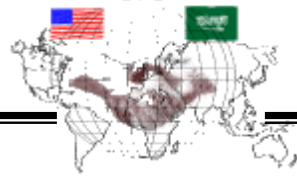


Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

November 17, 2003

Riyadh: Rooting Out Al Qaeda by Edward S. Walker and Wyche Fowler

At midnight on Saturday [Nov. 8], suicide bombers careened into a residential area, killing 17 and wounding over 100 others, mainly women and children. The perpetrators were from Al Qaeda or one of its affiliates. The victims were largely Arab, not Israeli or Western. The timing was deliberate, as always, and struck just as families were crowding the streets to attend Ramadan dinners that often last into the early morning. The target of the attack was America's long-time ally Saudi Arabia. The goal is unchanged: drive out all Western and foreign influences in order to weaken the country economically, undermine the House of Saud and ultimately establish a radical, Islamic state that has more in common with the 14th century than the 21st.

In this campaign, the radical Islamists have found odd bedfellows: neoconservatives, liberals and otherwise moderate pundits who emphasize the negatives and fail to acknowledge that progress is being made. US-educated Saudis, including women, many of whom spent a decade or more studying and working here, have told me that they are distraught to find Americans falling into the trap set-out by Usama bin Laden and his cronies : to drive a wedge between Washington and Riyadh that could destabilize the latter, leaving the door open for extremists to step in and take charge.

Since 1945, the U.S. has maintained a strong, strategic partnership with this conservative, Muslim nation. The Kingdom worked closely with us over many years to confront and defeat communism. It is also the only oil-producer in the world that has the 'spare capacity' that can protect our economy. And at the request of successive generations of American Secretaries of Energy, Secretaries of State and Presidents it has employed its reserve in times of crisis. One of those times was on September 12, 2001.

Let's be clear on Al Qaeda's goals. First and foremost is not the liberation of Palestine. Usama bin Laden picked up the Palestinian cause as a marketing and recruiting ploy, not a genuine campaign. Instead, Al Qaeda is intent on the overthrow of the House of Saud. It seeks control over the holiest cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, the site of recent shoot-outs and self-immolations, the work of its adherents. Its motive is to replace the existing government and lifestyle with an ultra Islamic regime that is reminiscent of the Taliban, and has nothing in common with the current reform programs of the Kingdom's rulers. Finally, it would harness

Saudi oil resources as a strategic weapon in the war against the West.

America's sin was that we got in the way of this dream. We provided strategic protection and a stabilizing presence in Saudi Arabia during the first war in Iraq, a war that Usama had lobbied to fight with his victorious Afghan Arab fighters. King Fahd refused, instead accepting an international coalition led by the US. So Usama and his Egyptian strategists turned on us. They handpicked a group of Saudi foot soldiers to carry out the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center with the aim of alienating two longstanding allies.

Osama had it right. His tactic has created tension in the relationship, led to the withdraw of US troops from Saudi Arabia, one of his 'campaign pledges,' and conveyed to the Islamic world the message that the U.S. is hostile not only to Saudis but all Muslims.

The fact is that President Bush understands the stakes, and the national security interests vested in a strong US-Saudi relationship. They may disagree with us on foreign policy; we may disagree with them on domestic policy. But those are signs of strength, not weakness, in our alliance. Enemies do not have a strategic dialogue; allies do.

In his speech on Thursday [Nov. 6], President Bush defied the angry rhetoric of some of his closest advisors in favor of mild praise for Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. "The Saudi government is taking first steps toward reform, including a plan for gradual introduction of elections. By giving the Saudi people a greater role in their own society, the Saudi government can demonstrate true leadership in the region."

There's much more he could have said. The call for elections actually stemmed from an exceptional "National Unity" meeting of members of all Muslim sects, professionals as well as academics, in the Kingdom under the Crown Prince's patronage. In a frank discussion of the Kingdom's future, these individuals pressed hard for -- and won -- elections for the parliamentary body, the Shura Council, whose members now serve by royal appointment.

President Bush could have added that almost two years ago, the Crown Prince took the lead in the peace process, challenging rejectionists by calling on Arab states to pledge recognition and acceptance of Israel under conditions of peace. In March 2002, his initiative won unanimous support at the Arab Summit in Beirut. The President could have mentioned the launch of a human rights organization and a press association in Saudi Arabia in the past six months. He might have added that women can now practice law and open their own firms in the Kingdom. He could have included the fact that the Crown Prince relieved almost 2,000 Imams from their duties because of their extreme rhetoric. And he could have talked about the Kingdom's establishment of financial controls for donations to Islamic charities both inside and outside the kingdom, including a joint effort with the US Treasury Department.

Too bright a spotlight could galvanize opposition and halt progress. But we commend President Bush for encouraging those who are making progress toward representative government in the region. The road ahead will be perilous for all concerned. The focus should be on finding common cause with reformers, whether royals or commoners, not with the extremists.

^^^ Saudi-American Forum ^^^

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- 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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