

# Saudi-U.S. Relations

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## Information Service

Item of Interest

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### Saudi Arabia -- Tragedy and Triumph

By Peter C. Valenti

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### Saudi Arabia -- Tragedy and Triumph

By Peter C. Valenti

"If all those who hate Arabs and Muslims, and their culture and humanity, had gathered in order to create the best way to malign us," suggested Ahmad al-Ruba'i in his June 20 op-ed in Saudi Arabia's *Asharq al-Awsat*, "even they wouldn't have done what a group of sickos did when they cut off the head of an innocent person in the name of Islam and transmitted this image through satellites to be seen around the world!"

Al-Ruba'i was referring to the kidnapping and subsequent beheading of Paul Marshall Johnson, a U.S. citizen who had worked and lived in Saudi Arabia for the past 12 years. After kidnapping Johnson from his car on June 12, his captors demanded that Saudi authorities release imprisoned terrorists within 72 hours, or Johnson would be beheaded. Saudi Arabia's stated policy, like that of the U.S., is no negotiations with terrorists -- so Johnson's horrible fate was meted out on June 18. Pictures of his severed head sitting atop his back were released through an extremist Web site called "The Voice of Islamic Jihad."

On the same day Johnson was kidnapped, another expatriate, Robert Jacobs, who worked for the Vinnel Corporation, was killed in his garage in Riyadh. This attack also was filmed and released over the Internet. The events of June 12 had been preceded by attacks on employees of an oil company and a BBC film crew in Saudi Arabia. The day before Johnson was beheaded, Korean translator Kim Sun-Il was kidnapped in Iraq, and later beheaded on June 22.

While these events seem to be part of a growing trend among terrorist groups to compete over who can kill the most foreigners, Johnson was specifically targeted, according to the Web site

statements, because of his work with Lockheed Martin on Apache helicopters for the Saudi government. The U.S.-made Apaches are symbolically linked with the Arab-Israeli conflict, because the Israeli government often uses them to fire missiles at Palestinians.

Innumerable press articles expressed the disgust and sadness Saudis feel over Johnson's murder. In case anyone in the U.S. questions the Saudi public's opinion of the men who kidnapped Johnson, Abd al-Aziz Hussein al-Sawigh's June 20 op-ed in Saudi Arabia's *Okaz* represents the united consensus: "it is impossible to describe [the group's] actions other than as terrorism and .. the people doing them as terrorists."

The group that claimed responsibility for Johnson's kidnapping and beheading, as well as a number of other attacks inside Saudi Arabia, is the self-described "al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula." Led by Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, its members are primarily young radicals, many of whom fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Not only was Al-Muqrin the most sought-after man in the country, but his followers also were on Saudi Arabia's "most wanted" list. Just hours after beheading Johnson, Saudi security forces found al-Muqrin and his three top lieutenants in a car near a roadblock. In the resulting shootout, all four men were killed, as were two policemen.

Following the killing of al-Muqrin and his lieutenants, Saudi television and all major newspapers displayed photographs of the four dead men as proof to the public. Furthermore, information gathered from the on-scene evidence led to subsequent raids that netted the arrest of 12 more members of the group, as well as a large stash of arms -- including bombs, grenades and grenade launchers -- false identification and over \$38,000 in cash. Among those killed or captured are individuals linked to a variety of terrorist attacks over the years, such as the bombing in 2000 of the U.S. destroyer *Cole* and attacks on residential complexes in Saudi Arabia.

### **Resolute Military Forces**

Much of the success of this counterterrorism effort was due to the hard work of Saudi officials. More than 15,000 Saudi police and intelligence forces scoured the capital, as well as farms and even the caves outside of Riyadh, looking for Johnson throughout the 72 hour-period. In all, they searched more than 1,200 Saudi homes. Some sources in the Saudi government confirm coordination with U.S. intelligence. In addition to the roadblocks that have been in place for more than a year, Saudi forces implemented surprise roadblocks as well, encircling entire neighborhoods of Riyadh. One resident described the tension to me: "it's hell in Riyadh right now," adding that the Saudi government is in the equivalent of DEFCON 1 (maximum military readiness).

Many Saudi columnists expressed admiration for the security forces which finally cornered and killed al-Muqrin and his cohorts. A June 20 editorial in the progressive *al-Watan* listed as among the security operation's many important accomplishments: "first, it affirmed the people's confidence in the abilities of the nation's [security] forces; second, it came as an immediate response to the disgusting crime perpetrated by the terrorists against a human soul .. third, it yanked out the roots of terrorism's strength from its foundations; fourth, it illustrated that Saudi Arabia will not be negligent as long as terrorism wants to wreak havoc; and fifth, it demonstrated that there can be no doubt of the important role of Saudi Arabia in extirpating

global terrorism .."

Why target Johnson and other expatriate workers in the Kingdom? *Asharq al-Awsat* editor Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid offered his analysis on June 19, arguing, "In [the terrorists'] view, Saudi Arabia is the 'Big Enchilada,' [with] a government of great Islamic, Arabic and international influence .. the direction [*qibla*] a billion Muslims in the world pray toward as well as the direction that the oil consumers of the world turn to .. a country that is not a police state, distinguished by its openness to more than six million people from 120 nations working in its lands."

### Arab Critics

Shamlan al-Isa argued that Johnson's killing, and that of Korean translator Kim Sung-II in Iraq after him, demands that Arabs raise their voices in protest. His June 23 editorial in Kuwait's political daily *Alseyassah* called for a re-examination of Arab society: "We, Arabs and Muslims, will be the first victims of this war [on terrorism] because we ourselves created terrorists, supported them and exported them to others by means of our educational systems which taught youths how to hate others and not respect them."

Some Saudi writers agree with this perspective. Saudi academic Madawi al-Rasheed wrote a scathing article in the June 24 edition of the London-based *al-Quds al-Arabi* criticizing the religious rhetoric of some Saudi imams that feeds into anti-foreigner sentiment. Over the years, al-Rasheed contended, these imams have shown themselves to be opportunistic and hypocritical, and their unchecked rhetoric had fired up Saudi youths who subsequently went abroad -- to Afghanistan in the 1980s, for example -- and formed various terrorist groups to combat foreign imperialism in the Muslim world. Now some of these terrorists have returned to Saudi Arabia -- many, like al-Muqrin, "Afghan Arabs" -- and have begun their version of "ridding the 'pagans' from the Arabian Peninsula."

In his June 20 *Asharq al-Awsat* editorial, Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid posited that terrorists have taken advantage of Saudi Arabia's conservative cultural milieu. "In [our] conservative society," he wrote, "men prefer to darken their car windows to protect themselves from the burning sun and prying eyes [looking at their women], and prefer to build high walls [around houses] so nobody has a clue what is behind them. Now, how can we continue in this kind of hidden anonymity when it has also become a perfect environment for fugitives and terrorists?"

### A Positive Track Record

Like many Saudi writers, Ahmad al-Jar Allah, editor of *Alseyassah*, highlighted the success of Saudi efforts in his June 29 editorial. He also argued that, as a matter of course, Saudi counterterrorism efforts could not conform exactly to American dictates or methods because of the nature of the terrorist threat. Whereas the U.S. is battling a terrorist movement that challenges American foreign policy and its military venture in Iraq, he observed, the Saudis are dealing with a localized threat that aims to completely destabilize their country and overthrow their government.

Al-Jar Allah also responded to critics of the Saudi government by expanding upon recent

statements made by Saudi Minister of the Interior Nayif ibn Abd al-Aziz, who is himself often accused by American critics of dragging his feet in the war on terrorism. Saudi Arabia's efforts have been dedicated and effective, Nayif argued, intimating that it can't be argued that the U.S. has outdone Saudi Arabia in the war on terrorism. Despite all U.S. efforts and capabilities, Osama bin Laden still is on the loose, his whereabouts unknown. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, recently dubbed "the most dangerous man alive" by American commentators, still remains at large in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi actually lives and operates under the noses of U.S. military forces, Al-Jar Allah pointed out, and yet they still haven't caught him. In comparison, Saudi Arabia caught and killed Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, the leader of the most dangerous al-Qaeda splinter group in the country, as well as his three main lieutenants. Saudi Arabia has also seriously weakened terrorism through numerous arrests and discoveries of weapons caches that have provided invaluable intelligence, the *Alseyassah* editor noted.

Salih al-Qallab lauded Saudi security forces in Jordan's June 22 *al-Ra'i*. While recognizing that the battle with the terrorists is not over, he argued it is unfair for many in the West to expect miracles from Saudi Arabia. As al-Qallab pointed out, even Britain, a country with a powerful intelligence service like the U.S., was unable to crush the Irish Republican Army (IRA) despite years of trying.

### **Threat to Nation and Religion**

Saudi writers have discussed at length the existential nature of the terrorist threat. Jamal Ahmad Khashiqji connected Saudi Arabia's troubles to the wider regional situation in his June 29 op-ed in *al-Watan*. In analyzing the violence in Iraq and the rhetoric of terrorists like al-Zarqawi, Khashiqji emphasized that "all of us, in [the terrorists'] view, are under occupation, whether due to the presence of foreign coalition forces in some of our countries, or because we are under the rule of infidel leaders who must be killed, according to [the terrorists'] bizarre jurisprudence."

The supposed religious justifications used by the terrorists is another issue that greatly upsets the Saudi public. The killing of Johnson is seen as another kind of Sept. 11, something which blackens the reputation of Saudis and Islam. Some writers try to challenge the religiosity of the terrorists. Miram Abd al-Rahman Makawi, who has often written critically of U.S. foreign policy in the region, states that despite distaste for those policies, this never translates into justifying the killing of an innocent American.

In a June 23 op-ed in *al-Watan* expressing her sorrow and apologies to the Johnson family, Makawi wrote, "They say that you [terrorists] are products of extremist schools. Well, I think you were simply bad students. In my school, the curriculum taught that among the seven greatest sins is 'to take life, which God hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law' [Qur'an 6:151] .. in our history curriculum I learned the command of [Caliph] Abu Bakr to his army impelling the respect of human life, trees and property. Therefore, you [terrorists] don't have a leg to stand on, whether in our religion or our curriculum, except [the argument] that your teachers were teaching outside the text!"

In his June 20 op-ed in the Saudi newspaper *al-Riyadh*, Muhammad Rida Nasr Allah also denigrated the religious interpretations of al-Muqrin and his group, reminding readers that Prophet Muhammad himself explicitly demonstrated respect for non-Muslims in a famous

episode. As Muhammad was sitting down one day, the funeral procession for a Jew passed by and Muhammad stood up. When an astonished companion asked why he would offer respect to a non-Muslim, the Prophet replied, "Was he not a living being?"

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