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Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question

Strategic Insights, Volume VI, Issue 2 (March 2007)

by [F. Gregory Gause, III](#)

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia's position on the Iraq crisis, and on the various proposals in the American debate about what to do in Iraq, is driven primarily by regional balance of power concerns. The primary Saudi fear, in official circles, is that Iran will use its position of influence in Iraq to consolidate a position of regional dominance in the wake of an American withdrawal. Riyadh therefore has urged the United States not to leave Iraq in its current situation, expressing public (if not particularly enthusiastic) support for the Bush Administration's "surge" option.^[1] While Saudi regional policy can best be apprehended through the lens of classic balance of power politics, Sunni-Shi'i sectarian tensions overlay that policy and, perhaps more importantly, are the lens through which much of the Saudi public sees the regional situation.

The Saudi government has not discouraged that view, in an effort to mobilize public support behind its policy of balancing Iranian power. However, this appeal to sectarian loyalties—whether actively encouraged by the government behind the scenes or simply tolerated—contains its own dangers for the Saudi government, both in terms of its own domestic politics of dealing with the Shi'i minority in Saudi Arabia and in terms of its policy toward Iran. While hoping to blunt Iranian influence, not only in Iraq but throughout the region, Riyadh wants to avoid a direct confrontation with Teheran and remains open to cooperation with the Iranians. To the extent that political tensions in the region become increasingly and rigidly sectarian, the Saudi government loses the flexibility necessary to both block and engage Teheran simultaneously—that is to say, to play the classic balance of power game.

Saudi Arabia and the Iraqi Crisis

Saudi Arabia was hardly keen on the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, though it cooperated in a low-key way with Washington to facilitate military operations. Since that time, as Saudi policy makers have expressed their growing dismay at the course of events in Iraq, Riyadh has taken a surprisingly passive stance toward events there. That passivity can be attributed to a number of factors, but the most important is the Saudi desire to avoid any complications in its relations with the United States. As long as the United States is occupying Iraq, any Saudi effort to chart an active, independent course toward the country would run the risk of American displeasure. Most directly, any Saudi effort to establish direct patron-client relations with Arab Sunni groups or factions in Iraq might place them in the very uncomfortable position of supporting people who are killing Americans.^[2] Thus, while Riyadh has undoubtedly maintained lines of communication with

all sorts of Iraqi parties and personalities—Arab and Kurd, Sunni and Shi'i, tribal and urban—it has not (at least from publicly available evidence) nurtured the kind of relations that Iran has with a number of the Iraqi groups. This is unusual for Saudi Arabia. In other inter-Arab conflicts and civil wars, most notably in Yemen and Lebanon, the Saudis have developed close ties with various parties, mainly through the provision of financial aid and diplomatic support but sometimes with direct military aid as well, to affect the course of the conflicts and advance Saudi interests.

Riyadh's passivity can be sustained as long as the United States is preventing what for the Saudis would be the worst case scenarios in Iraq: the consolidation of Iranian influence there and/or the effective break-up of the country in a bloody civil war. However, as calls grew in the United States for an end to the American military role in Iraq, gaining momentum after the Democratic victory in the 2006 Congressional elections, the Saudis were faced with the prospect that the United States would no longer be the bulwark against an Iranian-dominated Iraq. They feared that *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward—A New Approach* might be the vehicle through which suggestions for withdrawal would become American policy. They further feared that an American decision to withdraw would lead to a new American diplomatic initiative toward Iran, acknowledging Iranian primacy in Iraq in exchange for an orderly withdrawal.^[3]

These fears coincided with the on-going Lebanese crisis, which began with the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict of the summer of 2006 and has continued in the stand-off between Hizbullah and its allies and the March 14 coalition, which forms the Lebanese government. Saudi Arabia saw events in Lebanon, with Iran's strong support for Hizbullah, as further evidence, coming on top of the Iranian commitment to continue its nuclear program and Iran's support for Hamas in the intra-Palestinian power struggle, that Teheran was seeking a dominant role in the region.

Thus, in recent months Saudi officials, most prominently the outgoing Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Turki Al Faysal, very publicly urged the United States not to withdraw precipitously from Iraq.^[4] Saudi officials and those close to them raised the prospect of direct and indirect Saudi intervention in Iraq if the United States were to leave and warned the United States against a policy of engaging Iran.^[5] The threat of direct Saudi military intervention is most probably a bluff. The Saudi military is hardly capable of effective action in Iraq. The threats of a more active role supporting Sunni groups are much more credible. Riyadh's reception in October 2006 of Harith al-Dhari, the leader of the Association of Muslim Scholars, a Sunni Iraqi clerical group with purported ties to the Sunni insurgency, is an indication of its options in that regard.^[6]

The Saudi government breathed a sigh of relief as it became clear that the Bush Administration was not going to withdraw from Iraq. While Riyadh does not have any particular confidence that the United States can achieve its goal of a stable Iraq not under Iranian influence, at least the continued presence of American forces in the country kicks the prospect of the Saudi worst case scenarios down the road for the time being.

Saudi Regional Policy and Saudi Public Opinion

The Saudi government is viewing the Iraq crisis through the lens of regional balance of power considerations, looking to check Iranian power. However, Saudi public opinion (among Saudi Sunnis, the vast majority of the population) views the Iraq crisis through two interrelated lenses: 1) as an American occupation of an Arab land and (for many if not most Saudis) the legitimate armed resistance to that occupation; and 2) as a sectarian conflict between overweening Iraqi Shi'a and endangered Iraqi Sunni Arabs.

Since the beginning of the American occupation, Saudis have gone to Iraq to fight with the Sunni insurgency against the United States. Their numbers are a matter of some controversy. Many Iraqi Shi'a see "Wahhabis" as the core of the insurgency against them. They have good historical

and ideological grounds on which to suspect that the official Saudi interpretation of Islam encourages strong anti-Shi'a sentiments. American military officials contend that non-Iraqis make up only a small part of the Sunni insurgent forces, though the foreigners are probably overrepresented in the spectacular suicide attacks which spread terror among Iraqi civilians. Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid concluded in September 2005 that, based on information provided to them from Saudi and American security sources, Saudis made up only about 12 percent of the foreign fighters in Iraq, which were themselves only about 10 percent of the Sunni Arab insurgents.^[7] It is regularly asserted that private Saudi financial support helps to sustain the Sunni insurgency.^[8] While hard evidence of such support is difficult to come by, it seems very likely that some Saudis are sending money to Iraqi Sunni insurgents.^[9] It has been reported that Saudi volunteers are particularly welcome among the insurgents, because they tend to come with cash.

There is no evidence that the Saudi government has encouraged this support by individual Saudis, *jihadis* and financiers, for the Sunni insurgency. Riyadh is building an elaborate security fence along its border with Iraq, equally to keep Saudis from going to Iraq as to keep Iraqis from coming into Saudi Arabia.^[10] Leading clerics from the Saudi religious establishment have counseled young Saudis not to join what many Saudis see as the legitimate jihad against the American occupation, even while Saudi *salafi* activists have occasionally encouraged just such volunteers.^[11] Saudi officials will admit privately that there is nothing they can do to stop Saudis from flying to Damascus and entering Iraq from Syrian territory to join the fighting.

As fighting in Iraq shifted in 2006 to more direct inter-sectarian conflict between Arab Sunnis and Arab Shi'a, elements of Saudi public opinion began to emphasize the threat to fellow Sunnis in Iraq from the now-dominant Shi'a majority.^[12] On December 7, 2006 38 Saudi religious scholars, most affiliated with the Islamic universities in the country, posted an on-line call for the Sunni world to rally to the support of the embattled Sunni minority in Iraq. Their declaration contended that the United States (the "crusaders," in an echo of bin Laden's rhetoric) and the Iranians (referred to as the "Safavis," the Iranian dynasty which converted the country to Shi'ism in the 16th and 17th centuries) had conspired together to destroy Iraq and contain Sunni influence throughout the region. The declaration refers repeatedly to Shi'a as "al-rafida," a defamatory label identifying them as "rejecters" of the true Islam.^[13] Some well-known Saudi *salafi* activists further stirred the pot by issuing fatwas openly condemning the Shi'a as non-Muslims.^[14] While this kind of clerical opinion is not new in the Wahhabi tradition, the timing of these fatwas pushed the sectarian issue to the forefront at a time of heightened regional tensions. The circumstances surrounding the execution of Saddam Hussein in late December 2006 exacerbated the sectarian issue for many Saudis who are not normally sympathetic with either the more extreme elements of the country's religious establishment or with the former Ba'athist regime in Baghdad.^[15]

There is no question now that sectarian identity, never far below the surface in the Middle East, has risen to new prominence in the way the region's publics are interpreting not only the Iraq crisis, but also the Lebanese crisis and the effort by the United States to form a bloc of Arab Sunni states aimed at isolating Iran. How long this sectarian salience will last, in Saudi Arabia and in the region in general, is difficult to judge. To the extent that the Lebanese crisis continues, Sunni-Shi'a tensions will be exacerbated. However, if Lebanon cools down, a major driver of sectarian tensions will be removed. Iraq will continue for some time to provide fodder for those seeking to exploit sectarian differences. Even now, however, there are efforts by leading Islamist figures like the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Muhammad Mahdi Akif, to cool the sectarian passions stirred up by some Sunni activists.^[16]

Saudi Regional Policy: Anti-Iranian or Anti-Shi'a? And to What Extent?

I argued above that the Saudi government views Iran's efforts to spread its influence in the Arab world—in Iraq, Lebanon, among Palestinians and in Arab public opinion generally—through the lens of balance of power politics, not sectarian identities. I come to that conclusion based on two

major factors. First, the Saudi government itself has not played the sectarian card in the recent crises. On the contrary, Saudi writers who normally reflect elite opinion in the kingdom have gone out of their way to emphasize that it is Iranian power, not “Shi’a power,” that is of concern.^[17] The Saudis sponsored a meeting in Mecca in October 2006 in which Sunni and Shi’a clerics from Iraq issued a statement condemning sectarian violence, the shedding of the blood of fellow Muslims, attacks on religious sites and forcing people to leave their homes.^[18] King Abdallah himself recently told an interviewer that he thought Sunni-Shi’a tensions were “a matter of concern, not a matter of danger,” and that if handled correctly those tensions would not become dangerous. When asked in the same interview about allegations of Shi’a efforts to convert Sunnis in Arab countries, the King said that such efforts would fail, but quickly changed the subject to the support the kingdom gives to conferences aimed at bridging Sunni-Shi’a differences.^[19]

Second, the Saudi government has been on a minor, but in the Saudi context significant, charm offensive toward its own Shi’a minority for a number of years. The Saudi Shi’a leader Hassan al-Safar was very publicly invited to participate in the King’s “National Dialogue” initiative which began in 2003, and was photographed with Abdallah at the first meeting of the Dialogue. Municipal council elections in 2005 allowed Saudi Shi’a to elect representatives for the first time in decades to help manage their cities (though the elected members comprise only half of the members of these councils, and the councils themselves do not have much power). Perhaps most importantly from a symbolic standpoint, Saudi Shi’a for the past three years have been able to commemorate the Shi’a feast of Ashura publicly. Such public commemorations had been banned for decades, and are particularly offensive to hard-line *salafis* from the Wahhabi tradition.^[20] While Saudi Shi’a certainly feel the effects of rising sectarian tensions, I did not hear in my conversations with a number of Shi’a leaders during a visit to the Shi’a city of Qatif in early January 2007 that they felt that the Saudi government was reversing its tentative policies of outreach to their community. If Riyadh were viewing the rise of Iranian regional power primarily through a sectarian lens, the first place that it would react would be against its own Shi’a population, as it has done in the past.

That being said, the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Arab states worried about Iranian power are willing to play to the baser instincts of their own constituencies in allowing anti-Shia rhetoric to develop. The Saudi government could have cracked down on the *salafi* activists who raised the sectarian issue, but did not, at least in any public way, as of yet. From our own experience in the United States, we know that mobilizing public support for a foreign policy based on cold, realist, balance of power considerations is a tough sell. It would be an even harder sell for these Arab leaders, whose populations basically like the idea of Iran developing a nuclear program and cheered Hizballah in its confrontation with Israel this past summer. The Sunni Arab leaders cannot sell the policy on the basis of balancing Iran, so they sell it (or allow it to be sold) on a sectarian basis. The danger in this kind of cynical manipulation is that sectarian tensions might escape the control of these governments. In the Saudi case, the escalation of sectarian tensions could both complicate, if not reverse, King Abdallah’s efforts to reach out to the Saudi Shi’a minority and make it more difficult for Riyadh to pursue a nuanced policy toward Iran and the Shi’a-dominated Iraqi government. Playing with the sectarian issue is playing with fire. The Saudi government clearly believes that it can keep the fire under control. Whether it can remains to be seen.

Saudi Arabia seeks to balance, if not roll back, Iranian power—in Lebanon, among Palestinians and in Iraq. However, Riyadh is pursuing its balance of power strategy in a nuanced rather than overtly confrontational way. King Abdallah publicly received Iranian National Security Advisor Larijani in Riyadh, and dispatched his diplomatic trouble-shooter, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former Saudi Ambassador to Washington, to Teheran in late January for consultations on the Lebanon issue. The King emphasized in the interview cited above that he advised Larijani that Iran should be careful to observe limits in its dealings with outside powers, but at the same time assured the Iranians that Saudi Arabia had not joined a bloc against them nor would Saudi Arabia support any efforts to interfere in Iranian domestic politics.^[21] The Saudi-owned Arab press has

highlighted the beneficial effects of the Saudi-Iranian dialogue on de-escalating the Lebanese crisis.[22] Whether these contacts can actually avert a renewal of violence in Lebanon remains to be seen, but it is interesting that the Saudis are portraying them this way.

American Regional Strategy, Saudi Arabia and the Sectarian Temptation

The Bush Administration is seeking to build an ad-hoc coalition of regional states to blunt growing Iranian influence in the Middle East. That coalition includes Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon's embattled government and, on the sidelines, Israel. Saudi Arabia has indicated its willingness to play a role in this effort. If the various visits of Prince Bandar to Washington over the past months are any indication, it is possible that Riyadh might even have had a role in the construction of this coalition.[23] But Washington should not assume that Riyadh is on board for a policy of direct confrontation with Teheran. The Saudis know that they will be among the first targets for Iranian retaliation if the United States strikes Iran militarily. They lived through a period of intense hostility with Iran during the 1980's, as Ayatollah Khomeini sought to export the Iranian revolution and Riyadh backed Iraq in its war against Iran. They are not anxious to repeat that experience. The Saudis prefer a policy of working to roll back Iranian influence at its margins—in Lebanon, Palestine, among Arab public opinion—to a policy of striking directly at the Iranian government. They worry about Iranian influence in Iraq, but have few practical instruments to counter it there at this time, which is why they are happy that the United States is staying in Iraq.

American policy toward Iran, like that of the Saudis, seems to be driven by regional balance of power concerns. If Washington were concerned about "Shi'a power," as opposed to Iranian power, it would not be backing the al-Maliki government in Iraq. The Bush Administration's list of Middle Eastern enemies is ecumenical, including Sunni Hamas and the Ba'athist regime in Syria (sociologically Alawi Shi'a but politically secular nationalist), perhaps even Maronite Christian Michel Aoun in Lebanon, as well as Iran and Hizballah. However, there is more than a hint of sectarianism in the coalition of Sunni Arab governments that the United States is pushing to counter Iranian power. Washington must be aware of that. As with Saudi Arabia, playing the sectarian card is a double-edged sword for the United States. It might help in the short term to mobilize opinion in the Arab world against Teheran's efforts to extend its influence. However, fanning anti-Shi'a sentiment in the Arab world directly supports the world view of extremist Sunni *salafi* jihadists like al-Qaeda.[24] We need to recall that the *salafi* jihadist movement, of which al-Qaeda is but one manifestation, emerged in the atmosphere of heightened sectarian tensions of the 1980's, as the new Iranian revolutionary regime and the Saudis contested for leadership of the Muslim world and Iran and Iraq fought their long and pointless war. It is certainly not in the American interest to do anything to recreate that atmosphere of regional sectarian tensions, which would give aid and comfort al-Qaeda and its ilk.

About the Author

Gregory Gause III is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont. Professor Gause's teaching and research interests are in international relations and Middle Eastern politics. He is the author of a number of articles and two books, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (1994), and *Saudi-Yemini Relations: Domestic Structures and Foreign Influence* (1990). Before joining the Political Science Department at UVM, he was a member of the faculty of Columbia University.

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References

1. See [transcript](#) of the January 16, 2007 press conference of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faysal and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.
2. This analysis is based on a presentation by an official in the Saudi foreign ministry in which the author participated during a visit to Saudi Arabia in January 2007.
3. Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, columnist and director of the Al-Arabiyya satellite news channel, reported that there were "rumors of a secret deal" between the United States and Iran "in high Arab circles" recently, though al-Rashid discounted such a possibility. "nijad yil'ab fi al-saf al-'arabi" [(Ahmadi) Nejad plays in Arab ranks], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 7, 2007, 15. I was asked by Saudis about the possibility of an American-Iranian deal a number of times on my trip to Saudi Arabia in early January 2007.
4. Prince Turki told the Philadelphia World Affairs Council in December 2006 that "just picking up and leaving is going to create a huge vacuum" in Iraq. The event can be viewed by clicking [here](#).
5. The prospect of Saudi military intervention was raised very publicly in an article by Saudi security consultant Nawaf Obaid, "[Stepping Into Iraq: Saudi Arabia Will Protect Sunnis If the U.S. Leaves](#)," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2006, A23. King Abdallah reportedly told Vice President Cheney directly, during the latter's visit to Saudi Arabia in November 2006, that the Saudis might provide Iraqi Sunnis with financial aid in their fight against Iraq's Shi'a, if the United States withdraws. Helene Cooper, "[Saudis Say They Might Back Sunnis If U.S. Leaves Iraq](#)," *New York Times*, December 13, 2006.
6. Meeting referenced in Hassan M. Fattah, "[Bickering Saudis Struggle for an Answer to Iran's Rising Influence in the Middle East](#)," *New York Times*, December 22, 2006.
7. Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, "[Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response](#)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 19, 2005.
8. Most recently by the Iraq Study Group in its December 2006 report: "Funding for the Sunni insurgency comes from private individuals in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states....," [The Iraq Study Group Report](#), 25.
9. The Saudis have been extremely reluctant to bring charges against anyone for funding radical Islamist activities, though on February 3, 2007 the Saudi government announced the arrest of 10 people, including nine Saudis, in Medina and Jidda. The Saudi Press Agency reported that the arrested had "raised donations illegally and smuggled and transferred funds to suspicious bodies that use them to lure citizens and attract them into turbulent parts," a clear reference to Iraq. "Saudi Arabia Arrests 10 in Crackdown on Terror Funding," *Reuters*, February 3, 2007.
10. "[Iraq: Saudi Arabia to Seal Off Border with Security Fence](#)," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 15, 2006.
11. In November 2004 a number of notable Saudi religious activists issued a declaration terming the Iraqi resistance to the American occupation a legitimate jihad. While they did not explicitly call for Saudis to join the fighting, they provided a clear justification for doing so. The declaration was posted on the website operated by the prominent Saudi religious figure [Shaykh Salman al-Awda](#). The chief religious authority in Saudi Arabia, the Grand Mufti Shaykh Abd al-Aziz bin Abdallah Al al-Shaykh, responded by warning Saudis not to travel to Iraq to fight. "Saudi mufti says Iraq jihad is 'road to ruin'," *Reuters*, November 11, 2004.

12. While some news reports point to the Hizballah-Israel clash in the summer of 2006 as a factor in the turn in opinion in Saudi Arabia toward Sunni sectarian opposition to Shi'a, this seems to be a misreading. The Saudi government expressed its disquiet at Hizballah's actions in precipitating the crisis, but Saudi public opinion, including in *salafi* circles, seems to have been firmly supportive of Hizballah. Western news sources highlighted a fatwa by Shaykh Abdallah bin Jibreel, posted on his website, which seemed to condemn Hizballah and prohibit support for it by Sunnis. However, the Shaykh quickly clarified the matter, contending that the fatwa was an old one, reposted without his knowledge, which did not apply to the current situation. While still cautious about the Shi'a character of Hizballah, the Shaykh urged support for all Lebanese standing against Israel. "[bin Jibreel yu'akkid 'an fatwahu lan tikun 'an hizb Allah](#)" [Bin Jibreel confirms that his fatwa was not about Hizballah], *al-Arabiyya.net*, August 8, 2006, .

13. "[nida' li ahl al-sunna fi al-'iraq wa ma yajib 'ala al-umma min nasrathim](#)," 16 Dhu al-Qa'da 1427 [December 7, 2006].

14. Shaykh Abd al-Rahman Al-Barrak, the organizer of the December 7 declaration, issued a [fatwa](#) on December 17, 2006 in which he called Shi'a "polytheistic unbelieving hypocrites" whose threat to Islam is "greater than that of the Jews and the Nasari [Christians]." In an indirect swipe at the Saudi government, and a direct attack on recent conferences in the region, he condemned efforts to bring the two sects together as "a false effort." Shaykh Abdallah bin Jibreel posted on January 22, 2007 a [declaration](#) on the necessity to support the Sunnis in Iraq, accusing Iraqi Shi'a of allying with the Christians and of regular atrocities against Iraq Sunnis. He went on to list six reasons why the Shi'a are not real Muslims, among which is their "declarations, in every time and place, that the Sunnis are unbelievers." This accusation is particularly unusual.

15. I was struck, during my visit to Saudi Arabia in early January 2007, how many more liberal Saudis attested to how affected they were by Saddam's execution, coming on the first day of Eid al-Adha. The execution was followed by a spate of Saudi writers raising the sectarian issue in the newspapers. See for example the normally measured Saudi writer Daud al-Shiryani in *al-Hayat*, January 3, 2007, 9, where he accuses the United States of making an alliance with the Iraqi Shi'a in an effort to change "the sectarian composition in the region." See also Saudi liberal Hussein Shobokhshi's column in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, on January 6, 2007, p. 16, under the title "A Hateful Message."

16. See the statement, issued on January 25, 2007, on [Ikhwanonline](#), the official website of the Muslim Brotherhood. Referenced from Marc Lynch's "[Abu Aardvark](#)" website.

17. See Daud al-Shiryani, "al-'azma al-'iraniyya min wijhat al-nathar khalijiyya" [The Iranian Crisis from a Gulf Perspective], *al-Hayat*, December 27, 2006; Hussein Shobokhshi, "faristan" [Persia-istan], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 16, 2007.

18. "[Iraq Clerics Urge End to Violence](#)," *BBC News*, October 20, 2006. For the text of the Mecca Declaration, see the website of the [Organization of the Islamic Conference](#), the sponsoring organization.

19. Interview with the Kuwaiti daily [al-Seyassah](#), January 27, 2007, 35.

20. For an account of Ashura rites in Saudi Arabia in late January 2007, see Faizah Saleh Ambah, "[In Legacy of a Revered Martyr, Saudi Shiites Find Sustenance](#)," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2007, A10.

21. Interview with the Kuwaiti daily [al-Seyassah](#), *Op. Cit.*

22. See, for example, Walid Shuqayr, “waqf al-tas’id hasmu ittisal irani,” [Iranian contact decisive in ending escalation], *al-Hayat*, January 25, 2007.

23. “As it turns out, however, Bandar has secretly visited Washington almost monthly over the past year—and is at least as pivotal today in influencing U.S. policy as he was in his years as ambassador.” Robin Wright, “[Royal Intrigue, Unpaid Bills Preceded Saudi Ambassador’s Exit](#),” *Washington Post*, December 23, 2006, A18.

24. This point was cogently made by Vali Nasr in [testimony](#) given to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 17, 2007.