

Saudi Arabia, Morocco

# Terror bombings bare US crisis in Middle East

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The terror bombings that claimed the lives of 34 people in Saudi Arabia and at least 41 in Morocco last week have underscored the deepening crisis confronting US policy in the Middle East in the wake of the war against Iraq. Far from the “turning of the tide” in the “war on terrorism,” as Bush proclaimed last month aboard the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the US invasion has only exacerbated deep political and social tensions throughout the region.

Echoing assertions made by US intelligence officials, Bush declared earlier this month that the Al Qaeda organization was “not a problem any more.” Now it is Al Qaeda that is being blamed for both the Saudi and the Moroccan bombings, and the intelligence chiefs are warning that as many as 17,000 of its operatives could be preparing to strike.

While the immediate targets of the suicide car bomb attacks in Saudi Arabia were compounds housing foreign nationals in Riyadh, it was widely believed that the principal aim of the terrorist campaign was the destabilization of the Saudi monarchy.

The attacks came just hours before Secretary of State Colin Powell’s visit to Saudi Arabia, underscoring the regime’s internal crisis. Only recently, Washington had announced it would withdraw some 5,000 US troops that remain in the desert kingdom, effectively bowing to one of the principal demands made by Al Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden. Since the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, the US has established extensive bases in other parts of the Persian Gulf, particularly in Qatar.

With the bombings, the message has been sent that the end of the US military presence will not end the drive by Islamist forces to overthrow the monarchy. The deterioration in internal security in what remains a key source of US oil imports as well as petro-dollar investments could cause an about-face in the planned withdrawal of US troops.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Saudi bombings from Washington’s perspective was clear indications that they involved at least some level of collaboration from within the Saudi security forces themselves. Those who carried out the May 12 bombings in Riyadh had escaped less than a week before from a raid on a safe house that Saudi police had been staking out for some time. US officials have voiced suspicions that the suspects were tipped off or permitted to escape by the police.

The Saudi authorities released names and photographs of 19 suspects, yet proved unable to stop these same individuals from organizing the bombings. One of the compounds that was attacked was less than a block away from the raided safe house. The attackers appeared to have inside knowledge of the compounds, immediately

locating the switches that opened gates allowing explosive-laden cars to enter.

US officials issued pointed statements to the effect that the Saudi regime had failed to heed repeated warnings that a terrorist attack was imminent, and did not comply with US requests that it beef up security at the targeted sites.

The *Washington Post* on Monday cited Saudi and US officials saying that weapons seized in the May 6 raid had been traced to the stockpiles of the country’s national guard. Saudi officials insisted that the motive for the arms transfers to Al Qaeda was mercenary rather than ideological.

In a further indication that those responsible for the bombings enjoy broader popular support than either Washington or the Saudi regime have acknowledged, three prominent Saudi Islamic scholars issued an edict after the raid on the safe house, declaring that it was the duty of the country’s Muslims to hide those sought by the police.

The statement asserted, in part, that the suspects were charged as criminals and terrorists only because they had “participated in the jihad against the American Crusaders in Afghanistan,” and that it was “an Islamic obligation to support, shelter and defend these mujahideen.”

One of the principal targets of the bombers was the compound run by Vinnell Arabia, a local subsidiary of the Virginia-based Vinnell Corp. The company lost nine employees in the attacks. Its mission—sealed with a five-year \$800 million contract—is the training of Saudi military forces and, in particular, the Saudi Arabian National Guard.

The guard, which is separate from the regular military, is used strictly for the protection of the royal family and the suppression of internal unrest. It is also charged with protecting the country’s oil wells, the source of the immense riches of the several thousand Saudi princes.

Just as those identified in the Saudi bombings were all Saudis, so too the Moroccan regime has been forced to acknowledge that all those involved in the terrorist bombings there were Moroccan citizens. This deprived both monarchies of the ability to blame the attacks on foreign terrorists.

In the suicide bombings in Casablanca, the attackers are believed to have come from a local group based in the impoverished shantytown of Sidi Moumen on the edge of the city. Until now, the monarchy has tried to portray the country as largely immune to militant Islamist ideology, attributing any threat of terrorism to a relative handful of veterans of the war in Afghanistan.

Morocco has been among the most staunchly pro-American regimes, frequently cited as the linchpin for the Bush administration's vision of a US-Middle Eastern free trade zone. The country's ruler, King Mohammed VI, issued tepid statements declaring the government's preference for a UN solution in Iraq, but then earned a place in the "coalition of the willing" by offering to ship 2,000 monkeys to Iraq for the purpose of detonating Iraqi land mines. In a more strategic form of cooperation, the Moroccan monarch reportedly allowed the US Air Force to operate a base in the country and permitted the transfer of some of those captured in the Iraq war to Morocco for interrogation.

The Moroccan population, however, was among the most vocal in its opposition to the war. It staged among the largest demonstrations against the impending US invasion anywhere in the Middle East. Last March hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Rabat, Casablanca, Fez, Marrakesh and elsewhere, chanting, "We are all Iraqis." In large part, these protests were led by the Islamist opposition.

In the elections held last September, the Islamists tripled their parliamentary seats. Municipal elections set for this June have been postponed, apparently because of the monarchy's fears that the Islamists would register even larger gains.

The growth of this Islamist opposition is rooted in the social polarization that dominates Moroccan society and the identification of the old parties with the monarchy. The official unemployment rate stands at 30 percent, with over 120,000 university graduates leaving school to join the unemployment lines.

Under these social conditions, given the absence of a secular, democratic and socialist-oriented leadership fighting for the overthrow of the US-backed regimes, the Islamist groups have been able to recruit among the broad masses of youth who are denied a future within their own societies and are outraged by the US military intervention in Iraq, as well its support for the ongoing Israeli repression of the Palestinians.

There are ample numbers who can be attracted to the reactionary ideology of Islamic fundamentalism and the retrograde methods of suicide bombings.

The US for decades encouraged the spread of Islamic fundamentalism as a means of suppressing secular nationalist and socialist movements in the region, and the current wave of Islamist terrorism is a classic case of the chickens coming home to roost. The Saudi regime itself, long a bulwark of Washington's anti-communist foreign policy, draped itself in Islamic fundamentalism in order to achieve a measure of political stability. It supplied much of the funding and many of the volunteers—including Osama bin Laden and others who founded Al Qaeda—for the US-backed war against Soviet forces and the regime they supported in Afghanistan. Also in the 1980s, the Saudis were an integral part of the "Iran-contra" network run by Lt. Col. Oliver North to conduct the illegal terror war against Nicaragua.

The right-wing police mentality of the Bush administration automatically rejects any consideration of the social and political roots of either terrorism or the popular hostility toward the US presence in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. Its dull-witted mantra is that the cause of terrorism is terrorists, and the solution is the repression, killing and imprisonment of all those involved in these movements.

Bush's Democratic rivals have sought to outflank the White House on no less reactionary grounds, seizing on the bombings in Saudi Arabia and Morocco to charge the administration with failing to prosecute the "war on terrorism" with sufficient vigor. Presumably,

they would support an intensification of the police-state measures that have included the detention of thousands of immigrants without charges and a wholesale assault on democratic rights.

From the standpoint of protecting civilians from terrorist attacks, the US strategy of external aggression and internal repression has proven utterly bankrupt. There is speculation that the purpose of the recent attacks is to draw the US more directly into the repressive operations of the Saudi and Moroccan monarchies under conditions of intense anti-US sentiment in the region, in order to hasten the collapse of these regimes.

Compared to its normally bellicose rhetoric regarding the so-called global war against terrorism, the Bush administration's response to the Saudi and Moroccan bomb attacks has been cautious and even muted. These terrorist acts raise a number of troubling questions for the administration.

They point once again to the undeniable Saudi connection to the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Osama bin Laden, whose Al Qaeda movement claimed responsibility for the attacks, is a Saudi, as were 15 of the alleged hijackers. The funding for this movement is predominantly Saudi.

Osama bin Laden himself is a scion of one of the wealthiest Saudi families—one which, moreover, has had longstanding financial relations with leading figures in the Republican Party, including the elder George Bush, former president and father of the current White House occupant.

The administration attempted to downplay these links—not to mention the substantial evidence that US security services themselves had ample warnings of the impending attacks—as it sought to fabricate a link between the September 11 terrorists and Saddam Hussein.

The suicide bombings draw attention to the rotten foundations of US foreign policy throughout the region. They are indicative of the instability and reactionary character of the regimes upon which American interests rest, and serve to expose the predatory aims pursued by Washington in the Middle East. The Saudi connection gives the lie to Washington's empty rhetoric about promoting liberation and democracy through its conquest of Iraq. It demonstrates that the US utilizes the most despotic regimes to secure its supply of cheap oil and suppress any movement by the masses of the region to lay claim to the wealth of their own societies.



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