

**Nathan Hale Foreign Policy Society**  
Department of Studies  
Policy Background and Options Paper Series

**Democracy within Boundaries:**  
Managing Risks While Promoting Liberalization in Saudi Arabia  
By Cyrus Dioun

Produced by the Middle East Program  
Nathan Hale Foreign Policy Society  
[www.foreignpolicysociety.org](http://www.foreignpolicysociety.org)  
February 2005

## 1. Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

Recent militant attacks on the Saudi capital and economic infrastructure have sent a strong message to the divided Saudi royal family: intransigence in the face of growing calls for reform at home and abroad is no longer a viable option. A repressive authoritarian government - which bases much of its legitimacy on Wahhabism, a radical strain of Islam - has given rise to reactionary forces within the Kingdom, threatening the stability of the Saudi regime while breeding international terrorism. The United States had long neglected these internal developments because of its amicable, mutually dependent relationship with the Saudi regime. The devastating September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks forced the United States to reassess its longstanding policy of supporting the authoritarian Saudi monarchy while ignoring repressive intolerance within the Saudi state. Now is a critical time for the Saudi monarchy, which is caught in a precarious position: reform too much and become obsolete; reform too little and face greater radicalism and the spectre of revolution, or even civil war.

There are three principal policy options that the United States could promote with regard to reform in Saudi Arabia:

1. apply pressure for top-down liberalization, where the Saudi government allows limited participation;
2. support grassroots democratization that may eventually lead to the replacement of the Saudi regime;
3. revert to a hands-off approach to Saudi internal developments, tacitly supporting the Saudi regime.

This paper recommends the United States pressure the Saudi monarchy to follow through with proposed top-down liberalization, creating political space and developing civil society while enshrining royal power. Top-down liberalization would be the most effective of these three options because it creates political release valves that will diminish the appeal of extremism, while at the same time controlling the pace of liberalization. Even if a democratic Saudi Arabia is a goal of U.S. foreign policy, such a result would be much more likely if the oil kingdom went through an interim period where civil society and political institutions could develop in a steady, moderate manner that would ensure rational government. The United States must privately exert pressure on the Saudi regime - which may be hesitant to reform - to follow through with plans for liberalization in a cautious yet steady that will convince the Saudi public that reforms are more than window dressing.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is published as part of the Nathan Hale Foreign Policy Society Policy Background and Options Papers Series. The Nathan Hale Foreign Policy Society is a non-partisan and not-for-profit organization dedicated to the study of foreign policy issues. Views expressed in our papers are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the society or its membership, which as a non-partisan forum does not take particular positions on particular issues. Readers wishing to cite papers in this series are warmly welcome to do so, and are kindly requested to make use of the format 'author, 'paper title,' Nathan Hale Foreign Policy Society Policy Background and Options Paper, date, (see [www.foreignpolicysociety.org](http://www.foreignpolicysociety.org)).

## 2. Issues in Focus

The Saudi monarchy is facing growing unrest within the desert kingdom, as some Saudis who have seen their standard of living fall over the past two decades are increasingly turning towards radicalism, in part because there are no meaningful avenues to express their grievances within the Saudi state. The growth of radical Islam in Saudi Arabia is not only creating domestic instability, but also threatening U.S. national security and geopolitical interests. Resting upon 25% of the world's known oil reserves, Saudi Arabia plays a critical role in the world economy as an OPEC swing producer with the power to moderate oil price fluctuations.<sup>2</sup> Containing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the oil rich kingdom plays an important religious role in the Muslim world. The Saudi regime's conservative and relatively passive rule over the holy cities has safeguarded U.S. interests; for, if empowered, radical Islamists could use Mecca as a pulpit to recruit Muslim followers and possibly precipitate a clash of civilizations with the West.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Saudi Arabia's strategic position in the Persian Gulf has made it a pivotal part of U.S. security policy in the region. Over the past two decades, the United States has provided the Saudi regime with military support in the gulf, attempting to contain both Iranian and Iraqi aggression that might threaten Saudi Arabia.

Strong ties between Washington and Riyadh have long obscured the growth of radical Islam, which threatens U.S. interests abroad and national security at home. The authoritarian regime's prohibition of political expression and organization within Saudi Arabia has created a vacuum in Saudi civil society, which has been filled in part by the mosque. As the only fully developed social institution not entirely controlled by the Saudi government, the mosque has become the primary network for the organization of opposition and dissent; furthermore Saudi Arabia's "official religion", Wahhabism - a puritanical sect of Islam that denounces both non-Muslims and Shi'ites as infidels - serves to indoctrinate Saudis not only in mosques, but in schools as well. Over the past two decades, the Saudi religious establishment has gained influence over the educational establishment, which devotes at least a third of its curriculum to religious study and uses textbooks that divide the world into protectors of the faith and unbelievers.<sup>4</sup> As the authoritarian Saudi state pushes some moderates into radicalism, mosques and schools channel that opposition into puritanical Islam. To a degree, the growth of Islamic extremism in Saudi Arabia has been a byproduct of the Saudi regime's domestic and regional agenda, which has attempted to project power in the region and co-opt opposition at home - granting the Wahhabi religious establishment greater powers over Saudi society, while funding mosques, madrasas, and militants abroad.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past two decades, falling oil revenues and a rapidly growing population have caused the quality of life in Saudi Arabia to deteriorate.<sup>6</sup> These depressing conditions have produced unfulfilled expectations of prosperity, which have been breeding

---

<sup>2</sup> 167 Telhami, and Hill 2002

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Prokop 2003

<sup>5</sup>75 Rouleau 2002

<sup>6</sup> Jones Fall 2003

discontent among young Saudis, creating a pool of potential recruits in the Arabian Peninsula for militant groups such as Al-Qaeda. Over the past two years, such groups have attempted to sow chaos in the Saudi state through suicide bombings that have killed dozens. Although few believe that the Saudi government is presently in danger of being toppled, most analysts acknowledge that the Saudis must relieve some of the growing pressure within the kingdom if they hope to avert even greater, more dangerous, instability. In a recent interview, the scholar Mai Yamani stated: “the royal family are losing control of the situation... It is the beginning of the end, if there are no political solutions.”<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the Saudi monarchy is facing calls for reform from a broad spectrum of groups hoping to capitalize on the mounting threat within the kingdom. In January 2003, a group of 104 Saudi intellectuals presented Crown Prince Abdullah (Saudi Arabia’s de facto head of state since King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995) with a petition called “The Vision,” demanding political reforms including elections to the consultative council, civil rights, an independent judiciary, and an end to corruption.<sup>8</sup> The following April, a second petition was submitted to Abdullah by 450 members of the marginalized Shi’ite religious minority, demanding political reform and an end to “fanatical sectarian tendencies.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike previous movements for reform, these petitions are couched in terms of national unity and pro-regime rhetoric, making it harder for the government to denounce them. Reform is supported by some of the more liberal members of the royal family like Prince Talal, King Fahd’s half brother, who believes that “in order to survive the kingdom has to adapt itself to the new world and become fully integrated into the global economy.”<sup>10</sup> However, such feelings are not common, and the Saudi ruling family is divided about whether or not to reform and to what extent.<sup>11</sup>

The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks were a watershed moment for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The revelation that fifteen of the nineteen September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers were Saudi nationals forced a reevaluation of United States policy towards its ally. Previously, the United States has turned a blind eye to its allies’ repressive tendencies. However, Washington’s newly reformulated policy, the Middle East Initiative, with its successor the Greater Middle East Initiative, attempted to address the socioeconomic and political deficiencies that foster radicalism in the Middle East. Currently, Washington is pushing for liberalization, while paradoxically continuing to rely on autocratic governments in the region, perhaps a telling sign of the United States’ tenuous commitment to reform and the risks it may carry.

Saudi reformers have called for political liberalization, hoping to broaden participation and create elite accountability. Although liberalization is commonly associated with Western style democracy, it does not necessarily need to follow such a model, and may develop in a manner that reflects the realities of the Saudi state. Liberalizing measures,

---

<sup>7</sup> Wood 2004

<sup>8</sup> Translated from the Arabic *al-Ruya*, Jones 2003

<sup>9</sup> Jones

<sup>10</sup> Rouleau 2002

<sup>11</sup> Wood 2004

such as the introduction of elections and political parties, may act as a political release valve, providing breathing room for Saudi regime. However, liberalization can be hard to control and unpredictable, as many reforms that are needed to promote long-term stability may cause short-term unrest. Trying to control the reform process, Abdullah has announced plans for top-down liberalization in slow and steady steps starting with local elections to half of each municipal council in February. Regardless, it may be impossible for the Saudi royals to liberalize and stay in power, even in the best-case scenario, when the reform process is measured and stable.

In addition, perceived corruption and inefficiency in the kingdom's closed economy have led some Saudis to call for economic liberalization, which would create greater transparency and fiscal responsibility. Economic liberalization would integrate the paternalistic Saudi economy into the global marketplace, creating competition and rooting out corruption. Opening up the Saudi economy could lead to long-term economic growth and job creation, improving the situation of most Saudis and making the Saudi youth less susceptible to extremism. However, in the short term, a move to a market economy would uproot the patrimonial Saudi system based on patron-client relations, perhaps creating even greater alienation and instability. Economic liberalization would make it harder for the Saudi regime to control society, as market forces and the creation of non-oil wealth created greater autonomy for Saudi citizens. Although economic liberalization could play an important role influencing and affecting political liberalization, it is a complex issue which falls beyond the scope of this paper.

The effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy in Saudi Arabia is substantially limited by Saudi resentment of the United States. Most Saudis view the United States with suspicion because of its policies in the Middle East, which are seen by many as self serving and imperialistic. The presence of U.S. military bases in Saudi Arabia, the recent war in Iraq, and a perceived bias towards Israel have created resentment among many Saudis. Most public attempts to influence Saudi policy will be counterproductive, providing ammunition for conservative hard-liners and radical Islamists who wish to discredit reform attempts.

### **Most Recent Events**

- December 2002: Colin Powell announces the creation of the Middle East Partnership Initiative, a series of over 50 programs that emphasized "the softer elements of U.S. foreign policy,"<sup>12</sup> attempting to raise the standard of living in the region through foreign aid, trade, education, and democratization.
- April 2003: U.S. says it will pull almost all of its troops out of Saudi Arabia, where they have been stationed since 1991.
- May 2003: Suicide bombers kill 35 at Western housing compounds in Riyadh, hours before Secretary of State Colin Powell has planned to visit.

---

<sup>12</sup> Sharp, Jeremy. [The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview...](#)

- May 2003: President Bush announces the Middle East Initiative, comprised of the already established Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) which the President hopes will be completed within a decade.
- September 2003: Over 300 Saudi intellectuals sign a petition calling for political reforms.
- October 2003: Prince Abdullah announces elections for 14 municipal councils within a year. Rally in Riyadh calling for political reform broken up by police, who arrest more than 270.
- November 2003: Suicide bombing at residential compound in Riyadh, allegedly conducted by al-Qaeda militants, kills 17. King grants Consultative Council greater powers, allowing it to initiate legislation.
- April 2004: Car bomb at security forces headquarters by group linked to Al-Qaeda kills four and wounds 148.
- May 2004: Petrochemical site in Yanbu attacked, killing five foreigners. Attack and hostage taking at Khobar oil compound kills 22.
- June 2004: U.S. launches the Greater Middle East Initiative at G-8 Summit at Sea Island Georgia. The Greater Middle East Initiative is a group of programs very similar to the Middle East Partnership Initiative, which outline ways the G-8 powers can promote political freedom, equality for women, access to education and greater openness in the Middle East.
- June 2004: Following a week of militant attacks on foreigners that killed three Americans (one of whom was beheaded) and one British camera man, Saudi security forces intensify their crackdown on militants, killing local Al-Qaeda leader Abdul-Aziz Al Muqrin.<sup>13</sup>
- June 2004: Crown Prince Abdullah announces a one month amnesty for militants in Saudi Arabia, in which those who turn themselves in will not face charges.<sup>14</sup> The amnesty is largely unsuccessful, as only six militants turn themselves in before it expires.<sup>15</sup>
- September 2004: Saudi Elections originally slated for September and once delayed to November are once again postponed to take place in Riyadh on February 10 2005 so that they do not conflict with Ramadan.<sup>16</sup> Local elections to half of the municipal councils will happen in three stages. Elections in Riyadh will be followed by those in the Eastern and Southwestern regions on March 30<sup>th</sup> and polls in the Northern and Central parts of the country including Mecca and Medina on April 21.
- December 2004: U.S. consulate in Jeddah attacked, 5 killed. Tape purportedly recorded by Osama bin Laden released criticizing Saudi leaders

---

<sup>13</sup> *American Killed In Saudi Capital*. June 8, 2004

<sup>14</sup> *Wanted Saudi Militant Shot Dead*. June 30, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> *Saudi Amnesty For Militants Ends*. July 23, 2004

<sup>16</sup> *Saudi Local Elections Delayed*. September 13, 2004.

and praising Jeddah attacks

### 3. Background and Analysis

#### *Foundations of the Saudi State*

The Saudi royal family is a conservative dynastic monarchy that has monopolized political power since the modern nation state's founding. The royal family consists of the progeny of Ibn Saud (1879-1953) and the 17 wives he married in an effort to co-opt opposition and consolidate potentially antagonistic tribal and religious elements in the Arabian Peninsula during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Since its inception, the Saudi state structure has incorporated the tribal practice of balancing different populations.<sup>18</sup> According to Gundun Kramer, the Saudi regime, like other monarchies in the region, portrays itself “as the indispensable unifying element in a plural society otherwise threatened by internal division based on ethnicity, tribalism, and political conflict—the supreme symbol of national unity”.<sup>19</sup> Attempting to maintain this image, the Saudi ruling family makes policy decisions privately, emphasizing consensus-based familial rule. Political pluralism does not exist in the Saudi Kingdom, and in the past citizens who publicly voiced dissent have faced imprisonment.

The Saudi ruling family has long relied on Wahhabism to legitimise its rule. The alliance between Saudi rulers and Wahhabi clerics long predates the modern Saudi nation-state. In 1744, the preacher Ibn al-Wahhab convinced tribal chief Muhammad Ibn Saud to join him in a holy war against infidels in Arabia, in which the Saudi clan unified the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>20</sup> The resulting Kingdom was ruled politically by the Saudi clan and religiously by Wahhabi clerics. Although the Saudi Kingdom fell twice to the Ottoman Empire, when Ibn Saud once again consolidated power, this time in the form of a modern nation state, the alliance remained.

In modern Saudi Arabia, much like in earlier times, the Saudi ruling family and Wahhabi clerics hold power over their own separate spheres: politics and religion, respectively. However, the contingencies of the modern nation-state system have distorted the relationship between the two groups, enhancing the Saudi regime's powers. As the Saudi state developed, the monarchy gained the upper hand over the Ulama,<sup>21</sup> integrating them into state institutions. Islamic law became the nation's constitution, religious courts became state courts, and the Ulama were transformed into state employees.<sup>22</sup> Despite regime's formal consolidation of power, they still need the Ulama to legitimate potentially controversial policies. To gain support for modernization and quell Islamist unrest, the Saudi rulers have ceded greater powers to the religious establishment, who

---

<sup>17</sup> Kjeilen, Tore. 2004

<sup>18</sup> 259 Kramer 2000

<sup>19</sup> Kostiner 2000

<sup>20</sup> Viorst 1996.

<sup>21</sup> The Ulama is the high Wahhabi “official” religious establishment.

<sup>22</sup> 131-132 Kostiner 2000

have gained substantial control over education and religious policing.<sup>23</sup> Although modernization has tipped the balance of power strongly in the Saudi regime's favour, a dynamic of give and take still exists, albeit one that the regime ultimately controls.

### *The U.S.- Saudi Alliance*

Prior to the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, the U.S. foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia was essentially realist, involving a firm alliance with the Saudi ruling family, despite a record of human rights abuse and political repression. Both U.S. geopolitical interests and the Saudi monarchy's need for security have led to a mutually dependent relationship, in which the United States provides support for the autocratic monarchy, assisting them with technology, military transfers and external security, while the Saudis use their massive oil reserves to ensure a stable, affordable price for oil.<sup>24</sup> This relationship has made the United States a force of modernization in Saudi Arabia for more than half a century. According to defence consultant Joshua Pollack, "nowhere else in the region have U.S. businesses and government agencies been so disproportionately important in the life of the nation."<sup>25</sup> U.S. businesses have played a prominent role helping to build the Saudi economic infrastructure, particularly the oil industry. Over the past few decades, American defence contractors have sold the Saudi monarchy billions of dollars in military technology, while the American military has played an important role training Saudi forces.<sup>26</sup>

During the 1980s, Saudi Arabia's national security became more deeply intertwined with United States policy in the Persian Gulf.<sup>27</sup> The United States and Saudi Arabia allied against common enemies, such as Khomeini's revolutionary Iran and the communist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. At the same time, the revolution in Iran, which replaced the pro-U.S. Shah with the anti-American Islamists, as well as Egypt's expulsion from the Arab fold after making peace with Israel, made Saudi Arabia's close relationship with the United States much less comfortable. These events meant that Saudi Arabia could no longer openly embrace the United States without attracting the ire of much of the Middle East. During the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia distanced itself from Washington's policies in the region, while at the same time relying on the U.S. to ensure navigation and aid in air defence. An ad-hoc relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia developed, where the Saudi monarchy without any sort of formal alliance could depend on the United States when faced with an external threat, because it was understood that keeping Saudi Arabia secure was in Washington's own interests.<sup>28</sup>

The Saudi Kingdom's reliance on the United States for external security, while attempting to placate anti-Americanism in the Middle East, was part of a greater schism developing between Saudi Arabia's internal and external security policy. Radical Islam in Saudi Arabia has been a natural outgrowth of Saudi power projection in the Middle

---

<sup>23</sup> Kramer 2000

<sup>24</sup> Telhami and Hill 2002

<sup>25</sup> Pollack 2003

<sup>26</sup> 452 Safran 1985

<sup>27</sup> Pollack 2003

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*



East. Feeling threatened by Nasser's Arab nationalism in the 1960s, the Saudi monarchy invested heavily in the Islamization of the region. Saudi Arabia attempted to appeal to a pan-Islamic identity to counter what seemed to be Nasser's expansionary ambitions. This included granting political asylum to thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood fleeing Egypt who later played a prominent role politicising the Saudi Ulama as well as investing in mosques and religious education throughout the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>29</sup> Following the Grand Mosque seizure by Islamic militants in 1979, the Saudi government under King Khalid executed the militants, but at the same time granted greater powers to the religious establishment that inspired them. During the late 1980s, in cooperation with the United States, the Saudi government actively armed and trained militant Islamist Mujahedin fighters, including future al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, to fight the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Responding to short term threats the Saudi regime at times with U.S. cooperation substantially aided the radicals that would later threaten both countries national security.

### *1991 Gulf War*

The 1991 Gulf War brought to light the incoherence of the Saudi regime's policies that relied the U.S. for protection from foreign aggressors, while subsidizing an Ulama who were at best weary of corrupting Western influences and at worst promoting a holy war against infidels. Fearing Iraqi expansionism might spill over into Saudi Arabia, King Fahd allowed the United States to have a much more explicit role in Saudi national security. The Saudi government allowed 500,000 American soldiers into Saudi Arabia, from where they would protect Saudi oil fields and launch attacks against Iraq.<sup>30</sup> The Saudi monarchy's reliance on U.S. troops for protection frustrated many Saudis and would play an important role in turning Islamic militants against the Saudi government. Osama bin Laden and other Mujahedin fighters, fresh from a victory over communists in Afghanistan, asked King Fahd to deploy a Muslim force to repel the Iraqi army and overthrow Saddam Hussein. The King pragmatically declined. Having helped precipitate the fall of the Soviet Union, Osama bin Laden and radical Islamists turned their sights on the United States, and the rulers whom they now felt were apostates for allowing the presence of "infidel" troops on holy land.

Although eventually the higher level Saudi Ulama approved Saudi policy, the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia created a division within the Ulama. A number of religious figures who opposed the regime's policies were given heavy prison sentences, only to be released after the war. Despite such measures, the regime made concessions to the Saudi Ulama to quell unrest from moderate and radical Islamists. Religious education was intensified in schools and universities and the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, otherwise known as the religious police, was given greater powers to enforce public morality.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Rouleau 2002

<sup>30</sup> *Saudi Arabia; Withdrawal of US troops*. May 2, 2003

<sup>31</sup> Rouleau 2002

The weakness of the Saudi military, despite billions of dollars in investment, angered the general Saudi public who were dissatisfied with the deteriorating living standards in the kingdom over the past decade. Aggravating the situation, the Saudi government further tightened the noose around the domestic economy and budget when it shouldered \$29 billion of the Gulf War's cost.<sup>32</sup> Growing discontent amongst Saudis led to calls for reform and greater participation from a broad spectrum of groups including Islamists, intellectuals, and women. In response, King Fahd enacted the New Basic Law on March 1, 1992, which attempted to codify the Saudi constitution and formalise the Saudi monarchy's line of succession. It was announced with a set of reforms promising an independent judiciary, human rights, and government by Islamic law, while also creating a 90-member consultative council (later expanded to 120) appointed by the King. These reforms by and large proved empty. The New Basic Law did not substantially codify Saudi law, and the consultative council served only as a technocratic advisory board with no legislative power.

Although former President Bush promised King Fahd he would withdraw U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia following the war, 5000 American troops remained in the Kingdom to implement the United States' new policy of Iraqi containment.<sup>33</sup> The Saudi monarchy's explicit dependence on the United States continued to anger Saudi sensibilities, as did the presence of Westerners in Saudi Arabia, which some feared would liberalize and corrupt society.<sup>34</sup> The 1990s saw an escalation of Saudi Arabia's contradictory policies that cracked down on Islamic extremists and moderate Islamist opponents alike, while continuing to grant greater powers to the religious establishment that inspired them. Exercising their influence, the Ulama made Wahhabi Islam a cornerstone of the Saudi national university curriculum - churning out many young unemployed graduates, who susceptible to extremism, have been taught by radical lower level clerics. In the few years following the Gulf War, Islamist opposition surrounded two members of the Ulama, Shaikh Salman al-Wada and Shaikh Safar al Halawi. Known as the "awakened Shaikhs", these clerics circulated audiotape sermons that referred to the United States as an occupying power, and demanded Islamic reforms. However, the Saudi regime would not tolerate opposition. By 1994 both clerics were arrested and Saudi opposition moved into exile. Their supporters petitioned the senior Ulama and rulers, calling for a greater participation of the Ulama in politics and governance. By 1994, both clerics were arrested and Saudi Islamist opposition could only operate openly in exile.

### *1990s: Militants Grow Stronger*

During the 1990s, growing tensions in Saudi Arabia erupted in attacks on American military installations and violent open opposition to the Saudi monarchy. In May 1995, a terrorist bombing at the Saudi National Guard training center in Riyadh killed seven, including five Americans. 19 U.S. Airforce personnel were killed in the Khobar tower bombing in June 1996, allegedly the work of Saudi Shi'ites connected to Iran. Two months later Osama Bin Laden announced a "declaration of war" against the Saudi royal

---

<sup>32</sup> *Gulf War*, 2004

<sup>33</sup> *Saudi Arabia; Withdrawal of US troops*. May 2, 2003

<sup>34</sup> Pollack 2003

family and the United States.<sup>35</sup> Bin Laden claimed that the Saudi ruling family was no longer fit to lead, because they allowed “the occupation of the Land of the Two Holy Places... by the armies of the American crusaders and their allies”.<sup>36</sup> In February 1998, Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda organization announced a *jihad* against the United States. Six months later, the terrorists believed to be followers of Bin Laden bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 258 and injuring over 5,000.<sup>37</sup> The prohibition of dissent makes it hard to gage public opinion in Saudi Arabia, but many analysts believe that a large proportion of Saudis sympathise with Bin Laden.<sup>38</sup> Although the generally conservative Saudi populace looks down on radicalism, Bin Laden’s anti-American message resonates with many poor young Saudis.

The 1990s provided militant groups like Al-Qaeda with a growing pool of recruits and supply of money. During this period, the Saudi monarchy used Islam to bolster its legitimacy, empowering radicals and ceding the political discourse to extremists. In October 2002, the Council of Foreign Relations reported that: “[f]or years, individuals and charities based in Saudi Arabia have been the most important source of funds for al-Qaeda; and for years, Saudi officials have turned a blind eye to this problem.”<sup>39</sup> The Saudi government’s Islamization programs, intended to defend them from attempts at external power projection and internal criticism, have enabled radical Islamists to grow stronger and threaten both U.S. and Saudi national security.

The United States’ support for Israeli incursions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the Palestinian *intifada* that started in September 2000 incited a new wave of anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia. United States support for Israel despite Palestinian suffering angered many Saudis who felt the U.S. was biased towards Israel. In December 2000, an unnamed senior prince stated that “the reputation of the United States in the Arab Region has dropped to zero”.<sup>40</sup> The proliferation of satellite television, difficult for the Saudi government to control, has allowed stations like Al-Jazeera to beam pictures of Palestinian casualties into the Kingdom - intensifying internal pressure on the Saudi regime. Under fire, Crown Prince Abdullah refused to visit the White House, despite a series of requests from President Bush. Knowing that the Palestinian situation was strengthening Islamist opposition in Saudi Arabia, Abdullah made a plea in an address to 150 prominent Saudis: “a time comes when peoples and nations part. We are at a crossroads. It is time for the United States and Saudi Arabia to look at their separate interests. Those governments that don’t feel the pulse of the people and respond to it will suffer the fate of the shah of Iran.”<sup>41</sup> Although the U.S. responded to Abdullah’s concerns by promising a renewed commitment to the creation of a Palestinian state, the Crown Prince’s March 2002 attempt to create a peace plan for Israel/Palestine was largely ignored by the United States.

---

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> Snowden and Johnson

<sup>38</sup> Pollack 2003

<sup>39</sup> As quoted in Pollack 2003

<sup>40</sup> Pollack 2003

<sup>41</sup> Dorsey2001

### *Saudi Views on Reform*

Age, region, class, and religion divide Saudi society, influencing views on reform.<sup>42</sup> There is a generation gap with regard to reform: most older Saudis are conservative hardliners, while younger Saudis want greater freedom. This reflects a greater schism in Saudi Arabia between old and new, the forces of modernity and the importance of tradition. This generation gap is represented in the ruling family as well. The new generation of younger princes tends to favour liberalization, while the ruling septuagenarian sons of Ibn Saud are more conservative, desiring paternalistic rule. However, support for reform is not limited to young Saudis, but also stems from many Saudi women, business leaders, technocrats, and parts of the intelligentsia.<sup>43</sup> The greatest support for reform comes from members of the middle class who are University graduates. Increasing unemployment and the deterioration of living standards have created resentment amongst this educated and previously affluent group. The Saudi state's promotion of conservative Wahhabi values emanating from the ruling family's core powerbase in the Nejd region has created support for reform among marginalized Hijazis and Shi'ites in the Eastern Province, who find Wahhabism foreign to their own cultural and religious practices.

Amongst those who support reform, there is a general consensus that reform should come from within the Saudi state, rather than being imposed from the outside. Although Western journalists often talk about secular liberals in Saudi Arabia, such groups are a small minority. For reforms to reflect the contingencies of Saudi society, they must be implemented in an Islamic context. According to Eric Rouleau, former French Ambassador to Tunisia and Turkey, "most Saudis would be amenable to the modernization of their state - if it could be carried out without violating the fundamental principles of Islam".<sup>44</sup> Greatest support for reform comes from moderate Islamists who desire political autonomy and participation in governance. Like all forms of political assembly, moderate Islamist groups cannot openly exist in Saudi Arabia. Political groups born in the wake of the Gulf War, such as the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights, organize opposition and disseminate information from their headquarters in London. In active opposition to the Saudi monarchy itself, exiled groups use fax machines and the internet to distribute illegal publications in Saudi Arabia. It seems that most Saudis prefer a moderate Islamic government to reactionary radicalism whose ideology is foreign to their religious and cultural norms.<sup>45</sup>

### *Tentative Signs of Change*

The Saudi regime, facing militant attacks on one side and calls for greater participation on another, has promoted reform in sluggish, sometimes contradictory spurts. This is partially due to infighting between the moderate Crown Prince Abdullah and hard-line conservative Interior Minister Prince Nayef, who controls the Saudi internal security

---

<sup>42</sup> Yamani 2000

<sup>43</sup> Rouleau 2002

<sup>44</sup> Rouleau 2002.

<sup>45</sup> Yamani 2000

forces. Some believe that prior to the November 2003 Riyadh bombing which killed Muslim Saudis as well as Westerners, militant Islamists were allowed to operate by Nayef because they kept reformers in check. Since the November bombing, Nayef's security forces have come under pressure from the Saudi public to intensify their security operations against Al-Qaeda. In an attempt to win back public support, Al-Qaeda has avoided killing Muslims in their more recent attacks - for example, releasing Muslims hostages in an attack on a Petrol Plant that killed 22 last May. Instead, militants are now attacking the Saudi oil infrastructure and the foreigners needed to sustain it. Such a move attempts to create instability in a way that is more in line with the views of the Saudi public, who by and large resent foreigners.

The Riyadh bombings in May and November 2003 made the threat of radical Islam to Saudi regime stability increasingly apparent. For decades, Saudi monarchs had bowed to conservative and militant pressures, while silencing liberals - both religious and secular.<sup>46</sup> The steady increase of militant activity within the kingdom has made the Saudi political establishment rethink this policy. Sensing the shifting ideological landscape, reformists attempted to portray themselves as supporters of the regime who believe liberalization will diminish the appeal of radicalism. On September 24, 2003, a petition by 300 Saudi intellectuals (including 50 women) stated: "fighting militants can only be accomplished by identifying and eliminating the political, cultural and social factors that mobilize them."<sup>47</sup> Although these new reformers' support for the regime is most probably disingenuous, it is harder for the ruling family to denounce them.

Perhaps understanding the potentially precarious position of the regime, Abdullah not only accepted petitions from Islamist liberals, women, and the previously shunned Shi'ite minority, but also invited them to participate in a "National Dialogue" to discuss issues that affect them. However, such reforms have been criticized by some reformists as only skin deep. The Saudi regime controlled the size and scope of the National Dialogue, preferring discussion between government officials and 70 specially selected members of petitioning groups rather than free dialogue among the public. Newspaper editors who tried to test the boundaries of the strictly controlled Saudi press lost their jobs and sometimes faced harassment.

Despite the Saudi regime's sporadic and tenuous support for reform, relatively substantial changes are underway. On October 13, 2003, Abdullah announced a plan that would include elections to half the seats of local municipal councils nationwide within a year. Later that year, King Fahd granted the consultative council power to initiate laws without asking his permission and started televising council sessions for the general public.<sup>48</sup> In January 2004, the Shura council passed an education bill that called for changes in the Saudi curriculum, emphasizing moderation.<sup>49</sup> Although these small steps for reform show promise, fears of unchecked liberalization have caused the government to act in seemingly contradictory ways. Protesters were brutally repressed by Saudi police, outside

---

<sup>46</sup>Rouleau 2002

<sup>47</sup> Shi'ite petition cited in Jones 2003

<sup>48</sup> *Saudi Council's Power Expanded*. November 30, 2003

<sup>49</sup> *The Risks of Reform* 2004.

the government-sanctioned human rights conference where Abdullah first announced his plans for reform. Furthermore, this past year the Saudi government has used security sweeps to crack down on peaceful reformers and Islamic militants alike, while silencing media sources that reported such protests.<sup>50</sup> The Saudi government, timidly accepting the need to reform, is using both the carrot and the stick - undertaking limited changes while using force to keep reformers in check.

Municipal elections are to take place in three stages. First in Riyadh, next in the Eastern and South Western provinces, and finally in the Northern and Central parts of the city including Mecca and Medina. Originally scheduled for September, January and February 2004 respectively, elections have been twice postponed and are now scheduled to take place in Riyadh on February 10, 2005, with the second and third stages of elections following on March 30<sup>th</sup> and April 21<sup>st</sup> of the same year. Though the postponement of elections re-affirmed the cynicism held by many sceptical Saudis about the likelihood of reform, the start of voter registration this past November is an encouraging sign that the Saudi Monarchy will follow through with the planned elections.

#### 4. Policy Context

The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks exposed major limitations of United States security policy in the Middle East. By and large, the United States had focused on relations *between* nation states in the Gulf, not devoting enough attention to the internal developments *within* such states. While the autocratic Saudi regime has long been a safe ally of the United States, domestic conditions within Saudi Arabia have allowed sub-state actors like Al-Qaeda to grow stronger and become a sizeable threat to both U.S. and Saudi national security. Washington could no longer blindly promote a realist policy in the Middle East, but needed to implement a policy that would address developmental issues that might feed extremism. On December 12, 2002, the United States announced the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), a package of aid programs aimed to promote civil society, women's education and free enterprise in the region. Washington's revamped foreign policy was intended to battle extremism by addressing the social, economic and political deficiencies in the Middle East.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative promised great changes, but has only provided a hodge-podge of small aid programs. The only initiative program that affected Saudi Arabia was a media workshop that attempted to promote standards of independent journalism. The MEPI, perceived by many as a tool of U.S. imperialism in the region, has largely had a counterproductive effect - discrediting reform-minded opposition while providing fodder for conservatives opposed to reforms. The following June the U.S. unveiled the Middle East Initiative, which added future plans for Middle East Free Trade Area to the existing MEPI programs already in place.

The Middle East Initiative produced few positive results in Saudi Arabia.<sup>51</sup> Rather than "winning the hearts and minds" of the Saudi people, the MEI was criticized widely as

---

<sup>50</sup> Jones November 13, 2003

<sup>51</sup> Sharp 2003

self-serving and hegemonic. President Bush's grandiose speeches, with black and white "with us or against us" rhetoric, effectively classified those who did not support American foreign policy as enemies of the United States, further alienating the Saudi populace. Anti-Saudi feelings have been expressed regularly in the United States since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks by politicians and journalists who accuse the Saudi royals of tacitly supporting terrorism. Mutual suspicion between the American and Saudi populaces has limited their respective governments' ability to deal publicly with one another.

However, the Bush administration's recent decision to set the agenda publicly has left Abdullah and domestic reformers open to attack from conservative hardliners and radical Islamists. The Middle East Initiative has many similarities to European initiatives in the region, which have promoted socio-economic and political change through aid programs since the mid-1990s. While similar in content, European policy differed in tone, aiming to make small gains through low-key engagement.<sup>52</sup> Some Europeans criticised the U.S. initiative because it did not seem like a partnership between the United States and the Arab world, but rather a program drawn up independently by the United States without consulting Middle Eastern governments or elements of civil society.<sup>53</sup> This criticism resonated with the Saudi regime and press, which insisted that reform must come from within and develop in a Saudi context.

The U.S. announced the Greater Middle East Initiative at the G8 summit in June 2004 in an attempt to recast the MEI as a more inclusive, multilateral initiative, incorporating non-Arab states such as Afghanistan, Turkey, Israel, Iran and Pakistan. But it was met with stinging criticism from both Arab leaders and the Arab press who felt that it was another tool of American hegemony that did not adequately take Middle Eastern aspirations into account. President Mubarak of Egypt and Crown Prince Abdullah rejected the GMEI, refusing to attend the G8 summit despite being invited as special guests.

Recent polls show that American policies in the Middle East are continuing to provoke anti-Americanism in the Saudi Kingdom, which puts even greater pressure on the ruling family. According to a Zogby International poll taken in February-April 2002, 51% of Saudis held an unfavourable view of the United States.<sup>54</sup> During the following year, anti-American sentiment rose dramatically because of the war in Iraq. A July 2003 Zogby poll found that the percentage of Saudis who had an unfavourable view of the United States rose to 70%. This rise in anti-Americanism is even more dramatic considering the fact that the United States pulled its troops out of Saudi Arabia two months earlier. Though the evacuation of American troops from Saudi Arabia had long been a demand of both moderate and radical Islamists, the withdrawal did not produce results because of the continuing U.S. presence in Iraq and the Palestinian situation.

---

<sup>52</sup> Youngs 2004

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Pollack 2003

Even if regional conflict were to subside and the United States ceased to be viewed as an imperialist power unfairly supporting Israel, it is unlikely that the Saudi internal situation would stabilize. According to Pollack, “the continuing struggle between reformers and traditionalists alone would remain likely to perpetuate tensions.”<sup>55</sup> Whether or not regional friction exists, Saudi conservatives are likely to oppose anything seen as a Western influence on society. In any case, such a counterfactual is extremely unlikely, because the United States will most probably sustain an active presence in the Gulf and continue to provoke resentment.<sup>56</sup> Such conditions indicate that the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia will remain an uncomfortable one.

Much like Al-Qaeda, the United States is beginning to understand the importance of public opinion in Saudi Arabia. More recent developments in U.S. foreign policy indicate that the United States is attempting to promote a reform plan that reflects the realities of Saudi society. The withdrawal of American troops from Saudi Arabia, as well as recently announced plans to deploy a Muslim fighting force in Iraq, suggest that the United States is becoming more sensitive to the Saudi regional context. However, the United States’ predominant role in Gulf security and its commitment to Israel will probably negate any positive results.

## 5. Policy Options and Proposals

Currently, the United States promotes two separate policies in Saudi Arabia that may be mutually exclusive. In an attempt to stem the tide of extremism, the United States has put pressure on the Saudi regime to democratise; however, such a process has inherent risks that may manifest themselves in a new regime that is antagonistic to U.S. interests. At the same time, such anxieties about the dangers of reform have led to a continued support for autocratic dictators – where the United States does not put its real weight behind calls from democratization. There is no risk-proof policy that will resolve these potentially contradictory objectives, but there is a spectrum of nuanced policy options, each with their own dangers. The following three possible policy options will be explored below:

- (1) promoting top down political liberalization while at the same time institutionalizing monarchical power,
- (2) pressing for liberalization from below and supporting home grown opposition movements,
- (3) reverting to pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> foreign policy and doing nothing at all.

**Option 1:** The United States could support the Saudi regime, while privately pressuring the Saudi royals to impose top-down reform. The United States would advise the Saudi ruling family to implement top-down political liberalization in a slow but steady manner that would keep control of the process, while building confidence in the public that the government intends to see through reforms. The government could do this by holding free and fair elections, while at the same time enshrining monarchical power.<sup>57</sup> Since

---

<sup>55</sup> Pollack 2003.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Herb 1999



monarchs are born rather than elected, the royal family could hold elections and still rule, as long as two conditions are met: parliamentary power is limited and elections do not return a sizeable proportion of anti-royalists. Furthermore, although many in Saudi society resent the privileges of the royal family and blame them for the country's problems, some believe that much of the Saudi population sees the monarchy as an important part of the state.<sup>58</sup> The regime could hold elections within boundaries, only allowing politicians who support the monarchy to run for office. This could be accomplished by weeding out candidates who oppose the regime by making them opponents of the state. While the elections may not be as free as those in Western democracies, they would allow for the absorption of public demands, while doing so in a system where the ruling family still holds most of the cards.

Such political liberalization in Saudi Arabia would not be close to the Western model of democratization – nor should it be. The newly liberalized system must be rooted in Saudi beliefs and traditions, and most importantly must develop within the context of Islam. Setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan have brought into question the viability of exporting democracy to the Arab world. The U.S. and the Saudi regime could use political reform as an instrumentalist tool that will help combat the roots of extremism, making Saudi Arabia more stable and the United States more secure. Having a friendly rational government in power is just as important for the United States as battling Islamic extremism in Saudi Arabia – if not more so. The United States has had a safe ally in the Saudi regime for the past half-century, and therefore may prefer an autocratic ally with a weak parliament over a powerful parliament that could potentially contain a substantial number of radical Islamists.

If liberalization develops in a slow and controlled manner leading to the development of civil society and governing institutions, eventually the monarchy and its challengers could negotiate power sharing between palace and parliament.<sup>59</sup> The regime could hold onto enough power to ensure control over the reform process and the continuance of rational government, while presenting incentives for the moderates to buy into the system. Through measured liberalization the Saudi regime would be able to dictate the terms and pace of reform. Occasionally the regime may have to use force, and perhaps shut down parliament if it oversteps its boundaries. At the same time they would need to build confidence in the public that the reforms are bringing about meaningful avenues of participation—albeit within limits.

This policy would allow the regime to reform in small steps with predictable outcomes, lowering the potential costs of liberalization. Ideally, the Saudi ruling family would remain integral to the newly liberalized state: acting as a check against radicalism while securing regime stability. The development of political institutions such as a parliament could absorb Saudi demands. Such institutions, potentially acting as a barometer for Saudi public opinion, could increase the sluggish regime's ability to absorb change, while at the same time opening political release valves. Liberalization could follow the examples of Jordan and Kuwait who now have assemblies that are essentially

---

<sup>58</sup> It is hard to gauge real support because opposition is outlawed.

<sup>59</sup> Herb 1999

subordinated to the autocratic regimes. Jordan, which legalized political parties in 1993, has had elections to a bicameral assembly since 1989. Although the King has dissolved parliament three times in the last decade and has dictated changes in election law, the Jordanian parliament allows citizens greater participation in government. According to a recent State Department report, Jordan's Parliament has investigated corruption charges against several regime figures and has become the major forum in which differing political views, including those of political Islamists, are expressed.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Kuwait has institutionalized the power of the ruling Shaikhs, while creating a subordinate assembly that opens avenues for change.

For such a policy to be successful, the United States must engage Saudi reform carefully, conferring with the Saudi regime in a private and low key manner. Any public association with the United States would serve to discredit the reforms, making them less effective and harder for the divided Saudi public to accept. Under this policy, the U.S. would privately press the Saudis to continue liberalization, attempting to show the Saudi regime that it is essential for survival. Although U.S. diplomats should support the Saudi ruling family's iron grip over the liberalization process, they would need to stress the importance of winning public confidence that the regime is committed to reform. Empty reforms in the past have made many Saudis disillusioned with government promises, turning some of them against the regime.

This policy option is in many ways a continuation of current U.S. policy, but less visible to the Saudi public. Attempting to have its cake and eat it too, this policy would promote liberalization, while supporting the autocratic Saudis. Promoting two seemingly contradictory policies such as these may risk doing either not enough or too much. Reform groups might well criticise the U.S. for supporting what they would call a "sham" democracy. Furthermore, promoting political liberalization without the proper civil institutions is dangerous, because opening political spaces could initially empower reactionary groups, creating momentum for anti-royalists. As the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Iranian revolution demonstrate, once reforms in an authoritarian state start, they are hard to stop. Finally, substantial demographic, geographic, cultural and economic differences between Saudi Arabia and the more liberalized states of Jordan and Kuwait may be an obstacle to the implementation of similar policies in Saudi Arabia.

**Option 2:** The second policy option the United States could employ would promote liberalization in Saudi Arabia, while building relationships with home-grown non-regime-oriented reformists. This policy option assumes that the Saudi monarchy may not be able to survive liberalization, requiring the United States place itself in a secure position with any government that may one day come to power. Blindly supporting the royals, in the event of a revolution or coup, would put the U.S. in an uneasy position with the new government, which would associate the United States with the deposed royals.

This is an attractive policy option because it is more in line with U.S. ideals of liberty and democracy. The United States' promotion of democratization in the Middle East has

---

<sup>60</sup> *Background Note: Jordan* November 2003

come under fire by critics who argue that the United States has long supported authoritarian governments in the region, supplying them with arms and expertise for decades. By scaling back support for the Saudi ruling family and supporting bottom-up democratization in Saudi Arabia, the United States could claim a much more coherent and idealistic foreign policy in the Middle East, which could earn greater credibility on the Arab street and make the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia more palatable to both Americans and Saudis.

For this policy to be successful the United States would have to promote institution building within Saudi Arabia. Civil society must be strong for grassroots democracy to develop into a moderate political system, safe from the influence of radical demagogues. NGOs could lay the groundwork for a stronger civil society, promoting local initiatives that aim to bring citizens into the political process. Once Saudi civil society has grown strong enough, the United States could initiate contact with emerging opposition groups - allowing the United States to portray itself as a benevolent superpower that supports the desires and interests of the Saudi people.

Such a policy may be hard to implement because of the United States' present and past involvement in the Middle East. The U.S. occupation of Iraq and the ongoing Palestinian situation would make it more difficult to find a credible ally in opposition groups. The United States' historical support for the sometimes brutal Saudi regime would not only make Saudis suspicious of the United States itself; it might also taint any opposition group that would consider a partnership with the U.S. For such a policy to be successful, the United States would have to initiate a private dialogue with opposition groups, signalling that the U.S. would support and aid them if they came to power. This policy relies on the belief that, left to themselves, the Saudis would elect a rational government that would see cooperation with the United States as in its best interests.

Promoting bottom-up liberalization is dangerous because it risks alienating the Saudi ruling family. The monarchy will only relinquish a measure of their power in order to ensure regime stability. Supporting an opposition group could easily turn a U.S. ally into an enemy, as well as cut short any Saudi reform plans. Although the Saudis have historically had a close relationship with the United States, such a betrayal could force Saudi Arabia to grow more dependent on another oil-consuming superpower like China. Furthermore, the Saudi regime provides an important safeguard against the dangers of liberalization. Keeping in mind the prevalence of anti-Americanism in Saudi society, unchecked liberalization could bring radical Islamists to power, or even lead to civil war. The United States' continuing inflammatory presence in the Gulf suggests that this policy option would be dangerous in the near future.

**Option 3:** A third option for United States foreign policy in Saudi Arabia would involve U.S. disengagement from Saudi Arabian internal affairs. Some analysts believe that the United States should avoid attracting any more ire and not attempt to influence Saudi Arabian domestic policy, allowing Saudis to work out their own issues internally. Uncomplicated support for the current regime would allow Saudi Arabia to develop

within its own context, without potentially sympathetic groups being affected by the taint carried by the United States. Ideally such a policy would allow Abdullah to go ahead with his reform plan independently, thus strengthening its legitimacy. If the reform process gets out of control or the monarchy is overthrown, such a policy could decrease the level of backlash against the United States, possibly making it easier for Washington to have good relations with the new government. This policy option is appealing in the light of recent criticism of United States initiatives promoting democracy in the Middle East. It is clear that, although many Saudis may desire greater political freedoms, they do not want these freedoms to come from the United States.

However, this policy option could endanger United States geopolitical interests in Saudi Arabia. Since the Saudi monarchy is heavily dependent on the United States for its own security, ignoring Saudi Arabia could leave the regime open to both internal and external threats. Furthermore, the United States' dependence on Saudi Arabia for oil makes this choice impractical. Although politicians and media figures in the United States clamor for energy independence from Saudi Arabia, such an option will not be possible as long as the United States economy runs on oil. Whether or not the U.S. purchases its oil from Saudi Arabia, the kingdom's massive reserves ensure that the Saudi government will continue to play an important role affecting the price of oil worldwide.<sup>61</sup> Regardless, Saudi Arabia is critical to both U. S. national and economic security. Furthermore, the United States' influence in the region is only one factor fueling radicalism in Saudi Arabia. Without external pressure the Saudi regime may not have the fortitude to carry out reforms that create political space defusing radicalism. In such a case, the Saudi monarchy would most probably resort to increased repression in order to battle growing radicalism - leading to greater extremism.

## **6. Conclusion**

Although all of the aforementioned policy options are potentially dangerous, the first option seems to be the least so. If the Saudi government does not address the conditions that foster radicalism in Saudi Arabia, instability in the desert Kingdom is likely to grow. The Saudi regime must liberalize to build confidence in the Saudi populace that useful avenues of political expression exist, diminishing the appeal of violent opposition. However, years of authoritarian government have driven civil society into the mosque, where radicalism is becoming increasingly popular. The United States' actions in Iraq and its policies towards Israel and Palestine have further inflamed anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia. Tensions within Saudi Arabia must ease to foster an environment that promotes moderate discourse before it is safe for Saudis to participate in substantial elections.

U.S. policy must walk a fine line between idealism and realism if it wishes to weaken radicals in Saudi Arabia whilst maintaining good relations with present and future Saudi regimes. Abstractly promoting democratization without taking into consideration the political realities of the region is likely produce dangerous, often counterproductive

---

<sup>61</sup> Telhami and Hill 2002

results. On the other hand, blindly supporting an autocratic regime because it is politically expedient will lead to even greater instability that may threaten both Saudi and U.S. national security. The United States should privately lobby the Saudi regime to continue with reforms that will bring more radical Saudis into the moderate fold.

Abdullah's plans to hold municipal elections in February 2005 are a good start. If Saudis believe that they have a meaningful voice in government they will be less susceptible to extremism. Moreover, the introduction of local rather than national elections is a good way to minimize the impact radicals and demagogues will have on the election, while giving Saudi citizens time to develop a more stable political culture. Liberalization is a dangerous process, especially in an authoritarian state with Saudi Arabia's geopolitical significance; however, many experts agree that if the Saudis do not do something now, they are very likely to face much more violent widespread opposition in the future.<sup>62</sup>

Even if the Saudi ruling family successfully implements measured liberalization, they may not be able to hold onto power forever. The U.S. must support the Saudi regime in the short term, because they are the most likely to implement liberalization in a moderate, controlled manner. If top-down liberalization produces a moderate civil and political society, the United States might consider supporting a putative national assembly if it sought to gain greater power vis-à-vis the ruling family. Until then, the United States must remain close to the Saudi regime, while using low-key, discreet meetings pressuring the Saudi regime to liberalize. If the Saudis do not promote a reform policy that is perceived as substantial, such a policy could radicalize potential moderates - further destabilizing the Saudi state and providing recruits for extremists.

Finally, to combat the roots of terrorism effectively, the United States must look beyond Saudi Arabia, re-evaluating foreign policy and how it is perceived in the Greater Middle East. Although both geopolitical and domestic concerns make it unlikely that the United States will deviate from its general Israel-first policy, it could at least signal that it has a consistent desire to resolve the conflict in Israel-Palestine. Many on the Arab street have been frustrated by the stop-and-go nature of U.S. mediation in Israel-Palestine. If the Saudis or others put forward an alternate peace plan, the US should act diplomatically and show that it cares about engaging the issue. Although this may not change the perception that the United States has a pro-Israel bias, it will signal that the U.S. cares about a settlement (increasing its credibility in the Arab world) and perhaps one day lead to a resolution of the conflict - defusing a constant cause of anti-Americanism in the Middle East.

## Bibliography

- Dorsey, James *Saudi Leader Warns U.S. of 'Separate Interests'*.  
Wall Street Journal. New York, N.Y.: Oct 29, 2001. pg. A.17
- Ghattas, Kim. *Saudis register for landmark poll*. BBC News. November 23, 2004.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4034329.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4034329.stm)
- Hawthorne, Amy Arab Reform Bulletin. Volume 2, Issue 8 September 2004  
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Hawthorne, Amy Arab Reform Bulletin. Volume 2, Issue 9 October 2004  
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Herb, Michael. All in the Family. SUNY Press. Albany, NY 1999
- Jones, Toby. *Seeking a Social Contract for Saudi Arabia*. Middle East Report Online.  
Fall 2003. [http://www.merip.org/mer/mer228/228\\_jones.html](http://www.merip.org/mer/mer228/228_jones.html)
- Jones, Toby. *Violence and the Illusion of Reform in Saudi Arabia*. Middle East Report Online.  
November 13, 2003. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero111303.html>
- Kerry, John. *Security and Strength for A New World*. Kerry Edwards. May 27, 2004  
[http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/speeches/spc\\_2004\\_0527.html](http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/speeches/spc_2004_0527.html)
- Kleijen, Tore. *Saudi Arabia:History* Encyclopedia of the Orient.  
[http://lexicorient.com/e.o/saudi\\_5.htm](http://lexicorient.com/e.o/saudi_5.htm)
- Kostiner, Joseph. *State Formation and the Saudi Monarchy*.  
Middle East Monarchs. Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2000
- Kramer, Gudrun. *Good Counsel to the King: Islamist Oppostion in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morrocco*. Middle East Monarchs. Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2000
- Telhami, Shirley and Fiona Hill. *Does Saudi Arabia Still Matter?* Foreign Affairs  
Council of Foreign Relations. Inc. Nov-Dec 2002.
- Pollack, Josh *Anti-Americanism in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*.  
Middle East Review of International Affairs. Vol 7. No. 4 Dec 2004  
<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue4/jv7n4a3.html>
- Prokop M. *Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education*. International Affairs. Jan 2003,  
vol. 79, no. 1, pp. 77-89(14) Blackwell Publishing. Oxford, UK
- Rouleau, Eric. *Trouble in the Kingdom*. Foreign Affairs.  
Jul-Aug 2002. Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.
- Sharp, Jeremy *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*.  
Congressional Research Service July 23, 2003
- Safran, Nadav. Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security. Harvard University  
Press. Cambridge, MA. 1985
- Snowden, Ben and David Johnson. *Primer on the Embassy Bombings and the U.S. Strikes on Sudan and Afghanistan*. Infoplease.  
<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/newsfacts-sudanstrikes.html>
- Telhami, Shirley and Fiona Hill. *Does Saudi Arabia Still Matter?* Foreign Affairs  
Council of Foreign Relations. Inc. Nov-Dec 2002.
- Viorst, Milton. *The Storm and the Citadel*. Foreign Affairs.  
Council on Foreign Relations, Inc. Jan 1996

- Wood, Paul. "Concern Grows Over Saudi Stability". BBC News. May 13, 2004.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle\\_east/3708421.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/3708421.stm)
- Yamani, Mai. Changed Identities. The Royal Institute of International Affairs.  
 London, UK 2000
- Youngs, Richard Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform.  
 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. June 2004
- American Killed In Saudi Capital*. BBC News. June 8, 2004  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3787439.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3787439.stm)
- Background Note: Jordan*. U.S. State Department. November 2003.  
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3464.htm>
- Gulf War*. Encyclopedia of the Orient. <http://i-cias.com/e.o/gulfwar.htm#cost> *Saudi  
 Amnesty For Militants Ends*. Politinfo.com. July 23, 2004  
[http://www.politinfo.com/articles/article\\_2004\\_07\\_23\\_4838.html](http://www.politinfo.com/articles/article_2004_07_23_4838.html)
- Saudi Arabia; Withdrawal of US troops*. Council of Foreign Relations. May 2, 2003  
[http://www.cfr.org/background/saudiarabia\\_usforces.php](http://www.cfr.org/background/saudiarabia_usforces.php)
- Saudi Council's Power's Expanded*. BBC News. November 30, 2003.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/3251126.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3251126.stm)
- Saudis Hold Polls In November*. BBC News. August 4, 2004  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/3537190.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3537190.stm)
- Saudi Local Elections Delayed*. AlJazeera.Net. September 13, 2004.  
[http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/9F6EDB04-C9C7-4156-8154-  
 E063C53AA5B3.htm](http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/9F6EDB04-C9C7-4156-8154-E063C53AA5B3.htm)
- The Risks of Reform*. The Economist. Jan 24 2004.
- Trial Begins for Saudi Reformists*. BBC News. August 10, 2004  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/3548660.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3548660.stm)
- Wanted Saudi Militant Shot Dead*. BBC News. June 30, 2004.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/3854233.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3854233.stm) <accessed 8/22/04>