

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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Threats to U.S.-Saudi Ties

By Dr. James J. Zogby
President, Arab American Institute

Editor's Note:

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Arab American Institute
<http://www.aaiusa.org/>

Threats to U.S.-Saudi Ties **By Dr. James J. Zogby** **President, Arab American Institute**

Continued reports of violence against Westerners in Saudi Arabia has once again thrust the Kingdom back into the news.

Spokesman Adel Al-Jubeir held a widely covered press conference detailing a multi-pronged Saudi offensive against the terrorist threat. But on television and radio talk shows, a less informed political discussion unfolded.

Prominently featured on these programs have been "think tank" "experts" and authors of best-selling books on Saudi Arabia -- most of whom have never even visited the country. On one occasion, I appeared in one such debate responding to an Israeli-American woman who was described as a "Middle East expert" at a prominent right-wing think tank. She soberly gave her analysis that "this was the beginning of the end." The House of Saud, she predicted, was about to fall -- within the next 24 months.

"What should the U.S. do?" she was asked. Her response was that we needed to either immediately develop alternative energy supplies or find a way to "secure our oil," presumably by wresting it from the control of the "extremists," whom she predicted, were poised to take power.

This would all be laughable, if it were not so dangerous. The public discourse about Saudi Arabia has spun out of control.

The attacks of 9-11 exposed a deep rift in the U.S. understanding of Saudi Arabia and its people. Because enemies of the U.S.-Saudi relationship were quicker to respond and because the need for information was so great, it was they who were able to drive the media and policy debate -- defining the country of Saudi Arabia, its people, and its religion.

Even now, as Saudi Arabia has become more engaged in the effort to communicate with Americans, the damage done during the last two and a half years has taken its toll. A recent study of U.S. attitudes toward Saudi Arabia records both good and bad news and some important lessons that could prove helpful in the effort to change attitudes in the U.S.

The good news is that despite continued U.S. negative attitudes toward Saudi Arabia, because they are based almost completely on "received knowledge," these views are quite soft and can quickly change given the right effort.

Because the vast majority of Americans have no direct experiential knowledge about Saudis, when 9-11 occurred and was immediately followed with a barrage of misinformation about the country, they had no ability to filter out and reject false ideas. For too many Americans, the only face they were able to put on Saudi Arabia were the images of the 15 Saudis who were part of the group of 19. And when asked in open ended questions "what is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear about Saudi Arabia" -- a majority respond with "war," "danger," "terror," or "a bad place." When asked to tell the "first good thing that comes to mind when they hear Saudi Arabia" -- almost one half say "nothing."

The good news, however, is that those negative views do not hold for those Americans who know Saudis or the country of Saudi Arabia. Americans who have some direct experience with the people or the country, have significantly better views and have, therefore, been less impacted by the negative propaganda than other Americans.

The other good news is that because most Americans want to be open and fair, they actually appear to know that their negative views may not be correct. Over three-quarters of all Americans say they want to or need to know more about Saudi Arabia. In particular, they indicated that they want to know Saudi people, especially Saudi women and young people. There is in all of this an important lesson that should be heeded.

In this time of threat and crisis, Saudi Arabia's best asset in changing attitudes is its people.

Another problem revealed in the study is that the most disturbing shift in attitudes is not the decline in overall public opinion but the transformation in elite opinion about Saudi Arabia. This is a more difficult problem to solve, but it is one that must be addressed.

In years past, despite the ebbs and flows of general public opinion, Saudi Arabia could count on the consensus that existed among elites, of both the left and right, that the relationships between the U.S. and the Kingdom were strong and necessary. While the Administration continues to maintain this position, many elements in the new Republican foreign policy establishment have been leading the charge against Saudi Arabia. The same is true on the liberal side, as well. Leading Democrats, for example, criticize Saudi Arabia, accusing it of both funding and inciting

extremism and terror. They also criticize the Administration for being "too cozy" in dealing with Saudi Arabia and pledge to make the U.S. "less dependent" on imported oil.

While one strategy must be developed to help change attitudes in the broader public, another strategy should be focused on reaching into the institutions of the foreign policy elites and other opinion shapers in order to engage them in an open discussion on developments in Saudi Arabia, the realities of Saudi society, and the efforts being made toward reform in the social, economic, political, and religious spheres. This can only be done through more social interaction and developing personal relationships and the production of massive amounts of new and relevant information.

The relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia is too important to allow it to fall victim to the designs of the terrorists and the anti-Saudi ideologues who seek disruption and confrontation. The problem here, is, of course, compounded by the extremely negative attitudes toward the U.S. that exist among Saudis. Elites, in both worlds, who recognize the danger and the need to confront it head on, have undertaken important new initiatives in an effort to bring sanity and understanding back into our separate and combined political discourses. More, not less, should be done. The response must be as great as the challenge we both face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

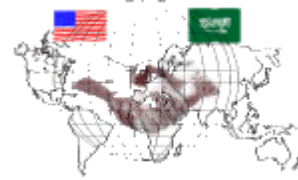
Dr. James J. Zogby is founder and president of the Arab American Institute (AAI), a Washington, D.C.-based organization which serves as the political and policy research arm of the Arab American community. Since 1985, Dr. Zogby and AAI have led Arab American efforts to secure political empowerment in the U.S. Through voter registration, education and mobilization, AAI has moved Arab Americans into the political mainstream.

For the past three decades, Dr. Zogby has been involved in a full range of Arab American issues. A co-founder and chairman of the Palestine Human Rights Campaign in the late 1970s, he later co-founded and served as the Executive Director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. In 1982, he co-founded Save Lebanon, Inc., a private non-profit, humanitarian and non-sectarian relief organization which funds health care for Palestinian and Lebanese victims of war, and other social welfare projects in Lebanon. In 1985, Zogby founded AAI.

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The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - 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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