

OIL AND BLOOD: SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAQ

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The war in Iraq is not about democracy and never was about “weapons of mass destruction”. It is about U.S. national security interests in the Gulf and this essay will argue that these revolve around two issues: the free flow of oil from the region at a reasonable price; and, after the September 11th attack, the curtailment of funds supporting terrorism as well as the export of Wahhabism, the intolerant form of Islam that had its birth in Saudi Arabia. The war is about dealing with Saudi Arabia.

The *imminent* threat of “weapons of mass destruction” from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq had been eliminated in the first Gulf war and was used as a pretext for the second war. Many in the intelligence community knew this, but nevertheless were obliged to fall on their swords. The current rhetoric is about “democracy,” but democracy—along with its prerequisites of civil society and the rule of law—cannot readily be externally imposed. Democracy has been used by the administration to make US actions in Iraq more palatable to the world community.

In discussing US policy in Iraq, the distinction between policy and strategy should be kept in mind. US policy goals are, as stated above, the flow of oil at a reasonable price and the curtailment of terrorism and the spread of intolerant Islam; how they are achieved, through diplomacy, war, or other means, is a matter of strategy. Confusing policy goals and strategy can easily lead one into an intellectual muddle. Establishing a “democracy” or some form of autocracy subservient to US interests—a goal that no US politician would openly espouse, is a choice of strategy not policy. The purpose of this strategy is to bring pressure on the Saudis to achieve the policy goals.

From the Saudi perspective, the US approach to achieving its policy goals by removing Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist regime, followed by a chaotic occupation of Iraq, only seems to provide a training ground for anti-Saudi jihadists, and perhaps far worse, has altered the balance of power in the Gulf region between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims in favor of the Shi’ites. And the only consistent explanation of US actions is that this was their purpose.

To explore this thesis we need to explore the nature of Islamic terrorism and the strangle hold the vast Saudi oil reserves have on the rest of the world. We begin with the nature of Islamic Terrorism and some of its history.

Islamic Terrorism

Islamic terrorism is the most recent manifestation of the reaction to the fall of the great Muslim empires to the West. The last was the Ottoman empire that was dismembered after 1918. Its sovereign ruled not only as a sultan over a specific state, but as the caliph, the head of Sunni Islam. As caliph he was the last of a line that traced itself back almost 1300 years to the Prophet Muhammad. Today, with its poor governance, high birth rate, and low productivity, the Muslim world is falling ever further behind the West. Islamists find fertile ground for their claim that restoration of the caliphate will restore the greatness of the past—a past which, unlike the peoples of the West who often do not know their own history, Muslims have not forgotten. Islamists feel that the failures of the Muslim world are due to excessive modernization. They see their primary task as reinstating a purely Islamic way of life—one that does not necessarily rule out the benefits of modern technology.

Some Islamist groups have been singled out for explicit condemnation by the Anglo-Indian author Salman Rushdie: the Muslim Brotherhood based in Egypt, “the blood-soaked combatants of the Islamic Salvation Front and Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, the Shiite revolutionaries of Iran, and the Taliban. Poverty is their great helper, and the fruit of their efforts is paranoia. This paranoid Islam, which blames outsiders, ‘infidels,’ for all the ills of Muslim societies, and whose proposed remedy is the closing of those societies to the rival project of modernity, is presently the fastest growing version of Islam in the world.” To those who say the terrorism has nothing to do with Islam, Rushdie answers “Of course this is ‘about Islam.’ The question is, what exactly does that mean?”

Al Qaeda, created around 1990 by Osama bin Laden and those around him after the Russians were driven out of Afghanistan, credit themselves not only with defeating the Russians in Afghanistan but also with the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. From this perspective, taking on the US isn’t as silly as it appears.

The US is viewed as degenerate and demoralized. Significantly, Islamists call the US “the Great Satan”, following Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. The term “Great Satan” should not be thought of in Christian terms since for Muslims it has the connotation of

weakness. Satan is a seducer, and for Al Qaeda it is the seduction by America that represents the greatest threat to their brand of Islam.

In the Islamic world, Egypt and Egyptian writers play a predominant intellectual role. It should therefore come as no surprise that the effort to find a form of the modern nation-state compatible with Islamist precepts apparently originated in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hasan al-Banna in the late 1920s. The Muslim Brotherhood, unlike many of today's Islamist groups, was willing to use modern political forms and processes, and was the first Islamic organization to call for an Islamic form of the nation-state. This is significant since, in many ways, Islamic fundamentalism can be viewed as a *reaction* to the modern nation-state.

Scholars and others have often pointed out that the term "Islamic fundamentalism" is inappropriate for designating what is also called here Islamist. The term "fundamentalism" really only applies to some branches of Protestantism, and gives the wrong idea of the division when used to distinguish Islamists from the Islamic mainstream. Nonetheless, the "fundamentalist" label has stuck and the press and even some scholars have begun to use the term. It will be used here interchangeably with Islamist.

While Islamic fundamentalism has a long history, it has become a significant factor in world events only since the 1970s. Its rise in modern times can be traced to the mid-1950s when Sayyid Qutb rose to prominence after he was arrested with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb was to become the main ideologue of modern Islamists. As put by Johannes Jansen of the University of Leiden in his 1997 book, *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism*, "he created a coherent ideology which has shown itself able to inspire many people to face their own death calmly for the sake of Islam, and to kill in its name." Perhaps Qutb's most influential work was *Landmarks* published in 1964. In it he accused contemporary Muslim societies of not adhering to the true Islam and the Arabic word he chose to characterize these societies implied apostasy, the penalty for which is death. He also wrote a major, widely translated and distributed commentary on the Koran in thirty volumes called *In the Shadow of the Koran*—the final half being written in prison after Egypt's President

Nasser cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood following an attempted assassination. Qutb was hanged in Cairo in 1966.

Qutb believed the source of error in the world was the divorce between the sacred and the secular. He attributed this to the early Christians and nearly two thousand years of ecclesiastical error. Paul Berman's fine *New York Times Magazine* essay on the subject emphasizes that Qutb blamed

“Christianity's modern legacy, which was the liberal idea that religion should stay in one corner and secular life in another corner. He blamed the Jews. In his interpretation, the Jews had shown themselves to be eternally ungrateful to God. . . . The Jews occupy huge portions of Qutb's Koranic commentary—their perfidy, greed, hatefulness, diabolical impulses, never-ending conspiracies and plots against Muhammad and Islam. Qutb was relentless on these themes. He looked on Zionism as part of the eternal campaign by the Jews to destroy Islam.”

He also blamed those Muslims who had inflicted Christianity's “schizophrenia” on the world of Islam.

This may give a flavor of Sayyid Qutb's monumental work, but it does not do it justice. It is not a shallow work and must be answered in depth. But the answer must come from the Muslim world, from those Muslims who believe in an Islam compatible with modernity.

There is a major divide between Islamists. There are those who believe in the doctrine ascribed to Ayatollah Khomeini wherein the *Ulama*—those Muslims educated in the Koran and other Islamic works, and who represent Islamic learning—called by the Shi'ites Ayatollahs, have absolute authority, the state and politics falling entirely within the sphere of their absolute, divinely ordained authority. And, on the other hand, the Sunni Arab fundamentalists who believe the *Ulama* have been corrupted and must be replaced by visionaries who would return Muslim societies to a truly Islamic way of life. Both these factions disagree with mainstream Islam.

In the end, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is about the conflict between the enlightenment and rise of the modern, secular nation-state, the impact of these developments on the Muslim world, and the demands of the Islamic faith as embodied in the Koran, the Sharia, and the Hadiths or Traditions. Islamists are out for power; they

want to rule in place of existing regimes. But, nevertheless, the conflict is fundamentally one of ideas in the Muslim world and must be resolved there. As put by Johannes Jansen:

“A number of small fundamentalist groups have degenerated into a state of primitive rebellion. Their total lack of doubt concerning God and the Last Things is possibly to be envied, but it cohabits with murderous designs on less favoured Muslims. This desire for murder has received its theological framework from Sayyid Qutb, who . . . died with a smile on his lips. The time may be coming when citizens of the Middle East who are not willing to die smiling will have to decide whether it is worthwhile to die fighting in order to forgo the privilege of being killed by men who are ready to die smiling.”

After the attack on September 11, 2001, it became clear to the Bush administration that, as put by Jeffery Sachs of Columbia University, “senior Saudi intelligence officials were probably involved and that 15 out of the 19 terrorists were from Saudi Arabia. Sachs goes on to say that the White House was “no doubt stunned to realise that parts of the vast Saudi royal family were not only corrupt but also deeply intertwined with anti-American terror and extremist fundamentalism.” As a result, the administration “needed to issue a powerful threat to the Saudi leadership: one more false step and you’re finished. Attacking the next-door neighbour was no doubt judged to be quite persuasive. A direct diplomatic attack was probably ruled out by the deep and inextricable links between the White House and the Saudi leadership.” If the White House was really “stunned” by this information it means that the White House was shielded from information that US intelligence has known for years.

How true are the claims that the Saudis are funding terrorist organizations and the spread of their intolerant form of Islam? According to the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the National Security Agency has for many years been collecting electronic intercepts of conversations between members of the Saudi royal family. The “intercepts depict a regime increasingly corrupt, alienated from the country’s religious rank and file, and so weakened and frightened that it has brokered its future by

channeling hundreds of millions of dollars in what amounts to protection money to fundamentalist groups that wish to overthrow it.”

The *New York Times* in its lead editorial of 14 October 2001 pulled few punches about Saudi Arabia, saying that “One of the disturbing realities clarified by last month’s terror attacks is Saudi Arabia’s tolerance for terrorism. Students of America’s deeply cynical relationship with Riyadh have long known that the kingdom did little to discourage Islamic extremists, as long as they operated outside its borders, and that Washington muted its objections to keep oil flowing to the West. It is now clear that the Saudi behavior was more malignant. With Riyadh’s acquiescence, money and manpower from Saudi Arabia helped create and sustain Osama bin Laden’s terrorist organization.”

However, the staff of the September 11 commission found in 2004 that there was no evidence that the Saudi government or senior Saudi officials financed Al Qaeda. It is not clear what this means, however, since one could hardly expect the commission staff to find documentary evidence here or in Saudi Arabia that directly implicated the Royal family or high government officials. Keep in mind that as of October 13, 2001, the US froze the accounts of some 65 Saudi and Pakistani individuals and groups. Among these was the Muwafaq Foundation administered by some of the kingdom’s leading families. According to the US government, “Muwafaq is an al-Qaeda front that receives funding from wealthy Saudi businessmen.” Given the nature of Saudi society, there is no way this could happen without knowledge of members of the Saudi royal family or high government officials.

Jean-Charles Brisard, a French terrorism investigator working for the plaintiffs in a case brought by families of the September 11 victims, testified before Congress in October of 2003 that “all of our leads and much of the evidence collected by the 9/11 families put Saudi Arabia on the central axis of terror and show that this government was aware of the situation, was able to change the path of its organisations but voluntarily failed to do so.” David Aufhauser, a former top US official on terrorist financing, testified to Congress that Saudi co-operation in stopping the flow of funding to terrorist groups was “halting, lacking all initiative [and] sometimes insincere.”

To understand, as put by Michael Doran of Princeton University writing in *Foreign Affairs*, “why one of Washington’s staunchest allies has been incubating a

murderous anti-Americanism—one must delve into the murky depths of Saudi Arabia’s domestic politics.” He compares al Qaeda to the Wahhabis that constitute the Saudi religious establishment. The Wahhabis believe that “Christians, Jews, Shi’ites, and even insufficiently devout Muslims . . . constitute a grand conspiracy to destroy true Islam.” This cabal is led by the “Idol of the Age”, the United States. “The chief difference between the ways al Qaeda and the Saudi religious establishment define their primary foes is that the former includes the Saudi royal family as part of the problem whereas the latter does not.” It must be understood that Wahhabism is at the foundation of Saudi rule, it is not possible to divorce the two.

Internally, the Saudi regime is facing an increasingly radicalized Sunni majority and a marginalized and restive Shi’ite minority concentrated in the oil-producing eastern province. With the Shi’ites likely to dominate Iraq, the Saudis cannot help but think that their own Shi’ites could, possibly with US acquiescence, proclaim their autonomy, relying perhaps on their coreligionists in Iran for support. They would then be able to control local oil revenues thereby depriving the Wahhabi majority, largely confined to central Saudi Arabia, of funds. While this is a very unlikely possibility, and actually bringing it about is almost certainly not the aim of US strategy, the scenario may well serve as a means of bringing pressure on the Saudi regime. As put by the writer Lee Smith—paraphrasing George Friedman and other Middle East experts and intelligence analysts—the idea “is to use regional threats like the Shi’ites to gain leverage over some of America’s Sunni allies, especially Saudi Arabia, and force them to crack down on home-grown Islamic radicals and preachers.” Doing so however may well tear the Saudi family and their country apart.

There is some evidence that minimizing Shi’ite influence in the future is what is driving some of the Sunni violence in Iraq. According to Sir Lawrence Freedman of King’s College, “Arguing that the bombings show why we must reverse course in Iraq suggests that the current violence in that country is about resistance to foreign occupation. At one point it might have been but the current, and extraordinary vicious, terror reflects the determination of some Sunnis, but in particular foreign militants, to prevent the establishment of a Shia majority government.” It would be interesting to

have reliable statistics as to how many of these foreign militants are from, or being funded by, Saudi Arabia.

The Oil Stranglehold

Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University is one of the few people to publicly raise the key issue about the war: “The crucial question regarding Iraq is not whether the motives for war were disguised, but why.” He points out that “Saudi Arabia is the key to world oil stability, the accommodating supplier when markets get too tight” and that it “has been a spigot of private wealth for key US figures, and for the Bush extended family in particular. The Saudi royal family lacks political legitimacy at home, so it buys US protection from abroad.” But what he does not say is that this is not a new deal, it was the understanding that Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Saud arrived at during their meeting in Egypt some sixty years ago: the US would guarantee Saudi power in return for a stable supply of oil—at the time developed and pumped by US companies.

The US and Western civilization as a whole had little choice about being involved in the Gulf region—unfortunately, a large fraction of the world’s easily accessible oil is found there. And international economic realities, not under the control of any one government, mandate that cheaper oil will be used before investments are made to bring more expensive reserves to market. As oil reserves are depleted in the Gulf region, the cost of extracting oil will rise. When this cost roughly equals the cost of extraction elsewhere, the importance of the Gulf as a source of oil to the west will decrease. There is plenty of oil in the world, but not at today’s relatively cheap prices.

OPEC currently supplies some forty-percent of the world’s oil. The International Monetary Fund has complained that international oil companies are too conservative in their investments to bring new oil sources into production; as of late 2005, most leading oil companies will only invest in projects that would still be profitable if prices fell to \$20-\$25 a barrel. But the oil industry has been burned before when new oil production precipitously dropped prices. They are well aware that it does not take a great deal of oil to impact prices on the margin.

While there are alternative sources of liquid fuel for the transportation sector, it would take ten to twenty years—even given a high priority and stable prices—to raise

production to needed capacity. Conservation and other alternative approaches can help but they do not have the potential to replace the need for a continued increase in the availability of liquid fuels.

Thus, when one speaks of US national security interests in the Gulf, one is speaking of oil. Whatever is said about “weapons of mass destruction”, human rights and democracy, Michael Ignatieff of Harvard University has articulated the real reason we are in Iraq:

“the obvious fact [is] that the operation was about oil, not in the callow sense of going to war for the sake of Halliburton but in the wider sense of America’s consolidating its hegemonic role as the guarantor of stable oil supplies for the Western economy. . . . The Iraq intervention was the work of conservative radicals, who believed that the status quo in the Middle East was untenable—for strategic reasons, security reasons and economic reasons. They wanted intervention to bring about a revolution in American power in the entire region. What made a president take the gamble was Sept. 11 and the realization, with 15 of the hijackers originating in Saudi Arabia, that American interests based since 1945 on a presumed Saudi pillar were actually built on sand.”

Whether or not the US gamble in Iraq will work is very unclear. If the Saudi family falls, what replaces it will likely be far worse from the US perspective. The most likely outcome in Iraq—and probably the best we can expect—is a power sharing arrangement under the guise of “democracy.” Such a federation would bind the three major Iraqi ethnic factions: the Kurds in the north of the country (it being unlikely that they would try to form an independent Kurdistan since the Turks would almost certainly invade if that occurred); the Shi’ites in the south being the dominant faction; and the Sunnis in what is known as the Sunni triangle, that roughly triangular area to the northwest of Baghdad. The other major possibility is the expansion of what can only be called the current civil war after the draw down of US forces. The likely outcome of an unrestrained civil war would be the slaughter of large numbers with the Shi’ites coming out on top. The current Sunni superiority in armaments would not last long and would not guarantee their survival.

For their part, the possibility of a divided Iraq—whether or not the pieces are federated—is not a new concept for the Saudis. In March of 1991, when uprisings in Iraq’s Shi’ite-dominated southern region and Kurdish northern region threatened to split the country, Saudi Arabia urged the US not to extend its military offensive. Saudi fear of Iranian domination in the south of Iraq, which motivated their call for restraint, later eased, and in February of 1992 a leader of the Shi’ite opposition in southern Iraq, Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim, was invited to visit Riyadh, where he was publicly received by King Fahd. A Saudi senior intelligence official was quoted at the time as saying that the partition of Iraq “may in fact be a better solution than the present situation. . . . we may need several small entities to deal with instead of attempting to preserve one Iraqi nation.”

Given that the Iranians are now in the process of developing the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons, and are likely to support their coreligionists in the south of Iraq, it is extremely doubtful that the Saudis still believe this. Indeed, Prince Saud al-Faisal, who has been the Saudi foreign minister for some thirty years, now maintains that “the main worry of all the neighbors” about Iraq was that its disintegration into Sunni, Shi’ite and Kurdish states would “bring other countries of the region into the conflict. . . . This is a very dangerous situation, a very threatening situation.” He also maintained that Iran was already sending money and weapons to the Shi’ite controlled south of Iraq.

So where do we go from here? Unfortunately, there are no simple answers. One thing is certain: Saudi Arabia is the key to containing the terrorist menace, assuring stability in the Gulf, and keeping the oil flowing at a reasonable price.