

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

July 1, 2004

John Kerry's Saudi Sucker Punch

By Ashraf Fahim

Editor's Note:

This article originally appeared in *Asia Times* on June 12, 2004 and is reprinted here with permission.

John Kerry's Saudi Sucker Punch

By Ashraf Fahim

Late in Senator John Kerry's May 27 speech in Seattle explaining his national security strategy, he did what he does in nearly every foreign-policy speech that he gives -- excoriate Saudi Arabia for supporting terrorism and President George W. Bush for supporting the Saudis and failing to end America's dependence on foreign oil.

"If we are serious about energy independence, then we can finally be serious about confronting the role of Saudi Arabia in financing and providing ideological support for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups," said Kerry, neatly eliding several election hot-button issues. The presumptive Democratic candidate for the presidency went on to promise that he would impose "tough financial sanctions" and "name and shame" nations that launder money for terrorists. "To put it simply," he warned, "we will not do business as usual with Saudi Arabia."

Saudi-bashing has been a national sport in the United States ever since September 11 and revelations that not only was former Saudi national Osama bin Laden the mastermind behind the attacks, but 15 of the 19 hijackers had Saudi citizenship. With effortless demagoguery, the Kerry campaign has sought to capitalize on this, playing to Saudi bashers of all political stripes by promising to do what the Bush administration, with its long ties to the House of Saud, hasn't: confront the supposed real villains of the "war on terror" and magically "free America from its dangerous dependence on Middle East oil."

There is only one problem with Kerry's strategy: he may actually win the election. And on his first day in office, reality is going to take a hefty bite out of his rhetoric as he grapples with the strategic necessity of the longstanding U.S.-Saudi alliance and the complexity of the situation inside the kingdom, which is presently reeling from attacks on foreigners and its security services. These realizations could force some embarrassing backtracking.

Bipartisan Scapegoating

John Kerry's pillorying of the Saudis is certainly good politics. From the airwaves of *Air America*, the new left-wing radio station, to the pages of the neo-conservative *Weekly Standard*, and in a raft of books with titles like *Hatred's Kingdom*, by Ariel Sharon's adviser Dore Gold, and *Sleeping with the Devil*, by former Central Intelligence Agency agent Robert Baer, the Saudis are lambasted as tyrannical, misogynistic, clandestine purveyors of terror.

Kerry has scored points with the pro-Israel right, who resent the Saudis for supporting anti-Israel groups. "The Saudi regime openly and enthusiastically supports Palestinian terrorist groups, such as Hamas," he wrote in the Jewish weekly, the *Forward*. "The Saudis cannot pick and choose among terrorist groups." And he has pleased the left by attacking the financial ties between the House of Bush and the House of Saud and making insinuations about the infamous charter flight that spirited the bin Laden brood out of America after September 11. Finally, he has serenaded the middle by blaming high gas prices on the "the Saudi-George Bush gasoline tax," and Bush's failure to strong-arm the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Nations, while repeating rumors of an election deal between Bush and the Saudis to lower the price of oil.

Threatening the Golden Goose

Though politically expedient, Kerry's attacks on the U.S.-Saudi relationship are ill-considered. Firstly, the kind of wholesale re-evaluation of the U.S.-Saudi alliance he suggests is simply unrealistic. In an era of increasing demand for oil and depleting supplies, the United States and world economies will be dependent on oil, particularly from the Gulf, for decades. Saudi Arabia currently provides 18% of the crude consumed by the United States and commands 25% of the world's proven reserves. With two million barrels of surplus production capacity, only Saudi Arabia can keep prices stable, and it has done so during numerous crises -- most recently after September 11 and during the Iraq war. The United States is thus poorly positioned to tinker with its alliance to the present regime.

While some have speculated that the actual motivation for the invasion of Iraq was to supplant Saudi supplies with Iraq's prodigious reserves, the dilapidated state of Iraq's infrastructure and the current security situation render such a plan moot.

Kerry does have an ambitious plan to break this dependency relationship by increasing fuel efficiency and investing in alternative energy. "As president, I will not stand by and allow America to be held hostage to Saudi oil," he has written. "We can unleash the spirit of American ingenuity to meet this challenge." His as-yet loosely fleshed out scheme does not fully kick in until 2020, however, and analysts are split on whether it will be sufficient to break America's dependence on foreign oil. What is certain is that no amount of "ingenuity" is going to break the dependence of the world economy, on which U.S. prosperity hinges, on fossil fuels any time soon.

Likewise, Kerry's threat to "shut [Saudi Arabia] out of the U.S. financial system" if they don't end alleged support for al-Qaeda is far-fetched. "The Saudis keep around a trillion dollars in U.S. banks and another trillion on the stock market," wrote Baer in the *Atlantic Monthly*. "If they were suddenly to withdraw all their holdings in this country, the effect .. would be devastating." The fine print of Kerry's remarks suggests he is cognizant of this reality. "The truth is that, for the moment, we have deep and inescapable energy ties -- corporate and energy dependence," he

has said. This admission makes his bluster seem all the more rash.

Kerry's sound-bite rhetoric also trivializes the seriousness of the crisis unfolding inside the kingdom. A low-intensity guerilla war has left the House of Saud teetering, with the extremists feeding off popular discontent with an authoritarian royal house that has been unwilling or unable to staunch the excesses of its 30,000 members, reverse an economic tailspin, or separate itself from unpopular U.S. policies in the region. And the May 29 Khobar attacks, in which 22 foreign oil workers were killed, demonstrate an ominous strategic premeditation to the militant operations that have swept the kingdom.

While both Kerry and the Bush administration's calls for reform in the kingdom have centered on the need to curb "extremism," neither has echoed the calls of Saudi reformers, liberal and conservative alike, on the need for genuine political power-sharing. An awareness that genuine democracy will bring to the fore the priorities of Saudi rather than U.S. interests may be behind this reluctance. Some, though not all, of the organized Saudi opposition is conservative Islamist in nature and deeply critical of the royal family for its alliance with the United States.

In any event, given the unpopularity of U.S. policies inside the kingdom, the internal debate on Saudi Arabia's future is not one that the United States should lend conspicuous voice to. So for better or worse, America's position in Saudi Arabia is married to the future of the House of Saud for the present. It is a corrosive embrace, to be sure, but necessary to maintain a consistent ally in a critical region, especially when the alternatives are so unpredictable. If a president Kerry were to ramp up the rhetoric, he would risk destabilizing a regime whose collapse could cause a worldwide recession.

Kerry's critique of the Bush administration's ties to the Saudi royal family is also somewhat disingenuous. The Saudi gravy train, an endless, multibillion-dollar carousel of kickbacks from "recycled" oil sales, arms shipments and industrial contracts facilitated by companies like the Carlyle group and Halliburton, has benefited Kerry's Democratic colleagues as much as the Republican elite. "Almost every Washington figure worth mentioning has been involved with companies doing major deals with Saudi Arabia," wrote Baer.

Kerry of Arabia

There is, of course, a grain of truth in Kerry's assorted critiques of the Saudi government, even though he unfairly fails to credit their efforts to regulate Saudi charities or clamp down on the conservative religious establishment. But, there is nevertheless something unbecoming in a candidate who has presented himself as the anti-Bush continuously laying into a convenient foreign scapegoat. Intentionally or not, Kerry's attacks play heavily into racist stereotypes of duplicitous, intolerant Arabs who spend their leisure time teaching their children to hate.

The liberal Massachusetts senator seems genuinely oblivious to how patronizing his tone toward the Arab world has sounded. "We must make avoidance of a clash of civilizations the work of our generation," he told the Council on Foreign Relations, "engaging in an effort to bring to the table a new face of the Arab world -- Muslim clerics, mullahs, imams and secular leaders." In addition to offering to promote acceptable Arab and Muslim leaders, the senator has lectured the Arabs on their obligation to "create" a "credible" Palestinian negotiating partner for Israel.

Likewise, his demands that that the Saudis alter their textbooks and fire "extremist" imams not only oversimplifies the root causes of terrorism but echoes the arrogance of the Bush administration. "We need more than promises," from the Saudis, Kerry has written. "We need to see the new textbooks. We need to hear what the government-financed clerics are preaching."

Indeed, Kerry's entire Middle East policy is shaping up to be as one-sided and tin-eared to Arab sensibilities as the Bush administration's. While the candidate has presented himself as the man to repair America's image abroad and rebuild her alliances, his feeble critique of Bush's Iraq policy and giddy love affair with Ariel Sharon is unlikely to win back the disillusioned Arab masses.

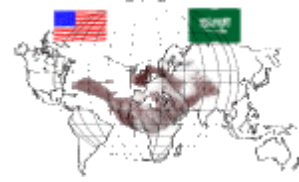
As the campaign rolls towards its climax in November, candidate Kerry continues to perfect an anti-Saudi routine that offers a cost-free shot to Bush's solar plexus. If he really intends to win the race, however, he should consider pulling that particular punch. Whatever the merits of his arguments, he risks oversimplifying a complex strategic conundrum and scapegoating a loyal ally. A president Kerry could end up repeating Bush's Iraq blunder by painting the United States into a rhetorical corner in which its vital interests are at stake and in which it has no obvious strategy for success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashraf Fahim is a freelance writer on Middle Eastern affairs based in New York and London.

ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM

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.

The Saudi-American Forum is a FREE service provided to the public by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. The Forum consists of a web site and an email information service.

Visit the web site at: <http://www.saudi-american-forum.org>

CONTACT INFORMATION

You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the Forum through use of the "Feedback" form on the website or through direct email to the Forum at: info@Saudi-American-Forum.org

Thank you for your support of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the Saudi-American Forum.