

Chapter 3

The impact of 11 September 2001

It may be no exaggeration to note that, after the United States, Saudi Arabia was one of the countries most directly affected by the tragic events of 11 September 2001. The presumed mastermind behind the perpetrators was Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, and 15 of the 19 hijackers of the airliners involved were Saudis. In the initial months after the strikes, the Kingdom found itself under a barrage of verbal attacks by American commentators, and there were real fears of severe damage to Saudi–American relations.

The damage caused to Saudi society – by the abrupt discovery of the extent to which extremism subsisted within, and (among the educated at least) by the shock of the vitriolic attacks from outside – will be deeper and will take time to assess. Saudi credibility was severely damaged in the eyes of American popular opinion, as the spate of Saudi-bashing in the last quarter of 2001 proved. But, despite the marked tension, Saudi–American relations remain too important to both sides to be allowed to deteriorate.

The Saudi government, prominent members of the ruling family, the media and key religious leaders all condemned the attacks of 11 September. King Fahd, in an interview on the eve of the annual GCC summit, was quoted as saying ‘It is normal that we cooperate to eradicate [terrorism] and ward off its evils’.¹ The Heir Apparent, Prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz, declared at the summit that ‘our Arab and Muslim nation was severely damaged because of the reckless acts of murderers who raised the banners of Islam ... and claimed to fight for the Arab and Muslim nation, which was the first

victim of their crimes ... It is the duty of all Muslims in these circumstances to condemn all terrorist acts, without ambiguity'.²

In the absence of public opinion polls, the reaction of the Saudi public cannot be ascertained. But an opinion poll published in Kuwait on 19 November 2001 showed that 82% of Kuwaitis polled were opposed to the American attack on Afghanistan, and 89% felt that the attacks would lead to a further struggle, although 71% approved of their government's cooperation in the US 'war against terrorism'. At the same time, however, 42% viewed Osama bin Laden as a *mujahid* (holy warrior), while only 34% saw him as a terrorist.³ Presumably, the opinions of the Saudi public were not markedly dissimilar.⁴

More importantly for American foreign policy, the regime repeatedly signalled its desire to continue strategic cooperation. The Saudis place great stress on the partnership. Unfortunately for the formation of American popular opinion, much of that cooperation, as usual, is carried out quietly, giving the appearance of Saudi inactivity or, worse, non-cooperation. The attitude of the Saudi government was that the close American–Saudi relationship had not been diminished or jeopardised, despite the differences over these foreign and security policy issues. Disagreements always have been part of the relationship – just as trade disputes form part of the broad US–European relationship.

Saudi Arabia and Islamic extremism

The events of late 2001 demonstrated that the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Islam also had its dark side. The involvement of numerous Saudis amongst the forces of Islamic terrorism inevitably will lead to some degree of introspection in the Kingdom and to examining the circumstances that gave birth to domestic Islamic extremism.

The great majority of Saudis are *Muwahhidun*, better known in the West as Wahabis.⁵ The movement was founded in the eighteenth century by religious reformer Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, who preached a return to the original austerity and purity of Islam. He also formed an alliance with the head of the Al Saud clan, which led to the extension of Al Saud power over much of the Arabian Peninsula with the aim of spreading the Wahabi message. The task of cementing Al Saud control over the present territory of the Kingdom fell to King Abd al-Aziz (often known in the West as Ibn Saud) in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In the early

years of this process, Abd al-Aziz relied for much of his military force upon the Ikhwan, groups of Najdi tribesmen imbued with a strong sense of Wahabi duty.

Forced to recognise the limits to expansion posed by the British mandates of Transjordan and Iraq to the north and by the British-protected emirates of the Gulf to the east, King Abd al-Aziz was forced to abandon his strategy of spreading the reach of Wahabism and to concentrate instead on forging an emerging nation-state. But Abd al-Aziz's change of strategy brought him into direct conflict with the ultra-conservative wing of Wahabism and the Ikhwan. Although he faced off the Ikhwan and forced them to bow to his will, the seeds were sown for the continuing tension between the state under Al Saud leadership and strict interpreters of the Wahabi message. The persistence of the fanaticism of the Ikhwan was demonstrated in 1979, when a neo-Ikhwan group led by Juhayman al-Utaybi seized control of the Great Mosque of Mecca.⁶

It is one of the enduring myths of Western critics of Saudi Arabia that the Al Saud and the Saudi state are unidimensionally arch-conservative and reactionary. On the contrary, the successors of King Abd al-Aziz continue to walk a tightrope between respecting tradition and pursuing development. They have been forced to tread warily and slowly in introducing such innovations as radio, television and mass education. In 1965 the erection of a television transmitter in Riyadh provoked a demonstration that the police dispersed, but several were killed; ten years later the brother of one of those killed (and a member of the ruling family) assassinated King Faisal. In another example, the state eventually reached agreement with the *ulama* that girls should be educated – but control of female education was placed in the hands of the *ulama* through the General Presidency for Girls' Education.⁷ In a game of give-and-take, the price King Fahd paid for grudging acceptance of his pursuit of development was the appointment of an arch-conservative, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, as *mufti* – a position signifying the highest religious authority in the country.

However, in tandem with a recrudescence of traditional Wahabi opposition to change in the Kingdom (as represented by those who took over the Great Mosque), other neo-traditionalist religious opposition began to appear in the 1970s. The *Salafiyah*, a term denoting a desire to return to the golden age of the Prophet

Muhammad, not only dismissed the Saudi state as corrupt and un-Islamic and opposed the Western presence in Saudi Arabia and the Islamic world, but also regarded the official religious establishment as a co-opted, and thus illegitimate, tool of the state. In the 1980s this opposition included figures such as Sheikh Abdullah bin Sulayman al-Masari, founder of the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights (more accurately translated as Committee for the Defence of Sharia [Islamic law] Rights), and his son Muhammad, who represented the CDLR in exile in London along with Sa'd al-Faqih before the two quarrelled and split. In the 1990s Sheikhs Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awdah became known for their fiery sermons delivered in mosques in al-Qasim region of central Arabia.⁸ Not surprisingly, some of these dissidents were vocal in their opposition to the American attack on Afghanistan.⁹

The best-known Islamic dissident of Saudi origin is, of course, Osama bin Laden. Disowned by the Saudi government and forced out of Sudan, Osama made his way to Afghanistan in 1996.¹⁰ By this time, the tentacles of his al-Qaeda movement appear to have stretched to a number of countries, notably Egypt and Yemen, as well as Saudi Arabia. Although the specifics are hazy, Osama seems to have had close ties with the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army in southern Yemen, which kidnapped a group of tourists in December 1998. A number of their captives were killed in a firefight with Yemeni soldiers, and the head of the 'army' was tried in Yemeni courts, convicted and executed. But adherents, many of them 'Arab Afghans', remained at large in remote areas of the country. It is widely thought that some of them, in conjunction with Osama bin Laden, were responsible for the bomb attack on the American destroyer, *USS Cole*, in Aden harbour in September 2000. The four Saudis executed for the November 1995 bombing of a building in Riyadh used by an American training team for the Saudi Arabian National Guard, killing five Americans and two Indians, claimed to be influenced by Muhammad al-Masari and Osama bin Laden.¹¹

It is clear from the 11 September hijackings that Osama had acquired a number of Saudi adherents: 15 of the 19 hijackers were of Saudi nationality. A significant number of the Saudis involved came from the southern and western regions of the Kingdom, areas that traditionally have nursed grievances against the central region of Najd, home of the ruling Al Saud family, and have benefited relatively

less from oil income.¹² In addition, at least 45 Saudis were killed in the 2001 war in Afghanistan,¹³ and at least 240 more Saudis were captured.¹⁴ The number of Saudis recruited by al-Qaeda to defend Islam in what were regarded locally as 'just wars' is an indication not of the Saudi government's passivity but rather of a failure of its intelligence and of its judgment in assigning low priority to this problem.

Unlike the previous Saudi religious critics, Osama bin Laden and his comrades and followers seem to cleave to a more ecumenical and activist Islamist ideology – not necessarily Wahabi, or even Sunni, but one that seeks to appeal to all Muslims. Hence his alliance with Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian founder of Islamic Jihad in Egypt, and his appeal to 'Arab Afghans' from many countries. He is also distinguished by his insistent opposition to the US military presence in the Arabian Peninsula and by his uncompromising advocacy of violence to achieve his aims. Ideologically, Osama descends from the extreme reactionary branch of Salafi Islamic revivalism that first appeared over a century ago. While many dissident Wahabi activists may agree with some or much of Osama's invective, they are unlikely to regard him as their leader. And, although Osama's Saudi origins cannot be dismissed as entirely insignificant in his ideological evolution, his ideology clearly does not derive from either Saudi liberal or traditionalist positions. In many respects, he might as well have been an Egyptian, Algerian or Yemeni.¹⁵

A new campaign of Saudi-bashing and the Saudi response

One of the more alarming side-effects of 11 September was the emergence of a new round of Saudi-bashing in the United States. The Kingdom had long been regarded with suspicion or hostility by some Americans for any number of reasons: it has been blamed for high oil prices; it supports the establishment of a Palestinian state and thus is a foe of Israel; it was seen as uncooperative with the American investigation into the 1996 al-Khobar bombing; it is not a Western-style democracy; it insists on the segregation of women; and it suffers from a widespread stereotype that its population consists of ignorant Bedouins who undeservedly have traded their camels for Cadillacs. After 11 September 2001, though, hostility to Saudi Arabia intensified, largely because most of the hijackers appeared to be Saudis and because of a popular perception, stoked by the mainstream media,

that the Saudis were not doing their part in the American 'war against terror', after President Bush's warning that 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'.¹⁶

In the US the last months of 2001 were marked by an intensive programme of detention of largely Middle Eastern suspects, including a number of Saudis.¹⁷ The seemingly indiscriminate nature of the dragnet, the refusal to release information on detainees and the denial of access for defence lawyers sparked civil-liberty concerns and fears of anti-Arab racism.¹⁸ One prominent case involved a Saudi doctor studying in San Antonio, who was arrested and kept in solitary confinement for 13 days simply because his name was similar to those of some of the hijackers.¹⁹ A Muslim Arab-American Secret Service agent, on his way to Texas to provide protection for US President George W. Bush, was removed from an American Airlines plane he had already boarded.²⁰ Even a US Congressman of Arab descent, a member of a congressional delegation on its way to Saudi Arabia, was bounced from an Air France flight in Paris.²¹ By early 2002 only 44 of the Saudis held by the US government had been released.²²

Otherwise responsible media were full of anti-Saudi polemics, some scholars contended that Islam and Saudi Arabia were intrinsic threats to the West, and the mayor of New York rejected a prominent Saudi businessman's humanitarian gesture of a \$10m cheque for relief because he objected to his politics. Members of the United States Congress also made inflammatory statements. An American senator accused the Saudis of playing a 'double game' of giving extremists free rein at home and financing their groups.²³ The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee claimed that Saudi schools were 'hate-filled anti-American breeding grounds'.²⁴ Another senator, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, suggested that the United States should withdraw its military forces from the Kingdom to 'a place which has not seen significant resources flowing to support some really extreme, fanatic views'.²⁵ Former CIA Director James Woolsey contended that Saudi Arabia 'deserves a very large part of the blame for September 11. I do not think we should do anything more with them right now than be cordial'.²⁶

The media reported that the Saudis had refused to arrest any of the suspects identified by the US government – although this was shown to be false.²⁷ The media also claimed that Saudi Arabia failed to close bank accounts used by individuals and organisations linked

to al-Qaeda. The Saudi response was slow, in part because of the government's claim that Washington had failed to provide evidence of the linkages or even advance warning of publicly announced lists of suspected terrorists and their organisations, but action was forthcoming.²⁸ Another media claim was that the Saudis had refused to allow American use of its military facilities for its Afghanistan campaign, including the American-run command centre at Prince Sultan Air Base outside al-Kharj. Little heed was paid to official Saudi and American statements that the US government had never asked to base aircraft used in Afghanistan at Saudi bases, and that the US military did indeed use the Prince Sultan command centre to direct the war.²⁹ Nevertheless, some members of Congress and the media continued to contend that Saudi Arabia was dragging its heels on cooperation in 'the war against terror'. Just as regularly, the White House countered that it had excellent cooperation with Riyadh.³⁰ One paper added fuel to the flames in early 2002 when it claimed that Saudi officials had hinted that Riyadh might ask for the removal of US troops in the country.³¹ The Bush administration quickly dismissed the report, with denials by the White House spokesman, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defence, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Saudis also denied it.

Nevertheless, the media attacks appeared to have played a key role in shifting American public opinion against Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. One opinion poll saw a drop in the US public's favourable view of Saudi Arabia from 56% to 24% between January 2001 and December 2001; over the same time, its unfavourable rating climbed from 28% to 58%.³²

Are these allegations credible or simply incredible? First, rather than trying to push up oil prices, the Saudis (as well as many other members of OPEC) seek to maintain what they regard as a reasonable and stable price. Today's oil price in real terms is said to be less than it was before the oil price revolution in 1973-4.³³ The drop in crude oil prices to under \$10 a barrel in 1998 and early 1999 (the price averaged slightly more than \$13 for the whole of 1998), created severe budgetary problems for Saudi Arabia, which depends on oil for some 80% of its government income. In 2001 Riyadh recorded its first budgetary surplus for more than a decade, because the price of oil rose to levels between \$25 and \$30. With the drop in

late 2001 and early 2002 to \$20 a barrel or less (although recovering to about \$25), the budgets of Saudi Arabia and other OPEC producers went back into the red, and development efforts had to be postponed or curtailed. Simply put, this cannot be called price gouging, and it is in the interest of both the Kingdom and the West that oil prices stay within a band around a mutually agreed optimal price, generally defined as \$25 a barrel.³⁴

Second, the establishment of a Palestinian state is a central goal throughout the Arab world and enjoys significant support around the world. Riyadh's official stance is that a Palestinian state must be created on the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, and that the Oslo process is the best way to achieve a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbours.³⁵ In the absence of more systematic research, anecdotal evidence suggests that most of its citizens seem to support that position. Now that the United States officially has accepted the principle of Palestinian statehood, this is hardly an extreme demand.

The Saudi complaint about al-Khobar, as well as about events after 11 September, has been that the US government systematically has failed to share information and evidence. There are also hints that the FBI has been heavy-handed and over-zealous in its activities in the Kingdom, and a similar charge has been made in connection with the USS *Cole* investigation in neighbouring Yemen.³⁶ Certainly the Saudis are not blameless in this affair: Saudi security services have never been noted for their cooperation with other forces and have often been over-the-top in their treatment of Saudi citizens and especially expatriates. At the same time, however, the handing down of indictments in the case in June 2001 a few days before the expiry of the statute of limitations, as well as the retirement of FBI Director Louis Freeh, without any prior notice to the Saudis and without the presentation of credible evidence, was regarded as an affront in Riyadh.³⁷ Essentially, the Saudis resent America's arrogance in seeming to believe that it can run these investigations as it likes, without regard to Saudi sovereignty.

It is certainly true that Saudi Arabia is not a Western-style democracy. It is also undeniable that the Al Saud ruling family often acts as if the country belongs to it alone. And the political system is authoritarian. But the regime is more accurately described as patriarchal, rather than tyrannical. Far from opposing change and denying basic rights to its citizens, the government has promoted

steady economic and social change – albeit at a measured pace, so as to keep a workable balance between traditionalists and modernists within the Kingdom. While the King and close family members make final decisions, a highly educated senior government cadre, drawn from diverse backgrounds, has come to play a key role in the decision-making process. The *majlis* system, under which many princes, governors, government officials and prominent businessmen host regular sessions that all are welcome to attend to voice comments and complaints, provides valuable feedback, even if sensitive topics are proscribed. Furthermore, the establishment of a formal *Majlis al-Shura*, although long in coming, is in itself an indicator of political transition. Anecdotal evidence again suggests that most Saudis do not want a different political system; they just want the present system to be fairer and more responsive.

The practice differentiating the Kingdom from nearly every country in the world, including its neighbours in the GCC, is its rigid segregation of women from men. This does not mean that its treatment of women is the same as that of the Taliban; although women in the Kingdom must be cloaked, and indigenous women must be veiled, most are educated, many work, a large number travel abroad and some run their own businesses.³⁸ It is arguable that female segregation is due more to social constraint than deliberate government policy, and that the government has been loosening the shackles at the same necessarily slow rate as in many other fields. In the end, however, the truth is that Saudi Arabia can learn more in this regard from its neighbours from Kuwait to Oman, where women drive, study and work side-by-side with men, hold high government positions and are eloquent in public participation.

It is unarguable that Wahabism is a conservative expression of Islam, and that Saudi Arabia's long isolation from outside influences, its historical development and pressures of its development have strengthened the hand of Wahabi traditionalists. But this is a long way from contending that Saudi Arabia supports and foments extremism. Pious Saudis, and the government to some extent, have engaged in Wahabi proselytising efforts around the world – but then many Christian groups also proselytise abroad, among them offshoots more extreme than the Wahabis. Undoubtedly, the Saudi establishment in Riyadh and Jeddah has realised, rather belatedly, that unsupervised religious activities can make fertile territory for a few extremists, and

that serious soul-searching is in order over how to separate the twisted extremists from the responsibly devout.

Are the Saudis really ignorant Bedouin driving Cadillacs? No, of course not. A minority is rich, as in America and Europe. Some members of this minority regard their fortune as a licence to do whatever they like, but others are competent, responsible businessmen who donate to charitable causes, as is required in Islam. Many are educated, middle-class people. They drive Fords and Toyotas as well as Mercedes, they work in government offices or for corporations or as small businessmen; they seek loans to build their houses and promotions to provide for their children. Many Saudis are relatively poor, live in modest housing and earn incomes as drivers and soldiers. Instead of being rich, a growing proportion are simply unemployed. Are Saudis anti-American? Undoubtedly some are, but many are absorbed with American culture even if they disagree with aspects of America's foreign policy.

The 11 September attacks and the American war in Afghanistan are likely to have substantial impact on the Kingdom's policies, but the dire warnings advanced in Western media that Saudi Arabia is on the verge of collapse are the stuff of fantasy. The same sort of predictions of doom have been advanced at various intervals since the 1940s. First, it was said that the nascent state, full of regional rivalries and overwhelmed by its inability to manage the new phenomenon of oil income, could not outlast the death of King Abd al-Aziz. A decade later, the Kingdom was seen as tottering because of the incompetence and profligacy of King Saud in the 1950s. Later it was contended that the Kingdom was helpless to withstand the challenge of Arab nationalism in the 1960s, particularly with Nasser's Egyptian forces poised in strength on Saudi Arabia's Yemen frontier. The fall of the Shah of Iran in the late 1970s brought predictions that the Al Saud would soon suffer the same fate, and the collapse of oil prices in the mid-1980s was seen as another final nail in the Saudi coffin. In the 1990s the rise and visibility of Islamic critics of the regime, both inside and outside the country, brought new fears that the Kingdom's days were numbered.³⁹

Certainly, the Kingdom faces serious problems – in corruption, in the unchecked arrogance of the Al Saud, in growing socio-economic difficulties and so on. But Saudi Arabia is not quite the dinosaur that the instant experts in the West seem to think. The state has grown

more sophisticated in dealing with these problems. With regard to 11 September, the government swiftly took precautions to make certain that domestic religious dissent did not get out of hand.⁴⁰

Adjustments to the events of 2001 cannot be predicted, of course. But likely effects may well include one or more of the following:

1. The government is likely to exercise closer supervision and tighter control over the international Muslim organisations headquartered within the Kingdom. It may well reassess and place stricter controls on the direction of its parallel Islamic foreign policy, although it is unlikely to regard official policies of building mosques and distributing Korans as subject to revision.
2. The state will undoubtedly seek closer control of domestic Islamists, via intensified penetration of and restrictions on Islamist groups and individuals, as well as via less tolerance of deviation from official viewpoints. This may well have the unintended side effect of increasing Islamist dissent among disaffected elements and driving it further underground and outside the country. On the other hand, it may well give the liberals a slight edge in the unending balancing of modernist aspirations against traditionalist obstructionism. Possibly this has been signalled already in the newly instituted issue of identity cards for women and in the tantalising promises that in the near future women may be allowed to drive motor vehicles.⁴¹
3. The regime undoubtedly will be far more meticulous in keeping track of Saudi citizens who leave the country to join Islamic causes in such places as Bosnia, Chechnya and Kashmir. Still, just as Riyadh (and Washington) was not aware of the involvement of the Saudi hijackers of 11 September, it will prove difficult to prevent and/or detain such activists.
4. In the short run, it is likely that official relations with the United States will cool slightly, particularly if there is no progress on the Israeli–Palestinian front and the US continues its uncompromising support of Israel. On the popular level, the United States may expect to see a short-term decline in the number of Saudi visitors, students and investments. These are more likely to be temporary dips rather than long-term consequences.⁴² The picture will radically change, however, should hints about military action against Iraq become facts.⁴³ Public opinion in

- Saudi Arabia, not to mention all the Gulf states and the entire Arab world, has become convinced that ten years of United Nations sanctions have had no effect on Saddam Hussein and his policies, but have served only to bring suffering to the Iraqi people.⁴⁴
5. Saudi insistence on sovereignty is likely to mean stiffer Saudi resolve on retaining jurisdiction over suspects in the 1996 al-Khobar bombing and, especially, any extradition of 11 September suspects (particularly in the absence of US explanation or apology for detaining Saudi citizens).
 6. Ties to Islamic countries, especially Pakistan, are likely to be strengthened. Given its perceived role as the protector of Islam, the Kingdom will find it necessary to deal with the increasing suspicion throughout the Islamic world that Islam is under attack from the West.

Without a doubt, the last months of 2001 and the early ones of 2002 have been trying times for the Kingdom – as well as for some of its fellow GCC members. It has seen a Saudi by birth become the most hated man on earth. It has discovered that Islamic extremists inside the Kingdom and its extremist citizens abroad pose far more of a threat than it supposed, and that real change must be made to disarm this threat. It has found itself the target of American hostility on a scale never seen before, leading to the real possibility that the 70-year American–Saudi alliance (the Kingdom’s closest bond outside the Arab world) will be jeopardised. While the long-term damage may be limited, the more immediate impact on Saudi policy makers and general population alike may be to rethink their overwhelmingly pro-Western and pro-American attitudes.

The Saudi–American relationship: the circle and the square

Saudi Arabia, very consciously, has deepened its ‘special relationship’ with the United States over the years. It is a relationship with many facets, both official and popular. In part, it is based on a long history of Saudi–American ties, particularly the establishment of the Arabian–American Oil Company (ARAMCO), originally a consortium made up of five American oil companies. ARAMCO received the first oil concession for the Kingdom and served as its principal producing company for many years. But ARAMCO’s role extended far beyond

the oil industry proper. It employed many Saudis in its operations; it educated many more; and it encouraged the establishment of a multitude of local companies from which it could make in-country purchases. It provided advice and counsel to Saudi kings and government. It created the first archive of historical materials and place-names in the country. And it was nationalised by the Saudi government almost reluctantly, years later than elsewhere in OPEC.

The ARAMCO relationship was soon mirrored on a political level, and then on a military level as well. The political relationship was regarded as particularly important during the 1950s and 1960s, when the Kingdom found itself under attack from the Arab nationalist republics. During the Cold War, the Kingdom's staunch anti-communist attitude struck a common chord with US administrations. The military association began with the establishment of the Dhahran air base, which was operated by the US Air Force between 1946 and 1962, and the provision of an American training team from 1953. Military ties escalated considerably in subsequent years and remain extremely significant.

Ties are also evident on a more personal level. American pop culture is extremely popular amongst a wide swathe of Saudi youth. Aspects of the American consumer culture, from Starbucks to McDonalds to American-style shopping malls and American cars, are everywhere. The thousands of Saudis who studied in the United States proclaim nostalgic memories of their stay there, and many retain homes in and/or travel to the US.

But there are undeniable cracks in hitherto close bilateral relations, and they are growing wider. The intensification of US popular and elite suspicions of Saudi Arabia after 11 September 2001 is damaging. New myths of Saudi intolerance in education and of its propagation of extremist Islamic views abroad have been superimposed on existing stereotypes. Saudis bristle at a perceived anti-Arab, and particularly anti-Saudi, attitude in some quarters in the United States, especially in the media and the Congress. If these attitudes continue, the end result is likely to be increasing numbers of Saudi citizens choosing other destinations for their holidays, education, property purchases and investment. It may also mean less fluid cooperation on military matters and adverse repercussions on trade. Such a deterioration will damage not only Saudi interests but American interests as well.

The Saudi government is frustrated at difficulties over its application for membership in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Many Saudi officials attribute the obstacles to gaining admission to behind-the-scenes US manoeuvres, while many American officials insist that participation in the WTO requires more competition in Saudi Arabia's economy and more transparency in its government. Furthermore, there are growing perceptions that the United States is displaying increasing arrogance during the post-Cold War era. Rather than negotiating and persuading Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to cooperate in security and political matters, the US is seen as simply telling its clients what they must do. This behaviour seems to have increased in the last quarter of 2001 and the beginning of 2002.

In the wider arena, divergence of views over Iraq threatens military cooperation. The Kingdom strongly resists US pressure to support what appears to be an increasingly aggressive anti-Iraq policy. As pointed out above, the Kingdom's leaders do not trust Saddam Hussein, nor can they work with him. At the same time, though, they strongly oppose military action to remove him. Minister of the Interior Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz responded to a question about an attack on Iraq at a press conference in mid-February 2002 by saying that 'Saudi Arabia is against resolving disputes through violence ... If this happens, God forbid, the Kingdom will not in any circumstance be for any war against any Arab country'.⁴⁵ The body of Saudi population is even more antagonistic to an assault on Iraq. An American assault on Iraq, even if only remotely similar to the campaign in Afghanistan, stands a good chance by itself of derailing the strategic and military side of Saudi-US cooperation.

The inclusion of Iran in the Bush administration's 'axis of evil' blacklist confounds the Saudis. The biggest power on the Gulf littoral, Iran is only a few miles away across the Gulf, and the Saudis know full well that, at a minimum, an essential part of their security rests on achieving a *modus vivendi* with the Islamic Republic. Rational self-interest has dictated Riyadh's gradual rapprochement with Tehran. It is in Saudi interests to strengthen ties in many ways beyond a simple normalisation of relations. American hostility to Iran, particularly when not immediately provoked, complicates Saudi-Iranian relations and jeopardises whatever influence the Saudis may have in encouraging Iranian moderates.

There is no greater source of permanent rancour between the two countries than the imbroglio of Palestine. The deep passions on the subject at all levels of Saudi society dictate that the Kingdom's fundamental support for the Palestinian cause will not diminish. The longer the present cycle of violence and hatred continues, the more it will poison US relations, not only with Saudi Arabia but with the entire Arab world and the Middle East. If the United States continues to remain essentially disengaged and at least passively supports the Sharon government in its tough line, the possibility exists that the Kingdom will move beyond verbal remonstrations and take direct action against the United States. Prince Abdullah has publicly ruled out another oil boycott, but there are other potential measures short of that drastic step.

All the Gulf regimes have serious reservations about the perceived American slant towards Israel, and increasingly voice their protest. They feel indignation themselves and/or feel they must act on the indignation of their people regarding American policies towards Israel and Iraq. The Saudi heir apparent and *de facto* head of government, Prince Abdullah, spoke with frustration in June 2001 when on a visit to Syria he stated that

*the premises and given facts of peace implemented since the conference in Madrid are now crumbling one by one. The Madrid conference received the acceptance of the Arabs and the Muslims, who extended the bridges of dialogue, hoping that this would bring about a future of co-existence for all parties according to the principles of justice and land for peace. This vision from Madrid is what led the Arabs to shake hands with Israeli negotiators, even though for more than fifty years they had rejected the extending of a friendly hand to any Israeli party. Today, what has happened to Madrid and its commitments, and what about the peace process in all its forms?*⁴⁶

In August 2001 he was angry enough to send an unusually sharp letter to President Bush airing his concerns. The President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan Al Nahyan, remarked on 3 July 2001 that 'At a time Israel unleashes its lethal weapons against the Palestinian people who have nothing else but stones, we see the United States unable to rein in Israel.'⁴⁷ Even after

the 11 September attacks, Saudi officials continued to voice their concern over Israeli–Palestinian developments.⁴⁸ The Israeli offensive into West Bank towns in early 2002 redoubled Saudi official dismay and intensified public outrage against Israel and the United States, provoking rare public demonstrations in the kingdom and elsewhere in the Gulf.

Prince Abdullah was widely praised for advancing an Arab–Israeli peace plan promising full normalisation of relations in exchange for the return of territory, which was adopted by an Arab League summit on 28 March 2002. His visit to President Bush’s ranch in Texas in late April, during which the prince presented a new Arab–Israeli peace strategy, was useful in forging a personal bond and nudging Bush towards more engagement on the problem. This positive development, however, was undermined by the negative reaction of Western public opinion to the near-simultaneous incidents involving the death of 15 girls during a Mecca school fire because the local religious police prevented them from leaving without being properly dressed and the publication of a poem by the Saudi ambassador to London that appeared to praise a female Palestinian suicide bomber.

Another source of divergence, differences over policy towards other Arab states, has diminished in recent years. Although the US has toned down its attitude to regimes in Libya and Syria, any change in US policy will be robustly resisted by Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom remains suspicious of Qaddafi but fully supportive of Syria.

Observers in the West have often made much of Prince Abdullah’s ‘Arab’ orientation relative to the Al Fahd, the branch of the family comprising King Fahd and his full-brothers, who are often regarded as closer to the US. Inevitably, this supposed divergence has taken on far too much significance. But with the steady deterioration in the Palestinian–Israeli situation, it is not inconceivable that Abdullah might feel constrained to use stronger means to express disapproval of US support for Israel than simply postponing a visit to the United States, as he did in mid-2001. One possibility might be to diversify arms purchases and training programmes more clearly in favour of other suppliers. The unofficial boycott of American products such as Coca Cola and Burger King, begun in sympathy with the second *intifada*, might conceivably evolve into more red tape and hassle over importing American

goods, especially if the Saudis continue to feel thwarted over their country's delayed WTO membership.

Should Saudi–American relations be reduced to a worst-case scenario involving the termination or drastic rescaling of the 'special relationship', does the Kingdom have other options to underpin its security efforts and economic prosperity? Could a new, exclusive relationship be built with Western Europe? Although the Kingdom could not expect to receive the same level of military protection that it enjoys with the US, European nations can and have provided significant assistance in the Gulf, as demonstrated in the Kuwait War. Britain's long relationship with all the GCC states generally has stood it in good stead with Gulf regimes. Moreover, Europe offers multiple investment opportunities – Europe–GCC trade already outstrips the trade with the US – and Gulf elites have strong personal ties to Europe. But there are negative aspects, ranging from simple matters, such as the difficulty of dealing with Europe as a single entity to trade problems, such as the inability of the GCC and Europe to reach agreement on petrochemical tariffs despite discussions lasting over a decade. And Western Europe can hardly be expected to side with Saudi Arabia should there be a serious dispute with the US.

Elsewhere, Russia has long been a player in the Gulf, although its support (notably for Iraq and Yemen) has most often run counter to the interests of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. Bridges of cooperation and understanding would have to be built virtually from scratch, and the effort might not be worthwhile. Much of a half-century of military development, training and doctrine would have to be replaced, and the Saudi model of economic development inevitably would be altered. Moreover, the two countries are cut-throat competitors in the oil market; Russia cannot provide the sort of investment and export-import climate on which Saudi businesses depend; and Moscow is not in a position to go head to head with the US over what for it must be a marginal interest.

Although China, as a growing consumer of Gulf oil and gas, has even more immediate national interests in the Gulf, its attractiveness as a partner is limited. True, it has useful military hardware for sale (it already has sold some equipment to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and could provide training and other assistance), but its economy is still developing, and the kind of expertise and trade it could offer is restricted. In addition, China does not have either the

force-projection capabilities of even Russia, nor, seemingly, any interest in developing them *vis-à-vis* the Gulf. A Saudi switch to Chinese assistance would have serious negative consequences for Saudi security needs. In short, reliance on China is an even less viable choice than relying on Russia.

Is there any point in looking elsewhere? An integrated GCC is far too small and weak to assure its own security against external attack. A broader Gulf security pact with Iran and Iraq simply is not feasible under present circumstances, even if Iran and Iraq could be persuaded to cooperate with each other. Even broader Arab security agreements, depending only on understandings with other friendly Arab states, are not likely to be useful, as shown in the quiet death of the 'GCC plus two' (closer cooperation between the GCC and Egypt and Syria) scenario following the Kuwait War. Similarly, a far wider arrangement involving Islamic and/or Third World spheres is even more problematic. Over and above the obstacles to creating a workable alliance (how to get such essential components as India and Pakistan to cooperate together), there is the essential question of whether such allies would be able to prevent an attack on Saudi Arabia and the GCC, and (even more fundamentally) whether they would actually take action when required.

In short, in the foreseeable future there is no viable option for the Saudis other than to continue to depend on the United States and the West for their regional security concerns. It is also true that continuing the alliance with Saudi Arabia is a valuable option for the United States. But it is equally true that fundamental differences between the two countries make it imperative for the Kingdom to move beyond improvident dependence on the West and to design a more lasting strategy.

Despite the present level of cooperation with the West, Gulf regimes only partly share the Western conception that Gulf security depends on containing Iraq and Iran. Gulf regimes acquiesce in the Western definition of Gulf security and cooperate with Western policy arrangements for reasons of alliance maintenance and regime survival. They feel that their states are small and vulnerable and the objects of real or potential threats in a sea of hostility. Furthermore, they are afraid that external actors and/or events may jeopardise their position or result in their overthrow. They also fear that the West might abandon them unless they cooperate. More fundamentally, they

have failed to conceptualise their own formulation of Gulf security, finding it easier to simply rely on outside forces to provide protection.

Regimes also worry about American long-term commitment to the Gulf. What will happen when the world no longer depends on the free flow of Gulf oil? They cite America's failure to stand behind the Shah of Iran when his regime was threatened; they point to American retreats from Lebanon and Somalia when their presence was attacked; and they have the earlier experience of abrupt British withdrawal from the Gulf without due consultation or consideration. They are uneasy about America's failure to consult with them on policies that affect them, and fear that their concerns and needs will be disregarded. All of these questions point to a deeper, fundamental concern that the most important considerations in regime survival may be internal, rather than external, and that complying with the American policy of containing Iraq and Iran may be more likely to threaten Gulf security than to protect it.

