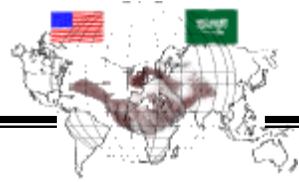


# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

May 7, 2004

## Saudi Arabia: Rethinking Its Soul Muqtedar Khan

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--Terrorism by extreme Wahhabis, for whom the clerics and the royal family are not sufficiently Islamic, is again forging a new social contract between the religious and the ruling elites. But this time the two will not come together to establish Wahhabism, but to dismantle it.--

Saudi Arabia: Rethinking Its Soul  
Muqtedar Khan

I have just returned from Saudi Arabia where I attended an international conference on terrorism (April 20-22) at the Imam Muhammad University in Riyadh, the global headquarters of Wahhabism.

Imam Muhammad University is the factory where Wahhabism is produced and serviced in Saudi Arabia. A large number of Saudi clerics are educated and trained here. Nearly twenty thousand students study the core teachings of Abdul Wahhab, the founder of the Saudi Salafi movement, which is sometimes pejoratively (and often popularly) referred to as Wahhabi.

In my previous visits in 1992, 1997 and 2000, I had found the Saudis to be proud of what they had become. They had covered a distance of nearly seven centuries on the back of oil in less than thirty years. They were arrogant and cocky about their place in the Muslim world and on the global stage.

That seems to have changed. While some are belligerent, even bellicose, most appear confused, unsure, hesitant, apologetic and willing to accommodate. The latter category is everywhere: students, political elite, scholars, businessmen, professionals and even cab drivers. They are perplexed by acts of terrorism within Saudi Arabia and perpetrated by Saudis.

For a society, which was so remarkably free from a culture of self-criticism, I found today's Saudi Arabia more willing to listen. That is the good news I have.

The conference itself revealed the extent and depth of rethinking taking place within Saudi Arabia. I was extremely critical of Wahhabism as well as Saudi policies in closed-door sessions and found the Saudi scholars and the various ministers who were in attendance, open and willing

to listen; sometimes they agreed, sometimes they appeared baffled, but never offended. Some even encouraged me to speak more.

There were of course the usual number of sycophants and apologists, but even they seemed apprehensive and willing to question their own beliefs. Several American and British scholars criticized the lack of critical thinking and openness in Saudi education and we were all pleasantly surprised when the Saudis responded by asking for help in introducing critical thinking in their pedagogy.

I ran into a member of the Majlis-e-Shura (the Saudi pretense for a parliament) at a TV studio where I recorded a one-hour interview on Islamic democracy. He berated me for not being more critical than I was! I listened to him lambast the university and Wahhabi clerics for being the source of the problem behind terrorism in Saudi Arabia. "All they teach," he said, "is to hate those who are different." "We are a country that is economically in the twentieth century and intellectually in the fourteenth century." I advised him to speak to his country and King as he spoke to me, as often as possible and as loudly as possible.

The House of Saud has long relied on the Wahhabi movement for domestic control and legitimacy and on the United States for international security. But after September 11th, these two allies of Saudi Arabia are being perceived as antagonistic. The House of Saud cannot have both as allies anymore.

It is now becoming apparent that the House of Saud has chosen America over Wahhabism. It is determined to maintain its relations with the US and is actively seeking to reform Wahhabism and reconstitute the domestic basis of its rule.

The Saudi society is composed of two types of elite, the conservative-religious and the liberal-political/economic. For decades the latter has focused on retaining political power and exploiting the black gold. In exchange for freedom to become rich, this elite allowed the religious-conservative elite the freedom to preach. Without a culture of internal criticism, without an engaging alternate elite, without the emergence of self-critical and reflective voices within the religious establishment, the spectre of Wahhabism has grown and now is out of the hands of those who nurtured it.

Wahhabi ideas are now so deeply embedded that neither the ruling elite, who had abdicated their normative responsibilities until now, and the religious elite who are afraid of what they have created, can rein it in. Any attempts at sudden reforms may upset the delicate balance within the society and empower those who have decided to use terrorism to replace both types of elite.

Saudi Arabia needs to push both social and political reforms without undermining domestic and regional stability. It must fast-track its social reform and maintain a steady progress towards political reform. The promise of municipal elections must be kept and the momentum towards more representative and accountable governance must be sustained.

It is time that Saudi Arabia stopped looking backwards for guidance and started looking forwards. Those who drive by looking in the rear-view mirror only are destined to crash.

Terrorism by extreme Wahhabis, for whom the clerics and the royal family are not sufficiently Islamic, is once again forging a new social contract between the religious and the ruling elite. This time the House of Saud and the House of Abdul Wahhab will not come together to establish Wahhabism, but to dismantle Wahhabism and replace it with a self-critical, open, more moderate, and softer form of Salafi tradition.

But before that can happen, the moderates within the religious establishment must prevail over the extremists and be prepared to make significant compromises — maybe even deviations — in the Wahhabi doctrine and in Wahhabi institutions. The extremists will then be isolated and can be fought both in the realm of doctrine as well as on the battlefield.

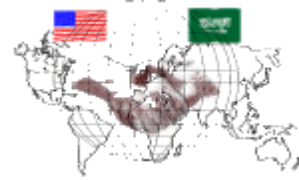
The staging of the terrorism conference at the Imam Muhammad University and the seriousness of the dialogue, its high degree of openness and criticism, have definitely raised expectations. Let us hope that Saudi Arabia can make the transition without trauma.

[Reprinted with permission.]

Dr Muqtedar Khan is a Non-resident fellow at Brookings Institution. He is also the Chair, Political Science, at Adrian College in Michigan. He is the author of *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom* (Amana, 2002) and his website is [www.ijtihad.org](http://www.ijtihad.org)

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