

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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Scapegoating Saudi Arabia for 9/11

by Ahmad Faruqui

Editor's Note:

The Saudi-American Forum would like to thank Mr. Faruqui for permission to share this Op-ed with our readers. It first appeared in the *Daily Times* of Lahore, Pakistan.

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Ever since the 9/11 attacks, a variety of American writers and talk-show hosts have declared 'open season' on Saudi Arabia. The vilification of Saudi Arabia began in July 2002. Laurent Murawiec, a Rand Corporation analyst, called Saudi Arabia 'the kernel of evil' in a briefing to the Pentagon's Defense Policy Advisory Board that was then headed by arch neo-conservative Richard Perle.

Then in April of this year, former CIA Director James Woolsey spoke at the University of California, Los Angeles. Speaking in glowing terms about US plans to remake the Arab Middle East, Woolsey threw the gauntlet at the leaders of Egypt and Saudi Arabia: "We want you nervous. We want you to realize now, for the fourth time in a hundred years, this country and its allies are on the march and that we are on the side of those whom you - the Mubaraks, the Saudi Royal family - most fear: We're on the side of your own people."

Continuing the theme, Gerald Posner argues in his book, 'Why America Slept,' that there were secret connections between Osama bin Laden and the governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Posner argues that Saudi Arabia had a secret arrangement with Osama to stave off fundamentalists within the kingdom.

Capitalising on this Saudi phobia, Dore Gold, former Israeli representative to the United Nations, published a book bluntly titled, 'Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism.' This book, based largely on information drawn from Israeli intelligence sources, has been accepted as a definitive piece of 'American' writing on Saudi Arabia.

Countering this stereotyping of Saudi Arabia is Ambassador Freeman, who served as Washington's envoy in Riyadh from 1989 to 1992, a span of time that included the Gulf War. Last month, he spoke at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Freeman said that he was reluctant to speak to American audiences about Saudi

Arabia because 'I find that in the audience there are people who can rehearse the details of the educational curriculum of Saudi Arabia and tell me what was allegedly said in which mosque on what date by imam so-and-so.' He noted sadly that people who had never been to Saudi Arabia, did not speak a word of Arabic, and had in fact never even met a Saudi were now considered experts on Saudi Arabia. 'I can say honestly that I didn't know a damn thing about Saudi Arabia before I went there.'

Commenting on the current state of affairs in the US, he observed, 'To say anything kind about Saudi Arabia is to invite a reprimand. To say anything unkind about it is to win points.' He said it had become conventional wisdom that religious education, especially Islamic education in seminaries [madrasahs], leads to violence. Ambassador Freeman said this theory had no basis in fact.

He then proceeded to take on a number of myths related to Osama bin Laden. He said it was commonly held that poverty breeds terrorism, even though Osama comes from a family that is the equivalent of the Rockefellers in Saudi Arabia. He also noted that most of the 15 Saudis who are alleged to have taken part in the attacks of 9/11 came from privileged backgrounds. 'However, even then people argue that poverty causes terrorism. Environmental degradation causes terrorism. Sexism causes terrorism. Whatever your pet rock is, that causes terrorism. Arab culture breeds terrorism. But, in fact, all the evidence seems to me to suggest that the causes of the terrorism are a combination of humiliation and a search for revenge on the one hand along with the lack of alternative weapons - people who have M-16s don't need to blow themselves up in order to strike targets. They can do it at less cost to themselves. So, grievance and desperation seem to me to be at the root of it.' In other words, terrorism is a form of asymmetric warfare akin to guerrilla war.

Freeman said that Americans ought to ask themselves a question or two about who is the real enemy. Noting that Saudi bashing had diminished recently, he said it was not because Americans understand Saudi Arabia better or that they have done any serious thinking about Saudi Arabia or the Middle East but because everyone is preoccupied with the difficulties facing American troops in Iraq.

He said it was very difficult to ask Americans to think rationally about the Middle East, at a time when 70 percent of them believed Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attacks, even though the Bush administration has stated recently that there was no such connection. He added that the US government clearly understood that Saudi Arabia was an ally in the war on terror and the Saudi government clearly understood that it needed the US equally to combat the threat of terrorism in the kingdom. Paradoxically, both governments find themselves defending their relationship against increasingly hostile publics. Freeman stated, 'all of the animosity that now exists in the United States towards Saudi Arabia is fully mirrored in Saudi Arabia in attitudes at the popular level toward the United States.'

He concluded his speech by saying that there was a lot of evidence that the Saudis had engaged in a fair amount of soul searching since the attacks of 9/11. He cited the speech of Crown Prince Abdullah at the Gulf Cooperation Council in December 2001, in which he called on the Arabs to stop blaming other people for their own mistakes and to look within themselves to improve their

situation. He also mentioned the Crown Prince's Beirut initiative, in which he (Crown Prince) had said that Saudi Arabia would be the first country to normalize relations with Israel in the event of an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Youssef Ibrahim, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former correspondent for the New York Times, acknowledges that Americans were genuinely incensed when they were attacked on 9/11 by a group of people of whom the majority were Saudi citizens. But he argues that this does not mean that the Saudi nation is America's enemy.

Ibrahim says that the anti-Saudi campaign has gone, 'as they say in Britain, a bit over the top.' Just as the acts of a few Christian fundamentalists who kill doctors at abortion clinics do not turn all Christian fundamentalist criminals into America's enemies, so the acts of a few extremist Saudis who may have carried out the 9/11 attacks do not turn all Saudis into America's enemies. It is time Americans eschewed emotionalism and began to think rationally about Saudi Arabia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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