

Saudi-U.S. Relations

Information Service

Item of Interest

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Outside View: Keeping Cool about Jeddah

By Anthony H. Cordesman

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The terrorist strike against the US Consulate in Jeddah on December 6, 2004 fed into a 24 hour-plus news cycle of reporting that examined the event itself -- *was it a success, a failure, or both at once?*; the commitment and performance of Saudi Arabia in the war on terrorism; the vulnerability of the world's energy market to terrorism in the Arabian Peninsula; and so on. Ignored by the media for many months has been the continued dedication of Saudi security forces in capturing and killing terror cell members and the continuous, quiet exemplary performance of US Marines and diplomatic security personnel charged with protecting American embassies and consulates around the world.

In such a media environment, Dr. Anthony Cordesman's call for "careful perspective" in evaluating this incident is appreciated. We are pleased to share his "Keeping Cool about Jeddah" with you today.

Outside View: Keeping Cool about Jeddah

By Anthony H. Cordesman

The attack on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah needs to be kept in careful perspective. It is a tragic event. Innocent foreign employees died, caught up in an attack on Americans. Saudi security forces died protecting the consulate, and some were wounded. It also, however, is the kind of attack that the world is going to have to get used to. No country that is relatively open, where people move freely into public buildings, and where terrorists can make easy gains by attacking such targets is going to be able to stop all such attacks nor prevent some from being successful.

All anyone has to do in the United States, the rest of the West, and most of the Middle East is look out of a window. Even protected public buildings are not fortresses. They are not designed to halt frontal assaults with explosives and automatic weapons. Only a few are far enough from public streets to stop a large car or truck bomb. Most are vulnerable to infiltration and sabotage.

The U.S. consulate in Jeddah was no exception. It was well protected by public facility standards, and had three layers of protection consisting of the Saudi police, Saudi National Guard and security, and U.S. Embassy security forces and Marine Guards. It had security

barriers and they kept the consulate properly secured, though they could not stop suicidal attackers from having some success and from entering the Marine residency.

At the same time, the consulate had to serve a population of some 9,000 expatriate Americans, carry out public diplomacy, and serve foreign nationals looking for visas. It had to be in a location people could reach, and it could not make security its only priority. Like virtually every such facility, it had the vulnerabilities that are inevitable in a facility that serves the public, and it could not be shut down or turned into an armed camp with every new warning of a very real terrorist threat. The choice had to be made between being paralyzed by the threat of terrorism and fighting terrorism by not letting it win.

No one knows how many thousands of additional such targets exist in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf. Every public facility, every government building, every energy facility, every airport and port, every building associated with Americans and other expatriates, every hotel and travel facility, are all potential targets. Some are defended and some have physical protection, but all are vulnerable to the levels of attack that even small, dedicated cells of terrorists and extremists can mount.

As a result, almost any such facility can be used as what Gen. John Abizaid calls a "weapon of mass media." Any attack becomes a victory, no matter how badly organized or how much it fails, if it produces casualties. The attackers know that every attack will be followed by a series of new articles challenging the stability of the Saudi or local regime; saying the country involved did not do enough to defend the facility, and claiming the local counter-terrorism effort has failed. More expatriates will leave the country; foreign investment will be affected, and the terrorists will seem stronger than they are.

Al-Qaida and its affiliates know this all too well. They know the weaknesses in the Gulf, and they know that Saudi Arabia is a particularly good target as is the United States. Any such attack hits the most important energy exporter in the world, and triggers yet another round of rumor and rubbish about divisions in the royal family and Saudi instability. Hitting a U.S. target is an attack on a country that Arabs see as a co-belligerent with Israel in the Israeli struggle with the Palestinians and gets more Arab sympathy than any other kind of target -- regardless of the fact that such attacks, like the one in Jeddah, kill fellow Muslims.

A successful attack that killed large numbers of Americans would also have exploited the tensions and fault lines in the United States and Saudi relationship that developed after Sept. 11, 2001, and which have yet to heal. Saudi Arabia is a natural "weapon of mass media," both in terms of actual news coverage and the certainty of triggering yet another set of irresponsible think tank and commercial risk analysis, and hostile op-eds.

The fact remains, however, that similar terrorist elements are now active in Iraq, and there are al-Qaida and violent Salafi Islamist extremist groups in every other Gulf country. What happened in Saudi Arabia can happen tomorrow in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Fortunately, the Saudi and Gulf response is neither passive nor weak. Every Southern Gulf

country is steadily improving its security and counter-terrorism capabilities. Most are working closely with the United States, including with the FBI, CIA, and U.S. military, as well as with other Western countries.

In Saudi Arabia's case, major improvements have been made since the kingdom had its own equivalent of Sept. 11 in May 2003 in Saudi intelligence, counter-terrorist capabilities, and security forces, and in the physical protection of virtually every kind of facility. It has and is cracking down on every aspect of terrorist financing; it is actively carrying out a national dialogue and moving toward educational reform and the other reforms necessary to end public support for terrorists. It is also expanding international cooperation and will host a major international conference on counter-terrorism in February.

As is the case in the United States, some of the measures Saudi Arabia has under way will take years to fully complete, but major progress has already been made in hunting down the cells, key leaders, and cadres inside the kingdom.

It will be years and perhaps decades before the problem of terrorism can be solved in Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Gulf, just as is the case in the rest of the Middle East and the West. There will always be vulnerable facilities and small cadres of suicidal attackers. There will always be new ways of grabbing media attention, feeding fear, and making terrorist movements seem stronger than they are. The most Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other nations can hope to do is to reduce such terrorist movements and levels of attack to levels that the nations involved, and the world, can live with -- just as we live with so many other low-level actuarial risks from accidents to storms.

This is no argument for not making every effort to fight terrorism that does not hand terrorists a victory by paralyzing normal life, dividing friends and allies, making citizens live in fear. It is no excuse for Saudi Arabia to not continue moving forward toward reform, nor for the United States to ignore other causes of terrorism like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The fact such attacks and risk are "inevitable" does not make them "acceptable."

It should also be clear that one of the key ways of fighting these attacks is to keep them in perspective. "Weapons of mass media" only work if the media, analysts, and others panic or exaggerate the importance of such attacks, and/or respond by blaming the defenders rather than the attackers. They only work if they can be used to create the kind of fears and recriminations that isolate friendly regimes or the United States, and divide friends and allies.

They can only continue to gather momentum or go on at unacceptable levels if the United States, Saudi Arabia and the many countries that face day-to-day threats do not cooperate, do not strengthen each other's counter-terrorism efforts, and do not make common efforts to address the causes of terrorism through reform and by ending the conflicts and tensions that terrorists exploit.

We have more to fear than fear itself, but Islamic extremism and terrorism are still supported by only a small minority and must ultimately fail because they do not offer a single practical answer to any political, economic, and social problem. In the interim, fear is the key weapon behind terrorist efforts to continue exploiting "weapons of mass media," and the proper answer is to

keep each attack in proportion, report on improvements in counter-terrorism and reform as accurately as possible, and blame the terrorists and not those who are attacked.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and is Co-Director of the Center's Middle East Program. He is also a military analyst for ABC and a Professor of National Security Studies at Georgetown. He directs the assessment of global military balance, strategic energy developments, and CSIS' Dynamic Net Assessment of the Middle East. He is the author of books on the military lessons of the Iran-Iraq war as well as the Arab-Israeli military balance and the peace process, a six-volume net assessment of the Gulf, transnational threats, and military developments in Iran and Iraq. He analyzes U.S. strategy and force plans, counter-proliferation issues, arms transfers, Middle Eastern security, economic, and energy issues.

Dr. Cordesman served as a national security analyst for ABC News for the 1990-91 Gulf War, Bosnia, Somalia, Operation Desert Fox, and Kosovo. He was the Assistant for National Security to Senator John McCain and a Wilson Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian. He has served in senior positions in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Department of State, the Department of Energy, and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. His posts include acting as the Civilian Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Director of Defense Intelligence Assessment, Director of Policy, Programming, and Analysis in the Department of Energy, Director of Project ISMIL AID, and as the Secretary of Defense's representative on the Middle East Working Group.

Dr. Cordesman has also served in numerous overseas posts. He was a member of the U.S. Delegation to NATO and a Director on the NATO International Staff, working on Middle Eastern security issues. He served in Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, the UK, and West Germany. He has been an advisor to the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Forces in Europe, and has traveled extensively in the Gulf and North Africa.

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