

# The Saudi bombing—who benefits from this atrocity?

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The November 8 terrorist bombing in the Saudi capital of Riyadh was an atrocity carried out with wanton disregard for human life and motivated by utterly reactionary political ends.

The target for the attack was a compound housing foreign workers and their families—virtually all of them Muslims from Lebanon and other Arab and south Asian countries. A police vehicle laden with explosives was driven into the compound and detonated next to a housing block. The blast claimed the lives of at least 18 people and injured more than 122. At least five children were killed in the blast, and dozens more were wounded.

Lebanon's *Daily Star* reported on the death and injury suffered by Lebanese contract workers who made up close to 60 percent of the compound's residents: "Those who perished were: Jad and Raya Mezher, both of them children; Nina Gebran; Rania Saleh, a mother of two; Richard Haidar, his wife Nancy and their son Jad, who was still a toddler... Five Lebanese are reportedly still in hospital: Neameh and Aline Mshantaf, Ghassan Tawileh, and Charbel and Maguy Mezher, the parents of Jad and Raya, who have not yet been informed of the deaths of their children."

Both the US and Saudi governments were quick to blame the terrorist attack on Al Qaeda, while a Saudi newspaper reported receiving an e-mail attributing the bombing to the Islamist group. "It is quite clear to me that Al Qaeda wants to take down the royal family and the government of Saudi Arabia," declared Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who arrived in the kingdom the day after the attack for previously scheduled talks on counter-terrorism.

George Bush telephoned Crown Prince Abdullah, the kingdom's de facto ruler, to assure him that Washington "stands with Saudi Arabia in the war on terror." The US government offered aid to Saudi security forces in capturing those responsible for the terrorist attack. For his part, Saudi Arabia's King Fahd vowed to crush his Islamist opponents with an "iron fist."

US officials have claimed that the attack in Riyadh represents a new tactic by Al Qaeda, targeting foreign

workers upon whom the ruling family relies to run the kingdom's economy. They further suggest that the motivation for the action is rooted in a radical interpretation of Islam, in which less observant Lebanese and other foreign Muslims are regarded as "infidels."

A number of academic and intelligence experts on the Middle East and Al Qaeda, however, have expressed skepticism about this official interpretation.

"[Al Qaeda's] target has been since the mid to late 1990s the United States, and not their own government," Nathaniel Brown, a professor of international affairs at George Washington University in Washington told Radio Free Europe. "And the most recent attack targets not the Saudi government but Saudi citizens and others who are in Saudi Arabia from Muslim countries. And if this is an Al Qaeda attack, it's not simply a departure, but a shocking departure."

Roger Cressey, a former senior counter-terrorism official in the Clinton and Bush administrations, described the attack as a "disconnect" from Al Qaeda's previous modus operandi, which exhibited sensitivity to how its actions would be perceived in the rest of the Muslim world. "It could well backfire...because it shows them killing innocent women and children who seemed to have no relationship to what their beef is," Cressey told the *Los Angeles Times*.

The terrorist actions attributed to Al Qaeda—including the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings—have all been carried out with wanton indifference to the fate of their innocent victims. But the choice of the target in last Saturday's bombing is so gratuitous and reactionary as to defy logic.

An attack of this nature points to the likely involvement of actors whose motives are hidden—in particular, one or another intelligence agency seeking to further the policy aims of its government.

In the case of Al Qaeda, the links with such agencies are intimate and longstanding. The organization's titular leader, Osama bin Laden, is the scion of a wealthy Saudi family that

has enjoyed close business relations with the Bush family in the US. He himself rose to prominence as a key figure in recruiting and supporting the CIA-backed Mujahedin in the campaign to topple the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan.

Saudi intelligence connections began at about the same time, but apparently continued. It has been widely charged that Prince Turki al-Faisal, the kingdom's former intelligence chief, served as a conduit for money from the royal family to bin Laden's organization.

Then there is the Pakistani military intelligence agency, ISI, which provided crucial support to both Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. A month after the September 11 attacks, the *Times of India* published a report citing evidence of intimate ties between ISI and the alleged hijackers, including a \$100,000 payment wired to the man identified as the ringleader of the September 11 attacks, Mohammed Atta, at the behest of Lt. Gen. Mahmoud Ahmad, then director general of ISI. Ahmad was removed shortly after the report, apparently at Washington's insistence, though connections between ISI and the CIA remained close.

Nor can one rule out a possible link to Israeli intelligence, which reportedly has operatives in a number of Islamist terrorist groups and is widely suspected of orchestrating terrorist attacks to further the foreign policy objectives of the Israeli government.

What motive would a foreign intelligence agency have for carrying out a terrorist bombing in Riyadh?

The Saudi monarchy sits, rather unsteadily, upon a quarter of the world's oil resources and is therefore a critical strategic factor in global relations. The royal family is itself deeply divided, with elements pushing for reform of the autocratic system in order to stave off revolution, and others insisting that reform will only hasten their demise.

Social polarization has turned the kingdom into a political powder keg. A royal family consisting of some 7,000 princes hordes over \$800 billion worth of oil wealth in private bank accounts, while between 30 and 40 percent of the population is unemployed. Population growth and economic stagnation have cut average incomes to about a third of their previous levels.

The bombing has been used by the Saudi regime as the justification for a sweeping campaign of repression that has targeted not only Islamist militants who could conceivably have ties to Al Qaeda, but a far broader spectrum of real and potential opponents.

These include Shiites in the kingdom's eastern province, the center of oil production, who have long chafed under conditions of exploitation and discrimination. Others pressing for democratic rights and jobs have been locked up as well. Even before the latest crackdown, human rights

groups reported that 400 political prisoners were held in Saudi jails, including over 200 rounded up last month for participating in peaceful demonstrations calling for democratization and jobs.

For their part, intelligence agencies in Washington have long complained about the Saudi regime's failure to cooperate in the response to terrorist attacks on US targets, including the September 11 attacks, in which 15 of the 19 individuals identified as hijackers were Saudi citizens. The timing of the latest bombing, on the eve of joint US-Saudi counter-terrorism talks, could not have been more advantageous to US aims.

It is by no means excluded that a terrorist provocation by one or another of these agencies would be staged through the manipulation of elements of Al Qaeda itself. The politics and methods of terrorist groups like Al Qaeda make them highly susceptible to the covert influence of state agents.

In political terms, Al Qaeda is a wholly reactionary movement, dedicated to the restoration of an Islamic caliphate, based on the Arab empire of the seventh century. This backward-looking religious outlook corresponds to that of a dissident faction within the Saudi ruling elite itself, which bin Laden represents. Bin Laden and his associates are entirely capable of targeting ordinary workers, whether on their own or under the influence of intelligence agencies, because they speak for social forces utterly hostile to the interests of the working class.

The methods of terror employed by Al Qaeda are aimed not so much at defeating imperialism or the ruling monarchy in Saudi Arabia, as at pressuring for a change in policy. In the final analysis, this latest act appears to have had the effect of justifying even more repressive measures and a closer US-Saudi connection in the "war on terrorism."

In the search for the perpetrator of a crime, one basic question has been asked down through the ages: "Who benefits?" US and Saudi investigators hunting for those responsible for the Riyadh bombing might best begin by looking close to home.



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