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INSTABILITY IN SAUDI ARABIA: CAUTION - HANDLE WITH CARE

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On October 5, 1981, President Reagan, defending his proposed sale of AWACS surveillance planes to Riyadh, pledged the United States would never let Saudi Arabia become another Iran. Less than a week later, his national security advisor, Richard V. Allen, virtually verbatim, repeated the same vow -- American would not countenance a Saudi counterpart to Khomeini.[1] The most intriguing aspect of these promises is not their overt cockiness -- made in the name of a country which only last year failed to rescue hostages taken by the very regime whose existence it now claims it could have prevented -- but by the comparison they imply. Sometime during the course of the AWACS debate, the Reagan Administration acknowledged one of the sale's opponents' strongest arguments, viz., that by selling billions of dollars of sophisticated arms to an unstable government, those weapons may soon wind up in unfriendly hands -- à la Teheran. Somewhere along the AWACS firing line, the administration also began to recognize similarities between present-day Saudi Arabia and Iran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution.

Nevertheless, this comparison between Saudi Arabia and pre-Khomeini Iran is historically inaccurate. The Saudis, unlike the Pahlevis, never sought to present themselves as rivals to the religious establishment; rather, in Saudi Arabia, religion serves to legitimize state power. Moreover, with a population of only five million, less than half of which effectively participate in the country's economic or political life, Saudi Arabia lacks the popular masses necessary for an Iranian-style revolution. In fact, at a superficial glance, Saudi Arabia appears a bulwark of stability among Middle Eastern Islamic states: its ruling dynasty has held power in at least part of the Arabian Peninsula since 1745, with only a decade of interruption (1891-1901), no record of successful coups, never a Western colony and thus no large-scale exposure to such radical European ideologies as nationalism and socialism.

The dissimilarities between Iran and Saudi Arabia do not, however, negate the fact that a Khomeini -- or a Qaddafi or even an Arafat -- in Mecca is not only a possibility, but perhaps an inevitability. Once touted by the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, together with Iran, as one of the "pillars of stability" in the Middle East; dynamic, progressive, militarily strong -- Saudi Arabia stands today as a country plagued by formidable factors for upheaval and, for the West especially, catastrophe.

The current situation in Saudi Arabia is far more complex than that which

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existed prior to the Shah's downfall. There are not two great forces of contention (i.e., the government versus the people), but rather a number of smaller sources for conflict. While these sources succeed in mitigating most of the factors for stability in the country, individually few are capable of bringing down the Saudi royal house. The danger lies in the expedient union of two or more of these elements for the purposes of revolt -- a development which could easily result in a situation analogous to that in Iran in 1978. Simply put, the means would be different, but the ends identical.

The sources of Saudi instability might be compared to a set of bottles of the sort found in a chemistry lab, each containing a particularly volatile substance and marked, "Caution - Handle With Care." As long as the chemicals remain in their separate containers there is little danger. But should two or more of the bottles be broken -- either through the clumsiness of a technician or an intentional act of vandalism -- an explosion could be ignited capable of destroying the entire laboratory.

The purpose here, then, is to identify the various "bottles," the combustible substances they contain, and the threat they present to Saudi security.

The Wahhabi Bottle

Certainly the largest and most potentially destructive bottle on the Saudi shelf is that labelled "Wahhabi." Wahhabism is the fundamentalist Sunni religious movement, which for almost two and a half centuries has lent legitimacy to Royal Saudi rule. Throughout this period, a delicate balance has existed between the *ulema*, the clergy, and the Saudi king who acts, *inter alia*, as *imam*, the chief interpreter of Islamic law, and as Protector of the Holy Places. Traditionally, attacks against the Saudi government have always been considered by both the *ulema* and *imam* as attacks against Islam itself.

In recent years, however, the government's desire for modernization and the deteriorative effects of vast wealth on Islamic standards of temperance and propriety have created strains in the government-*ulema* alliance.

The *ulema* had always been co-opted politically. In return for full jurisdiction over religious and social issues, they pledged loyalty to the royal house and acceded to the importation of Western technology while still rejecting Western values.* But now many members of the royal family are charged by the *ulema* with having "deviated from the path of Wahhabi" -- their alleged corruption, profligacy, and increasing westernization viewed as direct threats to Islam.[2] Even though the government goes to great lengths to downplay and cover-up internal mention of its dealings with the West (it publicly condemned the failed hostage rescue mission as "American aggression"), little can be done to dissemble the personal life-styles of Saudi royalty. These trends have resulted in an atmosphere so tense that the Wall Street Journal reported:

> Western experts worry that some miscalculated act of excess by a royal prince could produce such a public outcry that religious leaders would have little choice but to turn against the monarchy. [3]

On the morning of November 20, 1979, an estimated 350 insurgents attacked and captured the Haram (Grand) Mosque in Mecca -- Islam's holiest shrine. Timed to coincide with the new Moslem century, the take-over was a professionally planned and executed operation which trapped over 50,000 worshippers inside the structure. The rebels proclaimed Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Qatari, a fundamentalist religious

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* It is interesting to note that historically only the most "un-Islamic" Middle Eastern states -- Ataturk's Turkey, the Shah's Iran, Sadat's Egypt, and, of course, Israel -- have been open to large-scale Western modernization.

leader, the *mahdi* or messiah, while their political chief, Juhaiman al-Utaibi, presented a list of demands to the government: an end to corruption in the royal house, a ban on Shi'ite worship at the Haram, and a curtailment of the process of women's liberation in Saudi society. It took the Saudi army two weeks to dislodge the insurgents from the Haram; 5,000 people were reported killed and an undisclosed number wounded.* Sixty-three rebels were captured and later publicly beheaded.[4]

The Grand Mosque siege serves as a poignant example of the inherent fragility of the government-*ulema* alliance. If the royal family fails to fulfill the moral expectations of the *ulema*, then the legitimacy of its rule will be withdrawn -- and most likely not peaceably. The take-over was, after all, an expression of popular opposition -- not the first in Saudi history -- and possibly an adumbration of future outbursts of religious indignation.** It should not be viewed as an isolated incident, but rather as symptomatic of the wave of Islamic extremism which has swept the Middle East in recent years, producing the Moslem Brotherhood in Syria, the Sadat assassins, and, of course, the revolution in Iran.

The Shi'ite Bottle

The threat posed by Saudi Arabia's Shi'ite community can best be gauged from one of the demands made by the Grand Mosque insurgents: as noted, that the government forbid Shi'ite worship at the Kaabah. With an estimated population of 300,000, concentrated chiefly in the oil-rich Eastern Province, the Shi'ites constitute a pariah segment in Saudi society, one which considers itself oppressed by the Sunni majority.

In December 1979, shortly after the Grand Mosque was retaken, and again in February, the Shi'ite population of the Qatif Oasis, Eastern Province, staged large-scale disturbances. They were protesting against official religious discrimination -- a government ban on the Shi'ite ritual of public self-flagellation and on the import of Shi'ite books from Bahrain -- but also against the despised Bin Juluni clan of the royal family, which rules over the province.*** Thirty-six people were killed in the riots and over 100 arrested. [5]

The most disconcerting aspect of these demonstrations, from the Saudi perspective, is the Shi'ites' natural allegiance to Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution, the Ayatollah Khomeini has seriously challenged the status of the royal house as the apogee of Moslem faith, and this, in turn, threatens to undermine the very fabric of the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance. The government is seriously concerned about contacts made between the Khomeini regime and the country's Shi'ite citizens, specifically those it is unable to prevent: Radio Teheran's anti-Saudi programs broadcast in Arabic, and the visit last year of 50,000 Iranian pilgrims to Mecca.

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* There were reports, never formally confirmed, of course, that the Saudi government could not dislodge the insurgents with its own forces, or, perhaps was afraid to use them (see below), so arranged with the French government to have a unit of the French Foreign Legion flown in to do the job. The limited television coverage at the time showed that the troops who stormed the mosque were wearing full face masks, which lends credence to these reports since, as infidels, the Legionnaires were barred from setting foot on the holy site; hence they had to be disguised. Of course, the Foreign Legion is never required to report casualties either, making it the perfect force for such a secret mission. At the time, there were news reports of French "advisors" and "demolition experts" being brought in to help with the siege.

** A group of Moslem extremists, the *Ihwan* (Brotherhood), staged a bloody but unsuccessful revolt against the Saudis in 1929.

*** The Shi'ites claim the Bin Juluni are responsible for the execution of 50 Shi'ites on subversion charges in 1978.

The Foreign Bottle

The warning label on this bottle is multi-colored and printed in many languages; it is highly explosive. There are some two million foreigners currently living in Saudi Arabia, representing thirty-three percent of the entire population and three-quarters of the country's work force.

Major corporations in Saudi Arabia must import foreign workers and technicians because neither the manpower nor the expertise exists in the country to keep pace with the global demand for oil production and the government's massive modernization schemes. Compounding this acute shortage are the facts that the Saudi peasant views manual labor as beneath his dignity and the Saudi woman is prohibited from filling the overwhelming majority of occupations. These traditions have precluded the development of an indigenous blue-collar work force to the point that sixty percent of all native workers are outcast Shi'ites.[6]

Foreigners in Saudi Arabia are divided into three categories. The first, the smallest is composed of "Westerners," referring to the Americans, Japanese, British, and other European nationals, some 90,000 in all, who perform most of the country's high level technical and administrative tasks. For the most part, the Westerners earn considerable salaries (average $50,000 *per annum*) and live in separate communities where great efforts are taken to recreate a western-style environment in a fundamentalist Islamic sea.

In addition to the Westerners, there are numerous Egyptians (200,000) and Palestinians (75,000) as well as Somalians, Sudanese and other non-Saudi Arabs who fall under the rubric of the "professionals." The professional class assumes many of the white-collar positions in Saudi society: clerks, accountants, teachers. The Palestinians, understandably, are the focus of the government's consternation as those with the most contacts with both radical terrorist groups and rival Arab powers such as Syria, Libya, and Iraq. Interestingly, Palestinian professionals are not permitted to work in the Eastern Province.[7]

The third and by far the largest class is that of the "manuals" -- Pakistanis, Yemenis, Filipinos, Sri Lankans, and South Koreans -- who are the numerical majority in all of Saudi Arabia's major cities where they perform the vast bulk of the country's physical labor. The government grants this group no rights: unions are strictly banned; once fired, a foreign worker cannot be rehired; striking is punishable by six years' imprisonment. Their average monthly salary is only one third of that quoted by the government itself as the minimum needed to survive in the country, yet they are ineligible for state benefits.[8] Among this class, the Saudis fear most the over one million Yemenis, many of whom are natives of their perennial southern enemy, Democratic (Marxist) Yemen. The principal concern is that some radical element will succeed in uniting the diverse ethnic groups which comprise this class in a concerted uprising against the royal house. For this reason, in March-April 1979, some 40,000 pilgrims suspected of harboring such radical beliefs were exiled from the country - a high percentage of them Palestinians. It should also be noted that among those beheaded for their part in the Grand Mosque take-over, there were eleven Egyptians, six South Yemenis, three Kuwaitis, a Sudanese, an Iraqi, and a North Yemeni.[9]

The Royal Bottle

This is not so much one large bottle as many smaller ones: the 4,000 princes of the Saudi royal family - each potentially quite destructive. The unstable nature of this substance stems from two sources: problems of royal succession and the conflict between modernists and traditionalists within the royal house.

The system of succession in the royal family as set down by King Abdul Aziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, in 1932 calls for the throne to be inherited by each of Aziz' sons in age order, i.e., laterally according to primogeniture as

opposed to lineally, from son to grandson. This process has proven successful to date, surviving the test of King Saud's abdication in 1964. However, since the advent of Saudi Arabia's golden age in 1973, wide-spread discontent has arisen over the succession tradition. The sons of Abdul Aziz, twenty-nine in number, are all in their fifties, and belong to a generation which was, for the most part, born and raised in the desert. The grandsons, Western-educated and generally progressive, view themselves as better equipped to guide Saudi Arabia's emergence into modernity. The question, then, is whether this younger generation of princes will wait patiently until the last of the older generation dies, or will some of its members be moved to take matters into their own hands in the near future? If the latter situation develops, then further problems will certainly be generated by the absence of a succession tradition among the grandsons and conflicting claims to primogeniture.

Ideologically, the royal family is also divided into two opposing camps: the modernists and the traditionalists. The modernists, representing most of the younger generation, see Saudi Arabia's future as inextricably linked with that of the United States, the fiber of this linkage being continued high oil production rates. As a counterbalance to the *ulema*, the modernists stress a strengthening of the royal family's prestige and power through the construction of an expansive industrial infrastructure and the upgrading of the military. The traditionalists, on the other hand, with one eye on Iran and the other on the increasing alienation of the *ulema* caused by modernization, favor maintaining the delicate balance between progress and religion. Disappointed by America's failure in Iran and its role in the Middle East peace process, and concerned about internal threats from radical elements, the traditionalists advocate closer ties with regional forces, e.g. the Rejectionist Front. Given the explosive implications of the irreconcilability of modernization and Islam, and the ever-present manace of radicalism, the split between the modernists and the traditionalists is far more than just an internal family debate; it is a deep and possibly unbridgable rift within the royal house.

The Military Bottle

The inner controversies of the Saudi royal family also provide sources of conflict within the country's military. The volatile substance of the Saudi military is actually contained in two bottles, each labelled with warnings about the other, for the country possesses two distinct and separate armies.

The larger of the two is the 40,000-man Security Force, basically a mercenary army of non-Bedouin soldiers controlled by Prince Sultan. The second, with half as many men, is the National Guard, comprised of Bedouin troops contributed by leading shiekhs allied with the royal family and commanded by Prince Abdullah.

The division of the military is reflective of the struggles for power conducted within the royal house. King Khalid supports Abdullah, a co-traditionalist, as heir apparent for Crown Prince, while Crown Prince Fahd favors Sultan, a like-minded modernist.[10] Generally, the two armies are used as counterbalances against each other, the government careful never to let either one gain the upper hand. The Security Force is distrusted because of the high percentage of foreign-trained pilots and officers serving in its ranks (there were two abortive coups attempted by such pilots, in 1967 and 1979), and the large number (3,000) of American and Pakistani advisors attached to it.* Security Force tanks, planes, and bases are, as a rule, stationed hundreds of miles from Riyadh and other major cities.[11] The loyalty of the National Guard, once the bastion of fealty to the royal family, is now also being questioned. Desertion rates are high -- only seventeen out of forty units are operational -- and performance levels are reported low.[12] The news that several National Guard officers were participating in the Grand Mosque take-over, and that

* The Saudi government might recall that in the Iranian Revolution, those army units with the greatest number of American advisors were the most active in overthrowing the Shah.

the insurgents' weapons had been stolen from the Guards' own arsenal, forced the government at the time to call in troops from distant outposts (or elsewhere - see above). Apparently, the government had reason to suspect a conspiracy among locally-based National Guardsmen.[13]

Saudi Arabia is currently spending $245 billion on defense -- the largest single expenditure in its budget, amounting to $49,000 per person (compared to $520 in the U.S.). Western analysts have begun to question whether Saudi Arabia either needs or is capable of handling the quantity and sophistication of ordnance it is purchasing. The role of Saudi pilots in their own air force has been termed "decorative," as Americans and other foreigners fly their planes; French advisors and demolition experts had to be flown to Mecca to supervise the recapture of the Grand Mosque.[14] Analysts also note the dangers of supplying advanced weaponry to a country which, despite its great need for a dependable defense force, must balk at instituting universal conscription for fear of introducing radical elements into its military.[15]

The Bourgeois Bottle

This bottle contains the small but ever-expanding, upwardly mobile Saudi middle class -- merchants, technocrats, administrators -- which has become indispensible to Saudi society and economy. The danger arises from the fact that despite their enhanced importance in the professional sphere, no commensurate political power has been granted them. Immediately following the Grand Mosque battle, the government, in an effort to strengthen this progressive sector vis-a-vis the *ulema*, promised popular representation in a new *Majlis al Shura*, or Consultative Assembly. No such assembly, however, has been formed to date. The issue here is how long the middle class will continue to submit to a situation of "no meritocracy" politically in a country which is rapidly growing dependent on their services.

The Saudi Poor Bottle

This bottle contains a substance which, while not the most explosive on the shelf, is certainly capable of contributing to a major conflagration. The government has published figures showing that the income of the average Saudi citizen is $10,000, and that there is one car for every four persons in the country. What these figures fail to indicate is that certain individual Saudies (particularly members of the royal family) have billion-dollar annual incomes and own ten cars, and that the majority of Saudis earn about one-tenth of the government figure.[16] Despite its vast oil wealth, Saudi Arabia's population is eighty percent illiterate and, according to The Guardian, suffering from wide-spread malnutrition.

So far, government efforts to raise the standard of living of the country's poor, most notably the multi-billion dollar housing projects of Jeddah and Dhaharan (the so-called "towers of silence"), have netted few results. The average Saudi worker cannot afford the upkeep of a government-constructed apartment. Also, wages paid to unskilled Saudi workers, though considerably higher than those earned by foreign laborers, are inadequate to keep pace with the country's rampant rate of inflation, singled out by a 1979 U.N. report as one of the highest in the world.

The Student Bottle

An estimated 30,000 Saudi students are now studying abroad. Many of these return from large Western cities to find a country devoid of theaters, cinemas, and secular television, where women are forbidden to appear in the street without total body covering; a feudal society where justice is still meted out by the whip and the sword. Those who study in other Arab countries are often exposed to radical Arab ideologies, and have formed such anti-royalist groups as the Arabian People's Student Union, which operates out of Beirut with Libyan support (it claimed responsibility for the Grand Mosque attack), and its offshoot, the Popular Democratic

Union, which maintains contacts with ultra-leftist PLO factions.[18]

Catalysts for Explosion

The explosive situation in Saudi Arabia could be ignited either by government incompetence -- the previously-noted clumsy technician -- or by hostile external forces: the vandals.

In recent years, the government has accrued considerable culpability toward its own potential downfall. A foremost factor in this guilt is the practice of corruption and bribe-taking among members of the royal family, practices which incite not only the *ulema*, but the middle and lower classes as well. Such corruption is so conspicuous that the New York Times reported:

> American officials and businessmen said that questionable practices were so embedded and so widespread that it would take more than a temporary crackdown to end them and prevent resentment from building...(which) could conceivably mix with other factors...to set the stage for a coup.[19]

The Grand Mosque take-over also did much to undermine the legitimacy of Saudi rule; the absence of prior intelligence called into question the government's competence as Protector of the Holy Places. The tension between the royal house and the *ulema* has also heightened as the rate of social and political trends outstrips the ability of religious leaders to understand and control them. Fear of such internal threats has prompted the government to install the sophisticated SCICON domestic surveillance system, soon to be replaced by a $250 million Computer Sciences system, and to import foreign experts to run it.[20]

While internal threats are certainly the Saudis' chief concern, external ones also abound. In a region containing such outwardly hostile countries as Afghanistan, Iran, and Ethiopia, none of which would be adverse to aiding a popular revolution in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh's greatest external problem is its neighbor on the peninsula, South Yemen. The Marxist Yemenis, with a population greater than that of Saudi Arabia augmented by some 35,000 Russian, Cuban, and Ethiopian advisors, could easily launch a successful tactical strike against Saudi Arabia's ground forces, and a humiliating defeat in a minor clash would probably suffice to topple the House of Saud.

Can America Help?

With perhaps only a partial understanding of the extent of Saudi instability, America's response to threats to its oil supply has been to provide the Saudi military with advanced armaments. Given the internal nature of that instability, however, such hardware as the AWACS is as ineffective in preventing a "chemical explosion" as a burglar alarm would be in safeguarding our metaphoric laboratory against a clumsy technician or a rock-throwing vandal.

Another popular American response is the proposed Rapid Deployment Force, currently being developed though estimated to be years from being fully operational. Nevertheless, even if the Rapid Deployment Force were in a state of readiness, Western experts doubt whether it, too, could effectively defend Saudi Arabia against total upheaval:

> Valuable though the Rapid Deployment Force may be, it would hardly have the capacity to prevent the pro-Western rulers of Saudi Arabia, say, from being toppled by radical Arab neighbors or by an internal, popularly-supported revolution...[21]

The bleak fact remains that there is little America can do to reverse or stave off the effects of Saudi instability. As Newsweek magazine observed:

> There was no telling what the U.S. reaction would be to an Iranian-style upheaval in Saudi Arabia. Foreign diplomats and U.S. military experts alike said it would be virtually impossible to defend Saudi oil fields from attack -- internal or external.[22]

The issue then is whether America can afford, in the post-Vietnam, post-Iran era, to rely upon Saudi Arabia as the anchor of its Middle East policy or, for that matter, to risk once again having its most sophisticated arms fall into unfriendly hands.

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Notes

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