

## Rethinking Religion: The Legacy of the U.S.-Saudi Relationship

At a January 2005 counterterrorism conference in Riyadh, Frances Fragos Townsend, assistant to the president and homeland security adviser, stressed that “the world cannot defeat terrorism without Saudi Arabia defeating terrorism on its own grounds.”<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia’s brand of religion, Wahhabi Islam, and its reputation for intense proselytizing have landed it in the global hot seat. Home to 15 of the 19 hijackers in the September 11 attacks, a disproportionate number of Arab fighters cycling through Al Qaeda training camps during the 1990s, and Osama bin Laden himself, the kingdom has become a central focus in the war on terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

Saudi Arabia’s religiosity, which the White House once considered an asset, has become a political liability. For nearly a half-century, the kingdom’s religious fervor kept the oil-rich country in the U.S. political camp, helped inoculate future generations against Communist expansion, and aided U.S. causes from Central America to Central Asia. As early as 1954, historian Bernard Lewis wrote that “pious Muslims—and most Muslims are pious—will not long tolerate an atheist creed.”<sup>3</sup> True to these words, Saudi Arabia stood steadfastly against the spread of communism and was a useful Cold War partner to the United States. Yet, when the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed, Saudi Arabia’s policies did not change. In this new global political order, the religious zealots spawned by Saudi funding and U.S. complicity turned their wrath from Moscow toward Washington, Riyadh, and other capitals. The existence of radical Islamic groups is in part a legacy of political decisions made in another era to address a different set of security concerns.

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The role of religion in the U.S.-Saudi relationship has to date garnered far too little attention. Although oil and security remain enduring features, the utility of Saudi religious proselytizing has changed dramatically, and the United States has grown increasingly wary of how Saudi Arabia uses its religious power in international politics. In the past, Saudi leaders did not have to choose between religious and political ends, yet since the September 11 attacks, the international spotlight has focused on Saudi Arabia's willingness and ability to rein in Islamic extremism, both at home and abroad. Funding radical religious inculcation no longer serves U.S. or global interests. The Saudi leadership must now determine whether such activities still serve its own.

### **The Rise of Religious Extremism**

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The basic political bargain that underpins Saudi Arabia's current power structure was made in 1744, in a small town outside Riyadh. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, then an itinerant religious scholar preaching an austere form of Islam, agreed to provide religious legitimacy to a local potentate, Muhammad ibn Saud, the patriarch of today's Saudi royal family. Drawing on this history, many conclude that hostile religious proselytizing is endemic to the Saudi state, making change and reform unlikely if not impossible.

The determinism of this political/religious bargain, however, can be overstated. Although it is true that all Saudi kings have paid deference to the religious establishment and relied heavily on the *ulema* (the guardians of legal and scholarly traditions) to legitimize controversial decisions, over time Saudi leaders have calibrated their religious message according to the circumstances at hand. Whereas the first Saudi state (1745–1818) fell because unrestrained religious fighters antagonized the Ottoman Empire, the leaders of the second Saudi state (1843–1891) restrained their religious warriors to avoid their predecessor's fate. In the early 1900s, during the formation of the third Saudi state, Saudi Arabia's founder, King Abdel Aziz bin Abdel Rahman al-Faisal al-Saud (ibn Saud), organized and encouraged religious fighters to settle the population and provide foot soldiers for territorial aggrandizement. Known as *ikhwahn*, these fighters emerged as an important force to conquer Mecca and Medina, in particular. By 1929, however, Aziz destroyed his religious fighting force after it had served its original purpose and was no longer politically useful.

During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia, whose leaders wielded considerable international religious influence because of their ability to speak for Mecca and Medina, became a useful U.S. partner. Realizing that religion could be a tool to staunch the expansion of godless communism, U.S. policymakers

sought to partner with religious believers. As far back as the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration had hoped to make King Saud (1953–1964) into a globally recognized Islamic leader and transform him into “the senior partner of the Arab team.”<sup>4</sup> Later, Saudi Arabia’s value was augmented by its oil wealth, which provided ample resources to fund anti-Soviet operations. Yet, such funding was often accompanied by religious proselytizing.

The Soviet Union supported revolutionary Arab nationalists to undercut Washington’s more conservative partners, such as Saudi Arabia; Jordan; and, after 1973, Egypt. In response, the United States tacitly supported the politicization of Islam and those states and domestic groups that rejected godless communism, even though they did not and were never expected to embrace liberal democracy. This U.S. policy coincided with the Saudi royal family’s desire to align religious and political interests in the kingdom. From the mid-1950s until 1967, for example, Saudi Arabia was engaged in a bitter conflict with Soviet-backed Egypt. King Saud welcomed members of the Muslim Brotherhood (a grassroots Islamist organization) to Saudi Arabia as a way to challenge Egypt, from which the Brotherhood was fleeing.

**R**eligion was a tool to staunch the expansion of godless communism

Similarly, Crown Prince Faisal, who became king and ruled from 1964 to 1975, was a determined anti-Communist. He created a host of domestic and international Islamic institutions that had both political and religious purposes. Faisal helped establish the Islamic University of Medina in 1961 to spread Saudi-inspired Wahhabi Islam and, more instrumentally, to compete ideologically with Cairo’s prestigious al-Azhar University. The Islamic University eventually became a well-known recruiting ground for jihadi fighters. In 1962, Faisal helped found the Muslim World League, a worldwide charity to which the Saudi royal family has reportedly since donated more than a billion dollars.<sup>5</sup> In December 1965, Faisal embarked on a nine-nation tour through Muslim countries to establish “Islamic solidarity” and check Gamal Abdul Nasser’s continued regional appeal.

In 1967, after Saudi Arabia triumphed over Egypt at the Khartoum summit, which put an end to the Egyptian-Saudi proxy war in Yemen and left Egypt dependent on Saudi aid, Faisal did not disband these Islamic institutions or halt the creation of more. Unlike his successor, however, Faisal worked to ensure that the most radical clerics did not assume society’s most powerful religious posts. He tried to block extremist clerics from gaining dominion over key religious institutions, such as the Council of Senior Ulema, the kingdom’s highest religious body, and from rising to high religious posi-

tions such as grand mufti, a politically recognized senior expert charged with maintaining the whole system of Islamic law.<sup>6</sup> Still, at least some of the king's advisers warned early on that, once religious zealots were encouraged, they would come back to haunt the kingdom.<sup>7</sup> Faisal, who was assassinated in 1975, was ultimately unable to control the future direction of the institutions he created. These Saudi-based institutions became increasingly radicalized over the 1980s and 1990s.

**There is reason to be optimistic about the royal family's ability to stem the radical religious tide.**

In response to the dramatic events of 1979—the Iranian revolution, religious extremists' seizure of the Grand Mosque of Mecca, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—King Khaled, who reigned from 1975 to 1982, and Crown Prince Fahd, who ruled the kingdom from 1982 to 2005, allowed the unconstrained radicalization of Saudi Arabia's elaborate religious machinery. For two decades, it produced severe anti-Soviet and

ultimately anti-U.S., anti-Zionist, and anti-regime opponents who were willing to die for their beliefs. Harsh laws were imposed on women, and the king appeared in public with the most rabid preachers. One astute Saudi political observer recalls that, after 1979, "society was given an overdose of religion."<sup>8</sup>

In the decade that followed, the confluence of U.S.-Saudi anti-Communist interests was most obvious in Afghanistan. The United States and Saudi Arabia each spent no less than \$3 billion, channeling assistance to armed, anti-U.S. Islamic fundamentalists. Their shared vitriol for communism spawned proselytizing that stretched from Somalia to Sudan, Chad, Pakistan, and beyond—the same areas where today the Islamist threat is particularly vexing.

## **Saudi Arabia after 9/11**

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In the tradition of their predecessors, some members of Saudi Arabia's royal family have sought to subordinate the religious establishment since the September 11 attacks. Shortly after the attacks on New York and Washington, Turki al-Faisal, King Faisal's son and the retired longtime director of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Department and recently appointed ambassador to the United States, directly challenged Sheikh Abdullah al-Turki, secretary general of the World Muslim League and a member of the Council of Senior Ulema. In a widely read newspaper article, the prince argued that "those responsible for affairs of state are the rulers," whereas religious scholars "only act in an advisory capacity."<sup>9</sup> Prince Talal bin Abdel Aziz, the

king's half-brother, similarly challenged the "potentially very confusing" claim that rulers and religious scholars should jointly decide affairs of state.<sup>10</sup> In June 2004, in a well-publicized op-ed piece published in the Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan*, Saudi Arabia's then-ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, argued in Arabic that religious fighters operating inside the kingdom should be "vanquished" the way "King Abdul Aziz did at the Battle of Al-Sabla [in 1929]."<sup>11</sup> At least some elements of the royal family clearly are deeply engaged in the running ideological battle and are making some headway against religious extremism.

### REINING IN RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Today's political landscape provides some reason to be optimistic about the royal family's ability to stem the radical religious tide. May 2003 marked a turning point in Saudi Arabia's willingness to confront the worst excesses of religious radicalism directly and fight Al Qaeda and *takfireen* (those willing to define other Muslims as apostates). On May 12, 2003, homegrown suicide bombers simultaneously attacked three housing complexes in Riyadh. The Saudi leadership defined the attacks as a "wake-up call" and "our September 11" and began to take political, security, and economic action against local terrorists and their support base.<sup>12</sup>

In June 2003, then-Crown Prince Abdullah instituted an important "national dialogue," a broad-based series that has given Saudis a forum to engage on highly sensitive topics such as intolerance, the role of women, and socioeconomic challenges. It emboldened moderates within society who now use the sessions' findings to build their case for reform, including most recently a renewed push in support of a women's right to drive automobiles. Today, newspapers are increasingly able to publish articles that question fundamental religious principles. As several Saudi journalists and diplomats have recently pointed out, for the first time in recent history, Saudis can examine the works of ibn Taymiyya, a central figure in Saudi religious thought who emphasized a literalist interpretation of the Koran and supported the practice of declaring other Muslims as apostates.<sup>13</sup> Although this progress is not without its obstacles—one daring journalist recently reported that three of his articles on ibn Taymiyya were rejected, non-Muslims continue to be rounded up for privately practicing their religion, and the imprisonment of three human rights activists has dampened enthusiasm for reform—the evolving openness does appear designed to address some of society's grievances and to question the most radical interpretation of Islam.

From the spring of 2003 until today, a steady stream of reports describe Saudi security forces' efforts to hunt down militants, disband Al Qaeda cells, and seize weapons caches. By late summer of 2004, the forces had suc-

**Can the U.S. actually do anything to help reduce the influence of radical extremists?**

cessfully foiled a number of potential attacks, rounded up hundreds of suspects, and killed dozens of militants. By the spring of 2005, Saudi forces had either killed or incarcerated 24 out of 26 individuals on the kingdom's most wanted list and issued a new list of 36 men. Radical clerics were warned to tone down their fiery sermons; more than 2,000 of them were either banned

from preaching or underwent "reeducation" programs. After the May 2003 attacks, the Saudi government also became more serious about reducing the flow of funds feathering the bank accounts of known terrorists. In July 2004, the Financial Action Task Force, an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development group devoted to combating money laundering and terrorist financing, judged that the kingdom was "compliant or

largely compliant" with international standards in almost every indicator of effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> Although the report also identified three areas in which Saudi Arabia was not in compliance with established standards, progress has clearly been made.<sup>15</sup>

Over a two-year period, Saudi officials shut down the al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, the Riyadh-based charity responsible for disbursing \$40–50 million annually with ties to Al Qaeda's funding stream, although recent reports suggest that some of its offices may still be operational or operating under a different name.<sup>16</sup> The Saudi government implemented a series of laws making it much more difficult for its citizens to move money internationally, putting charities under the watchful eye of state regulators and eliminating the practice of placing charitable collection boxes in malls and other places in order to increase accountability. Abdullah urged Saudis to keep charitable support within their communities. Accordingly, Saudi citizens are now contributing more money to local causes than to those further afield. In 2004, Saudi domestic giving increased by approximately 300 percent as charitable monies were redirected home from foreign countries.<sup>17</sup> This shift necessarily reduces the financial flows to terrorists and radical extremists abroad.

The royal family appears committed to crushing Al Qaeda elements operating from its territory. Saudi Arabia's determination to diffuse the spiritual context that nurtures radical and violent groups, however, has been more difficult to assess, especially as a new generation of Islamic leaders increasingly vie for power and influence. Yet, how the House of Saud resists and co-opts its religious opposition, as well as how it manages the kingdom's growing socioeconomic problems and imminent political transitions, will in large part determine Saudi Arabia's direction in the future.

## A NEW GENERATION OF RADICAL CLERICS

Although Saudi Arabia appears to have turned a corner in its fight against violent jihadis, it was much easier to galvanize Saudi religious leaders for the battle against communism than it is against radical Islam, which is less powerful but more difficult politically to combat. The legitimacy of the Saudi regime has always been based in part on the country's religiosity, which the royal family has used purposefully to secure geopolitical ends. Even if the royal family is inspired to check religious extremism, undoing the decades of political patronage that served yesterday's global realities will be an extremely difficult and dangerous task. It is hard to imagine fiery imams conferring their support on a government policy that targets Islamic extremists with the same conviction that moved them to support their government's anti-Communist policies during the 1980s.

Moreover, the regime has become entangled in a delicate and dangerous dance with a group of non-establishment ulema, often referred to as the *sahwa*, or "awakening clerics."<sup>18</sup> Led by men such as Safer al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda, this new generation of Islamic leaders came of age during the late 1970s and 1980s, when Saudi Arabia was reaping the first benefits of its dizzying oil wealth and calls for jihad permeated society. These clerics became highly visible in 1990 when they ardently protested the king's decision and ulema's fatwa to allow the United States and other non-Muslim governments to defend the kingdom and eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait. These young, intense men, many of whom spent the 1990s in and out of prison, represent a generational shift in Saudi Arabia's religious hierarchy. Their preachings inspired bin Laden and his followers. The *sahwa*, who are vehemently opposed to the United States, relentlessly criticize the traditional ulema's fawning passivity and call for greater influence over all aspects of Saudi society, including foreign policy.

Since Abdullah released them from prison in 1999 as a goodwill gesture, the *sahwa* have mellowed somewhat. For the most part, they seem more intent on working with, rather than undermining, the Saudi government. Some clerics have even tried to help the ruling family identify and capture Saudi Arabia's hard-core dissidents in return for limited amnesty. Others have participated in reconciliation efforts between the Sunnis and Shi'a. In May 2003, the *sahwa* denounced the bombings inside the kingdom and publicly questioned the religious justification claimed by those who had carried out the attacks.

The U.S. should commit to assist in developing human capital.

Still, the *sahwa* are virulently opposed to the United States and continue to provide succor to radical elements of society.<sup>19</sup> In November 2004, prominent *sahwa* members signed an open letter to the Iraqi people, urging a jihad against the United States. In a public scandal, Salman al-Awda's son was intercepted on his way to Iraq, following what he reportedly believed to be his father's exhortations to fight. The royal family faces difficult choices when

**Joining the WTO would provide political cover to restrict corrupt practices.**

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confronting the *sahwa*. Working with these popular clerics offers some benefits, and by slowly engaging them, the government can point to real gains in co-opting and controlling their message. Nevertheless, the *sahwa*'s anti-Americanism and the toxic environment they have helped to create is profoundly troubling. The growing number of Saudis going to Iraq—some 2,500, according to one Saudi researcher<sup>20</sup>—is a disturbing indication that the context inside the kingdom has not changed as

much as many had hoped. This poses challenges to the futures of the United States and Saudi Arabia, as battle-hardened radicals return home trained in the latest urban warfare techniques. Clearly, the Saudi leadership still has a way to go to undo the radicalism that was encouraged over the last decades.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

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The question remains, can the United States actually do anything to help interested Saudi government members reduce the influence of the radical extremists? After the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush defined the transformation of the Middle East as one of his administration's foremost foreign policy priorities. He concluded from the attacks that "decades of excusing and accommodating tyranny, in the pursuit of stability, have only led to injustice and instability and tragedy."<sup>21</sup> The attention that high-level U.S. officials are giving to reform is a welcome departure from traditional practices of engaging Middle Eastern governments and only focusing on external security challenges. If not pursued deftly, however, increased attention from the U.S. government runs the risk of steamrolling local reform efforts and undermining the very people and projects Washington hopes to promote. For the last half of the twentieth century, the United States was willing not only to coexist with tyranny, as Bush suggested, but to overlook the politicization of religion. U.S. policies that help encourage opportunities outside or alongside religious pursuits would be a useful palliative to yesterday's complacent policies.



Certainly, some immediate joint counterterrorism efforts need bilateral attention, particularly those that seek to end terrorist financing. Having largely succeeded in shutting down illicit wire transfers of money, Saudi leaders must now turn equally aggressive attention to cash couriers who move easily throughout the kingdom. This task will be difficult in a country with a deeply ingrained cash culture. Saudi Arabia has recognized this problem but has been slow to address it. Nevertheless, as part of a long-term approach to depoliticizing religious extremism in Saudi Arabia, Washington should develop a comprehensive social, economic, and political reform strategy that supports local efforts.

### **SOCIAL REFORM**

The United States should make a commitment to assist in the development of human capital in Saudi Arabia and, more broadly, in the region. Higher oil prices will not solve all or even most of Saudi Arabia's looming social problems. Saudi Arabia has one of the world's fastest-growing populations, and nearly 40 percent is below the age of 15.<sup>22</sup> Similar to many of its neighbors, the kingdom has a young population and suffers from an exceedingly high rate of unemployment. Between 15 and 30 percent of Saudi men and approximately 95 percent of women are jobless.

The kingdom is in desperate need of technical training and educational reform to provide employment for its growing population as well as opportunities outside the religious realm. Unfortunately, between 1993 and 2003 the number of U.S. Department of State-sponsored exchange programs, which help top students acquire necessary skills, fell by 21 percent in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen.<sup>23</sup> A recent survey found that 29 percent of U.S. colleges and universities polled registered a decrease in Saudi student enrollment.<sup>24</sup> After the September 11 attacks, Saudi student visa applications fell 80 percent and have yet to recover.<sup>25</sup> The dramatic decrease in the number of Saudi students studying in the United States over the last few years follows a general decline in Saudi students studying abroad since the 1980s. According to the *Statistical Yearbooks of Saudi Arabia*, the number of Saudis studying abroad reached a peak of more than 12,500 in the mid-1980s but then dropped to 3,554 in 1990 and to only slightly more than 3,400 in 1996.<sup>26</sup> Over time, the Saudi government has offered less funding for its students to travel abroad. This reduction is partly the result of the Saudi government's desire to promote its own local universities but also of a lack of available resources.

Today, with oil revenues once again increasing, renewed attention should be paid to promoting educational and cultural exchanges between the United States and Saudi Arabia. To facilitate these exchanges, the U.S. gov-

ernment needs to streamline visa and entry procedures. Bush administration officials deserve credit for fixing a number of the problems that originally stalled many visa applications after the September 11 attacks.<sup>27</sup> Providing more opportunities for young Saudis to pursue outside or alongside religious study is one way to slowly “drain the swamps” of terrorism. Still, there are far too many stories of reformers and moderates who opt not to come to the United States because of the difficulties and harassment that others have experienced.

Bush and Abdullah made significant headway in addressing such issues during their spring 2005 meeting in Crawford, Texas. In a joint statement, the two leaders announced a commitment to increase the number of Saudi students studying in the United States, expand military exchange programs that provide education to Saudi officers, and facilitate travel to the kingdom by U.S. citizens. In addition to making such proposals a reality, Saudi leaders must now also commit to real educational reform inside the kingdom. This is important not only to the United States but also to Saudi Arabia’s future.

A good model for U.S. assistance to the long-term development of human capital in Saudi Arabia is a small (\$100,000) U.S. Agency for International Development grant to Effat College, a relatively new Saudi women’s college based in Jeddah, which will enter into a partnership with Duke University to establish an engineering program and provide desirable employment skills for new graduates. The Bush administration deserves considerable credit for this initiative, a public diplomacy coup that is reaping dividends far beyond its cost. Until recently, it was almost impossible to get U.S. foreign aid into the kingdom, an oil-rich country that few understandably believed worthy of aid. Yet, if the United States does not support its potential friends, it is now clear that few others will. Committing to broadening human capital will help wean some away from radical religious pursuit and, just as importantly, is a cause many moderates and reformers actively support.

## **ECONOMIC REFORM**

Given its rapidly increasing population and the fact that, when controlled for inflation, oil prices are nowhere near as high as they were in the late 1970s, Saudi Arabia’s oil money does not go as far as it once did. The kingdom’s per capita revenue from oil exports during the early 1980s was \$22,174. In January 2005, with oil prices hovering around \$50 per barrel, that figure settled at a mere \$4,511.<sup>28</sup>

In 2000, Condoleezza Rice wrote on a related topic that, “although some argue that the way to support human rights is to refuse trade with China, this punishes precisely those who are most likely to change the system. ... [T]rade in general can open up the Chinese economy and, ultimately, its

politics too.”<sup>29</sup> The same logic applies to Saudi Arabia’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which would benefit those within the kingdom who promote transparency and accountability. Joining the WTO would also provide cover for Abdullah, allowing him to make some very difficult and potentially explosive decisions at home, such as restricting corrupt practices among royal princes.

After a slow start, Washington has been more active in engaging Saudi Arabia on WTO accession since September 11, 2001. Over the last few years, Saudi Arabia has also become more serious about the process, changing the composition of its negotiating team and working to meet imposed membership requirements. By making the high-level political commitment to Saudi Arabia’s entry, Washington and Riyadh can overcome the remaining obstacles. The United States will need to prioritize its economic concerns and demonstrate some leniency. Because Saudi Arabia’s membership in the WTO will support the kingdom’s more Western-oriented business elite and reformers attempting to introduce controversial policies, such prioritization and leniency are well worth the potential costs. A congressional petition circulated in May 2005 calling Saudi Arabia’s WTO accession “premature” is shortsighted.<sup>30</sup>

Economic reform will help absorb the waves of young Saudis entering the market. Increased transparency and accountability will also reduce existing corruption, a chief complaint among the population and the regime’s opposition. It will also expand Saudi Arabia’s business class, which has a direct stake in economic stability and domestic security.

**The precedent set by the 2005 municipal elections is significant.**

### **POLITICAL REFORM AND DOMESTIC CHALLENGES**

Washington should continue to pressure Riyadh to gradually open its domestic political arena to ensure that violence is not the only available form of political expression. In particular, the harsh sentencing in May 2005 of three nonviolent political activists—Ali al-Domaini, Matruk al-Falih, and Abdullah al-Hamid—has cast a pall over local reform efforts and should draw high-level attention from the United States. They, along with 10 others, were arrested in March 2004 for circulating a petition advocating a constitutional monarchy for the kingdom. The situation provides the United States a perfect opportunity to defend freedom and increase political participation by regularly calling for the release of political prisoners and would also put the United States squarely on the side of supporters of political reform inside the kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

**To effectively reduce the influence of radical Islam in Saudi Arabia will take time.**

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Another looming domestic political challenge stems from the Saudi government's persistence in defining major Islamic organizations such as the World Association of Muslim Youth, the Muslim World League, and the International Islamic Relief Organization as international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than charities,<sup>32</sup> rendering the new laws centralizing and monitoring charitable organizations less effective. When pressed

by one U.S. representative about the distinction before her trip to the kingdom in early 2005, Bandar likened Saudi control over NGOs to U.S. control over the United Nations. He pointed out that, just as the United States could not control the UN, which operates on U.S. soil, neither can Saudi Arabia fully control Islamic NGOs. What Bandar failed to acknowledge is that Congress is constantly battling the United Nations, threat-

ening or actually withholding funds for activities related to policies conflicting with perceived U.S. interests.

Saudi Arabia has not made a similar public effort to rein in Islamic NGOs that operate on its territory—organizations that receive significant support from Saudi benefactors and whose leadership is often chosen by the royal family.<sup>33</sup> Steven Emerson, an analyst who closely tracks Islamic radicalism in the United States, testified before the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs in July 2003 that “in March 1997, Secretary General [of the Muslim World League] Abdullah al-Obaid thanked King Fahd for his continued support, noting that the Saudi government had officially provided more than \$1.33 billion in financial aid to the [Muslim World League] since 1962.”<sup>34</sup> Until all Islamic NGOs operating on Saudi territory are strictly audited and monitored, outsiders will have good reason to suspect that money continues to flow to unsavory people and places. Insisting on such monitoring should be a top priority for the United States when engaging in talks with Saudi officials.

Washington should also explore ways to engage the winners of Saudi Arabia's first municipal elections in more than 40 years, which occurred between February and April 2005. Although voter turnout was thin and women were excluded, the precedent set by the election is significant, especially as Fahd had previously declared Islam and voting to be incompatible. Perhaps through a multilateral effort, Washington could support regional training programs for newly elected political officials. Introducing them to their regional counterparts and providing political training would acknowledge the importance of the election, help institutionalize the results, and

encourage the Saudi royal family to take this new political group seriously. By reaching out to the winners, Washington could also avoid the charge that it is cherry-picking supporters and thus unintentionally discrediting them.

## **Beyond Oil and Security**

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Developing constructive policies that help local reformers steadily chip away at past decades of political decay is a subtle and painstaking exercise. This generational task requires sustained U.S. attention and instruments of power beyond the U.S. military. In today's battle of ideas in the Middle East, technical training, rational visa policies, and educational assistance are equally if not more important than assault rifles and fighter jets. Such sustained support cannot include gratuitous, counterproductive, and unwarranted anti-Saudi measures such as Representative Anthony D. Weiner's (D-N.Y.) June 2005 amendment that no funds be "obligated or expended to finance any assistance to Saudi Arabia," which specifically targets a paltry \$25,000 International Military Education and Training grant for Saudi military training.<sup>35</sup> Although politically popular, such measures are strategically counterproductive and impede the ability of the United States to assist indigenous Saudi reform efforts, which are already fighting an uphill struggle slanted against liberalism and religious diversity.

Oil and security have consistently been defining features of the U.S.-Saudi relationship; religion has figured less prominently in even the most sophisticated analyses. Yet, Saudi Arabia's religiosity, whatever its specific teachings, had served a useful political purpose for the United States for half a century, making the kingdom a reliable Cold War partner and providing its leaders with a perception of global threats similar to the one held by the United States. Now, however, Saudi Arabia's proselytizing activities have contributed to today's dangerous religious environment.

In such a dramatically different global political context, can Saudi Arabia play a productive role in altering the course of religious radicalism? History suggests yes. Saudi leaders have repeatedly reined in religiously excessive spokesmen and calibrated messages to accord with varying political contexts. Today, Saudi Arabia's abilities are difficult to assess. Although the leadership is going after hard-core religious fighters, the extent to which the spiritual context is changing is less clear. The *sahwa* are still active, popular, and anti-American and have spawned an even younger and more radical group of extremists with which the *sahwa* are themselves engaging in an ideological battle. Such groups present real challenges to moving quickly toward altering Saudi Arabia's social and cultural milieu.

**Religion is the strategic issue confounding both sides and must be tackled head-on.**

Riyadh clearly has the public confidence and support of the current U.S. administration. In his 2004 congressional testimony, Ambassador J. Cofer Black, then the State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, concluded that Saudi Arabia showed “clear evidence of the seriousness of purpose and the commitment of the leadership of the kingdom to this fight [against terrorism].”<sup>36</sup> In his acceptance speech at the Republican National

Convention in August 2004, Bush himself mentioned Saudi Arabia explicitly, stating that “four years ago ... Saudi Arabia was fertile ground for terrorist fundraising” but now “Saudi Arabia is making raids and arrests.”<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, if Saudi Arabia is effectively to reduce the influence of radical Islam, the process will take time. To assist those in Saudi Arabia interested in this long-term reform struggle, the time has finally come to reformulate the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The recent meeting between Bush and Abdullah in Crawford provides the basis for a more strategic recasting of the relationship. Both leaders committed to establishing “a high-level joint committee ... headed by the Saudi Foreign Minister and the U.S. Secretary of State that will deal with strategic issues of vital importance to the two countries.”<sup>38</sup> Although profoundly uncomfortable, religion must be part of that discussion; it is the strategic issue confounding both sides and must be tackled head-on. The way that each country understands, manages, and engages today’s religious trends will help shape the future of Wahabbi Islam in Saudi Arabia and subsequently the Islamic landscape throughout the Middle East and beyond. It is the core of the so-called battle for hearts and minds.

## Notes

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