

US war drive threatens to destabilise Saudi Arabia

By Jean Shaoul
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Last week, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld flew to Saudi Arabia, Washington's key ally in the Middle East, to shore up support for the US war drive against Afghanistan.

The Saudi regime has expressed fears that its backing for US war plans in Central Asia, combined with deep resentment among the Arab masses toward America's support for Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians during the year long *intifada*, could unleash a social explosion and topple its rule.

While Saudi Arabia has voiced public support for the American-led campaign against terrorism, its rulers have refused to allow the Pentagon to launch air strikes against Afghanistan from Saudi bases. This refusal came only days after Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Charles F Wald had moved his headquarters from South Carolina to Saudi Arabia to oversee the air strikes from a command post at the Prince Sultan airbase at Al Kharj, about 70 miles outside the capital, Riyadh.

The Bush administration was taken aback by the refusal. The Pentagon had apparently not even bothered to seek permission from the Saudi rulers, taking it for granted that since US aircraft take off daily from Saudi airbases to enforce the "no-fly" zone in Iraq, they could also be used for military operations in the present campaign. But without even the fig leaf of a United Nation's resolution backing the impending assault on Afghanistan, Riyadh could not face the wrath of its Arab neighbours or its own people.

Despite the centrality of Saudi Arabia to Washington's long-term strategic interests in the region, the current crisis has demonstrated the Bush administration's *ad hoc* approach to policy making. The US found itself without a seasoned ambassador in Riyadh, since the former ambassador—who had served under President Clinton—departed, leaving an interregnum. The present incumbent, Robert W Jordan, an oil industry lawyer and friend of the Bush family from Houston, was only nominated on September 12, the day after the attacks.

In his first visit since becoming Defense Secretary, Rumsfeld was very careful to adopt a conciliatory tone. He acknowledged the sensitivities of the region and his appreciation of Saudi Arabian backing, stressing that support would take different forms in different countries and military assistance was not necessarily required from all members of the "coalition against terrorism".

Rumsfeld appears to have established some kind of *modus operandi*, whereby the US can obtain the support it needs from Saudi Arabia as long as it does not make it public. While he refused to go into detail about the content of the talks, Rumsfeld did say that he was not worried about obtaining authorisation to use Saudi bases for the military campaign. "Those kinds of things get worked out," he said. Prince Sultan, the Saudi defence minister, refuted any suggestion that the US had requested the use of his country's airbases, saying that the matter had not been the subject of discussion.

In other words, Washington will make sure that its military actions are undertaken in a way that does not embarrass its Saudi clients. In this

context, it is worth noting that the Saudi government has always publicly maintained that it does not allow the US to launch military operations against Iraq from its eastern airbases, and that flights to enforce the no-fly zone in Iraq are carried out under the aegis of the UN. However, evidence exists that US and British warplanes have launched their attacks from Saudi's western airbases. Moreover, the UN has abandoned its 1992 resolution on the no-fly zone.

Subterfuge is vital because the Saudi ruling clique has little political legitimacy and faces increasing opposition. After rejecting Washington's pleas to use its bases, the Saudi regime moved quickly to sever ties with the Taliban, while calling on President Bush to give high priority to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Crown Prince Abdullah told Bush, "The Middle East peace process requires a stand from the American administration and all honest people in the world."

The feudal regime that rules over Saudi Arabia and its 22 million inhabitants has been called the largest family business in the world. It operates without any of the institutions and democratic norms of a modern state. There are differences within the royal family regarding the degree of openness about its reliance on the US, but nevertheless the house of Al Sa'ud has been dependent on Washington since 1943. With the discovery of oil in the 1930s, which was to be brought to the market by the US corporation Aramco, Washington declared, "the defence of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defence of the United States."

For the past 10 years, Saudi Arabia has been the largest recipient of US foreign military aid, including some \$33.5 billion in equipment, dwarfing even the sums Washington has supplied to Israel.

The aged and ailing King Fahd nominally rules the country. His father, Saudi Arabia's first King, Abdul al Aziz al Saud, captured Riyadh in 1902 and launched a 30-year campaign to unify the Arabian Peninsula. He conquered the nomadic tribes living in the former Ottoman Territories of the Arabian Peninsula in 1926, and established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under his own autocratic rule in 1932, naming the country after himself.

He and his heirs have used the country's guardianship of Islam's holy places in Mecca and Medina, and the creed of his own Islamic sect, the Wahhabis, to provide the ideological glue to bind together the country's citizens, who owed no national allegiance to the state that was formed in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. This has become ever more important as an increasing proportion of the population are migrant workers.

But since King Abdul al Aziz al Saud had several wives, and more than 40 sons, the now 7,000-strong royal family is riven with factions and feuds. It maintains rule by means of ever shifting coalitions. Since 1995, when King Fahd suffered a heart attack, the country has been ruled by his 77-year-old half brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, who will, in turn, be succeeded by King Fahd's full brother, Prince Sultan, presently the defence minister, whose own son is the Saudi ambassador to the US.

Tensions exist in all spheres of policy. King Fahd and the Sultan

faction, who belong to the al Sudairi family, have close ties with the US and are seeking greater direct foreign investment in the country and membership of the World Trade Organisation. In the last year, there have been promises of investment worth \$9.2 billion, of which more than 90 percent is from overseas. The regime has reduced corporate tax from 45 percent to 30 percent and allowed full foreign ownership in some sectors of the economy, with promises of more to come.

Crown Prince Abdullah heads the Saudi National Guard and has closer alliances with religious leaders. He is more conservative than his father and, since 1995, relations with the US have cooled slightly. In August, he sacked Prince Turki al Faisal, Sultan's full brother, who had been director of intelligence for 25 years, and replaced him with his own half brother, Prince Nawwaf. Prince Turki had been responsible for Saudi relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and liaison with US intelligence services. He seems to have been the victim of a power struggle over how to deal with US requests to curtail Osama bin Laden's activities. There are reports that shortly afterwards, King Fahd himself left the country with a massive entourage, ostensibly to seek medical treatment in Europe. He has not returned.

At the heart of these divisions within the ruling family is the fear that if it commits itself too publicly to Washington's assault on any Arab or Muslim country, its own tyrannical rule could be undermined.

Saudi Arabia's population is growing by 4.4 percent a year, rising from nine million in 1980 to more than 22 million in 1999. But economic growth has failed to keep pace with the rising population, particularly after oil prices tumbled in the 1980s. Businesses operating in Saudi Arabia brought in cheap labour—mainly from Pakistan, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Nigeria and the Philippines—to replace workers who, until then, had come from neighbouring Arab countries. Immigrant workers make up at least 35 percent of the 15 to 64 age group. In addition to filling many low paid manual jobs, immigrants are estimated to provide 84 percent of doctors, 80 percent of nurses, 55 percent of pharmacists and 25 percent of all teachers. More recently, the government has begun to replace expatriate workers with Saudi nationals, and thousands of foreign workers without proper papers have been arrested and deported.

The country has run up deficits for most of the last 20 years. Every time the price of a barrel of oil drops by one dollar it is estimated to cost Saudi Arabia about \$2.5 billion in annual revenue, as the ruling family uses its de facto control over world oil supplies to keep prices low and please its American backers. Additionally, its economic mismanagement, corruption and open looting of oil revenue mean that the country is now in dire financial straits. Public debt is equal to a massive 120 percent of GDP, and the 1999 budget deficit was 6.5 percent of GDP.

The government has cut back on its welfare programmes and reduced investment in the oil and energy sectors as well as in the country's infrastructure, leading to an unemployment rate that is estimated at 25-30 percent for Saudi males. Many lack a decent education, particularly women. According to business analysts, the government needs to create the conditions during the next five years for one million jobs for Saudi men (women are not included in the calculations). Incomes have fallen catastrophically, as per capita GDP fell from \$18,000 per year in the early 1980s to \$6,000 in 2000, fuelling social discontent.

But these grievances presently are unable to find any legitimate political expression. As a recent Amnesty International report explained, "Secrecy and fear permeate every aspect of the state structure in Saudi Arabia. There are no political parties, no elections, no independent legislature, no trades unions, no bar association, no independent judiciary, and no independent human rights organisations. Anyone living in Saudi Arabia who criticises the system is harshly punished. After arrest, political and religious opponents of the government are detained indefinitely without trial or are imprisoned after grossly unfair trials. Torture is endemic. Foreign workers are always at risk."

Many of those in jail include Shia and Sunni Muslim critics and other opponents of the government. The Shia community is viewed with deep suspicion, particularly after the 1979 Iranian revolution, which brought the Shia clerics under Ayatollah Khomeini to power. It faces constant discrimination, has limited access to social services and government jobs and is rarely permitted to build its own mosques or community centres.

The government controls all the domestic radio and TV stations, and closely monitors the privately owned print media. It allows no criticism of Islam, the ruling family or the government. The Saudi regime appoints and sacks editors-in-chief and dictates press content on sensitive issues. Foreign publications are routinely censored or banned. Telephones are frequently tapped and mail interfered with. The Internet is officially discouraged and there are only eight Internet Service Providers and 100,000 subscribers.

The most barbaric forms of punishment are routine, including public executions and amputations. The systematic use of torture and intimidation, and the flagrant abuse of basic democratic rights by the Saudi rulers are indispensable for maintaining their privileges and wealth. As much as 40 percent of the country's oil revenues goes straight into the pockets of the ruling family.

These social conditions have combined with resentment towards the presence of US military forces—whose main function is to lend support to the royal family in case of a popular uprising against its rule—to give some credence to the reactionary programme of Osama bin Laden and similar groups.

Born in 1957 to a Yemeni father and Syrian mother, Osama bin Laden is the son of Mohamed bin Laden, the powerful founder of the giant Saudi construction corporation, the Bin Laden Group. It was Mohamed and his family who, in the 1960s, engineered the transfer of power away from the corrupt King Saud to King Feisal, in order to shore up the ruling dynasty.

Although part of the upper strata of Saudi society, Osama bin Laden rapidly became disenchanted with his exclusion from power. His apparently contradictory political career has been that of a radical anti-communist adventurer who turned to religious fanaticism and later anti-Americanism, in an attempt to maintain a social base for himself and other scions of the Saudi elite. In both Afghanistan and Sudan, he has worked to support the most reactionary regimes that are totally hostile to the working class and the oppressed masses, with disastrous consequences for the peoples of the region. For a while he was a useful tool of US imperialism. But now, like many others before him, he has been outlawed for blocking its strategic interests in the region.

Bin Laden became a member of the Muslim Brotherhood as a student. When Russia invaded Afghanistan in 1979 he went to Pakistan, where he joined the Afghan rebellion against the hated Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. The rebellion was financed by US imperialism as part of its Cold War operations aimed at destabilising the Soviet Union. Bin Laden used his wealthy connections in Saudi Arabia to raise money and supplies for the Afghan resistance—the Mujahedeen—recruit Arab fighters and help organise guerrilla operations. He established a network of camps inside Afghanistan—Al Qaeda—to train fighters recruited from all over the Middle East for the war against the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime.

In 1990, when Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and also threatened Saudi Arabia, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia and proposed a defence plan based upon the type of mobilisation the US, Pakistan and the Saudis had helped to organise in Afghanistan. Despite the fact that the Afghan resistance had had the backing of the Saudis, the returning Arab Afghans, as they became known, were far from welcome at home. The last thing King Fahd wanted to do was arm the masses. He turned down bin Laden's plan and expelled him forthwith.

Instead, the King turned to the US and invited Washington to station its troops in Saudi Arabia. This was despite the argument of bin Laden and others, including many senior clerics, that under Islamic law it was

forbidden for foreign non-Muslim forces to be based in Saudi Arabia under their own flag. Their concerns rose when, having "liberated" Kuwait in 1991, the Pentagon failed to withdraw all its 550,000 troops, while the Saudi government kept quiet.

Unwelcome at home, bin Laden first went to the Sudan, where he spent the next five years supporting the reactionary Islamic government that was prosecuting a ferocious civil war in the south of the country. When his activities conflicted with Sudan's hesitant steps at rapprochement with US imperialism, the Sudanese government offered to arrest bin Laden and place him in Saudi custody. However, Riyadh rejected the plan, freezing bin Laden's bank account and stripping him of his Saudi citizenship instead.

Expelled by Sudan, bin Laden returned to Afghanistan, where, cut off from Sudanese and Saudi patronage, he stepped up his radical fundamentalist rhetoric. He supported the Taliban, whose social base is the most backward layer of poor tribespeople and villagers, in its war against the unstable alliance that took power in 1992, following the earlier withdrawal of Soviet troops. On seizing power in 1996, the Taliban imposed strict Islamic Sharia law throughout the country, banned women from being educated or getting jobs, insisted that men grew beards, outlawed film, video and music, and sought to obliterate Afghanistan's varied cultural heritage by destroying its world famous Buddhist statues.

In 1998, bin Laden issued his *fatwa* (religious ruling) calling for war against the US. Bomb attacks against the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania followed a few months later. While bin Laden himself has denied responsibility for these attacks, those who were arrested named him as a backer. He is also believed to have been linked to the World Trade Centre bombing in 1993 and the attack on the *USS Cole* in Yemeni waters last October. According to a June report on Middle East Broadcasting, a Saudi-owned satellite television channel, bin Laden praised the *Cole* bombing, which killed 17 US sailors, and called on his followers to attack "Western and Jewish targets worldwide". The US State Department has called him a "terrorist sponsor" and "one of the most significant sponsors of extremist activities in the world today".

Within Saudi Arabia, the mounting economic and social crisis has fuelled discontent, particularly among immigrant workers and Shia Muslims, but not confined to these layers. The growing evidence of intimidation and torture, and the horrific rise in public executions published by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, point to increasing expressions of social discontent. However, press censorship means that there is little information about the forms and extent of opposition to the Saudi government.

Bin Laden's views and methods appear to have struck a chord with many Saudi dissidents, who regard him as a hero for waging holy war against the US. There have been a number of terrorist attacks on US property in Saudi Arabia over the last few years. In November 1995, a bomb in Riyadh killed five Americans and two Indians. In 1996, there was a bomb attack on Khobar Towers, the US Air Force barracks, killing 19 servicemen. Scores of people were rounded up and held without trial or charge for years. Fourteen people were formally indicted but the Saudi government refused to let the FBI interrogate them. In part, this reflected tensions within ruling circles over Saudi Arabia's subordination to the US. But more importantly, it expressed a fear that the extent of social discontent within the country would leak out to the world.

The US war drive has intensified anti-American feelings in the country. The year-long *intifada*, with its huge loss of Palestinian lives at the hands of the Israeli armed forces, which are widely regarded as having Washington's backing, has generated a strong reaction against the US. So, too, has the regime's support for the stringent sanctions against Iraq and the US-British bombing raids that are punishing innocent Iraqi civilians and have led to the death of more than half a million children.

There can be no doubt that in the coming period sections of the ruling

Saudi clique will attempt to capitalise upon these feelings, possibly even voicing opposition to Washington's war drive, in an attempt to placate social tensions at home. But, tied as they are to international capitalism, the Saudi royal family cannot resolve the immense problems of the Middle East. That requires the development of a political movement to unite the peoples of the region in a common struggle for the United Socialist States of the Middle East; removing the artificial borders dividing the region's peoples and economies and enabling its vast resources to be used to satisfy the needs of all.

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