

## U.S.-Saudi Relations: Rebuilding the Strategic Consensus

by Joseph McMillan

### Key Points

**The United States inevitably will look to Saudi Arabia to play a critical role in any effective campaign against global terrorism. For Saudi Arabia to fulfill expectations, the United States must revitalize a strategic relationship that was under serious strain before the attacks on September 11.**

**Managing this relationship has always presented unusual challenges. In particular, the Saudi Kingdom's unique history and status in the Islamic world create risks that close military cooperation with the United States could damage the House of Saud's political and religious legitimacy.**

**These challenges were met in 1990 by a common understanding of the threat, shared strategic objectives, and careful accommodation of each other's sensitivities. However, the factors that made the *Desert Storm* coalition work have deteriorated, while the political environment has evolved to make military cooperation more difficult.**

**Restoring the relationship will require: addressing grievances that have grown over a decade of American presence in Saudi Arabia; prioritizing what Washington needs from Riyadh; reaching an understanding on the strategic basis of the bilateral relationship and the future of the region; structuring decisions to avoid forcing the Saudi regime to take sides against America; overhauling U.S. military presence in the Kingdom to ensure improved coordination; renewing diplomatic efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian front; and articulating a positive American vision for the region—one that is open to political and economic change.**

openness to such a process more clearly than it has done in the past.

The United States must recognize that it cannot take Saudi Arabia for granted. Any coalition to build security in the Gulf, let alone one aimed at defeating global terrorism rooted in a radical interpretation of Islam, cannot succeed without the full involvement of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. America needs to address the problems in the relationship starting now.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At his 1945 meeting with President Roosevelt aboard the USS *Quincy*, Abdul Aziz said, "You and I want freedom and prosperity for our people and their neighbors after the war. How and by whose hand freedom and prosperity arrive concerns us but little. The English also work and sacrifice to bring freedom and prosperity to the world, but on the condition that it be brought by them and marked 'Made in Britain.'" Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945*, 8, Near East and Africa (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Koran, Sura 3:103, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, The Islamic Computing Centre, London, available at <http://info.uah.edu/msa/quran/yusufali.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan, 1970), 738.

<sup>4</sup> The Wahhabis destroyed the Shi'a shrines at Karbala, Iraq, in 1801, then captured Mecca and Medina in 1803–1804, where they cleansed the holy places of all traces of what they considered idolatry. They then invaded Iraq and Syria and were only driven out by a prolonged campaign led by Egyptian forces at Istanbul's behest (Hitti 740–41). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the British-brokered 1922 Treaty of Uqair, which defined the boundaries of Iraq and Kuwait, was aimed primarily at containing Saudi expansion into territories ruled by Britain's protégés, a fact that is now often forgotten.

says must be better coordinated and better controlled than it has been in the recent past.

4. *Get better organized.* On the diplomatic side, this means avoiding prolonged gaps in ambassadorial representation, such as the one that was just closed by the arrival of Ambassador Robert Jordan. Equally pressing is the need to overhaul the way the United States organizes its defense presence in the Kingdom. For historic and bureaucratic reasons, the U.S. military now has at least three general officers in Saudi Arabia on a continuing basis. None of the three works for either of the others. The Department of Defense should elevate the commander of Joint Task Force Southwest Asia to three-star rank—equal to the senior naval officer in Bahrain—and consolidate defense activities in the Kingdom under his operational control. At least the U.S. military would then be able to speak with a single voice.

5. *Give renewed attention to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.* It will be argued that taking on this challenge now would be rewarding terrorism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Osama bin Laden did not attack the World Trade Center because the United States was not working on the peace process. He does not want movement toward a peaceful Israeli-Palestinian solution. The Palestinian issue is not the root cause of radical Islamic terrorism or the source of the Iraqi threat to the Gulf, but it is much easier for the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs to support America on terrorism and Iraq when they see the United States working for a just settlement in the Occupied Territories and when they are seriously consulted on the direction of that process.

6. *Articulate a positive vision for the region.* The United States cannot expect the Saudi government to make a public case on its behalf, not least because the American vision—a world open to pluralism, freedom, and participatory government—is not the Saudi vision. Arabs in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere need to start hearing not only what the United States is against (Iraq and Al Qaeda), but what it is for, what kind of life it wants for them. In précis form, this vision would call for a region free from war, terrorism, and tyranny where people are allowed to live their lives, raise their children, and develop their political, social, and economic institutions as they see fit.

The people of the Middle East need to hear this message not second-hand but straight

have developed over 10 years of U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia. These run from how America prices military training courses and spare parts to the details of how the host nation support program is utilized. Serious attention to addressing these grievances would help in daily dealings with the Saudi military. It will have little effect on Saudi public opinion, however, or on the ability or disposition of the Saudi government to support the American policy agenda. For that, the United States needs to take serious action in six areas:

1. *Prioritize what the United States wants.* It may well be that Riyadh's most important contributions to a war on terrorism will be providing clear public condemnation of Islamic extremism and quiet private intelligence on Islamic extremists. On the other hand, the Bush administration may judge that it is more important to have access to Saudi air bases to fly offensive operations against the Taliban or to have stable oil prices throughout a crisis period. Nothing says that America cannot seek help in all these areas, but the U.S. must have a government-wide understanding of what it is prepared to give up if necessary to get the things needed most.

2. *Undertake a genuine strategic dialogue.* Ten years after the defeat of Iraq, there is no shared understanding with the Saudi leadership on the strategic underpinnings of the bilateral relationship and the future of the region. American and Saudi officials have conflicting rationales for the presence of U.S. forces in the Kingdom, conflicting understandings of the threat, and undoubtedly conflicting conceptions over how to move forward. These consultations need to be frank, strictly private, regular, and inclusive of all aspects of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, from security and oil to agriculture and education.

3. *Do not make cooperation harder than it has to be.* It will not always be possible to avoid forcing the Saudis to choose between the United States and the Arab and Islamic causes that contend for their support, but America often pushes them into these choices needlessly. Moreover, U.S. public characterizations of what the Saudis have agreed to do, and of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with that support, often have unpredictable and unproductive consequences. Maintaining the kind of secrecy that the Saudis would prefer is neither practical nor appropriate, but what America

the number of Americans living in the Kingdom remains substantial; what has changed is the nature and depth of person-to-person contact.

The same is true militarily. Restrictions on accompanied tours for military personnel, imposed in the wake of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, have shortened tour lengths and hampered the development of personal relations between Saudi officers and American advisory personnel. The consolidation of air operations in the interest of force protection has meant the loss of day-to-day contact between fighter pilots and ground crews of the two air forces. Because of the oil price slump of the 1990s, there have been no major Saudi

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weapons procurements from the United States for several years, further limiting opportunities for interaction and familiarization.

The drift in ties has also been visible at the policy level. Other than Secretary of Defense William Cohen's regular visits, cabinet level officials in the Clinton administration visited Saudi Arabia only when the United States had demands to levy, whether lower oil prices or pressure on the Palestinians. Even Cohen's visits, designed as routine consultations, were often dominated by the need to enlist support for particular actions against Iraq.

### Rescuing the Relationship

For many reasons, Saudi Arabia must play an important role if an international campaign against global terrorism is to succeed. Its political stature in the Islamic world, the fact that its regime is the ultimate target for many of the terrorists, and indeed that the ideological, financial, and personal roots of Al Qaeda may be found within Saudi Arabia give the Kingdom a special role to play. For it to play that role well, the two countries must find a way to revitalize their strategic relationship.

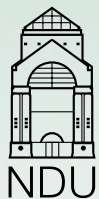
American military officers and defense officials who have spent time with their Saudi counterparts have heard the litany of grievances—some petty, some significant—that

Israel's principal sponsor and protector—and as the starver of Iraqi children—it is easy for opponents of American policies to portray the Saudi regime as accomplices in an anti-Arab, anti-Muslim conspiracy.

Ten years ago, fears about the attitudes of the Saudi "street" could reasonably be disparaged. That is no longer the case. The information revolution has hit Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab world with a vengeance. In the 1980s, the regime could exert almost total control over information entering the country. Foreign newspapers were carefully censored, and the only television news available was the dry recitation of the day's royal appointments. In 2001, Saudis get news of the world from 24-hour satellite news channels, such as Qatar's Al Jazeera. They read online editions of Arabic newspapers from London, Cairo, and Baghdad and exchange political views by fax, cell phone, and e-mail. When an Arab child is shot in Nablus or suffers malnutrition in Basrah, the images are instantly and repeatedly beamed to the Kingdom and throughout the Arab world.

The flood of news has been matched by an equal flood of political discourse. The power of radical religious scholars is felt in the publication of manifestos and the preaching of inflammatory sermons in mosques. Since the outbreak of the Al Aqsa *intifadah*, the Kingdom's cities have even witnessed street demonstrations, something unheard of in the past. Meanwhile political reforms, such as national charters and democratic elections in neighboring Kuwait, Iran, Bahrain, Qatar, Yemen, and Jordan emphasize for Saudi citizens their lack of a voice in the future of the country.

Against the background of this rapidly evolving political landscape, U.S.-Saudi interaction at the personal, grassroots level seems to be withering. Although the number of Saudi students in American universities is still substantial, it is considerably smaller as a proportion of the university-age population than was the case before the Kingdom's own higher-education system was up and running. Furthermore, because of the narrow, Islamically oriented curriculum in the Saudi education system, a progressively larger share of young Saudis are reaching adulthood with only limited exposure to Western ideas, let alone to the West itself. Meanwhile, the nationalization of Aramco has meant fewer Americans living and working with Saudis in the oil industry. Again,

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<p>circa 1745 Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud form religious-political alliance and establish Wahhabi state in central Arabia (Nejd).</p>	<p>1811–1818 Ottoman-Egyptian offensive destroys Wahhabi state.</p>	<p>1836–1838 Ottoman-Egyptian force invades and occupies Nejd, installs collateral branch of Al Saud as rulers.</p>	<p>1891 Al Rashid rulers of Hail (now in northern Saudi Arabia) conquer Riyadh, drive Al Saud into exile in Kuwait, and recognize Ottoman suzerainty.</p>	<p>1912 Abdul Aziz begins establishing settlements of Ikhwan (“brotherhood”) of Wahhabi tribesmen in an effort to harness religious zeal on behalf of Saudi state.</p>	<p>1924–1927 Abdul Aziz conquers Hashemite Kingdom of Hijaz, including holy cities of Mecca and Medina; drives Hashemite family off Arabian Peninsula and becomes King of Nejd and Hijaz.</p>	<p>1932 Abdul Aziz proclaims Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.</p>	<p>1938 Oil discovered in commercial quantities near Dhahran.</p>	<p>1947–1962 U.S. builds and uses Dhahran Air Base.</p>	<p>1962 U.S. deploys small force of F–100s to Saudi Arabia in reaction to Yemeni civil war.</p>	<p>1979 Radical Wahhabis seize and occupy Grand Mosque in Mecca.</p>	<p>1990–1991 Coalition forces invited to use Saudi bases during Gulf war.</p>	<p>1993 Radical Islamic opposition group, Committee for Defense of Legitimate Rights, is formed; later succeeded by Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia.</p>	<p>1995 U.S. Army Saudi Arabian National Guard program office in Riyadh destroyed by bomb.</p>
<p>1801–1804 Nejdi-Wahhabi forces sack Shi’a shrines in Iraq; capture Mecca and Medina, invade Syria. By 1804, the Nejdi-Wahhabi state embraces most of Arabian Peninsula.</p>	<p>1820–1834 Al Saud family begins reconstituting Wahhabi power in Nejd; by 1834 the revived Nejdi-Wahhabi state includes most of modern Saudi Arabia minus Red Sea coast.</p>	<p>1843 Imam Faisal ibn Saud returns from exile, resumes throne, and rebuilds domains.</p>	<p>1902 Abdul Aziz ibn Saud (later first king of Saudi Arabia) retakes Riyadh and founds modern Saudi state as Sultan of Nejd.</p>	<p>1921–1922 British repeatedly repel Ikhwan threats to Kuwait, Transjordan, and Iraq, leading to Treaty of Uqayr defining Nejd’s northern borders. Ikhwan raids continue as late as 1927.</p>	<p>1928–1929 Abdul Aziz puts down rebellion of <i>Ikhwan</i>.</p>	<p>1933 Oil concession granted to Standard Oil of California.</p>	<p>1945 President Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz meet aboard USS <i>Quincy</i> in Great Bitter Lake, Egypt.</p>	<p>1951 U.S. Military Training Mission established.</p>	<p>1979–1989 U.S. deploys small force of F–15s to Saudi Arabia in reaction to Iranian revolution, then deploys AWACS during Iran-Iraq war.</p>	<p>1989 Governor of Asir arrests conservative preacher on morals charges, provokes large demonstrations.</p>	<p>1991 Fundamentalist clerics issue “Letter of Demands” to increase role of religion in decisionmaking.</p>	<p>1994 Saudi security services arrest leading radical cleric, provoking protests and calls for violent action against government and foreign forces. Osama bin Laden calls for holy war and is stripped of Saudi citizenship.</p>	<p>1996 U.S. Air Force apartment building in Khobar destroyed by bomb.</p>

from the more cosmopolitan influences that shaped the countries around it.

The House of Saud, which has ruled for most of the last 200 years, has sought with diminishing success to preserve this isolation. One of the principal reasons King Abdul Aziz, father of the current ruling generation, sought American rather than British oil companies to develop the oil resources of the Eastern Province was his perception that U.S. involvement came with no political strings attached. American companies were in it for the money, not for strategic influence, and therefore would be less likely to present challenges to the Saudi political system.<sup>1</sup> Until the 1970s, broad areas of the country, including the capital, Riyadh, were off-limits to Westerners. Foreign embassies were restricted to Jiddah, a port city already tainted by contact with the outside world. Even today, all foreign embassies are corralled within a secure, purpose-built diplomatic quarter on the outskirts of Riyadh, where interaction between foreigners and Saudis can be controlled. Unlike the mercantile elites of the smaller Gulf states, the dominant political groups in Saudi Arabia rarely had to deal with foreigners, especially non-Muslim foreigners

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This rope is made up of countless fibers woven and intertwined—religious, legal, social, cultural, economic, educational—and disentangling them is almost impossible. But two strands are of particular importance in constraining the Saudi political system: *Mecca and Medina*. First, geographically and historically, Saudi Arabia holds the two holiest sites of Islam. It is, as the definitive history of the Arab peoples puts it, “the cradle of Islam,” with “a halo of sacredness around it

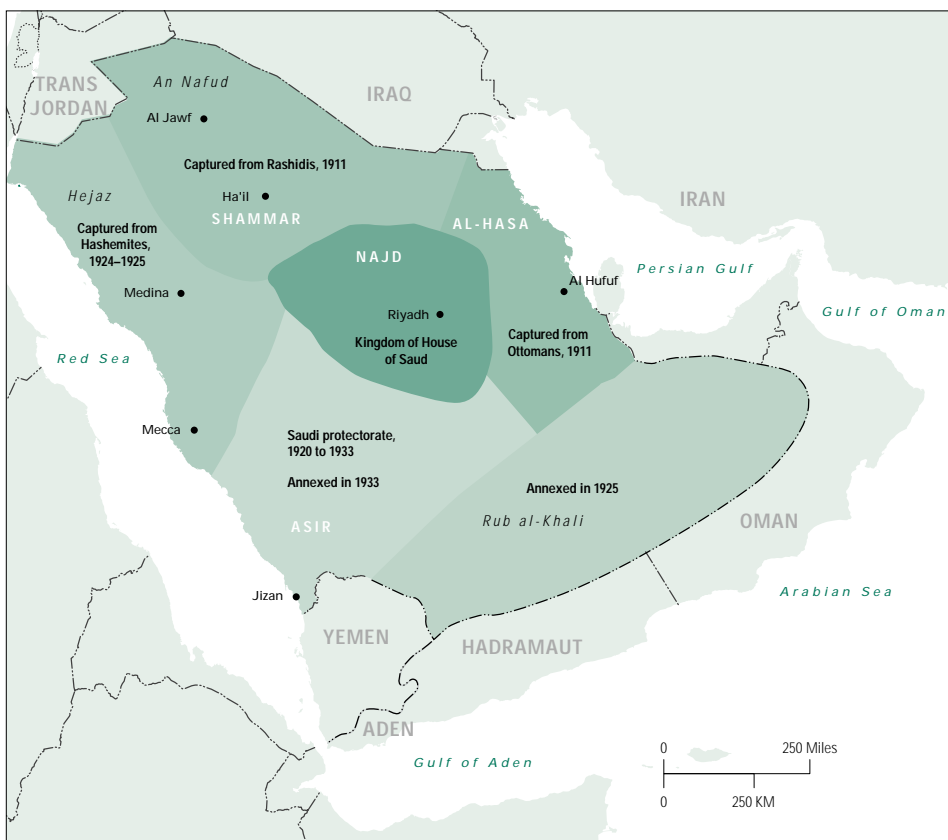
This Strategic Forum was prepared by Joseph McMillan, a distinguished research fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Please direct any questions or comments to Dr. McMillan at (202) 685–3610 or forward them by e-mail to mcmillan@ndu.edu.

[and] a unique place in the hearts and minds of believers throughout the world.”<sup>3</sup> Most Westerners living in a post-Enlightenment world find it hard to understand the profound emotional attachment of Muslims to these places, above all to Mecca, and the uneasiness with which they hear reports (however untrue) that infidel troops are occupying this sacred soil.

*The Legacy of Abdul Wahhab and Al Saud.* Secondly, the House of Saud came to power in the 18<sup>th</sup> century through an alliance with the most puritanical movement yet to arise within orthodox Islam. Founded by the Nejdi teacher Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (d. 1792), the Wahhabis, as their opponents called them, were viewed throughout the Muslim world as the quintessence of radicalism and fanaticism for the first 200 years of their history.<sup>4</sup> Under Wahhabi political philosophy, Al Saud rule is ideologically justifiable only to the extent that the ruling family upholds the faith in all its purity. Unlike King Abdullah of Jordan or King Muhammad VI of Morocco, King Fahd and his brothers do not rule by hereditary descent from the Prophet but as part of a social contract with the community of believers.

Osama bin Laden’s message derives much of its appeal in Saudi Arabia from its reliance on the very same Islamic teachers who provided the theoretical justification for the Saudi state. Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taimiyah (1263–1328), perhaps the most important seminal influence on Wahhabi doctrine, taught that subjects are not bound to obey a ruler who fails to enforce the holy law, or *Shariah*. Ibn Abdul Wahhab himself held that subjects have a positive duty to disobey, depose, and, if need be, kill a ruler who falls away from enforcing the faith. That was the appeal on which Muhammad ibn Saud, the founder of the

### Expansion of the Modern Saudi Kingdom



dynasty, first came to power in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. So when bin Laden preaches a duty to overthrow and kill rulers who permit innovations and foreign influence, the Saudi royal family is hard pressed to dispute the point.

Islam is not only the basis of the internal legitimacy of the House of Saud but also the source of much of its international standing. It is significant that King Fahd’s official title is not “His Majesty” or “King of Saudi Arabia” but “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.” This

petroleum reserves. The wealth that flowed from those resources in the 1970s and 1980s surely reinforced the strength of Riyadh’s voice, but neither oil nor money alone could buy the Saudis the stature that they enjoy in Arab and Islamic councils; credibility in managing and protecting the holy places does. However, close military association with the United States, the country that, more than any other, embodies the modern globalist challenge to traditional Islam, undermines that credibility.

### Building a Coalition

For both religious and historical reasons, allowing non-Arab (especially non-Muslim) troops into the land of the Two Holy Mosques was a momentous decision for Fahd to take in August 1990. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and the team he took to Jeddah to secure agreement on U.S. deployments may not have fully appreciated the historical basis of these sensitivities, but the circumspection with which they approached the task reflected a clear recognition of how unprecedented and difficult their proposal was.

Once King Fahd agreed to the deployments, General Norman Schwarzkopf and staffs in Washington, Tampa, and Riyadh began devising a structure for coalition forces that threw aside the traditional U.S. insistence on the indispensability of unity of command. The coalition had no single supreme commander but three separate chains: a NATO-style arrangement by which Schwarzkopf exercised command over U.S. forces and operational control over British forces; a second chain in which Saudi Arabian Lieutenant General Prince Khalid bin Sultan Al Saud commanded all Arab and Islamic forces; and a third, separate French chain of command. Instead of insisting on a formal combined command

structure, the United States counted on personal relations between Schwarzkopf and Khalid to ensure effective coordination.

The agreement on command structure illustrates how far the U.S. administration went to ensure that the Saudis could stay on board in the common struggle. This careful approach was visible in countless other ways as well, from American efforts to keep Israel out of the fight to Schwarzkopf’s prohibition of the consumption of alcohol by American troops and restrictions on public disclosure about American use of Saudi bases. In return, the Saudis agreed to a range of activities by U.S. forces that would have been anathema a few weeks earlier, such as non-Islamic religious services and allowing American servicewomen to drive on Saudi roads. It was this combination of American sensitivity and Saudi flexibility that enabled the coalition to work.

### Postwar Changes

In contrast to the U.S. experience in Europe, where long-practiced habits of cooperation make joint action easier, operational cooperation in Saudi Arabia has grown more difficult since the victory over Iraq. There are many reasons. Some problems stem from the inevitable cross-cultural frictions, some from the decade-long slump in oil prices that altered the financial terms of both the security assistance and host-nation support components of the relationship. More fundamentally, however, U.S.-Saudi military ties have been affected by transformations in three major areas that overlap with and reinforce each other: the Saudi leadership, the political consciousness of the Arabs of the Gulf, and the American role and image in the region and the world.

With King Fahd’s debilitating stroke in late 1995 and Crown Prince Abdullah’s subsequent

assumption of a de facto regency, the modalities of U.S.-Saudi relations became significantly more complicated. This is not because Abdullah is anti-American, but because, as regent instead of king, his freedom of action is constrained by the requirement that he work within a collective leadership. This constraint is magnified by Abdullah’s lack of full brothers as natural allies within family councils and his concomitant

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need to reach out to other allies through compromise and negotiation. Abdullah is not in a position to take risks or make bold decisions as Fahd was in 1990.

Abdullah’s views, interests, and managerial style are also significantly different from Fahd’s. Where the former focused on the strategic picture, the latter focuses on details. Where Fahd’s attention was oriented toward the Gulf and the West, family connections on his mother’s side orient Abdullah’s attention more to the Arab north—and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Moreover, Abdullah is reputedly more pious, which makes the Islamic dimension even more germane to understanding his decisionmaking. Finally, the crown prince is in much closer touch with ordinary Saudis than Fahd was, still conducting a weekly *majlis*, the public council at which any subject can present requests and grievances directly to the regent for quick action.

What Abdullah undoubtedly hears through his contacts with the Saudi people is discontent with the fact that Western forces are still in the Kingdom 10 years after the defeat of Iraq. To the United States, the reason to remain in Saudi Arabia is clear: Iraq has not implemented its ceasefire obligations, Saddam Hussein remains in power, and Iraqi forces still threaten neighbors. Nevertheless, the Saudi royal family is under steadily growing pressure to explain how it can claim to defend the Holy Places if it cannot even defend itself without the aid of unbelievers. Its critics demand to know how the leaders of Islam can allow the sacred lands of Mecca and Medina to be used as a military base by those who are making war in Iraq and Afghanistan against believers. These criticisms, which go to the fundamental legitimacy of the regime, are the source of Saudi refusals to allow offensive operations against Iraq from its bases and of its anger when the United States allows operations conducted from Saudi Arabia to be publicized.

In addition, the myth of American omnipotence (reinforced by its own frequent pronouncements of its stature as the sole superpower) leads many Arabs to conclude that, if Saddam is still in power, it must be because America wants him to be. The seductive explanation is that the United States is obviously plotting to dominate the Middle East and its resources, particularly as the effectiveness of the U.S. deterrent makes the Iraqi threat seem misleadingly remote. Public receptivity to these messages did not originate in dissatisfaction with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, but attitudes toward the United States and the governments that work with it have been substantially hardened by the collapse of that process and the onset of the Al Qaeda *intifadah*. To the extent that the United States is seen as