

Bushites as their Iraq policy faces further scrutiny.) But if you read way, way down the Meyer article (paragraph 18 out of 19) you learn that "...a host of senior intelligence and law enforcement officials" *disagree* with the report. Says one "official familiar with the classified section": "There is a lot of information in there that's inflammatory but not accurate, or inferential or open to interpretation. Some of it is based on information that is partial, fragmentary and wrong. It is certainly not conclusive."

The Saudi government, naturally, was deeply upset by the allegations. On July 26, the *Arab News*, which reflects Riyadh's views, editorialized that the censored report was "nothing less than a charter for Saudi-bashing... an invitation to the U.S. and other media to speculate... It will be open season on Saudi Arabia." Riyadh urged transparency; Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal, who charged that the report "wrongfully and morbidly accused" the kingdom, made an emergency trip to Washington July 29 to urge the censored pages be released so that his government could make a detailed reply. In a statement issued after meeting Bush, he declared, "We have nothing to hide. And we do not seek nor do we need to be shielded. We believe that releasing the missing 28 pages will allow us to respond to any allegations in a clear and credible manner; and remove any doubts about the Kingdom's true role in the war against terrorism and its commitment to fight it." But his plaint was rejected; Bush declared it would make "no sense to declassify [the censored pages]...because it would help the enemy." Instead we have more secrecy, more scary leaks.

Sound familiar? Again, it looks like a split between the mainstream, the traditional "host of senior intelligence and law enforcement officials" to whom Meyer alludes, and the cutting-edge proponents of deception-as-policy, in this case operating through a Congressional investigation. (I don't mean to suggest that those steering the investigation at the time of the joint inquiry, Florida Democrat Bob Graham and Alabama Republican Richard Shelby, are full participants in the *neocon* cabal, but it's quite likely that the intelligence they credit passed through the same hands that provided us with evidence that Saddam and bin Laden have been buddies for a long time. The new chairman and vice-chairman of the committee are Kansas Republican Pat Roberts and West Virginia Democrat Jay Rockefeller. Roberts is a Bush loyalist, Rockefeller a somewhat timid critic of the war.)

The mainstream intelligence community must recognize that for various reasons (principally the presence of U.S. bases in the homeland of the Prophet, land of the holy places of Medina and Mecca; unconditional, limitless U.S. support for Israel; and the cruel sanctions against Iraq) there is in fact much opposition to U.S. policy among the Saudis. They understand that such sentiment is encouraged by the religiously based Saudi educational system. But (perhaps increasingly indignant at the *neocons'* distortion of intelligence to serve their world-transforming goals) they resist the effort to depict the Riyadh regime as a terror-sponsoring operation.

The *neocons* for their part will likely from this point play the *religious* card, since it's all they really have to go on. They will probably focus on the national education and legal systems in Saudi Arabia, both rooted in "Wahhabism," and on the charities issue. (Islam requires contributing to charity; it is one of the Five Pillars of the faith. So Saudis, like Muslims everywhere, contribute billions to charities every year, and such contributions, according to Muslim thinking, might as legitimately go to the support of righteous *jihad* in defense of Islam as to the building of a school or hospital. Anyone *wanting* to build a case against Saudi Arabia

could easily find some funds, from some charity, going to someone associated with al-Qaeda, and purporting to pursue *jihād*, and since Riyadh to some extent oversees the charities, *voilà!* there's your official terrorist connection.)

Saudi religious practices and institutions were not problems when the Carter and Reagan administrations were promoting *jihād* against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s, exploiting Muslim fundamentalism for all it was worth and leaning on Riyadh to contribute thousands of *mujahadeen* to confront the pro-Soviet, secular Afghan state. But now, since it (temporarily) dovetails with myriad anti-imperialist forces in the region and world, "Wahhabism" has become a major concern. This is where the so-called "War on Terror" really does threaten to become a war on Islam.

### Trashing a School of Islam

Influential voices in this country argue that "Wahhabism" itself runs fundamentally counter to U.S. values and goals, motivating believers to join "terrorist" groups and to donate funds to terrorists. *Neocoon* ideologue Francis Fukuyama even before 9-11 declared that "Wahhabi ideology easily qualifies as Islamo-fascism..." Sen. Charles Schumer, New York Democrat, targets "Wahhabi"-style education: "Saudi Arabia is the foremost sponsor of malicious madrassa schools that spew anti-American hatred all over the Middle East and inspire terror." Some cable news reporters are stating that the latest round of violence in Iraq is fueled by certain resistance supporters crossing the Saudi border into Iraq ("Wahhabis, they are called"), giving the viewer the impression that "Wahhabis" are a military or political organization rather than a religious community of tens of millions. Some suggest that Riyadh will have to either undertake major religious reform to expunge the "anti-American" aspects of "Wahhabi" rhetoric in the madrassa and mosque, or risk serious consequences.

The demonization of Saudi Arabia, if it occurs according to the *neocons'* plan and is not muffled by cooler heads, will thus not involve, as it has elsewhere, charges of possession of weapons of mass destruction, or even emphasize dubious ties between government and terrorism. Rather, we'll be told that since Riyadh's intrinsically and incorrigibly "anti-American" religious ideology motivates wealthy Saudis to abet terrorism, Washington (in *self-defense*) must act to remove the oil fields that generate Saudi wealth, and are vital to the world economy, from "Wahhabi"/"terrorist" control. Anticipating that possible campaign of disinformation, we should acquaint ourselves a bit with the targeted ideology.

The "Wahhabi" movement was a reform effort within Islam founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-87). It emerged before the West was a major issue in the region (and before there even was a United States of America), as an effort to purge Islam of what Abd al-Wahhab viewed as heretical and polytheistic aspects of contemporary religious practice. At its inception the movement targeted magical practices, the veneration or worship of saints it associated with Shiism, and the pantheism sometimes advocated by Sufi Muslim devotees. It banned tobacco, gambling, music and dancing. In its basic doctrine, it is about as threatening to you and me as the doctrine of Abd al-Wahhab's very close contemporary, the British theologian John Wesley (1703-91), founder of Methodism, also a "back-to-basics" kind of guy who promoted a Christian fundamentalism, and frowned upon dancing, card-playing, theater-going, intoxicants and cosmetics. (I do not mean to suggest an exact parallel, but they did have a lot in common. Both

insisted upon absolute belief in a Book, authored by the Creator of the cosmos Himself, who, should anyone resist its teachings, would consign the nonbeliever to everlasting hellfire. Utter submission to the Book and its Author would on the other hand guarantee eternal life.)

In 1744, Abd al-Wahhab forged an alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud, ancestor of the present ruling family in Saudi Arabia; by his death in 1792 the Saudis had conquered much of the peninsula, gaining control over Mecca and imposing "Wahhabist" practice. In 1801 they attacked and sacked the Shiite center of Karbala, in today's Iraq. (Note: the Bushites on occasion imply close cooperation between al-Qaeda and Iranian Shiites in terrorist plots. But there being no love lost between "Wahhabists" and Shiites, the charge is highly implausible.) Thereafter, the Ottoman Turks colonized the region, but in 1902 the above-mentioned Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud captured Riyadh, and in 1932 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was officially proclaimed. It has always been wedded to "Wahhabist" fundamentalism (although today some 15% of the population may be Shiites). The oil companies engaged with Riyadh since the discovery of petroleum in 1938, and the governments soliciting Saudi friendship, have accommodated themselves easily enough to that faith. Funded by Riyadh and private Saudi charities, "Wahhabist" missions have spread especially since the 1990s to southeast Asia, the Balkans, even the U.S., where according to former Trotskyist-turned-neocon journalist Stephen Schwartz (director, Islam and Democracy Program at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, speaking before the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security June 26), it has "come to dominate" the Islamic community. Others disagree, contending that "Wahhabism" is very much a minority trend.

## **Really a Threat?**

In Saudi Arabia itself, is "Wahhabism" really the threat posited by some *neocons*? John Esposito, director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, suggests otherwise. Schwartz, he says, "fails to make" distinctions among "Wahhabi" adherents. He adds that "even conforming to an ultra-conservative, anti-pluralistic faith does not necessarily make you a violent individual." (There are of course millions of peaceable if ultra-conservative, anti-pluralistic *Christians*.) Islam scholar and professor of political science at the University of Vermont, F. Gregory Gause III, cautioned the House Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia last May about conflating "Wahhabists" and terrorism. The "dangerous trend," he argued, "is not Saudi or 'Wahhabi' in any exclusive sense. It is part of the zeitgeist of the whole Muslim world right now... It is undoubtedly true that the al-Qa'ida network was able to recruit many Saudis. But it would be a mistake to attribute this simply to some purported affinity between 'Wahhabism' and al-Qa'ida's message of jihad. Some Saudi clerics and intellectuals have supported al-Qa'ida's message, but the vast majority have condemned it. Moreover, al-Qa'ida has been able to recruit both fighters and intellectual supporters from many countries---Egypt and Pakistan, to name but two---where 'Wahhabism' is not a prominent intellectual current." Those who charge that Saudi Arabia officially promotes "terrorism" focus on the kingdom's education system, which is unapologetically based on the Qur'an. Last year the Middle East Media Research Institute, a non-profit organization much praised by the *neocons* that translates documents from Arabic, Hebrew and Farsi, released a much-discussed preliminary report on the content of Saudi textbooks. The most widely cited passage from the report claims that an 8th-grade textbook says Jews and Christians have been cursed by Allah for "accepting polytheism

and turned into apes and pigs." It's apparently exegesis on Surat Al-Ma'idah (The Feast), verse 60:

Say: shall I inform you  
Who will receive the worst chastisement  
from God?  
They who were condemned by God,  
And on whom fell His wrath,  
And those who were turned to apes and  
swine,  
And those who worship the powers of evil.  
They are in the worst gradation,  
The furthest away from the right path.  
[Ahmed Ali translation].

(Further down the text---verse 69---one reads "All those who believe, and the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians, in fact anyone who believes in God and the Last Day, and performs good deeds, will have nothing to regret" Presumably the school kids read this too.) The report also cited a 9th-grade textbook citing the Prophet's declaration that the Day of Judgment "will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them." Questions for class discussion include "Who will be victorious on the Day of Judgment?"

### **Who's Really Intolerant?**

Troubling, perhaps, but no more than a Bible class, in a Christian parochial school, which might offer for discussion passages from the New Testament such as these:

- Matthew 8:10 (Jesus, to a Roman centurion, comparing the Roman's faith to the unbelief of the Jews): "[In the last days] the subjects of the kingdom [i.e., Jews] will be turned out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth." (Discuss: why will the Jews be weeping?)
- John 8:42-44 (Jesus, addressing Jews): "If God were your father, you would love me... The devil is your father, and you prefer to do what your father wants." (Discuss: why did the Son of God tell the Jews that the devil was their father?)
- 1 Thessalonians 2:14 (Paul, to the Christian congregation): "[You are] suffering the same treatment from your own countrymen as [Christians in Judaea] have suffered from the Jews, the people who put the Lord Jesus to death, and the prophets too. And now they have been persecuting us, and acting in a way that cannot please God and makes them the enemy of the whole human race...but retribution is overtaking them at last." (Discuss what this means for Christians today.)
- Revelation 2:9 (Jesus, to the Christians in Smyrna): "I know...the slanderous accusations that have been made against you by the people who profess to be Jews but are really members of the synagogue of Satan." (The only "real" Jews now are those accepting

Christ. Discuss.)

The fact is, both Christian and Muslim scriptures have harsh words for Jews (and other non-believers), while one finds in the Jewish scriptures passages in which Yahweh orders the wholesale slaughter (men, women and children) of any peoples "stubborn enough to fight against Israel" (Joshua 11:20). Abrahamic monotheism tends to divide humanity into two categories: those on the side of God, and those on the other side. (John Wesley, confident that he was on God's side, saw the Pope as the Antichrist, the "Man of Sin" and "Son of Perdition.") Secular humanist that I am, I find this whole worldview irrational, and potentially dangerous. (Wesley's rhetoric contributed to the anti-Catholic riots in London in 1780, led by his follower Lord George Gordon, which resulted in the deaths of over 450 people.). But I also believe in tolerance, and agree with Esposito that those conforming to such faiths aren't *necessarily* threatening.

Religions, "Wahhabism" and Methodism included, are passed down over centuries from parents to children. People usually don't *choose* them, in a process of careful, dispassionate study and reflection; rather, religious concepts work into our brains at an early age, often providing enormous comfort, although they can have unhealthy effects too. We inherit them, submitting to them with varying degrees of enthusiasm, more rarely discarding them as we mature. Or we (at least overtly) embrace them, in part to better relate to our believing neighbors. Virtually *all* U.S. politicians profess belief in an Absolute Being, and most make it a point to attend religious services. Normal, decent, literate people even now in the 21st century believe in all kinds of dubious phenomena: elephant-headed gods, divinely-inspired prophecy, talking donkeys, the visit of Jesus to recite the Sermon on the Mount in the sky over upstate New York 2000 years ago. Surely "Wahhabism" posits nothing any more outrageous than any of these beliefs. Some well-intentioned people of my acquaintance see non-Christian faiths as "the enemy" and believe it incumbent upon them to---"marching as to war, with the Cross of Jesus going on before"--- spread the Holy Word (which they just *know* is the *Truth*) before the Rapture comes. Some upstanding youth in my community, driving past antiwar vigils in their SUVs festooned with oversize U.S. flags, righteously bark, "Nuke 'em all!" "Wahhabism" poses no greater threat to world peace than the mindset of such blissfully air-headed, self-assured enthusiasts.

## A "Methodist Moment"?

Nor is it a greater threat to peace than the mix of *religieux* in the U.S. administration now planning its next moves. There are the Jewish Likudists like Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, undersecretary for political affairs at the Defense Department. (Feith, whom the British government has reportedly requested be dismissed, purports to know that Iraq transported WMDs to Syria. He has drawn up a plan for attacking Damascus, and looks very dangerous to me.) In higher positions, we find fundamentalist Christians (who rival the Feiths in their Zionist fervor), like the born-again U.S. president and vice-president. Both men, by the way, are members of the United Methodist Church, as are White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, Commerce Secretary Don Evans, and Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta. Condoleeza Rice is a graduate of Southern Methodist University. The rightwing Institute on Religion and Democracy has proclaimed: "the Bush era is a 'Methodist moment' in the nation's capital." But that doesn't mean that the invasion of Iraq was a specifically *Methodist* project, and by the same

token, 9-11 was not a "Wahhabi" event. We can leave Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and his contemporary John Wesley, out of this.

Hermann Goering once declared that "*the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders... All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked...*" The *neocons*, who've been banking on the manipulation of fear for almost two years, and who are still midway through their fear-based empire-building program, probably believe that. They've yet to exploit the full potential of racism and Islamophobia at their disposal, but they may in the wake of the putatively explosive censored report. But religion should *not* be the issue. Islam (including "Wahhabism"), is not the enemy and need not frighten us. The issue's *imperialism*, and the unholy lies and distortions always deployed to get people to rally around its banner. May we prove Goering wrong, and reject the leaders' bidding, as they turn their attention to further aggression in the Arab world and beyond.

**Note:**

[1]. The proper term for the "Wahhabi" school is Muwahhadin; adherents dislike the former term, but since it is widely used in journalism, I employ it in this article, surrounded by quotation marks.

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The views expressed in this essay are those of the author.

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