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Al Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia

Osama bin Laden had ambitious plans to follow up the attacks of September 11, 2001. He and his top aides expected that an invasion of Afghanistan would follow their "Manhattan Raid" and welcomed it as a chance to ensnare the United States in what they hoped would become a bloody quagmire. Washington's invasion of Iraq in early 2003 offered bin Laden more than he could ever wish for: the chance of a second U.S. quagmire. Bin Laden also had a third front in mind: his own homeland in Saudi Arabia, where he would wage a terrorist campaign with the intention of driving the United States and its British allies out of Islam's holy land and of toppling the "apostate" Saudi monarchy.

The war in Saudi Arabia is being waged over the biggest stakes of all: control over Islam's holy cities and oil wealth. Yet, having withdrawn most of its forces from Saudi Arabia in August 2003 after al Qaeda began its war, the United States remains on the margins. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia is waging an aggressive counterattack. How has bin Laden implemented his vision thus far, and how effective has Saudi Arabia's counterterrorist campaign been in stopping him? Has the U.S. military withdrawal from Saudi Arabia had any effect on bin Laden's plan for Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle East? What effect has the war had on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, especially toward its U.S. alliance?

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Bin Laden's Plan for Saudi Arabia

Before September 11, 2001, bin Laden had been careful not to carry out violent operations in his own country. Although he endorsed the attacks on U.S. military troops in Riyadh in 1995 and in Khobar in 1996, he made clear that he had no direct involvement in either operation, and no evidence suggests that he did. Perhaps he did not want to open a campaign at home prematurely, before his cadres were strong enough, or was just eager to keep a low profile inside the kingdom so he could continue to raise money and find recruits there. His ambitions changed, however, after the attacks of September 11.

The unexpected swiftness of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and its rapid toppling of the Taliban regime were partly responsible for changing bin Laden's tactics. After the fall of Kandahar in 2002, several hundred Saudi members of al Qaeda returned to the kingdom and began working with sleeper cells that had been operating there covertly for several years at bin Laden's direction. The extent of al Qaeda's underground infrastructure in the kingdom came as an ugly surprise to the Saudi authorities and U.S. intelligence services. There had long been suspicions of a significant al Qaeda presence, but no one anticipated its reach, capabilities, or influence within Saudi society.

Bin Laden previewed the insurrection in the kingdom in a major address to the Muslim world on February 14, 2003, coinciding with the eve of the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq.[1] The address came just a few days after his "Letter to the Iraqi People," in which he urged Iraqis to get ready to fight the invaders. Bin Laden was evidently preparing for an epic battle on two fronts simultaneously.

Much of bin Laden's sermon was a review of contemporary regional history from the familiar al Qaeda formula laid out by his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Bin Laden accused the House of Saud of betraying the Ottoman Empire to the British in World War I and opening the door to Western ("Crusader") and Jewish ("Zionist") domination of the Muslim world (*Ummah*). Moreover, he argued that the goal of the Crusaders is to divide the Saudi kingdom into smaller states to make it easier to control and accused the Saudi family of complicity in this endeavor. The goal of the Crusader invasion of Iraq and of the Crusader military forces in the Arabian Peninsula, bin Laden said, is to consolidate Greater Israel, which will incorporate "large parts of Iraq and Egypt within its borders, as well as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the whole of Palestine and a large part of Saudi Arabia."[2] He argued that the Saudis must be overthrown for many reasons but above all because they have betrayed the Palestinian cause to "Jews and Americans." Bin Laden railed against then–Crown Prince Abdallah for his proposal at the Beirut Arab summit in March 2002 suggesting a permanent peace agreement with Israel by all the Arabs if Israel withdrew to the 1967 lines, an act which "betrayed the Ummah."

Bin Laden admitted that this will not be an easy task given U.S. support for the Saudis but reminded his listeners that no one anticipated the fall of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The United States has been defeated previously, he noted, in Lebanon in 1982 and in Somalia in 1993. The mujahideen have inflicted many blows on the Crusaders: in Aden, Yemen in 1992; Riyadh in 1995; Khobar in 1996; Tanzania and Kenya in 1998; Aden again in 2000; and most spectacularly in New York and Washington in 2001. Bin Laden did not claim credit for all these operations but clearly took credit for the September 11 attacks, which he called a "brave and beautiful operation, the likes of which humanity has never seen before destroying the idols of America" and striking "the very heart of the Ministry of Defense and the American economy." That operation "in Manhattan was a result of the unjust policies of the American government on the Palestinian issue," he said. He concluded that "America is a super power ... built on the foundations of a straw."

> Bin Laden was simultaneously preparing for an epic battle in Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

At the end of the sermon, bin Laden "brings you all—and those in Palestine particularly—the good news that your mujahedeen brothers are sticking to the path of jihad to target the Jews and Americans and that the Mombassa operation was just the beginning of the deluge." This is a reference to an al Qaeda attack in Kenya on an Israeli-owned hotel on November 28, 2002, in which 10 Kenyans and three Israelis were killed by a car bomb. An attempt was also made to shoot down an Israeli chartered passenger jet at the nearby airport, en route to Ben-Gurion Airport in Israel, using a surface-to-air missile. His message was clear: the war to overthrow the apostate Saudi monarchy is part of the struggle to liberate Palestine.

Spring 2003: Enter al Qaeda's Insurgency

Bin Laden ordered the start of the uprising at roughly the same time that the United States invaded Iraq. Subsequent accounts from the al Qaeda leadership in the kingdom suggest that they felt the order was premature and that they needed more time to prepare. Bin Laden, however, was determined to initiate the uprising against the House of Saud immediately in the spring of 2003.[3] Senior Saudi officials privately believe the timing of the order from bin Laden reflected his sense that the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq offered a unique opportunity to overthrow the Saudi monarchy by appealing to the intense anti-American reaction it had provoked among the Saudi population. Al Qaeda members in the kingdom may have also felt that the Iraq invasion

and fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist government would be a good precursor to their own insurrection. One al Qaeda member wrote a short piece in 2003 entitled "The Future of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula after the Fall of Baghdad," in which he argued that the collapse of the Ba'athist government in Iraq would be followed by the fall of all the monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula.[4]

The vast majority of the al Qaeda operatives have been Saudis themselves.

The war's first terrorist act in the kingdom came less than three months later on May 12, when multiple suicide car bombs detonated in several housing compounds in Riyadh used by U.S. and other Western contractors working in the city. Seven Americans were among the 34 killed, and another 200 people were wounded.[5] What followed would be the longest and most violent sustained internal struggle against the Saudi monarchy and establishment since the founding of the modern Saudi state in the early years of the twentieth century. Not even the uprising in the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 was as serious of a threat to the House of Saud as the al Qaeda challenge. The insurgency was well organized and widespread.

Gun battles between Saudi security forces and bands of al Qaeda operatives became almost daily incidents in the next few months. Clashes occurred in Jeddah, Khobar, Mecca, Riyadh, Taif, Yanbu, and other cities and towns across the country. Al Qaeda used car bombs to target Western facilities and kidnapped and murdered individual Westerners. Occasional episodes of relative calm, when it appeared the security forces had defeated al Qaeda, were followed by new eruptions of violence. Terrorists assassinated senior officers of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), and even the MOI's inverted pyramid headquarters in Riyadh was targeted for attack. One of the most violent attacks was on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah on December 6, 2004. Nine people were killed when an al Qaeda cell penetrated the consulate grounds and almost succeeded in capturing a young female U.S. diplomat.

The vast majority of the al Qaeda operatives have been Saudis, although they also have had the help of Arab volunteers from Yemen and elsewhere.[6] Many of the Saudis had fought earlier in Afghanistan and had experience in combat. They seemed to have access to almost unlimited supplies of weapons and explosives and a large network of safe houses and hideouts. Not enough is known about the organizational structure or membership of al Qaeda within the kingdom. For example, it is still not clear whether it is a unified and coherent organization or a network of autonomous cells. There is also no reliable estimate of the number of individuals operating in Saudi Arabia; some speculate that there are no more than 1,000 to 2,000, while others suggest much

higher or lower figures.[7] Since 2006, the attacks have subsided somewhat, but the Saudis report continued al Qaeda plots for spectacular terrorism. As recently as December 2007, for example, the kingdom reported foiling a major plot to disrupt the hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.[8]

The Kingdom's Response

Saudi Arabia is not inexperienced in dealing with terrorism. In November 1979, for example, the government violently put down the Grand Mosque uprising with French military help. The uprising was staged by Juhayman al-Utaybi, a charismatic preacher, and his group of followers who called for the abolition of radio, television, professional soccer, and employment of women outside the home and urged the overthrow of the royal family for its alleged corruption and close relationship with infidel powers. On November 13, 1995, terrorists struck a joint U.S.-Saudi training facility in Riyadh and killed five Americans. A few months later, a truck bomb exploded outside Khobar Towers, an apartment complex housing 2,000 members of the U.S. armed forces. The explosion killed 19 U.S. servicepeople and wounded another 372 people. Yet, these were just preludes to the new level of terrorist violence after the September 11 attacks.

After the shock of the first rounds of the 2003 insurgency subsided, the House of Saud mounted a very effective and sophisticated counteroffensive. Lists of the top al Qaeda operatives were published in the press, and secret police and other security forces went after them relentlessly. The results were impressive: many on the most wanted lists were either captured or killed in shootouts across the kingdom. The lists were updated periodically to take note of new operatives and the killing of experienced ones.

At the same time, the kingdom launched an extensive effort to paint the al Qaeda menace as a perversion of Islam and to rally the Wahhabi establishment against the threat. Wahhabism is the strict and fundamentalist Islamic ideology that the Saudi family has championed and applied in the kingdom since the eighteenth century. Senior Wahhabi clerics denounced attacks on the Saudi nation by bin Laden and his followers, and some of those captured were turned against al Qaeda by clerics working for the monarchy. The MOI, led by Prince Nayef, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, run by Sheikh Salih Bin Abd al Aziz al-Sheikh, a descendant of the original founder of Wahhabism, made extensive use of clerical support to fight al Qaeda. They set up a reeducation and rehabilitation program to turn captured terrorists into peaceful citizens. The two ministries sent the captured terrorists to special camps where pro-regime clerics engaged them in extensive discussion to persuade them of the errors of supporting al Qaeda.

At first, the reeducation program was a secret. Over time, however, the Saudis found it so successful that they made its existence public. Approximately 100 sheikhs and scholars form the nucleus of the program, aided by another 30 or so psychologists who help with counseling. Since its inception in 2004, roughly 2,000 prisoners have gone through the process; and 700 have renounced their jihadist beliefs, been released, and returned to their families. Another 1,000 are still in the program, while 1,400 refused to participate and are in regular Saudi jails. Less than a dozen of those released have been found to have returned to the al Qaeda camp.[9]

The results of the Saudi government's counteroffensive were impressive.

On October 1, 2007, a prominent sheikh by the name of Abd Al-Aziz bin Abdallah al-Sheikh issued a fatwa (religious edict) prohibiting Saudi youth from engaging in jihad abroad. In his fatwa, he stated that setting forth to wage jihad without authorization by the ruler is a serious transgression. Young Saudis who do so are being misled by suspicious elements who are exploiting them to accomplish their own aims and who are actually causing serious damage to Saudi Arabia, Islam, and the Muslim community.[10] This statement was intended to undermine bin Laden's appeal inside the kingdom.

The Saudi counteroffensive against al Qaeda has produced significant results. The Saudis foiled more than two dozen attacks and killed or captured more than 260 operatives, including all but one of the 26 most wanted by 2006. On February 24, 2006, a major attack in the Eastern Province on the Abqaiq oil processing center, the facility where 60 percent of Saudi exports are handled, failed when the attackers were killed by Saudi guards. Had it succeeded, oil prices would have soared. One estimate suggests they could have gone as high as $200 a barrel.[11] In late November 2007, the Saudi authorities managed to arrest 208 suspected terrorists in six cells and thwart several planned attacks in the kingdom's largest terrorist sweep to date.[12] Among others arrested were up to 112 people whom the MOI said were in a cell responsible for recruiting Saudis to be trained with insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan so that they could later return and initiate attacks within the kingdom.[13]

Saudi Arabia has also taken steps to deny the channeling of terrorist funding through the country. The monitoring of significant bank deposits and transfers is now far more comprehensive. Charitable giving, formerly a key means for transferring monies to armed groups, is much more closely circumscribed, with one notable organization eventually prevented from operating. The Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency is more efficient than a number of other Gulf Cooperation Council countries' central banks in following financial trails

and in limiting the potential for monies to be transferred out of the country for nefarious purposes. Despite these measures to stem the flow of Saudi money for terrorist activities, reports indicate that some private Saudi citizens are financially aiding Sunni insurgents in Iraq and much of the money is used to buy weapons, including shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles. Yet, Saudi officials have vehemently denied that Saudi money is being used to fund the armed Sunni insurgency in Iraq.

A major element of the Saudis' success has been cyber warfare. They have targeted al Qaeda operatives who use the Internet to communicate both among cells inside the kingdom and to cells outside, including the leadership in Pakistani hideouts. In March 2007, for example, three al Qaeda webmasters were arrested for their roles in the online jihadist community. They had been using password-protected Web sites to communicate with other al Qaeda groups and cells in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan, as well as within the kingdom itself. Nevertheless, their arrests had only a limited impact on the al Qaeda and jihadist Internet community. Specialists in the Internet war note that jihadist sites are growing rapidly in the kingdom, outpacing the monarchy's success.[14]

The Saudi authorities are deeply concerned about the return of Saudis who were aiding the Iraqi insurgency and are working on providing better intelligence on Iraq and border control. The Saudi decision to build a double-track barbed fence fitted with remote sensors and thermal cameras along its border with Iraq reflects this concern. According to Nayef, the proposed fence will have 135 gates, all monitored with ultraviolet technology to prevent the infiltration of terrorists and to halt the smuggling of arms, drugs, and persons into the kingdom.[15]

The Saudi Front and al Qaeda's Wider War

Following the start of al Qaeda's insurgency in Saudi Arabia in 2003, bin Laden continued to provide it with direction and inspiration, although it became increasingly difficult for him to communicate directly with the al Qaeda cells inside the kingdom due to the effectiveness of the Saudi counteroffensive. In January 2004, he provided a long analysis of the faults of the monarchs of the Arabian Peninsula in a message urging the peoples of the Muslim world to "resist the new Rome."[16] He catalogued the betrayal of the Saudi and Hashemite families, who supported the British in World War I, and mocked the Saudi and Persian Gulf leaders for having to ask for U.S. soldiers to defend them from Iraq in 1990, a reflection of his effort to persuade the Saudi leadership to let him do the job instead. He linked the battle against the occupation of Iraq to the struggles inside the kingdom against the House of Saud as one continuous battle to defeat the Crusader-Jewish conspiracy.

Another call to depose the "tyrants" came in December 2004. In this message, bin Laden wrote a letter to the "Muslims in Saudi Arabia in particular and Muslims elsewhere generally" with a blistering attack on the Saudi monarchy.[17] He accused the Saudi leadership of having colluded with the Bush administration to invade Iraq, citing Ambassador Prince Bandar's meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney. The battle in Iraq and the battle in Saudi Arabia are all one conflict in his messages.

The Saudi and Iraqi conflicts became increasingly merged on the ground as well. Saudi Arabia and Iraq have a long and porous border, and according to Nayef, around 900 Saudis are believed to be operationally active in Iraq and may return to conduct operations inside the kingdom as of November 2006.[18] Prince Turki, a former Saudi intelligence chief, noted as early as mid-July 2004 the connections between the two. "Much of the equipment we have seized during raids on al Qaeda cells in the [k]ingdom has come from Iraq.… [A]s a result of the Iraq war, it is easier for al Qaeda to sell their point of view to potential recruits in the [k]ingdom. Al Qaeda has become stronger and more active since the Iraq conflict."[19]

At the same time, more and more Saudis began traveling to Iraq to join the insurgency there and fight alongside bin Laden's protégé, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, before he was killed in June 2006, and al Qaeda in Iraq. Some Saudi opposition sources claim that up to 5,000 Saudis participated in the insurgency through October 2003.[20] U.S. officials estimated in 2007 that at least 45 percent of the foreign fighters in Iraq came from Saudi Arabia and were the most frequent foreign fighters involved in suicide attacks.[21] Iraqi sources reported that nearly one-half of the foreign detainees in Iraq were Saudi citizens.[22] The majority fought with the Zarqawi group.

Al Qaeda has also benefited in Iraq from the support of parts of the Wahhabi establishment in the kingdom. If some clerics were critical of the al Qaeda attacks on Saudi targets, others were openly supportive of Zarqawi and al Qaeda in Iraq. Some Wahhabi authorities provided religious blessing for attacks on the Shi'a and on Shi'a shrines.[23] Others organized conferences to rally support for the Sunni insurgency and to highlight the threat posed by the Shi'a in Iraq and by Iran. A group of three dozen Saudi clerics issued a statement in December 2006 supporting the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and urging all Sunnis to back it. The statement denounced the occupation as a joint conspiracy of the United States and Iran, a "Crusader-Safavid" alliance, harkening back to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Safavid Empire that established Shi'ism as the official faith of Iran: "Nearly four years after the occupation of Iraq, it is clear that their goal is to take over Iraq as a partnership between the Crusaders and the Safavid, realizing their ambitions in the region, protecting the Jewish occupiers, removing Sunni influence, encircling the Sunnis in the

whole region and creating a Shi'a crescent."[24] The statement was enthusiastically greeted by al Qaeda in Iraq and by other jihadist groups.

Al Qaeda has big ambitions for its war against the kingdom. According to the questioning of detained al Qaeda senior lieutenant Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia had a plan to recruit pilots in the Royal Saudi Air Force to fly their own aircraft to attack the southern Israeli port city of Eilat. The goal would be to provoke an Israeli counterattack on Saudi Arabia and put the two countries at war with each other, turning the region into a cauldron of violence and pitting two U.S. allies against each other in a military conflict. The idea never got off the ground before Muhammad was captured by the CIA.[25]

A major element of the Saudis' success has been cyber warfare.

There is also still-unverifiable evidence that al Qaeda considered plans to provoke a war between the United States and Iran. Indeed, as the war in Iraq has progressed, al Qaeda in Iraq has increasingly focused on Iran and its Shi'a allies in Iraq as the main long-term enemy. Al Qaeda's propaganda argues that the United States and United Kingdom will withdraw from Iraq sooner or later but that Iran will be a long-term threat to Sunni interests in Iraq.

Bin Laden was initially reluctant to attack the Shi'a in Iraq in his public statements, perhaps out of concern for al Qaeda operatives, including some of his family members, who fled to Iran after the ousting of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2002. He was also careful to avoid opening another front with another enemy too soon after the loss of Kandahar. After the death of Zarqawi in June 2006, however, bin Laden's forbearance seems to have ended. He has openly sided with Zarqawi's position that the Shi'a are a legitimate target because they are "agents of the Americans."[26]

Al Qaeda in Iraq went even further in mid-2007, threatening to attack Iranian targets in Iraq and in Iran if the Islamic republic did not cease its interference in Iraq on the side of the Shi'a, especially the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and Badr Brigades. Some senior al Qaeda figures are even more scathing in the attacks on the Shi'a. Abu Yahya al-Libi was captured in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan but escaped from Bagram prison in July 2005 along with three other senior al Qaeda operatives. One of his fellow escapees went to Iraq to join Zarqawi and was killed there. Libi became a frequent commentator for al Qaeda and a harsh critic of the Shi'a and Iran. In an early 2007 commentary, he accused Iran of seeking to dominate the region in a secret partnership with Israel and America.[27] Libi even accused the Saudi monarchy of partnering with the Shi'a and Iran be-

cause they allow Shi'a and Iranians to perform the hajj, thus validating them as real Muslims. If the Saudis were real defenders of the holy mosques, Libi argues, they would not allow Shi'a to come to them.[28]

As many as two million Shi'a live in Saudi Arabia, where they represent 10–15 percent of the population. Most Saudi Shi'a reside in the Eastern Province, which is also home to the world's largest concentration of oil assets and about 90 percent of Saudi Arabia's oil production.[29] Although no significant Shi'a military activity has been reported inside the kingdom, the ongoing violence between Shi'a and Sunnis in Iraq could ignite the flames of confessional violence. As Saudi jihadists return home from Iraq and inject new blood, energy, and more sophisticated techniques into homegrown Saudi terrorist movements, they may clash with the quiescent Shi'a living inside the oil-rich kingdom.

The al Qaeda struggle has not spread to the small Gulf emirates despite bin Laden's threats to those states. Aside from a few isolated acts of violence in Kuwait and Qatar, the Gulf states have remained quiet. Al Qaeda does receive considerable financial support from private sources in the Gulf states, however, and recruits operatives for training as well. Al Qaeda has opened a front in Yemen and has been a thorn in the government's side there for years. Yemeni recruits are a major element in al Qaeda operations globally.

Effects of the War on Saudi Policy

The war between the House of Saud and al Qaeda has had a profound effect on the kingdom's foreign policy, accentuating trends away from the United States and toward other Islamic states and groups. The monarchy understands well that the al Qaeda message about its historically intimate relationship with the United States resonates with many Saudis who have a deep antipathy for the United States in general and President George W. Bush in particular. King Abdallah has shown little affection or regard for the Bush administration from its first days in office, when he became convinced Bush was abandoning pursuit of the Arab-Israeli peace process at the height of the intifada in 2001. He famously refused to visit Washington to see the president prior to September 11, 2001, despite a full court press by the White House.

The Iraq war has added to the strains, as the Saudis felt their advice about the difficulty of building a stable postwar regime in Mesopotamia was ignored in the run-up to the conflict. When bin Laden began his war to topple the Sauds, their response was therefore to distance themselves further from the Americans. Riyadh was happy to see most U.S. forces leave the kingdom after the end of the Iraq invasion in August 2003 and has kept up a steady drumbeat of criticism, both public and private, of the Bush team's policies in Iraq

and Palestine. Many senior Saudis privately credited the Bush decision to divert resources from the war in Afghanistan and the search for bin Laden with saving the al Qaeda movement and its leader.

The battle against al Qaeda at home has also encouraged the kingdom to seek stronger ties with other states facing the same threats. In most cases, this means strengthening existing close ties, such as those with Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. The tightest embrace has come with Pakistan, which has been instrumental in keeping at least some pressure on bin Laden and his lieutenants in the border lands. Keeping President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan in power has become a priority of the king.

Authorities are deeply concerned about Saudis returning from aiding the Iraqi insurgency.

The wounds opened in the fabric of Islamic unity by al Qaeda's violent attack on Shi'a in Iraq have also helped to magnify Saudi concerns about Iran's role in the region. Because a small group of al Qaeda operatives fled Afghanistan to Iran after the fall of Kabul, Riyadh has concerns that Tehran might be allowing them to plot against the kingdom and serve as a communications center between bin Laden and his cells in the kingdom. With anti-Shi'a feelings at a boiling point in the Gulf, the kingdom has become a bastion of Sunni interests and is reluctant to support the new, U.S.-sponsored Shi'a government in Baghdad. The kingdom has instead sought to outbid al Qaeda in support for the Sunni minority in Iraq, even hinting that it might intervene to help Iraqi Sunnis if Iran threatened their future. With al Qaeda pressing on one side, Riyadh cannot afford to look weak on Shi'a to its Wahhabi home front.

Riyadh has also sought to lure Sunni Islamists who might be sympathetic to al Qaeda to its side, especially Hamas, the standard bearer of Sunni resistance to Israel. Hamas has long been courted by Riyadh, even during the height of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s. Abdallah tried hard to bring Hamas into the Saudi orbit after it won the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006. He then summoned Hamas and Fatah to Mecca in early 2007 to try to unite the Palestinian movement, but the deal collapsed as a result of Hamas's seizure of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. Since the collapse of the Mecca deal, the Saudis have been concerned that Hamas is now moving into the circles of Iran or al Qaeda. Riyadh is likely to endeavor to keep Hamas, the Palestinian symbol of Islamic resistance to Israel, from permanently becoming aligned with either of its enemies.

Despite the vital stakes, the United States has been a marginal player in Saudi Arabia's fight against al Qaeda. Washington has helped with counterter-

rorism expertise, but the Saudis have done all of the fighting. The kingdom's leaders made a conscious decision to keep U.S. involvement quiet and discrete and to reduce the U.S. military footprint to take away a rallying cry for al Qaeda. There is a clear lesson in this for other battlefields in the global battle against bin Laden and his allies: the United States' Muslim allies may see U.S. aid as more harmful than helpful, and it is always best kept discreet.

The United States moved most, though not all, of its military forces out of Saudi Arabia in August 2003 and relocated them to Iraq. In a sense, therefore, bin Laden ironically achieved his goal of removing the "Crusaders" from the "Land of the Prophet." Of course, he did not call off the war. The Crusader presence in Arabia has always been a symptom of deeper grievances for bin Laden: the existence of Israel and the "apostate" Arab states, such as the Saudi kingdom, that seek to make peace with the Jewish state and its U.S. ally.

Bin Laden's Enduring Challenge

The modern oil boom in the Gulf began with the oil price rise during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. At the time, three very different forms of government dominated the area: the secular modernizing monarchy of the shah's Iran, the radical secular socialist (even Stalinist) Ba'ath party of Saddam's Iraq, and the traditional Islamic Wahhabi monarchy of Saudi Arabia. Only one survived, a tribute to the resiliency and strength of the Saudi system. Bin Laden, a product of the system, has posed the most serious challenge to its survival in modern times. He has threatened not only to end the monarchy but also to end U.S. preeminence in the region, which also dates from 1973.

For now, al Qaeda is incapable of overthrowing the House of Saud, which has weathered many challenges since it first came to power in the eighteenth century. Yet, al Qaeda already has tested Saudi Arabia severely and has proven to be a tenacious and resilient foe. For the Saudi monarchy, bin Laden poses a threat not just through terrorist attacks but also by undermining the regime's Wahhabi ideological base. He challenges the regime by holding its *'ulama* (religious scholars and officials) to Wahhabism. Central to bin Laden's rejection of the Saudi regime is his charge that the Saudi regime is now a tool for the United States. He believes that disrupting this web, preferably by severing the kingdom's ties to Western powers, could fatally weaken the domestic position of the royal family. He will continue to try to undermine the existence and legitimacy of the Saudi state.

Despite the strength of his following, bin Laden also has major weaknesses. He not only now is an exile from Saudi society but also lacks a political program. The thrust of bin Laden's oppositional discourse and activities now

focuses more on external factors than on domestic ones, such as the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia. Despite his sweeping criticism of the Saudi regime, bin Laden has no vision for the kingdom's political and economic future. He clearly views himself as part of the larger Islamic movement, which transcends national boundaries. His discourse is more episodic than systemic. Bin Laden may want to establish a theocratic state in which Shari'a law is supreme, yet nothing in his written or spoken statements delineates the shape or instrumentalities of that state.

The United States has been a marginal player in Saudi Arabia's fight against al Qaeda.

Saudi authorities have so far successfully countered al Qaeda's offensive, but the war inside the kingdom is anything but over, as Abdallah noted recently.[30] Bin Laden still has followers in the kingdom, as the constant arrests by the Saudi intelligence service and a generation of Saudi jihadists who are learning their trade in Iraq affirm. Still others travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan to train and to learn from their leader. Almost certainly, the remaining infrastructure in the kingdom is lying low, seeking to rebuild networks and new hideouts for the next round. Although bin Laden's call for overthrowing the House of Saud has so far been unsuccessful, declaring the war over would be premature.

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