

## SAUDI ARABIA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: A NEW SECURITY DILEMMA

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Throughout much of 2003, 2004 and 2005, the international community has watched in morbid fascination as Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) waltzed through a halting, reluctant slow-dance, with each side alternately pushing the other away in response to unwanted entreaties, only to re-embrace in the halting partnership. Chaperoning the encounter is the European Community acting as a supportive partner, with the United States and Israel in a more threatening guise. The song is still playing, though it remains unclear whether the two sides will decide to stay until the end of the dance. Many interested parties await the outcome: the Israelis, the United States, and indeed the entire Middle East.

While the international community remains rightfully transfixed by the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, another concern now shimmers on regional radar screens. Periodic press reporting throughout 2003-05 asserts that Saudi Arabia is also seriously considering the acquisition of nuclear weapons as part of a general re-

examination of the assumptions that have driven the kingdom's quest for security over the last 50 years. The latest reporting indicates that the Saudis have begun talks with the IAEA about its "Small Quantities Protocol." As it has for other states, the protocol would allow the Saudis to admit the possession of allowable quantities of uranium and plutonium and provide requisite assurances that the material was not stored in a nuclear facility. Under the protocol, the material would not be subjected to routine IAEA inspections.<sup>1</sup>

While the prospect of a nuclear-armed Saudi Arabia has been dismissed by many observers and, if realized, would represent a profoundly unwelcome development for regional security, the fact that the Saudis appear interested in a systematic look at their security strategy is in many ways a healthy and welcome development. During the 1990s, the United States unsuccessfully sought to build a structured dialogue with the kingdom to address long-term security strategy and the role that the Saudis might play in a broader regional framework. The Persian Gulf and Middle East have re-

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mained largely impervious to any efforts promoting a more integrated regional security framework. Indeed, regional security can be best described simply as American hegemony. In addition to American predominance, there are many reasons why the regional states have not organized themselves in an overarching security construct. Continued interstate disputes, lack of a common threat perception and simple inertia have to be at the top of any list. Outside of half-hearted, but well-intentioned efforts by the sultan of Oman, none of the region's states have tried to lead the region toward military integration and collective security.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps times are changing. Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal told an audience in Bahrain in December 2004 that a new regional-security framework needed to be constructed around the following four pillars: (1) a strong, vibrant Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in which the members are integrated economically, politically and militarily; (2) the inclusion of Yemen; (3) a stable and unified Iraq; and (4) the inclusion of Iran.<sup>3</sup> Saud al-Faisal noted that the security of the region should not depend on the United States, but should stem from guarantees "...provided by the collective will of the international community through a unanimous declaration by the Security Council guaranteeing the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all the countries of the Gulf and promising to act forcefully against any external threats." Whether or not such soaring rhetoric will be turned into meaningful action remains to be seen, but the past actions of the GCC and the Saudis provide little cause for optimism. Indeed, the speech was followed by a GCC summit notable for the lack of high-level Saudi

participation due to reported annoyance over Bahrain's free-trade agreement with the United States. The GCC, it seems, is the same as it ever was.

With the region's largest military boasting some of the most modern U.S. defense equipment ever sold to foreign customers, it seems logical that Saudi Arabia would seek to insert itself into a leadership role to work with the region's smaller and less-populous states to fashion a more coherent security framework. Saud al-Faisal's words notwithstanding, the Saudis' lack of enthusiasm for regional collective security has only been confirmed in persistent press reports suggesting that they are instead considering a route taken by other regional states – the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and/or nuclear weapons. One particularly interesting report points to Saudi interest in three options for ensuring security: (1) seeking the declaration of states in the region to forsake WMD and create a WMD-free zone, (2) acquiring nuclear weapons, and (3) aligning themselves with an existing nuclear power and placing themselves under its nuclear umbrella.<sup>4</sup>

The kingdom's review of these issues as evidenced by Saud al-Faisal's December 2004 speech and the related press reports over the last 36 months reflects the House of Saud's obvious reactions to fundamental changes in the regional-security environment. While the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East have always been noted by strategists for their chronic instability, events over the last several years have made a bad situation worse. The Saudis, it seems, have noticed these changes and are taking stock.

Changes to the region's security environment flow from a variety of interre-

lated forces. First came the September 11 attacks and the unwelcome (at least from the Saudi perspective) attention in the American press to alleged Saudi financial support for al-Qaeda in conjunction with stories of Saudi sponsorship of religious extremism through the funding of madrasas in Pakistan and elsewhere preaching a “Wahhabi” fundamentalist version of Islam to receptive Muslim audiences around the world. The situation seemed particularly acute in Pakistan, where Saudi financial support for the madrasas and the jihadists during the war in Afghanistan morphed into the Taliban, which eventually took over Afghanistan and provided al-Qaeda with a geographic base to build an infrastructure to support terrorist operations around the world.<sup>5</sup> While the press and public justifiably focused on the fact that 15 out of the 19 attackers on 9/11 came from Saudi Arabia, this alone might not have been so serious but for the wider context of U.S.-Saudi relations. There had been a decade of drift in the U.S.-Saudi security relationship, highlighted by the obvious discomfort of the House of Saud with the continuing presence of U.S. forces operating out of Prince Sultan Air Base. With the presence of these forces seized upon for criticism by emerging domestic political forces in the kingdom, the House of Saud found it could no longer quietly conduct business with the Americans out of the public view. Moreover, despite various critics pointing to an alleged cozy relationship between the Bush family and the House of Saud, it seemed unclear after 9/11 whether the Bush administration was prepared to continue “business as usual.” These strains converged to undermine the U.S.-Saudi relationship; just how seriously remains to be seen.<sup>6</sup>

Second came the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the now-open declaration by President Bush that one of the principal objectives of using force in Iraq is somehow to transform the region into more transparent societies with fundamentally different political and economic systems. Such fundamental change is anathema to the founding principles of the kingdom as created by Abdul Aziz Ibn Al-Saud in 1932. Rumors accompanied the Iraq invasion that the United States also sought to establish a military partnership with a reconfigured Iraq that would act as a potential alternative to the strained relationship with the House of Saud. Iraq and its 112 billion barrels of oil reserves could, some argued, replace Saudi Arabia as the strategically vital U.S. partner in the region. The United States is reportedly developing a number of military facilities in Iraq that could serve as operational hubs similar to the facilities now in use in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman.<sup>7</sup> On the political front, Bush administration policy initiatives being advanced under the rubric of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) seek to help create new governmental political and economic institutions that will embrace transparency and accountability. The Saudis have neither signed up for any of the MEPI programs nor embraced the administration’s broader calls to transform the region. Perhaps unsurprisingly, forcible regime change in Baghdad has not been embraced in Riyadh. Indeed, as will be discussed later, a new Shiite government in Baghdad represents a potential threat to the kingdom. While important in and of themselves, the limited municipal elections in February 2005 do not represent a rush to fundamentally alter the political status quo

in the kingdom in ways that meet the overarching U.S. goal of advancing freedom and democracy in the region.

Third have come the unfolding revelations by the IAEA that had been long suspected by many – that Iran is engaged in a comprehensive and systematic program to develop fissile material outside of international oversight. There appears little doubt in some quarters that Iran intends to develop its own nuclear weapons, going the route of other regional states – Pakistan, Israel and India. This program, in conjunction with the development of long-range missile capabilities, potentially provides Tehran with the means to put a variety of regional capitals at risk, opening the door to a coercive political and military framework designed to support Tehran’s regional objectives. The prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran with long-range missiles promises to establish a new strategic factor of analysis for states throughout the region.

Last, but not least, is an emerging and complicated domestic political landscape within the kingdom that is forcing the ruling family to play to its varied “publics” at the same time it is waging an increasingly active war against an entrenched militant infrastructure. The impact of internal politics and the battle against al-Qaeda are both difficult gauges in the context of the House of Saud’s decision-making process on how to ensure its long-term security. Western observers are often quick to dismiss Saudi domestic “politics” per se, but the House of Saud governs by consensus and has done so successfully since the inception of the kingdom. Maintaining consensus – a process that is largely opaque to all but the best-informed observers – has become increasingly complicated

for the Saudi leadership over the last decade. The impact of these domestic complications on security issues is difficult to discern. It can and should, however, be subjected to some informed speculation by governments that are interested in trying to forestall the Saudis from acquiring new and threatening military capabilities, whether long-range missiles or nuclear weapons.

In short, strategic, regional and domestic factors are all combining and overlapping to create a profound security dilemma both for the regime and the nation. Seen within this framework, it is not surprising that the Saudis would be giving serious thought to the most appropriate way to ensure their security.

### **SMOKE AND FIRE?**

Growing Saudi concern over its security dilemma can be detected in the smoke wafting around this issue. It started appearing in the fall of 2003, with further hints throughout the winter and spring of 2004. Following the September 18, 2003, story in *The Guardian* on the options under consideration to ensure Saudi security, the London-based Saudi daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* published an editorial on October 8 titled “Yes, We Fear Iran’s Uranium.” The editorial, penned by editor Abd Al-Rahman Al-Rashad, dismissed the idea that the Iranian nuclear program was directed at threats from the United States and Israel: “The Iranians are enriching uranium to produce nuclear weapons aimed, essentially, at its neighbors, mainly Pakistan. However, the danger encompasses the other neighboring countries as well, such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan....”<sup>8</sup> The editorial further opined,

We fear Iran's intentions in producing nuclear weapons because we understand very well, given the history of conflicts in the region, that Iran will push us toward one of the two tragedies: The simpler tragedy is that Iran will ignite the spark of the nuclear arms race in our poverty-stricken region, whose governments will begin to purchase these ecologically dangerous toys at an unbelievably high price. The second tragedy is that the arms race will result in putting these insane weapons to use.<sup>9</sup>

Following the *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* editorial, UPI reported in October 2003 that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan had concluded a "secret agreement on nuclear cooperation" following a visit by Crown Prince Abdullah to Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> According to the report, Abdullah and Pakistani

President Pervez Musharraf agreed to exchange Saudi oil for Pakistani nuclear "know-how and expertise."<sup>11</sup> The leaders also reportedly discussed the possibility of Pakistani troops deploying to the kingdom, presumably to provide added assurance against external threats. Other reports went further, suggesting that agreement was reached during these meetings to station Pakistani nuclear weapons on Saudi soil.<sup>12</sup> During meetings in Islamabad on October 4, 2004, Pakistani and Saudi delegations were rumored to have discussed "ways to undertake a joint venture in the production of arms and ammunition, ar-

mored fighting vehicles, missiles and tanks."<sup>13</sup> All recent activity seems consistent with previous Saudi support for and interest in Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs, consisting of alleged Saudi royal-family representation at a Pakistani ballistic-missile test in May 2002 and a visit by Saudi Minister of Defense and Aviation Prince Sultan in May 1999 to the Pakistani uranium-enrichment facility at Kahuta.<sup>14</sup> Some allege that Saudi Arabia provided Pakistan with critical funding and other support to help Pakistan absorb the substantial costs of building a nuclear capability.<sup>15</sup>

Further commentaries have emerged highlighting the

Saudi-Pakistani connection as well as a rumored Sino-Saudi connection, stemming in part from the \$3 billion to \$3.5 billion Saudi acquisition of 40 to 50 Chinese CSS-2 missiles in the late 1980s. Given

China's past

history of involvement with the Pakistani missile and nuclear programs, it is argued that a Sino-Saudi-Pakistani connection becomes even more plausible.<sup>16</sup> A further twist on this line of reasoning has been offered, noting that Saudi Arabia is now China's primary source of imported oil, a relationship that will only become more pronounced over the next 20 years, assuming the Energy Information Administration's projections provide an analytically sound baseline.<sup>17</sup> The president and chief executive of Saudi Aramco, Abdallah Jumah, in fact, recently indicated that the world's largest oil company will

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work hard in the years ahead to increase exports to China.<sup>18</sup> The EIA projects that China may be importing up to 10 million barrels of oil per day by 2020, with most of this coming from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf producers, a significant increase from today's levels of approximately 500,000 barrels per day from Aramco.<sup>19</sup> These factors, in a dangerous neighborhood, might combine to make a more robust military Sino-Saudi security relationship attractive to the Al Saud leadership in the years ahead.<sup>20</sup> Some analysts go further, suggesting that China aspires to replace the United States as the guarantor of Gulf security and wants to craft a strategic partnership with the Saudis as part of such a plan.<sup>21</sup>

What is to be made of this reporting, and which of these issues constitute actual fires rather than mere smoke? The flurry of reporting and follow-on analysis provides national-security academics and professionals with a useful means to analyze the kingdom's security predicament in the new century. The task is admittedly difficult. There is no open debate within the kingdom about security strategy, and senior princes rarely talk about these issues in public except to repeat shopworn statements of policy. Discerning and deducing Saudi signals and intentions is at best a haphazard process. It must be attempted, nonetheless, if the United States and the international community are to address what may be the next, and arguably most crucial, proliferation challenge in the region. As part of this process, the kingdom's search for security needs to be framed in a broader context that can guide analysts and policy makers to understand the interrelationships among various Saudi motivations and interests.

Constructing such an analytical framework can then inform strategy and policy aimed at addressing the potential issue of Saudi proliferation.

The public Saudi position on proliferation and nuclear weapons is clear. High-ranking officials in the kingdom repeatedly renounce interest in acquiring nuclear weapons, pointing to Saudi Arabia's accession to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in October 1988 and its consistent position calling for the creation of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. (Saudi Arabia also ratified the Chemical Warfare Convention in 1996.) A press release posted on the website of Saudi Arabia's Washington Embassy summarily states: "Reports that Saudi Arabia is considering acquiring nuclear weapons are baseless and totally false. Saudi Arabia has long advocated for a Middle East that is free of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and there is no basis to change current policies."<sup>22</sup> Deciding to acquire nuclear weapons would clearly place Saudi Arabia outside its NPT commitments. Recent Saudi statements confirm these positions. Saud al-Faisal flatly denied that the kingdom would develop nuclear weapons in response to Iran's acquiring them, stating, "No, we will not [build our own nuclear weapons]. We do not believe that it gives any country security to build nuclear weapons."<sup>23</sup> These statements have not ended the speculation and seem at odds with indications that the Saudis have expressed interest in the IAEA small-quantities protocol, which would free the Saudis from reporting up to 10 tons of natural uranium, 20 tons of depleted uranium (depending on enrichment levels) and 2.2 pounds of plutonium.

## **LOOMING CSS-2 REPLACEMENT DECISION**

The Saudis face a near-term “wedge” decision on the proliferation issue: whether to replace or upgrade CSS-2/DF-2 missiles bought from the Chinese in the late 1980s in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War. The Saudis purchased 50-60 missiles with conventional warheads and a dozen-odd transporter erector launchers, which are deployed at two sites with four to six launch pads per site. This protracted strategic bombardment of both Tehran and Baghdad, while of limited military utility, had a profound psychological impact on the leadership of both states. The missile purchase followed a decision by the United States not to sell the kingdom surface-to-surface missiles. In going to the Chinese, the Saudis demonstrated interest in diversifying their arms-sales relationships. This was also indicated by their purchase of advanced Tornado aircraft from the British after repeated difficulties in acquiring F-15s from the United States in the 1980s. But, while the Tornado purchase made sense in terms of Saudi security requirements, given the pre-eminent role of the Royal Saudi Air Force in defending the kingdom, the link between the CSS-2 and legitimate military requirements always seemed more tenuous. With a 2,650-kilometer range and a reported circular error probability of nearly a kilometer, it was always difficult to identify the military utility of such a conventionally armed missile. This led various commentators to suggest that the missiles boasted a nuclear payload.

Whatever the reason for the original purchase, the Saudis must now decide whether to replace this aging system. The Chinese are fielding a second-generation,

solid-propellant missile (DF-21A), which means that training and support for the liquid-fueled CSS-2 will become increasingly more complicated and expensive.<sup>24</sup> The Saudis face a decision on whether to allow the CSS-2 to lapse into obsolescence or replace it with a next-generation system. The Saudis have a number of options: (1) phase out the CSS-2 from the force structure and abandon the long-range missile program, (2) upgrade to a new missile and conventional warhead, (3) upgrade to a new missile with a nuclear warhead, and (4) opt for a new missile with an unconventional warhead.

Choosing among these options forces the Saudis to confront the kingdom’s increasingly complicated security dilemma, the heart of which is arguably the state of the U.S.-Saudi partnership.

## **A WEAKENED U.S.-SAUDI PARTNERSHIP**

Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the United States has remained at the heart of the kingdom’s quest for security since its founder, Ibn Abdul Aziz Al Saud, met with President Roosevelt in the Great Bitter Lake in February 1945. That meeting placed a political face on the growing commercial relationship (dating to Standard Oil of California’s concession in 1932) and Saudi Arabia’s gradual emergence as the dominant player in the world’s oil markets.

As it evolved over the twentieth century, the U.S.-Saudi partnership formed around a number of critical political, economic and military pillars:

- U.S. companies – the Aramco partners – would exploit Saudi oil reserves and build out the Saudi energy infrastructure;
- At the political level, the United States would regard the security of the king-



dom as a “vital” interest – a commitment conveyed to the House of Saud on a number of occasions in the post-World War II era – and would use force and/or deploy forces to the kingdom if necessary on those occasions when the House of Saud and the U.S. political leadership agreed that the situation warranted;

- The United States would seek to develop Saudi internal and external security capabilities through the sale of defense equipment and training supported by the presence of advisory elements to help manage the complicated programs and day-to-day training activities;
- The Saudis would use their influence as the dominant supplier within OPEC and world oil markets to ensure that crude reached the market in a relatively predictable stream;
- The Saudis would generally support U.S. interests in the region, such as the Middle East peace process, though it would not take the lead publicly in supporting these interests;
- The United States would not push substantial internal political or economic reform, leaving the House of Saud to fulfill its part of the tacit bargain.

While Saudi Arabia remains a con-

structive and moderating influence in OPEC, other central elements of the partnership now appear in question. While one hears various high-level Bush administration officials make the usual supportive diplomatic statements about the U.S.-Saudi relationship, there is little doubt that various parts of the Bush administration’s national-security bureaucracy – mostly located in the Defense Department – are now openly questioning the value of the Saudi partnership. Moreover, the constituency in the

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State Department’s Near and South East Asia Bureau that provided important internal bureaucratic support for the relationship has eroded and gradually been subsumed by a bureaucratic constituency emphasizing the centrality of the U.S.-Israeli partnership to

achieving U.S. regional objectives.<sup>25</sup> Saudi Arabia now also has few friends in Congress. Protection of Saudi territorial integrity and the maintenance of the House of Saud are no longer routinely described as “vital” U.S. interests. To be sure, the U.S.-Saudi partnership has always been a marriage of partners that could not be more culturally and historically dissimilar. But both parties made a conscious decision to ignore and work around their incongruencies to build a security partnership that has proven remarkably durable.<sup>26</sup>

The partnership arguably reached its apex in the 1980s, when, backed by the CIA and the White House, the two countries embarked on covertly opposing the Soviets in Afghanistan and various other adventures around the globe to combat an illusory communist menace. Since then, however, the partnership has drifted into decline as the United States during the 1990s increasingly focused on solving the Arab-Israeli dispute and containing Iraq and Iran, subjecting the House of Saud to growing domestic political pressures stemming from the prolonged presence of U.S. forces in the kingdom.

The September 11 attacks unleashed a torrent of unflattering stories about the kingdom's alleged support for terrorists around the globe, stemming partly from the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, but also due to the apparently unregulated financial support for charities suspected of links to al-Qaeda. The formulation of these stories identifies the Saudis as the source of the Wahhabi "extremist" religious ideology, which has been aggressively exported throughout the world with active Saudi political and financial support. Thus, the formulations go, the Saudis are now regarded as an enemy in the global war on terror.<sup>27</sup> Constant battering in the press has taken its toll on those within the kingdom's leadership who would continue to support a strong U.S.-Saudi strategic partnership.

The Bush administration's repeated and forceful enunciations of a strategy to transform the Middle East into a series of democratic states have placed additional pressures on the degraded Saudi-United States partnership.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, one of the implicit understandings throughout the post-World War II era was that the United

States would not overtly push the House of Saud to institute political and economic reforms. Clearly, this understanding is no longer operative. The Bush administration appears determined to actively push all countries in the region towards fundamental political and economic reforms. This places the monarchy on a long-term collision course with the United States.

### **A DETERIORATING REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

At the same time that the U.S.-Saudi relationship has been drawn into question, regional developments have taken a dramatic turn for the worse – at least from the Saudi perspective. While the death of Yasser Arafat and the emergence of the democratically elected Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas is a welcome development, the last four years have seen the emergence of militant hardliners on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides who appear uninterested in reconciliation and accommodation. The sway of these groups, in combination with the de facto U.S. abandonment of its policy of acting as an "honest broker" in the peace process, has created a seemingly permanent landscape of conflict that feeds a radicalizing (and anti-U.S.) mass psychology that regimes throughout the region must deal with as a factor in their internal and foreign policies.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq represents another threatening feature on this already troubled regional landscape. However much the Saudis may have disliked Saddam, the prospect of a Shia-led pseudo democratic confederation in Iraq (a best-case scenario) can hardly be any more palatable in Riyadh. The Saudis would face the prospect of a potentially powerful

neighbor representing a profound political and religious threat to the kingdom. A politically successful Iraq administered by its Shia majority would place the Saudi monarchy in a difficult position politically, since it is already under pressure to speed up the kingdom's political reforms. The emergence of a Shia-dominated Iraq also would exacerbate the Saudi regime's strained relations with the Shia throughout the region, but particularly in the kingdom's Eastern Province.

Other scenarios in Iraq are hardly much better for the Saudis. The potential splintering of the country into fiefdoms defined along ethnic, tribal and sectarian lines creates the prospect of one massive headache along Riyadh's unpoliceable northern frontier. An Iraq consumed with ethnic, tribal and sectarian warfare providing a base of operations for money, men and materiel that can be funneled into al-Qaeda's infrastructure in the kingdom is another potential negative outcome of regime change in Baghdad. In sum, it's difficult to see an outcome in Iraq that will ease Saudi Arabia's threat perception and enhance its sense of security.

But if the day-to-day violent spiral in Iraq is cause for concern in Riyadh, Iran's apparently inexorable march towards developing its own nuclear capability represents an even more serious challenge. Tehran's intentions seem clear to most observers. It has built a redundant and hardened nuclear infrastructure that is all but impervious to an Osirak-type attack, and its hard-line religious leadership has repeatedly stated it will neither abandon its nuclear program nor place it under meaningful international oversight. In the context of Iran's mature and apparently successful long-range missile program, the

Islamic Republic appears positioned to eventually become the world's next nuclear power with the ability to deliver a nuclear weapon to a range of at least 1,250 miles. Iran's August 2004 test of an enhanced Shehab-3 medium-range missile capable of carrying a 2,250 pound warhead only confirmed Tehran's ability to reach targets throughout the region, including Riyadh.<sup>29</sup> Iranian officials have repeatedly claimed that its nuclear program is intended to supply fuel for reactors that can generate up to 7,000 megawatts of electricity by 2020, when Iran's oil reserves will start to decline. It is unlikely that the House of Saud finds any solace in the hollow-sounding claims by Iran's leadership that it is only developing nuclear power for peaceful purposes.

## **POLITICS AND NATIONAL DEFENSE**

The May 12, 2003, attacks in Riyadh on Western housing compounds and the ensuing violence over the next two years leave no doubt that the House of Saud has finally awakened to the serious threat posed by al-Qaeda. The extent of its network throughout the kingdom serves as a cruel reminder that al-Qaeda continues to pursue a primary mission, as articulated by Osama bin Laden: to destabilize the kingdom and remove the apostate House of Saud from power. The emergence of an activist militant infrastructure is a complicating factor for the regime as it contemplates growing uncertainties in the domestic political environment that will invariably affect any security strategy to mitigate external threats.

The complexities of the Saudi domestic political environment and the challenges facing Crown Prince Abdullah and the

royal family cannot be overstated. They must mobilize the fight against al-Qaeda while simultaneously preserving consensus within the royal family and negotiating reform among the important players on the domestic scene.

Crown Prince Abdullah has cautiously initiated a domestic political process that seeks to address the many difficult issues facing the kingdom: the role of women, lack of economic diversification, the place of the religious establishment in governance and reform, and the kingdom's role within the region and with outside powers – to name a few. Internal discussion of the nation's external security is absent from the "National Dialogue" forums held over the last two years. However, some of the "petitions" presented to Abdullah by so-called reformers have linked the need for internal reform with the changing external environment. In February 2003, petitioners presented Abdullah with a "National Reform Document" that complimented the crown prince for stimulating an internal debate: "It is a commendable course that generated support among a score of your brothers and sons among the citizens, who are worried about the dangers facing their country since September 11, 2001. For instance, [the region is] threatened with military action, intervention in internal affairs and redrawing the whole regional map." The petitioners further stated their solidarity with the ruling family "...in facing all dangers which threaten our country's present and future. And they see that those dangers require serious reforms to strengthen relations between the leadership and the community." Another related group of pro-reform petitioners reiterated their concern about the growing terrorist threat to the kingdom and, in a September 24,

2003 letter to Abdullah, called for a rejection of "...all kinds of extremism and violence and terrorism" in the kingdom.<sup>30</sup> It is clear in these and other passages in the petitions that certain parts of the Saudi domestic political diaspora recognize the link between security (both internal and external) and governmental reform and want the issue openly discussed.

The process of domestic political reform will, if nothing else, place security issues in a broader domestic political bargaining framework as the House of Saud navigates between competing constituencies. There are rumors of internal schisms within the royal family itself on the pace and direction of internal reforms. And, while the regime may seek to limit treatment of an issue that has always been limited to dialogue among senior family members, it seems clear that the outcome of the kingdom's internal debate could have a profound impact on its approach to security strategy.

While the removal of U.S. operational forces from Prince Sultan Air Base eliminated a domestic political irritant for the regime, broader treatment of the status of the U.S. relationship must logically appear at the top of any list of issues to discuss. While Saudi Arabia has relied on U.S. protection for most of the twentieth century, due to a conscious commitment by the royal family, it is unclear that there is still consensus on this issue. Moreover, it is almost certainly the case that powerful domestic constituencies do not want to continue the U.S.-Saudi relationship on the same basis. Public opinion forms a supporting backdrop on this issue, in which a variety of opinion polls show overwhelming disapproval of U.S. policies and of the United States more generally. Both the

religious establishment and dissident clerics seem united in this opinion. Consistent with doctrine of *tawhid*, these actors are said to endorse the view that the United States must be ejected from the region as an infidel regime engaged in a war on Islam. There is much common ground here between al-Qaeda and certain elements of the religious establishment. There are also rumored splits in the family on this issue, pitting Interior Minister Prince Nayef and others against Crown Prince Abdullah.<sup>31</sup>

Recent pronouncements by some dissident clerics calling for the ejection of the United States from the region bring an added layer of complexity to the domestic political landscape.<sup>32</sup> In November 2004, these clerics released a fatwa urging support for the jihadist forces in Iraq battling the U.S. occupation, asserting that "...resistance is a legitimate right. In fact it is a religious duty..."<sup>33</sup> Several prominent Sunni scholars signed the fatwa – Awad Al Qarni, Salman Al Awdah and Safar Al Hawali. This fatwa followed a May 2004 pronouncement by Saudi dissident cleric, Nasser bin Hamed Al Fahad, that provided al-Qaeda with a legal justification for using weapons of mass destruction, stating, "If the nonbelievers are not going to be pushed away from Muslims unless weapons like WMD are used, then it is legal to use such weapons to kill them all and destroy their crops and offspring."<sup>34</sup>

These clerics represent new and powerful actors in the kingdom's domestic politics. It's becoming increasingly difficult for the regime to simply throw these dissidents in jail, the regime's preferred course of action over the last decade. Two of the main clerics, Safar Al Hawali and Salman Al Awdah, have carved out a role

for themselves at the national level. The clerics are said to represent certain strands of thought that resonate within the state-sponsored religious establishment and broader conservative elements in Saudi society.<sup>35</sup> While they differ in terms of their support for the regime, they are more united in their xenophobic message, which is both strongly anti-Shia and anti-Western. If the clerics are not united on the outlines of domestic political reform, they are united in opposition to both the prospect of a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad and the U.S. presence in the region, which is aiding and abetting the ascent of the Shia on their doorstep. The House of Saud eventually must address the contradictions between its partnership with the United States and the arguments for ending the relationship being advanced by a powerful domestic political constituency that has been a central pillar of the regime's governing structure. The confluence of positions between the dissident clerics and the religious establishment restricts the House of Saud's bargaining power on domestic and international issues, since the regime's legitimacy stems from its historic pledge to uphold the conservative tenets of Wahhabi Islam in coordination with the religious establishment.

The shrinking domestic political maneuvering room may help explain the caution in placing new military orders with the United States. There have been no major arms sales since the 1997 purchase of the F-15I fighter aircraft. The eroded U.S.-Saudi political partnership cannot but lead to the re-emergence of the doubts frequently voiced by the Saudi leadership during the early 1980s about the reliability of the United States as a supplier of advanced weaponry. The issue of U.S. reliability becomes critical given the

dependence of the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces (SAAF) on the continuous flow of spare parts and logistical support from the United States and the accompanying phalanx of U.S. contractors. Any disruption will quickly lead to a deterioration of the kingdom's ability to defend itself with conventional military force. The regime's dependence on the U.S.-supported and supplied Saudi Arabia National Guard (SANG) constitutes another difficult issue. SANG's primary mission of protecting both the regime and the oil fields may be even more important than the combat capabilities of the SAAF. Altering the U.S. security partnership in a way that leads to deterioration in the conventional military capabilities provided by the Ministry of Defense and Aviation and Office of the Program Manager for the Saudi Arabia National Guard organizations only increases Saudi Arabia's vulnerability to external and internal threats, making asymmetric security capabilities that much more cost effective.

House of Saud decision-making on issues related to external defense and national security traditionally has been exercised by a relatively few actors in the ruling family. It remains unclear how the senior leadership will address these new domestic political pressures and the plethora of emerging actors from across the political spectrum. But all these factors militate against a business-as-usual approach and suggest a new and more complicated set of factors that will shape the kingdom's security strategy in the years ahead.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The opposition of the United States to nuclear and other WMD proliferation is

unequivocal, and a decision to proliferate by Saudi Arabia obviously would have disastrous consequences for the U.S.-Saudi partnership and the wider regional security environment. The critical question for policy makers and the international community must be to identify the instruments of national power that can usefully influence the House of Saud's decision-making calculus to prevent a decision to proliferate. In considering how to approach the issue, it is important that the United States openly concede the gaps in its knowledge about the motivations and intentions of the members of the senior leadership (and other important domestic actors) who will play a role in shaping Saudi Arabia's approach to protecting the kingdom. The difficulties of penetrating what is largely an opaque decision-making environment cannot be underestimated as the United States thinks about fashioning an effective counterproliferation policy.

A few guidelines suggest themselves:

- Both the internal and external security environments of the kingdom must be adjusted to reduce its sense of insecurity.
- Coercive diplomacy and rhetoric directed at Saudi Arabia is likely to backfire, providing further ammunition to internal actors calling for a reduced U.S.-Saudi security partnership. Instead, the United States should quietly assist the regime's internal battle against al-Qaeda. This can help provide the House of Saud with the space to manage the process of internal political evolution while simultaneously battling the militants.
- Forestalling Iranian acquisition of fissile material that could be used for nuclear weapons is obviously a central challenge that will affect the security of all regional states, including Saudi Arabia.

- Transition to a democratic Iraq must be carefully managed and should include a no-WMD pledge from the Iraqi regime as a confidence-building measure for other regional states.
- The U.S.–Saudi partnership needs to be placed on a new footing, based on a realistic appraisal of the interests of each party. The United States should engage the House of Saud in sustained dialogue on proliferation and security issues. Such a dialogue might help ease the security concerns of the regime as one element in an integrated approach to discourage proliferation.

## CONCLUSION

The question of proliferation in Saudi Arabia has its own particular nuances that on some levels make it different from other

cases – North Korea, Iran, Libya, Syria and Iraq. These nuances stem from a variety of factors: the changed context of the U.S.–Saudi security relationship, a highly unstable regional-security environment that could quickly deteriorate due to events in Iraq and Iran, and an unfolding process of domestic political evolution that is making it more difficult for the House of Saud to govern by its traditional process of consensus. An appreciation for these nuances is central to crafting a mosaic of policy initiatives at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Integrating these levels offers the best chance of success in forestalling a decision by Saudi Arabia to acquire new unconventional capabilities and address the different levels of Saudi Arabia's emerging security dilemma.

<sup>1</sup> George Jahn, "Saudis in Talks on Nuke Loophole," Associated Press, April 20, 2005, <http://www.sacunion.com/pages/world/articles/4150/>.

<sup>2</sup> More extensive discussion of the GCC's inability to structure itself into a more coherent organization to manage collective security is contained in James A. Russell, "Formation of the Iraqi Political System: The Role of the GCC," *Emirates Lecture Series #46*, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Prince Saud's address titled "Towards a New Framework for Regional Security," in Manama, Bahrain, on December 5, 2004 as posted on the website of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia at <http://www.saudiembassy.net/2004News/Statements/SpeechDetail.asp?cIndex=483>.

<sup>4</sup> Ewen MacAskill and Ian Traynor, "Saudis Consider Nuclear Bomb," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> See details of the role that Saudi financial support for madrassas in Pakistan and its role in bankrolling the jihadist groups in Afghanistan later played in the emergence of the Taliban in Steve Coll's book *Ghost Wars*, (Penguin Press, New York) 2004. As also described by Coll, the Saudis developed a particularly close relationship with Pakistan's Directorate for Inter Service Intelligence Services during the 1980s and 1990s – a relationship that also proved instrumental in the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s as the most powerful of the many groups vying for control over Afghanistan.

<sup>6</sup> A relatively upbeat assessment on the state of the U.S.–Saudi relationship was provided by Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal, who said in a recent interview that the U.S.–Saudi relationship was "nearly to where it was before the September 11 attacks." See "Q&A: The Saudi Foreign Minister," *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2005, p. B1.

<sup>7</sup> See Chalmers Johnson for details in "America's Empire of Bases," posted at <http://www.alternet.org/story/17563/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Yes We Fear Iran's Nuclear Weapons," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, October 8, 2003, as posted on the Gulf 2000 website.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> "Pakistan-Saudi Trade Nuclear Technology for Oil," United Press International, October 20, 2002. The substance of the story has been repeated in a variety of forums through late 2004, with one of the latest being

Zeev Schiff, "Iran: Pakistan Helping Saudis Develop Nukes," *Haaretz*, December 8, 2004. Like previous stories, Schiff quotes "official Iranian sources" about the Saudi-Pakistani agreement.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> G. Parthasarathy, "Axis of Evidence," *Indian Express*, November 14, 2003, translation by FBIS.

<sup>13</sup> "Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Explore Joint Ventures in Defense Production," AFP, October 11, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> As referenced in Richard Russell's piece "Saudi Nukes: A Looming Intelligence Failure," *The Washington Times*, January 5, 2004, p. 17. Also see Ed Blanche, "Playing With Fire: Deepening Suspicions that Saudis are Considering Atomic Arms," *Daily Star*, November 29, 2003, for some of the same arguments.

<sup>15</sup> Roula Khalaf, Farhan Bokhari and Stephen Fidler, "Saudi Cash Joins Forces with Nuclear Pakistan," *Financial Times*, August 4, 2004, 20:37.

<sup>16</sup> Emphasized by Richard Russell, as footnoted above.

<sup>17</sup> Gal Luft & Anne Korin, "The Sino-Saudi Connection," *Commentary Magazine*, March 2004, pp. 26-29.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Romero and Jad Mouawad, "Saudis in Strategy to Export More Oil to India and China," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2005, Section C, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lut and Korin, pp. 27-28. Also see report by the Gracia Group, *The Sino-Saudi Energy Rapprochement: Implications for US National Security*, January 8, 2002, prepared for Dr. Andrew Marshall, director, Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, Washington, DC.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Woodrow, "The Sino-Saudi Connection," *China Brief*, Issue 21, Volume 2, Washington DC, October 2002 at [http://www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=18&issue\\_id=661&article\\_id=4680](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=18&issue_id=661&article_id=4680).

<sup>22</sup> Statement as posted at <http://www.saudiembassy.net/2003News/Press/PressDetail.asp?cYear=2003&cIndex=128>.

<sup>23</sup> *Washington Post* interview, February 27, 2005, op.cit.

<sup>24</sup> Good supporting detail for the CSS-2 program can be found in Lt. Steve McDowell, "Is Saudi Arabia a Nuclear Threat," Naval Postgraduate School Master's Thesis, September 2003, at <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/research/theses/McDowell03.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> The recent phenomenon of the decline of the "Arabists" in the State Department is detailed in Stephen Glain, "Freeze-Out of the Arabists," *The Nation*, November 1, 2004. The decline within the State Department dates to the early 1990s, when the Clinton administration made a conscious effort to boost pursuit of the peace process, which saw a gradual decline in the influence of the "Arabist" portion of the Near East South Asia bureau.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph McMillan, "U.S.-Saudi Relations: Rebuilding the Strategic Consensus," Strategic Forum No. 186, November 2001, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University

<sup>27</sup> As an example, see Victor Davis Hanson, "Our Enemies the Saudis," *Commentary Magazine*, July/August 2002

<sup>28</sup> President Bush stated on November 6, 2003, that "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty." Quoted in Deb Riechmann, Associated Press, "Bush Urges Spread of Democracy in the Middle East," November 6 2003.

<sup>29</sup> See details of the missile test in "Analysis: Iran's Missile Capabilities," UPI, October 6, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Text of the letter "In Defense of the Nation," dated September 24, 2003, as translated by Gwen Okruhlik and Yara Youssef at the University of Texas at Austin for the Gulf 2000 website.

<sup>31</sup> Details of the alleged split and the surrounding arguments are in Michael Doran, "The Saudi Paradox," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004.

<sup>32</sup> An outstanding discussion of the role of the dissident clerics in Saudi domestic politics is contained in Toby Jones, "The Clerics, the Sawha and the Saudi State," *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 4, No. 3, March 2005.

<sup>33</sup> FBIS translation "Saudi Scholars Address Open Letter to Iraqis Saying 'Resistance is Legitimate,'" November 8, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Fatwa dated May 2004, "Thesis in the Legality of Using WMD against Infidels," written by Nasser bin Hamed Al-Fahad, May 2004. Translation by Mowafiq Anazi.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, op. cit. p.