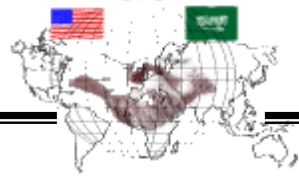


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SAF Item of Interest

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Re-inventing Saudi Arabia: The View from Washington

By John R. Bradley

Editor's Note:

The Saudi-American Forum would like to thank Mr. Bradley for permission to share his article with our readers. This article originally appeared in the *The Daily Star* online on January 17, 2004.

Re-inventing Saudi Arabia: The View from Washington

Trio of books detail corruption of ruling Al-Saud dynasty and US complicity

By John R. Bradley

With America searching to explain the emergence of Al-Qaeda and the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, but more willing to listen to theories about the “clash of civilizations” than to subtler criticism of U.S. foreign policy, there is now a broad consensus that Saudi-backed Wahhabi fundamentalism is behind many of the world’s conflicts and much of the world’s Islamist-inspired terrorism. Who in America has been allowed to forget that 15 of the 19 suicide-hijackers on Sept. 11 were Saudi? From Algeria to Indonesia, Bosnia-Herzegovina to Chechnya, there is, this argument goes, a Saudi connection to almost every conflict in which Islamic jihad has played a role.

The kingdom has rarely been out of the headlines: as bin Laden’s birthplace; as the home of Wahhabi Islam; as a donor to international terror groups through its global network of Islamic charitable organizations; as the unreliable U.S. ally in the “war on terror;” as the reluctant backer of the invasion of Iraq; and, most recently and somewhat incongruously, as the victim of Al-Qaeda terrorism itself in the heart of its capital city on May 12 and Nov. 8 this year, when bombers blew up residential buildings, killed over 50 and wounded hundreds.

Before Sept. 11, for ordinary Americans the Saudi royal family had been the occasional subject of vague comic reference, and periodic scrutiny for its business links to the Bush dynasty, but little more. Afterward, they found themselves confronted with a barrage of articles arguing that the Al-Saud were the cultivators of Al-Qaeda’s anti-Western ideology.

Headlines like "USA-Saudi divide," "With friends like the Saudis, who needs enemies?" and "Saudi Arabia: Peace-seeking image, pro-terrorist reality," were difficult to escape. Michael Moore’s book *Dude: Where’s My Country?* kicks off with a chapter titled "Questions for George of Arabia."

Inevitably, the three books under review, which detail the corruption of the Al-Saud and U.S. complicity in it, also made the bestseller lists. They rode an anti-Saudi wave driven, in part, by anti-Saudi and pro-Israeli figures inside the U.S. administration, but also by countless confused Americans seeking to understand the kingdom that had set so many of its subjects on those fateful flights.

The argument that the Saudi state is at the root of Islamic terrorism, and that the Al-Saud regime has managed to buy off successive U.S. administrations because it sits on a quarter of the world's known oil reserves, is promoted unquestioningly by these books. Robert Baer's *Sleeping with the Devil*, Dore Gold's *Hatred's Kingdom* and Stephen Schwartz' *Two Faces of Islam: the House of Saud from Tradition to Terror* wear their colors on their book-jacket sleeves. Just read the titles.

Predictably, the state-controlled Saudi media has dismissed these three authors as themselves motivated by hatred: Saudis are under attack, the defense has been, by Zionist or pro-Zionist figures eager to undermine a staunch ally of the Palestinians. However, these books do more than pour scorn on the Saudi regime. They represent a historic shift in Washington foreign policy thinking: away from indulging Al-Saud support for a radical religious establishment with whom it has ruled in effective partnership since the kingdom was founded in 1932, and toward a radical reassessment of the "blowback" of the 60-year-old "special relationship." After Sept. 11, it was obvious even to the Saudis that the U.S.-Saudi alliance was at a crossroads.

The central region of Saudi Arabia, Al-Najd, is the stronghold of the Wahhabi sect of Islam, founded by a local, Mohammed bin Abdul-Wahhab, in the 18th century. It is a more austere branch of the Hanbali school, considered the most puritanical of Islam's four recognized schools of thought. The Al-Saud family has historic ties to the Wahhabis and has ruled in partnership with a Wahhabi religious establishment since Ibn Saud unified the country.

Ibn Saud used the religious army known as the *ikhwan* (brotherhood) to conquer the vast swath of mostly desert land now called Saudi Arabia, and was first to pacify by force and afterward unify through indoctrination its historically rebellious peoples. Ibn Saud and the Wahhabis then made a pact: Let the Al-Saud dynasty have the government, national security and foreign policy, the king said, and you can impose a strictly interpreted Islamic social order and run the education and judicial systems.

It was a marriage, say the three authors, made in hell. The Wahhabi ideals of Islamic jihad were still being promoted in mosques even after Sept. 11, both Gold and Schwartz argue, with Gold providing documentary evidence in an appendix. Indeed, with the U.S. brought into the equation in an "oil-for-security" partnership in the 1940s, it became a menage-a-trois fated to spiral into tragedy.

The author of *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism*, Dore Gold, is an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and formerly the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations facts which do little to undermine Saudi paranoia about Zionist conspiracies. The book, moreover, is endorsed by the U.S. hawks Richard Perle and Daniel Pipes.

Schwartz' book appeared at the height of the anti-Saudi media campaign at the end of 2001, and Baer's book, the most recent of the three, was also an international bestseller, proving that the appetite for all things anti-Saudi still rages in America.

Gold's diplomatic activity on behalf of Israel goes back decades, which alone justifies his claim to regional expertise, and his argument is the most well-constructed. If his undeclared agenda is to separate Israel from the internal politics of Arab countries in the region -- "the Arab world has a problem with Israel because of its deeper anger toward the West" rather than the other way around -- he has insightful things to say about Al-Qaeda ideas, at the very least.

Baer is a former CIA operative who has raided in great detail the work of two previous students of the country, Stephen Emerson (*The American House of Saud*) and Said K. Aburish (*The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud*), and added new information of his own, mostly culled from mainstream media.

Schwartz, who serves on the Pro-Israel Bradley Foundation in Washington, has even fewer qualifications to comment, with no direct experience of the Middle East, let alone secretive Saudi Arabia, and his narrative is as disjointed as it is removed from the facts on the ground.

Neither Schwartz, Gold nor Baer has visited Saudi Arabia, a detail Gold and Baer consider unworthy of discussion but which Schwartz tackles head-on: "George Orwell did not learn about Stalinism by going to Moscow; rather, he went to Barcelona, where he witnessed the Communist secret police at work undermining the Spanish left. Similarly, I did not need to go to Riyadh to understand the malign activities of the Arabs, because I learned about them in Sarajevo, where Saudi-backed extremists actively sought to subvert the legitimate cause of the Bosnian Muslims."

Schwartz is not, unfortunately, Orwell, and we are left with a crude ideological summary untainted by personal experience or real evidence, only compounded, as in all three books, by what seems like a general contempt for the Saudi people and the more (un)orthodox manifestations of their religion.

Schwartz goes so far as to endorse a description of the inhabitants of the southern Asir region (from where most of the Sept. 11 hijackers came) as "barbarians." For him, as for Gold and Baer, Islamic terrorism is inherent to Wahhabism, part of the culture if not the doctrine.

Only Baer tries to place its development and growth over the last decades into any kind of historical perspective a perspective which includes CIA-funding of Al-Qaeda genotypes in Afghanistan, and State Department backing for Saudi excesses and authoritarianism which have done so much to fuel Islam-inspired resentment in the region.

The real story of Saudi Arabia now, which none of these books even gets near, is whether the Al-Saud will succeed in marginalizing extremism in its ongoing crackdown on terror, now that the fanatics have finally turned against them; and, if not, who the great majority of the Saudi population -- its youth -- will side with. The other, related question is whether the reform process initiated by the Al-Saud which includes economic liberalization and partial elections -- is

anything but an attempt to buy time and pacify U.S. critics; and, if so, just how much time they have left before an uprising takes place in the name of some kind of Islam, which will finally sweep them aside -- if that is indeed what is to happen.

The welfare state the Al-Saud created with oil money in the 1970s is crumbling. However, as the invasion of Iraq has demonstrated, American foreign policy largely ignores the subtle internal reality of Mideast countries, and when it comes to Saudi Arabia the anti-Al-Saud venom which defines these three books has more U.S. listeners than do those who argue that progressive elements in the Al-Saud need U.S. backing for reforms.

Anti-Saudi sentiment in the U.S. has only added to anti-Western sentiment among Saudis, now at an all-time high and increasingly fueled by the Palestinian issue and the invasion of Iraq. In such circumstances, it might well be that, after a Taleban-style regime is brought to power in Saudi Arabia and the Al-Saud have decamped to Geneva, the right-wing in the U.S. will have to realize that it has committed yet another blunder in its manipulation of Middle East affairs. And these three authors will then have to take some blame for the chaos that ensues.

About the Author

John R. Bradley, formerly managing editor of the Jeddah-based *Arab News*, is the author of the forthcoming *Saudi Arabia Exposed: Princes, Paupers and Puritans in the Wahhabi Kingdom*.

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