

# Saudi Arabia: The Nightmare of Iraq

Simon Henderson

Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a nightmare to Saudi Arabia. Iraq without Saddam is also a nightmare.<sup>1</sup> While he was in power, Riyadh saw Saddam as a bully, a regional troublemaker, and a constant destabilizing force. But Iraq without Saddam has become a power vacuum, almost equally destabilizing. For the Saudis, Saddam's merit was that he was a Sunni who viewed his own Shiite population with distrust and neighboring Iran with visceral hatred.<sup>2</sup> As such, he was a bulwark against Shiite and Iranian influence trying to penetrate the kingdom and perhaps contest the House of Saud's self-declared custodianship of the two holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina. Without Saddam, Iraqi Shiites are empowered and on the Saudi border, while Iranian influence is threatening Iraq as well as Shiite-majority Bahrain and reaching out to the Saudi Shiites who live in the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where they constitute a local majority.<sup>3</sup>

With the exception of its self-view as the leader of the Islamic world and the concomitant belief that the Islamic message should be spread,<sup>4</sup> Saudi Arabia usually behaves as a traditional status quo power. Riyadh has a natural preference for things as they are; but, if they cannot be kept as they are, trouble should at least be kept at a distance. The kingdom was threatened by secular Arab republicanism in the 1950s and 1960s. It protected itself by offering sanctuary to Islamists. It was again threatened in 1979 by Iran's Islamic Revolution, but the revolution consumed its own children, as well as being distracted by the yearning for more autonomy by Iran's ethnic minorities. To stop any export of Iran's revolution, Saddam, with Saudi and other Gulf Arab financial backing, proved a willing foil. And Saddam's fixation on Iran blunted his ambitions to meddle in Arab politics.

The United States has been understanding—perhaps too understanding—of Saudi

<sup>1</sup> The "nightmare" metaphor is common in descriptions of Saudi policy choices. In May 2006, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal reportedly told President George W. Bush: "We have two nightmares about our relationship with Iran. One is that Iran will develop a nuclear bomb, and the other is that America will take military action to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb." Christopher Dickey, "Who Leads the Middle East?" *Newsweek International*, April 9, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Saddam's uncle and former guardian was Khairallah Talfah, a one-time mayor of Baghdad in the early days of Baath Party rule, who in 1981 published the booklet "Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews and Flies." Talfah described Persians as "animals God created in the shape of humans." (Jews were a "mixture of dirt and leftovers from diverse peoples.")

<sup>3</sup> Saudi Arabian public opinion is often critical of Shiites, who form an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the kingdom's population and are traditionally discriminated against. Famously, several *fatwas* (religious edicts) by the late top Saudi cleric Abdul-Aziz bin Baz denounced Shiites as apostates, and senior cleric Abdul-Rahman al-Jibrin in 1994 even sanctioned the killing of Shiites. In early 2007, King Abdullah, reacting to reports of Sunnis being converted to Shiism, spoke of being "aware of the dimensions of spreading Shiism and where it has reached," adding that "the majority of Sunni Muslims will never change their faith." "Saudi King: Spreading Shiism Won't Work," Associated Press, January 27, 2007. Contemporary Saudi religious conservatives

are also sharp in their criticism: Abdul-Rahman al-Jibrin, now retired but still a key member of the clerical establishment, wrote in early 2007, "[Shiites] are the most vicious enemy of Muslims, who should be wary of their plots." And Abdul-Rahman al-Barak, another top cleric, wrote, "Shiites should be considered worse than Jews or Christians." "A Top Saudi Cleric Declares Shiites to Be Infidels, Calls on Sunnis to Drive Them Out," Associated Press, January 22, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> The Saudi education system has for years produced, through its Islamic universities, thousands of religiously indoctrinated young men, motivated to spread the Wahhabi hardline version of Islam. The Saudi government found exporting many of these radicals convenient, either as workers for Islamic charities, spreading the word, or as militants. (After the September 11, 2001, attacks, the public realized that some of these types formed the global support network for Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist organization.) Fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s was attractive, as was Chechnya and then Bosnia. Post-Saddam Iraq can be seen as just the latest destination of choice for those wanting to fight for the cause of Islam. Those who returned, that is, those who were not martyred in the cause, were encouraged to settle down—and quiet down. Those who were still Islamic radicals were found jobs in the *mutawa* (the religious police).

perceptions of regional policy challenges within the Arabian peninsula and Persian Gulf areas. In Washington's mind, the key aspect of the relationship with Riyadh has focused on the kingdom's status as a major oil exporter and the need to maintain the unrestricted flow of reasonably priced oil to the world economy.

Traditionally, Washington has stood apart from Saudi concerns about its leadership role in the Islamic and Arab worlds. This stance was severely damaged by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi nationals. The kingdom's compromise with Islamist extremists to protect the regime became clear, and it had the effect of directing onto U.S. targets the challenge represented by militant Islam.<sup>5</sup> But Saudi Arabia's compromise with its own extremists broke down after terrorist attacks began inside the kingdom in 2003.

Since then Riyadh has been able to rebuild its relationship with Washington, overcoming adverse U.S. public opinion and an apparent lack of trust within at least parts of the Bush administration. Indications of Saudi caution toward the United States appear to be ignored, or excused as some sort of Saudi balancing act, worthy of being tolerated.<sup>6</sup> A principal reason for Vice President Cheney's Thanksgiving Day weekend trip to Riyadh in November 2006 was reportedly to hear King Abdullah's warning that, despite the apparent will of the new Congress, U.S. forces should not withdraw from Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Yet at the March 2007 Riyadh Arab summit, King Abdullah

unhelpfully condemned the "illegal, foreign occupation" of Iraq, a phrasing which, to Arab and Muslim ears, legitimized attacks on U.S. and other coalition forces. This glaring public disconnect was sure to have been addressed behind closed doors during Cheney's May 2007 visit to Riyadh, along with the looming issue of Iran's nuclear program that both countries also see as a threat—although again the Saudis are reluctant to say so.<sup>8</sup>

### SAUDI OFFICIAL THINKING

Riyadh saw the overthrow of Saddam as inevitable and not regrettable—he had run a hostile and unpredictable regime. Given the post-September 11 shadow over U.S.-Saudi relations at the time of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, cooperation at the time was limited, especially in comparison with Saudi assistance at the time of liberation of Kuwait in 1991. Riyadh prevented U.S. airstrikes from being flown out of the Prince Sultan Air Base but did allow U.S. and other coalition special forces to use Saudi airstrips along the Saudi-Iraqi border.

Although contradictory, the Saudi position is comprehensible in terms of its three foreign policy priorities: being leader of the Islamic world, remaining among the leaders of the Arab world, and retaining its position as the leading oil exporter in the world. The kingdom was restricted by Muslim and Arab opinion against the use of military action from tackling Saddam Hussein's obduracy on weapons inspections; yet, to safeguard its status as an oil exporter, a measure of cooperation with the United States was vital.

The inevitability of a Shiite-dominated government emerging in Iraq did not appear to be fully realized. "The kingdom will wait for the Iraqi people to set up their government and then we will deal with it," Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal was quoted as saying. He added: "Does the idea of participation in governing their affairs seem a threat to the

<sup>5</sup> Senior Saudi princes paid off Osama bin Laden in the years after the 1995 attack on a Saudi National Guard facility in Riyadh to stop attacks in the kingdom. See Simon Henderson, "The Saudi Way," *Wall Street Journal*, August 12, 2002. After the September 11 attacks, diplomatic pressure by the United States and other countries stopped the money transfers, a consequence of which was probably the recommencement, after a gap of more than seven years, of al-Qaeda attacks against U.S. and other foreign targets in the kingdom in May 2003, when three housing compounds for expatriates in Riyadh were attacked.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Elliot House, "Saudi Balancing Act," *Wall Street Journal*, April 4, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Helene Cooper, "U.S. Feels Sting of Winning Saudi Help with Other Arabs," News Analysis, *New York Times*, March 30, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Henderson, "Cheney in the Middle East: Defining Key Issues and Mutual Interests," *Policy Watch* no. 1229 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 8, 2007).

people of the Middle East? The question seems to us in the region to be ridiculous.”<sup>9</sup>

Officially, the Saudi policy has been to work for “Iraq’s security, unity and stability with all of its sectarian groups.”<sup>10</sup> But when signs of anxiety at Iranian interference emerged, gut sentiments surfaced as well. In September 2005, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal expressed concern in a briefing to U.S. journalists about “the entry of people, money and weapons [from Iran] as well as meddling in political life.” He also told the Council on Foreign Relations that U.S. policy was “handing over the country [of Iraq] to Iran, for no reason.” A few days later, and after the Iranian Foreign Ministry had described the remarks as “surprising and irrational,” the then Iraqi interior minister responded by saying Iraq would not be lectured by “some Bedouin riding a camel.” He broadened his remarks to say of Saudi Arabia: “There are regimes that are dictatorships; they have one god, he is the king, he is god of heaven and earth, and he rules as he likes. A whole country is named after a family.”

Such sentiments cast doubt on the sincerity and optimism of the stated Saudi policy, although the Saudis persevered for a while. For example, in October 2006, the kingdom invited to Mecca senior Shiite and Sunni scholars from Iraq to agree to a declaration of reconciliation. The meeting was actually held under the auspices of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), but the delegates were received by King Abdullah, who told them: “I welcome you in your second country and wish you every success in your efforts as you are brothers in Islam and we don’t want anybody to interfere in the affairs of the Islamic nation.”<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the Mecca meeting, on October 22, the Iraqi Shiite and Sunni scholars approved the “Mecca Document,” which they

labeled a *fatwa* (religious ruling) against Muslims killing Muslims.<sup>12</sup> The document was signed on the fifteenth floor of the al-Safa palace in Mecca, in a room overlooking the Grand Mosque. The scholars had just had an audience with King Abdullah, but he was not at the signing ceremony, which instead was chaired by Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the Turkish secretary-general of the OIC. A total of fourteen scholars from each sect signed the document, one Shiite and one Sunni going forward together to the table. The *Arab News* reported that “[n]early every paragraph of the declaration cited a verse from the Koran as the basis for required action.” The writer commented, “[t]here is pessimism that the Mecca Declaration is nothing but a piece of paper.” Within days, when it had no effect on the violence, this prediction proved to be the case, and the declaration is now largely forgotten—especially in comparison with the longer-lived January 2007 Mecca Agreement between the Palestinian Fatah and Hamas factions—in which King Abdullah appears to have invested more personal and political prestige.

#### SAUDI SUPPORT FOR SUNNIS IN IRAQ

Behind this veneer of sectarian neutrality, Saudi Arabia has found itself facing at least two pressures. The Sunni elite of Saddam’s former regime found itself excluded from political power, and the Arab Sunni community as a whole found themselves in a minority compared to both Shiite groups and the (non-Arab, but mainly Sunni) Kurds. Also, militants linked to al-Qaeda saw Iraq as a battleground on which to confront the United States. The Iraqi Sunnis had tribal links with Saudis living in the kingdom. The jihadists linked to al-Qaeda were able to appeal to Saudi Islamists for financial and logistical aid based on their confrontation in Muslim lands with the infidel (the United States and other coalition members). Despite a crackdown on al-Qaeda within

<sup>9</sup> “Kingdom Wants Iraqis to Set Up Their Own Government,” *Arab News* (Jedda), April 10, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Saudi Press Agency, as reported in *Arab News* (Jedda), December 3, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Saudi Press Agency, as reported in *Arab News* (Jedda), October 21, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> *Arab News* (Jedda), October 21, 2006. The newspaper quoted Iraqi journalists as saying that Shiites and Sunnis were “living peacefully in Iraq until the Americans occupied the country.”

the kingdom, the temptation seemed to exist for Saudi Arabia to exploit the willingness of jihadist fighters to fight in Iraq, including a sizable contingent of Saudi young men.

As the Shiite dominance of politics in Baghdad increased, partly as a consequence of elections (initially boycotted by Sunnis) that showed voting on strict ethnic and religious lines, Saudi Arabia became more concerned. Always suspicious of Iranian motives, Saudis' anxieties were only raised by reports of Iranian activities in Iraq, especially after the election of Mahmoud Ahmedinezhad as president of Iran in June 2005. As the Sunni insurgency developed, jihadist and Baath attacks on Shiite targets served only to increase Shiite militancy in response, confusing cause and effect in what was clearly a vicious cycle of violence. The February 2006 attack, which destroyed the dome of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, a major Shiite shrine, was considered especially significant in hardening Shiite attitudes.<sup>13</sup> Both Saudi Arabia and Iran began to see Iraq as an important part of their own sphere of influence, which each was not prepared to concede to the other.

A further blow against the façade of Saudi neutrality was an op-ed article published in the *Washington Post* in November 2006<sup>14</sup> by Nawaf Obaid, who described himself as an advisor to the Saudi government, although he also noted that the opinions in the article were his own and did not reflect official Saudi policy. Obaid warned that if U.S. forces were to leave Iraq abruptly, "massive Saudi intervention to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis" would take place. Saudi Arabia quickly denied the article's content: "This article is utterly baseless," an official told

the Saudi Press Agency.<sup>15</sup> Obaid, who had worked as a consultant for Ambassador to the United States Prince Turki al-Faisal, found himself unceremoniously fired.

But it is clear, at least in retrospect, that Obaid's article conveyed significant aspects of some Saudi official thinking, even if it appeared to undermine King Abdullah's efforts, in Obaid's words, "to minimize sectarian tensions in Iraq and reconcile Sunni and Shiite communities." The article said that the kingdom was considering options including "providing Sunni military leaders ... with ... funding, arms and logistical support ..." and "Another possibility includes the establishment of new Sunni brigades to combat Iranian-backed militias."

At the very least, a sharp policy debate occurred within Saudi official circles about the dilemmas posed by Iraq. This was confirmed to some degree by the otherwise unexplained abrupt December 2006 resignation of Prince Turki as his country's envoy to Washington after only fifteen months in the role. The most frequently suggested cause was a personality clash between Turki and his predecessor, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Bandar had returned to Riyadh and become the secretary-general of a new National Security Council, a role that allowed him to become a global troubleshooter, including making visits to the White House in Washington without the knowledge of Prince Turki.<sup>16</sup>

### THE SAUDI TWO-TRACK STRATEGY TOWARD IRAQ

As of mid-2007, Saudi Arabia appears to be maintaining a two-track policy toward Iraq, both reaching out to the Iraqi government and also trying to blunt the challenge of Iran more directly. Notable steps in helping Baghdad are the following:

- Continuing to press for reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq. In an April 2007 Friday sermon at the Grand

<sup>13</sup> Other significant incidents included the March 2004 attacks on Shiites in Karbala and Baghdad in which 140 died, the February 2005 attack in the Shiite town of Hillah in which 114 died, a series of attacks in September 2005 in which 182 Iraqis died in a mainly Shiite district of Baghdad, and the November 2006 series of car bombings in the Shiite Sadr City area of Baghdad in which 200 died.

<sup>14</sup> "Stepping into Iraq: Saudi Arabia Will Protect Sunnis if the U.S. Leaves," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2006. (Obaid is a former visiting fellow of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.)

<sup>15</sup> Reported in *Arab News* (Jedda), December 3, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Henderson, "Talking Turki," *Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 2006.

Mosque in Mecca, the imam, Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Sudais, said, “Muslim intellectuals and politicians must work to stop bloodshed in the community and the killing of Muslims by Muslims.” He warned of a “huge human catastrophe” if the killings in Iraq continued, calling for unity: “Many Muslims have forgotten an important principle of Islam, the principle of unity. The Holy Koran has said: ‘Hold fast, all together, the rope of Allah and be not divided among yourselves.’”

- Speaking out against the idea of the partition of Iraq. In January 2007, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said: “For Saudi Arabia, a partition of Iraq is inconceivable. It is essential to avoid it. This break-up would first of all hurt Iraqis, who have suffered decades of conflict.”<sup>17</sup>
- Writing off much of Iraq’s debt. Both Iraqi and Saudi officials said in April 2007 that the kingdom had agreed to forgive 80 percent of the more than \$15 billion that Iraq owes the kingdom. Iraq had pressed for total forgiveness, but the Saudi side stuck to 80 percent, reportedly in line with Paris Club creditors, the group that negotiates international sovereign debt.
- Attending the March 10, 2007, meeting of Iraq’s neighbors (plus the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and other Arab and Islamic representatives) that convened for one day in Baghdad.<sup>18</sup> Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal also attended the May 3–4 ministerial meeting of the “International Compact for Iraq” and neighbors’ follow-up meeting at Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt. In that context, Saudi Arabia signed on (with sixty-odd other delegations) to the conditional rhetorical pledges of political and economic support for the Iraqi government issued there, under nominal UN auspices.

- Endorsing a protocol for security cooperation between governments of countries neighboring Iraq to combat terror, intrusion, and organized crime, at the April 17, 2007, weekly meeting of the Saudi council of ministers. Under the accord, Iraq’s neighbors will not allow their territories to be used for planning, organizing, and executing terrorist operations or for instigating or promoting such crimes.<sup>19</sup> According to Nawaf Obaid, in his last Washington presentation (at the Wilson Center) in November 2006, the Saudis genuinely preferred to prevent jihadists from crossing their border into Iraq, on the theory that they could be better monitored and detained while still inside the kingdom. Statements by U.S. and Iraqi officials, who regularly claimed through April 2007 that the vast majority of foreign fighters were entering Iraq from the Syrian side, lend some credence to this assertion. The kingdom has previously announced the construction of a 560-mile-long security fence (reportedly equipped with electronic sensors) along the entire length of the Saudi-Iraq border.<sup>20</sup>

The significance of such moves is mixed. The backing of al-Sudais for King Abdullah’s call for reconciliation is notable because the cleric is seen as being a hardline member of the clerical establishment, who might otherwise be backing a tougher line against Shiites.<sup>21</sup>

On the debt issue, Riyadh is probably responding to pressure from the United States, which is anxious to free Iraq from debt obligations incurred during the time of Saddam Hussein. Given current oil prices and Saudi production of 11 million barrels a day while Iraqi exports are restricted, the 80 percent forgiveness is not generous. The debts relate to Saudi loans or oil sales on behalf of Iraq during the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, when Sad-

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the French daily *Le Figaro*, quoted in the *Jerusalem Post*, January 25, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> The kingdom, along with other states, sent only an official-level as opposed to a ministerial-level representative, assistant undersecretary for political affairs Prince Turki bin Muhammed bin Saud.

<sup>19</sup> *Arab News* (Jedda), April 17, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> “Work on Iraq Border Fence Starts in 2007,” *Arab News* (Jedda), November 15, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Sudais is “a noted Wahhabi bigot.” Stephen Schwartz and Irfan al-Alawi, “Valentine’s Day in Saudi Arabia: Portents of Change from the Desert Kingdom,” *Weekly Standard*, March 5, 2007.

dam was seen as blocking the advance of Iran's (Shiite) Islamic Revolution into (Sunni) Arabia. At the time, and until his overthrow in 2003, the Iraqi leader saw such loans as gifts, a point never conceded by Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, the other principal financial supporter of Saddam against Iran.

Yet the Saudis clearly have also not given up on the prospect of needing to confront Iran more directly. In February 2007, Iran's national security advisor Ali Larijani visited Riyadh and "left feeling quite unsatisfied," according to a knowledgeable Saudi analyst.<sup>22</sup> The March 2007 Riyadh summit between King Abdullah and President Ahmadinezhad of Iran is believed to have included some blunt talking on both Iraq and Iran's nuclear program. The Saudi monarch is believed to have told the Iranian leader that Iran was vulnerable to domestic insurrection by its ethnic minorities, implying or even stating that Saudi Arabia was prepared to finance or otherwise instigate such activities.<sup>23</sup>

The Saudis are also ready to apply pressure on the Baghdad government, either to encourage it to make concessions to Iraqi Sunnis or to distance itself from Iran. Symbolic evidence of this readiness was the reported refusal of King Abdullah to meet Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki in advance of the May 2007 Sharm el-Sheikh "International Compact for Iraq" ministerial meeting—and the refusal by the Saudi foreign minister to meet with Maliki when that ministerial gathering took place. Moreover, in his remarks to the press at that conference, Prince Saud was dismissive, both of the conference itself and of the Iraqi government's own efforts. He told the *New York Times*: "Our American friends say there is improvement: improvement in violence, improvement in the level of understanding, improvement in disarm-

ing militias. But we don't see it.... You have to have national consensus ... you can't do it from the outside."<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, in the same interview, he welcomed U.S. discussions with Iraq's other neighbors, including Syria and Iran, while ridiculing the previous American boycott of such talks: "Sometimes it appears people in diplomacy use talk as a reward or punishment. That seems to me very childish." In comments to *al-Hayat*, the Saudi foreign minister was even blunter about Iraq: "The situation in Iraq is getting worse and not improving. This leads to thinking about the end of the road and of the move towards the abyss. We are fearful of the deterioration of the situation turning into civil war."<sup>25</sup>

Asked point-blank whether Saudi Arabia supported or opposed the Maliki government in Baghdad, Saud said only that, "This is not in our hands. We do not interfere in the internal affairs of Iraq or any other country. This matter concerns the Iraqis." Four days later, the U.S. secretary of state offered a gentle verbal nudge from that studiously aloof Saudi posture: Iraq's neighbors, she said, should not "just sit back and say, 'they [the Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis] have to reconcile.' Of course they have to reconcile. But those neighbors should support the Iraqi government."<sup>26</sup>

## SPILOVER EFFECTS

Saudi Arabia has two principal concerns about possible contagion of the troubles of Iraq:

1. Iranian subversion of the Saudi Shiite community. Despite improvements in recent years, the ethnic minority still faces discrimination and so could provide fertile ground for Iranian agents. Although a local majority in the Eastern Province, where most of the kingdom's oil is produced, Saudi Shiites find gaining employment in

<sup>22</sup> Adel al-Toraifi, quoted in Hassan M. Fattah and Nazil A. Fathi, "Iran Says Its Leader Will Join the Saudi King for Talks on the Region's Conflicts," *New York Times*, March 2, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Western diplomat interviewed by the author in a Persian Gulf state, March 2007. The ethnic group mentioned in particular was the Arab population of Khuzestan, the oil-rich province in southwestern Iran.

<sup>24</sup> "Rice and Her Syrian Counterpart Discuss Iraq Border," *New York Times*, May 4, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> *Al-Hayat* (London), May 5, 2007, translated in Middle East Wire (online). [http://www.mideastwire.com/index.php?action=timesearch&news\\_day=7&news\\_month=5&news\\_year=2007&x=28&y=3#15438](http://www.mideastwire.com/index.php?action=timesearch&news_day=7&news_month=5&news_year=2007&x=28&y=3#15438)

<sup>26</sup> Interview on The Charlie Rose Show," PBS, May 8, 2007 (as heard).

the oil industry difficult, apparently because they are not trusted. Politically, Saudi Shiites are underrepresented and discriminated against. For example, in municipal elections held in the Eastern Province in 2005, a result was gerrymandered in the al-Hasa constituency to disqualify a Shiite and give victory to a Sunni so that, along with appointed Sunnis, the resulting council had a Sunni majority.

2. Reinvigoration of al-Qaeda in the kingdom. Determined and harsh efforts by Saudi security forces have effectively countered the emergence of al-Qaeda cells. Most jihadists with experience and training from Afghanistan have been imprisoned or killed in clashes. Young Saudi Islamists appear still to be attracted to the opportunities of fighting in Iraq or martyrizing themselves there.<sup>27</sup> Those able to return to the kingdom can inspire new recruits and provide training. Financial assistance from rich Saudi Islamists appears to be still forthcoming, much to the concern of the U.S. government. In his January 2007 interview, Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal noted: "From Iraq, al-Qaeda threatens not only Saudi Arabia but also the entire region."<sup>28</sup>

Even just one of these possibilities could threaten the Saudi regime itself. Indeed, the House of Saud probably already feels directly threatened by both possibilities. Combating such threats will be an onerous task for Saudi security forces. Although numerous, the most

competent parts of the forces are small. A further concern, at least in respect to al-Qaeda, is the uncertain loyalty of parts of the security services, which are sympathetic to radical Islamic views and perhaps are supportive of attacks on non-Muslim foreigners, precisely the ones whom they might be notionally protecting.

Saudi Arabia is especially apprehensive about the vulnerability of its oil installations. An al-Qaeda suicide attack on the crucial processing facility at Abqaiq in February 2006 was nearly devastatingly successful. Since then, Saudi officials have been increasingly concerned about Shiite attacks on oil facilities, which will have the consequence of increasing local discrimination against Shiites.

### SAUDI OPTIONS

Unless the U.S. military achieves greater success in dealing with the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and thwarting malevolent Iranian influence, the kingdom has few options with much likelihood of success. A stable, benign Shiite-dominated regime in Baghdad would be the best alternative for the kingdom, but this option seems currently unlikely. In its absence, a Shiite-dominated government focused internally on its own problems would be better. The temptation for Saudi Arabia is to encourage internal problems in Iraq by providing support for Sunni insurgents and jihadists.

Partition of Iraq probably has attractions for some segments of Saudi society, offering solace to their Sunni coreligionists wanting to avoid Shiite tutelage. But much of the Saudi-Iraqi border area is adjacent to southeastern Iraq where Iraq's Shiites are dominant. So this option would be another nightmare rather than a solution.

Causing trouble for Iran inside Iran is possible but offers the countervulnerability of Iranian agents provoking unrest or sabotage in the kingdom. Such activities in Iran, especially if limited to Saudi financial support, which would be unidentifiable and therefore

<sup>27</sup> In the Schwarz and al-Alawi *Weekly Standard* article, "Valentine's Day in Saudi Arabia," op. cit., the Saudi newspaper *al-Watan* is quoted as stating that 2,000 Saudis have died in Iraq since 2003. In the same *Weekly Standard* article, the Wahhabi periodical *al-Sahat* is quoted in reference to the report of a Saudi subject, Hudhaiban al-Dosary, who crossed into Iraq to blow himself up "in a massacre of dozens of Iraqis during the solemn commemoration of Ashura," which took place in January 2007. In a presentation to the annual policy council of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, October 30–31, 2006, Nawaf Obaid said the cumulative total of Saudi fighters in Iraq up to October 2006 was 655, a figure exceeded by jihadists from Algeria (1,875), Syria (1,170), Yemen (1,050), Sudan (920), and Egypt (850), but "still a major concern for the [Saudi] government." His presentation offered no sources for his figures.

<sup>28</sup> Interview in *Le Figaro*, op. cit.

deniable, could have additional benefits, such as destabilizing the clerical regime in Tehran or distracting it from its presumed efforts to make nuclear weapons.

A further way of combating Iran, though less directly, is to work toward decreasing the price of oil. With high demand causing high prices—boosted by political uncertainty in the Persian Gulf, Nigerian, and Venezuelan production areas—a weakening of the price seems unlikely but might be achievable by careful manipulation of market sentiment. Iran's economy is considered very inefficient, and it reportedly needs prices over \$50 per barrel to meet budget requirements. Bringing prices below this figure could achieve benefits for Saudi—and U.S.—policy not only in Iraq but also in regard to the Iranian nuclear program.

#### **CONCLUSION: UNCERTAINTY IN THE FACE OF CERTAIN DANGER**

The late, celebrated British economist John Maynard Keynes is famous for saying “in the long-run, we are all dead.” The challenge for Saudi policymakers is that even in the short run, King Abdullah will be dead. The eighty-four-year-old monarch will outlive the late King Fahd in 2007, the previous oldest Saudi king—who spent his last ten years increasingly incapacitated by a series of strokes. Abdullah's death could well end the Saudi policy of reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq. The next likely king, Crown Prince Sultan, eighty-three in 2007, is renowned for lacking Abdullah's claimed liberal tendencies and is reportedly antipathetic towards Shiites.

But Sultan's own poor health—he reportedly had cancer in 2004—makes his succession questionable. The selection of the next king is unpredictable. An Allegiance Council was established in 2006 to confirm Sultan's eventual choice of crown prince and therefore next-in-line to be king, but who that might be can only be guessed. Even that forecast is dependent on the circumstances of the moment.

For example, the death in rapid succession of an aging Abdullah and Sultan, or Sultan's predeceasing Abdullah, might cause the council to choose a younger and healthier candidate than it would otherwise do.

Within a probably similar timeframe, a change in leadership will also take place in the United States. Iraq looks to be the dominant issue of the 2008 presidential and congressional campaigns. If a substantial withdrawal of U.S. forces occurs on a timescale that Saudi Arabia regards as premature, greater military support for Iraqi Sunnis, as predicted in the Obaid op-ed, might be anticipated. Such intervention might offer the Sunnis some relief but is unlikely to be decisive. Saudi military units have a poor reputation for effectiveness.<sup>29</sup>

Perversely, despite King Abdullah's March 2007 description of U.S. forces as an “illegal, foreign occupation,” Saudi interests are probably best served by the United States' remaining in Iraq, providing it can boost the Baghdad government, contain Iranian influence, and protect the political interests of the Sunni Arab minority. But Washington can expect little public thanks for such a stance.

Little doubt exists that Saudi Arabia sees events in Iraq in apocalyptic terms, in large part because of the unintended benefits they confer upon the Saudi archrival, Iran. Ironically, a dimension of this vision would have occurred even if U.S.-led coalition forces had not invaded Iraq in 2003. The developing Iranian nuclear program was already beginning to threaten Saudi Arabia's status in the Persian Gulf region and its standing as the leading state of Islam.

The Sunni-Shiite aspect of the Saudi view of Iraq, and the additional threat from Iran, means that usual Saudi preferences for compromise will be harder, if not impossible, to achieve. Riyadh seems uncertain of its policy options, which are likely to be reconsidered anyway in the event of a new monarch and a change in political leadership in Washington.

<sup>29</sup> At the time of the original Obaid op-ed, a retired British officer who had spent many years training the Saudi military commented on the notion of Saudi forces intervening: “They'd lose.”