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Strategic Insight

"In Defense of the Nation": Terror and Reform in Saudi Arabia

by [James A. Russell](#)

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The May 12, 2003 attacks in Riyadh on Western housing compounds and the ensuing summer-long series of anti-terrorist operations mounted by the Saudis against Al Qaeda leave no doubt about the intent of the Saudi government to seriously address its terrorist problem. The May 12 attacks constituted a wake-up call to the House of Saud, just as the September 11th attacks awakened the United States to the global nature of threat posed by Al Qaeda. The extent of the Al Qaeda network in the Kingdom, which apparently exists throughout the country from Riyadh to Medina to Qasim and the Eastern Provinces, serves as a reminder that Al Qaeda continues to pursue a core mission as articulated by Osama bin Laden: to destabilize the Kingdom and remove the House of Saud from power. If Iraq now constitutes the "central front" in the global war on terror^[1], then the Kingdom itself must be regarded as one of the related and important geographic theaters in that war.

The seizures of material by Saudi authorities have been truly staggering: underground storage facilities containing bags filled with over 20 tons of chemicals used for explosives; 72 kilograms of the explosive material RDX along with fuses and igniters; caches of small arms, machine guns and rocket propelled grenade launchers; night-vision goggles, communication devices and lap top computers; cash as well as motorbikes and cars ready for use in executing terrorist attacks. Hardly a week goes by in the Kingdom without a new report of a foiled operation and an exchange of gunfire. Since May 2003, Saudi Arabia has arrested more than 140 individuals with suspected ties to terrorism and large numbers of Saudi policemen have been killed in anti-terrorist operations. This is in addition to more than 300 arrests of terrorist suspects since September 11, 2001. The now-frequent press reports of government roadblocks and shootouts throughout the Kingdom bespeak a dramatically altered internal security environment. While press reports indicate that the movie "Battle of Algiers" is being shown in various Pentagon offices to highlight the difficulties of fighting an entrenched insurgency in the region, an actual battle of sorts is happening in real time in the Kingdom. The world has to hope that Saudi Arabia does not turn into a "Battle of Algiers."



Ongoing operations against Al Qaeda in the Kingdom have attracted sporadic media attention in the West, but it is by any measure an extremely active and intense theater in the fight against al Qaeda. Shown at left are bloodstains as seen on the stairs of a three-story housing complex of the King Fahd Hospital in Jizan, 960 kms (600 miles) south from the capital Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia, Wednesday, Sept. 24, 2003. Three suspected militants and a policeman were killed in a shootout between Saudi police and militants who were hiding in an apartment. One of those killed in the raid was Zubayr Al-Rimi, one of four men with alleged links to al-Qaeda listed in a special FBI bulletin issued just before the second anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. His father reportedly identified Al Rimi's body.

The Politics of Reform and Terror

The fight against Al Qaeda comes as the Royal family is engaged in delicate negotiations with a variety of different stakeholders inside the Kingdom to determine the nature and pace of internal political and economic reform. Petitioners pushing a reform agenda met with Crown Prince Abdullah in January 2003 in a meeting that was widely publicized, and a [copy of the petition](#) was released to the press.^[2] The fact that Abdullah met with the petitioners at all reflects his recognition that the reform issue will not go away and must receive attention at the highest levels of government. The petitioners called for a constitutional system of government with an elected legislature, an empowered and separate judiciary and an acknowledgment by the government of a variety of different rights—free speech, freedom to form associations as well as a commitment to address an expanded role for women in Saudi society. While attention within the Kingdom has undoubtedly been diverted by the internal security situation over the last several months, the issue of reform remains very much in play. To be sure, the war on terror in the Kingdom represents another complicating factor in this process. One can imagine that the last thing Crown Prince Abdullah wanted to see in the midst of rolling up militant cells was another public call for political, economic and social change. But the reformers would not wait.

The latest reform petition, delivered to Crown Prince Abdullah on September 24, 2003, is titled "[In Defense of the Nation](#)."^[3] The petitioners signaled their support for the government's fight against Al Qaeda by stating unequivocally that "...expressing refusal and condemnation to all kinds of extremism and violence becomes a national, political, moral and cultural necessity." At the same time, however, the petitioners note that "...we are all invited to take our responsibility and review our steps and admit that being late in adopting radical reforms and ignoring popular participation in decision-making have been the main reasons that helped the fact that our country reached this dangerous turn, and this is why we believe that denying the natural rights of the political, cultural and intellectual society to express its opinions has led to the dominance of a certain way of thinking that is unable to dialogue with others because of its inherent structure, and which does not reflect the greatness of Islam nor does it reflect enlightened trends, which is what helped create the terrorist and judgmental mind that our country is still plagued with."

The petitioners further state that "confronting terrorism can only be done through security means and solutions, but with a thorough diagnosis of the political, social and economical and cultural factors that have led to it, and by starting to implement political and economic reforms, developed through many suggestions, opinions and demands" that have already been submitted to the royal family (i.e., the January petition). Significantly, the petitioners signal their growing impatience at the pace of reform and reiterate previous calls (again from the January petition) to eliminate corruption and to end the "mismanagement" of public funds, redistribute national wealth more equitably, ensure that women play a more prominent role in political and economic issues, and call for the government to address the pressing social needs of poverty, housing and health care. In sum, the petition throws down a gauntlet before the House of Saud.

Crown Prince Abdullah: A High Wire Act

The complexities of the Saudi domestic political environment and the challenges facing Abdullah cannot be underestimated as he mobilizes the fight against Al Qaeda while simultaneously preserving consensus within the royal family and negotiating among the important players on the political landscape to nudge the Kingdom towards meaningful reform. Not surprisingly, the stakeholders in this process do not share common objectives, though there is overlap among several of the groups.

- *House of Saud.* The royal family is reportedly divided on the pace and direction of reform. Interior Minister Prince Naef and Defense Minister Prince Sultan (Sudairi brothers) are rumored to oppose moving quickly to implement reforms. Crown Prince Abdullah is said to be sympathetic to the reformers, but lacks the authority as acting regent to impose his will on the rest of the royal family. And, even if King Fahd was to pass away and make Abdullah king, it is unclear that Abdullah would have enough broadly based support within the family to move as quickly and dramatically as the reformers want. Operations against the terrorists complicate the intra-family dynamics, with Interior Minister Naef taking a leading role in this fight. While the family arguably should be united against Al Qaeda, which aims to bring down the House of Saud, rumors persist of royal family financial support for the organization. Further, Abdullah must carefully weigh the political tradeoffs of ensuring Naef's continued aggressive pursuit of Al Qaeda while continuing to signal support for a reform agenda opposed by powerful elements within the family (said to include Naef).

The reform agenda also confronts powerful institutional interests within the ruling family developed through the family's widespread dispersal throughout government ministries. Here, the central issue of corruption and the potential of a truly independent and empowered judiciary represents a profound source of opposition to reform within the royal family. While there are no "public" finances per se (as referenced in the latest petition), it is no secret that a certain percentage of proceeds from oil sales are disbursed throughout the royal family to support their opulent lifestyle. And this is separate and distinct from the well-known royal family practice of using their positions in government ministries to steer contracts to suit their own ends—and bottom line. An end to corruption and a redistribution of wealth—as called for in the petition—holds forth the prospect of the royal family losing its privileged socio-economic status within the Kingdom and even worse (from the perspective of the royal family) that the family could be held accountable for past crimes by an independent judiciary. Having said this, however, there are certain elements within the family, said to be led by Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal, who recognize that reform is inevitable and that the ruling family should try to preserve its position by managing and controlling the reform process. Abdullah must manage these different factions and preserve consensus to avoid an open break within the family.

- *The religious establishment.* The Nejd religious establishment, in partnership with the House of Saud since the inception of the state, constitutes another central player in the political landscape. This establishment is directly supported by the state, and their fate is tied to that of the royal family. In terms of the war on terror in the Kingdom, the House of Saud cannot choke off terrorist funding within the Kingdom without the support of the religious establishment due to the latter's

control over mosque activities. The religious establishment, however, is facing its own problems in exerting more control in the mosques due to an emerging caste of "dissident" clerics who are calling for a return to the country's Islamic roots while preaching an anti-American, anti-Western message in mosques around the country. It remains unclear the degree to which these clerics are leading or following public opinion in the Kingdom—opinion which is shown to be anti-United States in a number of recent polls. While the reformers on the one hand are asserting the need for an Islamic state administered according to Islamic law (the Sharia), the prospect of a truly independent and empowered judiciary potentially threatens the primacy of the religious establishment writ large and their omnipresent role in the country's legal system. Moreover, the religious establishment's control over the country's educational system potentially could be threatened if constitutional reforms are implemented. Last, the religious establishment remains uninterested in supporting any agenda that expands women's rights.



Sheikh Safr al Hawali is a leading "dissident" cleric in the Kingdom that was jailed by the government for his activities in the early 1990s. Now released from jail, he is regarded as one of a new group of younger clerics that is challenging the religious establishment and, by extension, the royal family. The fiery sermons of Hawali are widely available throughout the Kingdom on cassette tapes. He has also written a "open letter to President Bush" expressing some of the same themes seen in bin Laden's fatwas.

- *Merchant families of the Hijaz and Riyadh.* These powerful players on the Saudi political landscape have much to gain and lose in the reform process. The prospect of opening up the country's economy promises to place them in an even more ascendant position as the "new captains" of the Saudi economy. On the other hand, the prospect of real and genuine competition in a transparent system operating in accordance with standard practices of the global economy threatens to put some of them out of business. For this group (to the extent they can be lumped together), the apparently stalled effort to gain entry in the World Trade Organization (WTO) is a critical issue. These families are said to have demanded an end to corruption as the price for their support for Abdullah's efforts to join the WTO. Abdullah cannot honor these terms to the letter—since it means addressing corruption within his own extended family. The House of Saud also needs the support of these merchant families in the battle against the Al Qaeda, since this groups represent another potential source of financial and political support for the militant groups. While the families of the Hejaz and Riyadh have had historic ties to the House of Saud it is also fair to say that prudence would demand that the families hedge their bets on reform. This is another important constituency that needs to be addressed by Abdullah.
- *The "Reformers".* It is impossible to know the depth and breadth of support for the petitioners. As a group, their demands for a constitutional governmental system that addresses the issue of women's rights places them on the left side of the conservative Saudi political spectrum and at odds with the religious establishment. And, loudly proclaiming their demand for an end to corruption places them on a collision course with powerful elements within the House of Saud. What to do about this group presents a political conundrum for the United States and the West in general. The petitioners clearly support a series of ideas consistent with the Bush Administration's views on creating fundamentally new economic and political systems throughout the region. However, any expression of support by the United States or other countries for these ideas might only serve to de-legitimize the group given the pervasive anti-American sentiment within the Kingdom.^[4] While it is unclear what direct influence this group can bring to bear on Abdullah, the group's continued public demands for a more "modern" system of governance will inevitably attract international attention, which in and of itself will represent an indirect pressure on the royal family to acknowledge the necessity of reforms. The petitioners have everything to lose in the fight against Al Qaeda. On the one hand, they see that the regime will use the internal

security situation as a defensible excuse to delay reforms. On the other, the Taliban-like state that would ensue if the militants won would not be a healthy environment for professionals, educators and technocrats.

- *The Silent Majority.* As a still largely opaque society, it is impossible to definitively gauge the attitudes of the 18 million Saudi nationals toward political and economic reform and the government's battle against the militants. It is equally impossible to know the extent of Osama bin Laden's support within the Kingdom and whether that support extends to Al Qaeda's objective of fundamentally changing the country's internal politics. To the extent that a "silent majority" can be identified, it is this group—the wider Saudi populace—that holds the key to the Kingdom's economic and political future. While Abdullah must carefully navigate around and through (if necessary) the powerful interest groups identified above, it is the attitudes of the Saudi people themselves that will determine how far Abdullah and successive leaders can push the Kingdom down a reform path while simultaneously fighting a war against terrorists.

Conclusion

The battle on terror within the Kingdom thus becomes inextricably intertwined with forces on the domestic political landscape maneuvering to address political and economic reform. Crown Prince Abdullah will need a mixture of toughness, subtlety and deft skill to successfully navigate through these treacherous waters while at the same time dealing with a surprisingly well-established militant infrastructure. If there was ever a "deal" between the royal family and bin Laden that provided him with financial support in exchange for not directly attacking the Kingdom, that deal clearly is now over and the battle is joined. It remains to be seen whether the Kingdom can address both terrorism and reform at once, but it seems clear that failure to successfully manage both issues will have dire consequences for the Kingdom's future. And, the future of Kingdom should be of interest to the global community of nations. With the world's dependence on oil expected to grow by 40 percent over the next 20 years, we can expect events inside the Kingdom during this critical period to resonate around the globe.

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For related links, see our [Middle East](#) and [Homeland Security and Terrorism Resources](#).

References

1. President Bush declared that Iraq was the "central front" in the global war on terror in his [address to the nation](#) on September 7, 2003.
2. For discussion of the January 2003 petition and its broader context see James A. Russell, "[Political and Economic Transition on the Arabian Peninsula: Perils and Prospects](#)," *Strategic Insights*, May 2003.
3. Translation of the letter has been provided by Gwen Okruhlik and Yara Youssef at the University of Texas at Austin to members of the [Gulf 2000 website](#) managed by Gary Sick at Columbia University.
4. Observation by Dr. Gregory Gause, University of Vermont, posted to the Gulf 2000 list on October 2, 2003.

