

What Do We Do If the Saudi Monarchy Falls?

MARK N. KATZ
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA, USA

Although by no means a certainty, the growing internal problems inside the Kingdom as well as the increased strains in Saudi-American relations since September 11 both indicate that the downfall of the monarchy may be more likely now than in the past. How could America respond to such an eventuality? The impact of this "worst case" scenario would be so enormous that some thought clearly needs to be given to what U.S. foreign policy options might be even if the probability of its occurrence is seen as low. If the probability of this scenario is seen as high, then this task is even more urgent. This paper argues that while responding to the downfall of the Saudi monarchy will not be easy, there are some strategies that the United States can adopt to contain the threat that it will pose.

Will the Saudi monarchy fall? Since the events of September 11, 2001, there has been growing speculation that it might.

Several factors fuel this speculation. First of all, the declining living standards and rising unemployment in Saudi society—which the Saudi government has been unable to reverse—has provided a seedbed for discontent and opposition within the Kingdom.¹ Second, the fact that the leader of Al Qaeda (Osama bin Laden) is a Saudi, and that fifteen of the nineteen September 11 hijackers were also Saudi, is an indicator that opposition to the monarchy definitely exists within the Kingdom. Nor is Al Qaeda the only opponent of the monarchy; there are several others—almost all of which are anti-democratic and anti-American.² In addition, anti-Americanism is not limited to people like bin Laden: a recent opinion poll revealed that the Saudi public is highly dissatisfied with American foreign policy toward the Middle East, the presence of American forces in Saudi Arabia, and the Kingdom's alliance with the United States generally.³ And this is a problem since it raises the possibility that any American military effort to defend the Saudi monarchy against its internal opponents may only serve to further de-legitimize it in the eyes of the Saudi public.⁴

The situation is so serious that it is not just the avowed opponents of the Saudi monarchy that are predicting its demise, but even organizations which presumably have a large stake in its survival. According to one press report, a classified CIA study written in early 2002 "describes the House of Saud as an 'anachronism' that is 'inherently fragile.'"⁵

There are other observers, though, who predict that the Saudi monarchy will prove as durable in the future as it has in the past. Virtually everyone, however, seems to agree that the demise of the Saudi monarchy would have a tremendously negative effect on both the international economy and world politics generally. This is because the most likely successor to the Saudi monarchy is generally seen as a virulently anti-Western Islamic fundamentalist regime whose rise to power alone will result in a dramatic, sustained increase in the price of oil.

Although by no means a certainty, the growing internal problems inside the Kingdom as well as the increased strains in Saudi-American relations since September 11

both indicate that the downfall of the monarchy is far more likely now than in the recent past. How could America respond to such an eventuality? The impact of this "worst case" scenario would be so enormous that some thought clearly needs to be given to what American foreign policy options might be even if the probability of its occurrence is seen as low. If the probability of this scenario is seen as high, then this task is even more urgent.

Before discussing how America might respond to it, though, something first needs to be said about the foreign policy challenges which the downfall of the Saudi monarchy would pose as well as the probable reactions of other governments to its occurrence.

Foreign Policy Challenges

While divided on whether or not the Saudi monarchy will fall, observers on both sides of this issue seem generally agreed that an Islamic fundamentalist regime is the most likely replacement for it. Yet even assuming the occurrence of an Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia, the precise nature of the foreign policy challenges it will pose are highly uncertain due to the many possibilities concerning how the old regime is replaced by the new one, what political forces and interest groups the new regime is composed of, who its leaders are, what its initial relations are with other countries, and other, unpredictable, factors.⁶

That being said, however, both the theoretical literature on the international relations of revolution and the history of the foreign policy of previous revolutionary regimes indicate that certain events are highly likely to occur which will pose serious challenges to American foreign policymakers. These include the following:

The Abrogation of Existing Alliances

Experience has shown that when revolutionary regimes first come to power in the developing world, they abrogate the old regime's principal alliances.⁷ Marxist revolution in the Third World, for example, usually resulted in a country ending its alliance with the United States, as did the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Since the United States is the principal ally of the Saudi monarchy, a revolutionary regime which overthrew it can be expected to immediately end this alliance.

The Declaration of Intent to Radically Transform the Existing System of International Relations

This is typical of new revolutionary regimes espousing an "internationalist" ideology (i.e., one which has widespread appeal outside the state where revolution occurs).⁸ A radical Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia is highly likely to identify the United States as the ultimate source of the Muslim world's grievances, to declare the existing borders between Muslim states to be the artificial creations of "Western imperialism" in order to keep the Muslims weak and divided, and to advocate the creation of a superstate encompassing the entire Muslim world which can "confront" the West from a position of strength.

A Positive Response from Opposition Groups Elsewhere

This also typically occurs whenever a revolutionary regime advocating an internationalist ideology such as Islamic fundamentalism comes to power in an important country.⁹

There are already, of course, many Islamic opposition groups operating in many Muslim countries as well as non-Muslim ones. The success of Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia will encourage such groups elsewhere to emulate this example. Some will declare their allegiance to the new regime in Saudi Arabia in the hope of obtaining material support from it. Some will even go there in order to establish "safe havens" where they can operate and train.

The Attempt to Export Revolution by the New Regime

This is something that many new revolutionary regimes try to do. Their ideologies tell them that this is desirable. In addition, opposition groups elsewhere persuade them that this is possible. Further, the fear that counter-revolutionary attempts to overthrow them will be launched from neighboring states impels them to attempt the export of revolution as a defensive measure to prevent this.¹⁰ An Islamic revolutionary regime that came to power in Saudi Arabia possessing these motives would be highly likely to vigorously attempt to export its revolution to the small neighboring monarchies with which the Saudi royal family had close ties (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman). An especially zealous and self-confident revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia might attempt to export its revolution beyond this throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds. At minimum, the new revolutionary regime might allow Islamic revolutionaries from elsewhere to set up camp on Saudi territory.

War between the New Regime and Other States

Although they disagree as to exactly how and why this occurs, several students of revolution have observed that revolution in one country and war between it and others often occur at more or less the same time.¹¹ Even when this does not actually occur, the potential for it doing so is usually great. Although precisely which countries a revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia might go to war with cannot be foretold, there appears little reason to think that the new regime there would not conform to this well-established pattern.

In addition to these generally observable patterns of the international behavior of new revolutionary regimes, there are two additional factors that will affect the foreign policy of a revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia:

The Guardianship of Islam's Two Holy Cities

One of the new regime's chief justifications for overthrowing the Saudi monarchy will be that the latter is not a legitimate guardian of the two holy cities due to its insufficient support for Islamic causes and voluntary subordination to America and the West.¹² An Islamic revolutionary regime replacing the Saudi monarchy will seek to demonstrate that it is the legitimate guardian of the two holy cities through vigorous support of Islamic causes (such as Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and others) and that it is completely independent from American and Western influence.

The Oil Factor

The new regime will undoubtedly welcome any increase in the price of oil that its coming to power leads to. It will, however, quickly face a dilemma: while it may be tempted to limit oil exports in order to weaken what it perceives as a hostile West, doing so will mean less revenue for it (and, like all governments, it will need revenue). The best

situation for the new regime, it might conclude, is one in which it threatens to use the "oil weapon" (which will serve to keep prices high), but does not actually do so. "Moderates" will see the new regime as dependent on the West to buy oil from it. "Hard-liners," by contrast, will see the West as dependent on the new regime to keep on selling.

It should be clear from the above that the foreign policy challenges arising from the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy by an Islamic fundamentalist regime would be both numerous and serious.

Reactions of Other Governments

How America reacts to this worst case scenario in Saudi Arabia will obviously be affected by how other governments react to it. Since how this worst scenario will unfold (or indeed, if it will) cannot be predicted with any degree of precision, the policies that other countries might adopt toward it cannot either. Nevertheless, the history of how other governments have reacted to previous revolutionary upheavals—especially the 1979 Iranian revolution and the September 11 crisis—provides some indicators as to how they might respond to this scenario.

America's Principal Democratic Allies

None of these countries (other NATO members, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) will welcome an Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia. All of them will feel threatened if the new regime there actively attempts to export revolution. Most of these countries, however, are much more dependent than the United States on oil imports generally, and from the Middle East particularly.¹³ As occurred after the 1979 revolution in Iran (another major oil exporter), the initial reaction of our principal democratic allies to a revolution in Saudi Arabia is likely to be an attempt to establish good relations with the new regime in order to ensure the continued flow of oil.¹⁴

Indeed, most (if not all) of our principal democratic allies might pursue this effort even if (as seems highly likely) American relations with the new regime deteriorate. While not wanting to see the new regime successfully export revolution, our principal democratic allies might (quite reasonably) fear that any direct Western military intervention in the country containing Islam's holiest cities would inflame the entire Muslim world against the West. Continued American support for Israel is likely to cause increased friction between the United States and its principal democratic allies, which will see the close Israeli-American relationship as inflaming the new regime, and Islamic fundamentalists elsewhere, against the West.¹⁵

The one circumstance that might motivate our principal democratic allies to support American military intervention is if they feared (as in the case of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990) that the new regime was about to extend its control beyond Saudi Arabia to other oil rich Gulf countries. America and the West, of course, would fear that such a move would allow the new regime to threaten their economies through the increased ability this would give it to determine how much Gulf oil the West receives and at what price. These allies, though, would expect the United States to take the lead in any such military endeavor. Some would contribute significantly to this effort while others would contribute little or nothing, depending on their means and their own domestic political considerations.

Other Muslim Governments

Non-Islamic fundamentalist governments in other predominantly Muslim countries will feel extremely threatened if an Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia leads to an upsurge in opposition activity seeking to overthrow them and if the new regime in Saudi Arabia declares that it will actively assist such efforts. These governments, though, will face contradictory imperatives. On the one hand, non-Islamic fundamentalist governments will seek American support in combating this threat. On the other hand, they will be vulnerable to Islamic fundamentalist charges that they are allying with the superpower which supports Israel, and may try both to forestall the rise of domestic Islamic opposition and avoid the wrath of the new revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia through distancing themselves from the United States publicly.

Should any of these non-Islamic fundamentalist governments in predominantly Muslim countries feel that their very survival is under imminent threat, they will undoubtedly call for the United States to rescue them. How much, or even whether, any of them would cooperate militarily with the United States beyond this, however, is questionable. It seems especially doubtful that any of them would be willing to join an American-led military intervention against the new regime in Saudi Arabia, or even to allow their territory to be used by the United States for this purpose. Siding with non-Muslim American forces intervening in the country of Islam's holiest sites would simply be too risky for them in their own domestic political context.

Thus, while non-Islamic fundamentalist governments in predominantly Muslim countries would undoubtedly be threatened by an Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia, their ability to cooperate with the United States in countering this threat would be relatively limited.

Non-Muslim Governments Fighting Muslim Opponents

As in the wake of the September 11 crisis, some of America's most willing allies in countering an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia would be the governments of predominantly non-Muslim countries which are engaged in ongoing conflict with Muslims either inside their borders or just outside them. Governments in this category include Israel (which is fighting the Palestinians), Russia (fighting the Chechens), India (the Kashmiris and Pakistan), the Philippines (the Moros), and China (the Uighurs). What those governments in this category would want, however, is not so much to contribute their resources to any American-led effort against the new regime in Saudi Arabia but for America to assist them in combating their own specific Muslim opponents.

In sum, while most governments would see an Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia as a threat, the willingness of many of them to cooperate with the United States against it will be limited by a fear of being cut off from an important source of oil, a desire not to alienate either their own Muslim population or the Muslim world generally, or a preoccupation with their own immediate conflicts. Indeed, the U.S. government itself will share at least the first two of these concerns.

Unrealistic Options

Given the foreign policy challenges that an Islamic revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia would create and the problems other governments will see (or present America with) in

responding to them, what will be America's foreign policy options in dealing with this situation? Before discussing those options which may have some chance of success over the long run, something needs to be said about two extreme, albeit polar opposite, options which will undoubtedly be championed by different groups: 1) friendly engagement of the new regime; and 2) direct military intervention in order to overthrow it. The first of these is likely to be tried, but to fail. The second is likely to be judged too risky to try except in the most extreme circumstances.

Friendly Engagement of the New Regime

Contrary to what is widely believed by many, the United States does not always adopt a hostile foreign policy toward revolutionary regimes when they first come to power. Instead, as Robert S. Snyder argued, during the Cold War the U.S. government usually tried to befriend revolutionary regimes in the period just after they overthrew even long-standing American allies. Thus, the United States attempted to establish friendly relations with Castro in Cuba in 1959, and with both the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the ayatollahs in Iran in 1979.¹⁶

But, as Snyder also argued, this policy usually (though not always) fails. Since the end of World War II, revolutionary coalitions that have succeeded in ousting old regimes which had been allied to the United States have been divided into a "moderate" camp which advocates re-establishing normal relations with the United States and an "extremist" camp which sees America as its principal enemy. The dispute between these two groups, however, is not just about what the new regime's relationship with the United States should be, but also—and far more importantly—about which of these two groups will dominate the new regime and which will be eliminated.

What the extremists fear is that the moderates—many of whom may have been educated in America or have other close personal connections in it—will be able to ally with the U.S. government in order to oust them. The emerging friendly contacts between Washington and the moderates convince the extremists that their suspicions are justified. In order to prevent this "plot" from reaching fruition, the extremists decide they must engineer a serious confrontation with the United States which rouses the nationalist (or religious) passions of the citizenry. This crisis serves to discredit the moderates calling for good relations with the United States, and thus make it easier for the extremists to eliminate them. Though perhaps not part of their conscious plan, the crisis also serves to rouse nationalist sentiment in the United States and make it politically impossible for Washington to continue a policy of engagement. Relations between America and the new revolutionary regime, now increasingly dominated by the extremists, rapidly deteriorate.¹⁷

Questions about the validity or general applicability of Snyder's model aside,¹⁸ the prospect for its playing out in the case of Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia appear quite real. The U.S. government (like others) would have a strong incentive to establish good relations with the new regime. If the old regime is overthrown, after all, it would only be pragmatic to try to get along with the new one both to ensure a smooth supply of oil and to moderate the new regime's policies. And there would surely be those in the successful revolutionary coalition who would see having good relations with the United States as preferable to hostile relations with it. This moderate group would place a high priority on domestic economic well-being, and would thus advocate

policies enhancing this goal (such as continuing oil sales) while eschewing those (such as exporting revolution) which would detract from it.

The literature on revolution has long observed that while "moderates" appear to dominate in the period immediately following a revolution, they soon lose out to the "extremists."¹⁹ If this pattern holds true in this case (which assumes that there are any moderates in the first place), the extremists could be expected to act quickly to oust the moderates through, among other actions, provoking a crisis with the United States in order to discredit the moderates domestically, and make it impossible for Washington to collaborate with them.

Once having seized full power for themselves, the extremists could be expected to aggressively pursue their efforts to export revolution. As with other revolutionary regimes when this sequence of events unfolded, any U.S. government effort to engage the new regime in Saudi Arabia could not be sustained. Previous experience has shown that the engagement of revolutionary regimes usually only succeeds (if it does at all) after they have been in power for a considerable period of time and not when the extremists have just come to power. If this pattern holds true following an Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia, a far more robust American foreign policy will be necessary in order to deal with it.

Direct Military Intervention

Swift American military intervention aimed at eliminating an Islamic fundamentalist revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia is a policy that many might advocate. Indeed, such an operation would probably be easier to mount than the recent American-led one in Afghanistan. The largely flat, desert terrain of Saudi Arabia would not provide the advantages to a guerrilla resistance that Afghanistan's mountains with their unusual cave structure do. Nor does the current population of Saudi Arabia have anything like the martial spirit and experience that the present-day population of Afghanistan does.

Yet despite the relative ease with which American military forces could intervene and quickly overthrow an Islamic revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia, there are important reasons why undertaking such a course of action should be avoided except under the most extreme circumstances.

First, while the new regime in Saudi Arabia might quickly reveal itself to be tyrannical, corrupt, and incompetent, an external attack might serve to rally domestic public support for it—as has often occurred in the past when newly arisen revolutionary regimes were attacked.²⁰

Second, even if American forces succeeded in toppling the Islamic fundamentalist regime and overrunning the country quickly, installing (or reinstalling) a "friendly" government would prove extremely difficult. The very fact that it was put (back) in power by the United States could drastically undermine the legitimacy of either the Saudi monarchy or any other "moderate" government we hoped to set up. Washington could be faced with a situation where American forces would become the focus of opposition activity if they remained inside the country, but their withdrawal from it would quickly lead to the downfall of the pro-American regime.

Third, and most importantly, direct American military intervention in the country containing Islam's holiest sites is highly likely to arouse virtually the entire Muslim world against the United States, making it impossible for "moderate" Muslim governments to cooperate with Washington or perhaps even to remain in power. Inflamed Muslim rage

against the United States might also lead to an unending tidal wave of terrorist attacks against American citizens and institutions all over the world. In short, whatever benefit might be obtained by an American military occupation of Saudi Arabia would probably be vastly outweighed by the costs the United States would incur through conflict with the Muslim world from it.

Direct military intervention against an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia, then, should only be undertaken as a last resort if the new regime there, like bin Laden, launches direct attacks against the United States. Presuming that the leadership of the new regime learns from bin Laden's mistakes and does not launch direct attacks on the United States or any of its principal democratic allies but "limits" its foreign policy ambitions to the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world, the U.S. government (along with allied governments as well as American and Western public opinion) is likely to seek foreign policy options for dealing with the new regime entailing less risk of conflict with the broader Muslim world.

Strategies of Containment

This would not, of course, be the first time that the United States faced a set of constraints like this. The Soviet Union was also an opponent which was extremely hostile and which America was unwilling to risk a direct confrontation with—as was the Soviet Union with the United States. Because a direct Soviet-American clash anywhere could have escalated into a catastrophic nuclear war, Washington sought to prevent the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence principally through a less risky, long-term strategy of containment. Because direct American intervention against an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia could escalate into a prolonged American confrontation with the wider Muslim world, Washington might also seek to prevent the expansion of the new revolutionary regime's sphere of influence through such a strategy.

It is the predominantly Muslim nations in the Middle East and elsewhere in Asia and Africa where the ideology—and influence—of the new regime in Saudi Arabia would threaten to spread. American cooperation with non-Muslim states alone, then, will be insufficient to prevent this. Containing the ideology and influence of an Islamic fundamentalist Saudi Arabia elsewhere in the Muslim world will require the active cooperation not just of the governments of predominantly Muslim countries, but also of the publics there as well.

But will Muslim governments be able to cooperate with the United States? Will Muslim publics be willing? If the conflict between the United States and an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia appears to them as a stark choice between "infidel" America and an uprightly Islamic protector of the two holy cities, then the answer to both questions is likely to be "no" in all too many Muslim countries. There are, however, many long-standing conflicts and rifts within the Muslim world. The rise of an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia may well exacerbate some of these and create others. Three such possibilities which could well occur in the aftermath of an Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia are: 1) a revival of the interior vs. coast tensions in the Arabian Peninsula; 2) an exacerbation of Sunni vs. Shia divisions; and 3) the emergence of pan-Islamist vs. narrow nationalist conflicts even among Islamic fundamentalist regimes. How likely each of these developments might be, and how each of them might serve as an opportunity to cooperate with Muslim partners in containing attempts by an Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia to encourage or export its brand of revolution elsewhere will be examined next.

Interior vs. Coast Tensions in the Arabian Peninsula

The five monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula that neighbor Saudi Arabia all have much smaller populations, and are generally much weaker, than the Kingdom. An Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia would immediately raise the prospect either of the new regime in Saudi Arabia directly invading these five states, or of copycat revolutions occurring in them as well as populous but impoverished Yemen. Whatever led to the downfall of the Saudi royal family could be expected to negatively affect the legitimacy of the other Gulf monarchies as well as their ability to defend themselves. The spread of Islamic fundamentalist revolution to these small states, by whatever means, might appear inevitable.

This, however, need not be the case. On several occasions during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the Saudis themselves attempted to spread their austere brand of Islam to the coastal regions of eastern and southern Arabia. The shaykhs and other rulers on the coast were able to resist these efforts with external assistance from Britain. The British did not become the predominant power along these coasts simply through conquest, but because they were able to provide the local rulers with a valuable service—protection against powerful land-based enemies such as the Saudis in the interior.²¹

After the British withdrawal from the region (completed in 1971), the Saudis intermittently pressed territorial claims (some of which were quite substantial) against several of their neighbors, and engaged in occasional border clashes with some (including Qatar and Yemen). Over the years, the Saudis dropped their claims and signed border agreements with each of their neighbors which basically favored the latter.²² Nevertheless, the long history of Saudi border claims against them has left a residue of mistrust in each of the coastal states regarding the intentions of their neighbor in the interior toward them. This mistrust would revive quickly if the Saudi monarchy fell and an Islamic fundamentalist regime replaced it which proclaimed its desire to spread its brand of revolution to the coastal states.

Under such circumstances (especially if they see their very survival as being threatened), the governments of these coastal states on the Arabian Peninsula could be expected to quickly seek American and British protection. Whatever misgivings the people of these countries have about the existing governments, their relatively mild rule is likely to appear preferable to that of the religious zealots from the interior. Even the religiously inclined might think so if the new regime in Saudi Arabia is intolerant of the other variations of Islam found in some of the coastal states.²³

And these states would certainly be worth protecting. Kuwait and the UAE both possess enormous oil reserves while Qatar holds large natural gas reserves.²⁴ Oman is located at the southern end of the Strait of Hormuz—the choke point for all Persian Gulf oil being exported by tanker. Yemen commands the southern entrance to the Red Sea. The highly likely desire of the governments and people of these coastal Arabian countries not to be taken over by those in the interior of the Peninsula would clearly allow the United States an opportunity to prevent the latter from gaining control over all the valuable assets held by the former.

Sunni vs. Shia Divisions

Just like the Taliban in Afghanistan, radical Sunni fundamentalists from Saudi Arabia have given abundant indication that they are profoundly anti-Shia²⁵—the Islamic sect

dominant in Iran which the Islamic Republic's leadership upholds. A Sunni Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia, then, can be expected to be anti-Shia also.

If this actually occurred, the new regime in Saudi Arabia could turn out to be more of a threat to the IRI than the Taliban was (which the IRI came close to conflict with in 1998).²⁶ This is because to the extent that a Sunni fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia proved attractive to Sunni revolutionaries elsewhere, Shia Iran's role within the Islamic revolutionary movement would be increasingly marginalized.

A Sunni fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia might be seen as so threatening to Iran that, despite its previous hostility toward the United States, Tehran would seek a rapid rapprochement with Washington. Nor would such a move be unprecedented: when the virulently anti-American People's Republic of China felt sufficiently threatened by the USSR, it sought rapprochement with the United States in the early 1970s.

In addition, Shias comprise a majority of the population of Iraq,²⁷ while the regime of Saddam Hussein is drawn principally from the Sunni minority. Up to now, one of the principal objections to an external military intervention to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein is that this might lead to the Shia majority taking over the country. It is feared that a Shia-dominated Iraq would ally with the IRI. It is by no means clear that this would actually occur since the Arab-Persian division may be stronger than the common Shia bond, but if Iran became allied to the United States, close ties between the IRI and a Shia-dominated Iraq would no longer be a problem.

At present, it is feared that a Shia-dominated Iraq would be in a far stronger position than Iran to support the Shia opposition in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. While Washington obviously does not wish to see this happen as long as there is a friendly government in Riyadh, it might take a very different view of such a development if a hostile regime came to power in Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, the fact that the Shia population of Saudi Arabia is located predominantly in the Eastern Province, where most of the Kingdom's oil is also located, raises another possibility: the creation of a separate Shia-dominated state independent from the rest of Saudi Arabia.²⁸ The establishment of such a state would deprive a Sunni fundamentalist Saudi Arabia of most of its wealth, thus limiting its ability to export revolution. Further, in that the Sunni fundamentalist regime in the remainder of Saudi Arabia would undoubtedly want to reclaim the Eastern Province, the government of a secessionist state there would have little choice but to seek American protection in order to retain its independence.

A Sunni fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia will not necessarily lead to an Iranian-American rapprochement, a Shia-dominated government friendly toward the United States coming to power in Iraq, or the secession of a Shia-dominated Eastern Province from Saudi Arabia that would also be friendly toward Washington. Each of these, however, is a possibility that might arise (or that the U.S. government might help arise) which would prove useful in limiting the ability of a hostile regime in Saudi Arabia to undermine important neighboring countries.

Pan-Islamist vs. Narrow Nationalist Conflicts

The two previous strategies outlined here may not be completely successful in containing an Islamic fundamentalist Saudi Arabia. Such a regime may succeed in spreading its brand of revolution to some or all of the coastal states of the Arabian Peninsula. Neither Iran nor Iraq may be amenable to cooperation with the United States after the downfall of the Saudi monarchy. Or maybe the two strategies outlined here will work, but an Islamic

fundamentalist revolution will occur somewhere farther afield, such as Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, or anywhere else in the Muslim world.

It seems only prudent to assume that an American-led effort to contain the spread of revolution from an Islamic fundamentalist Saudi Arabia will not be successful everywhere. Although impossible to predict where, it is clearly possible that the Saudi example will spark Sunni fundamentalist revolutionary efforts elsewhere, and that one or more of these will succeed and ally with the new regime in Saudi Arabia.

Should it occur, such a development will be extremely frightening to the non-Muslim world, to moderate Muslim governments, and even to radical secular Muslim governments. Yet even if Sunni fundamentalist revolutions occur in several countries, all will not be lost. As the spread of Marxist-Leninist and Arab nationalist revolutions outside the countries they originated in demonstrated, regimes espousing the same or similar revolutionary ideologies do not always remain—or even become—allied with one another. The USSR ended up having hostile relations with Marxist China, Yugoslavia, and Albania. Nasser's Egypt ended up having hostile relations with Bathist Syria and Iraq (which also had hostile relations with each other).

Disaffection among revolutionary regimes espousing the same or similar ideologies can occur when their leaders want their own country, and not another one, to lead the international revolutionary movement. Or even if they do not have this ambition, revolutionary leaders are often motivated by the nationalist desire that their country not be dominated by another country—even the one where the "mother" revolution took place.²⁹

Even when the revolutionary leaders of one country do acknowledge another country's leadership of their common revolutionary movement, they usually do so in the expectation that they will receive some tangible benefit—such as economic or security assistance—from that other country. If this is not forthcoming, or not forthcoming to the extent that they believe they are entitled to, their acknowledgement of that other country's leadership usually comes to an end.

And when alliances among revolutionary states come to an end, these states often become bitter enemies calling for each other's downfall. When this has happened in the past, one—or even both—parties suddenly found it expedient, despite all past anti-American rhetoric, to turn to Washington for help against what appeared to be a far more dangerous opponent.³⁰

It seems highly likely that a Sunni fundamentalist regime that came to power in a relatively powerful and populous country such as Egypt or Pakistan would think that it deserved to be the center of the international Islamic fundamentalist movement, not Saudi Arabia. Islamic revolutionary regimes in smaller countries might acknowledge the leadership of a Saudi fundamentalist regime in the hope of receiving billions of dollars from it, but would not be willing to follow its lead if this money were not forthcoming (or perhaps even if it was).

Of course, some Islamic revolutionary regimes in other countries might become—and remain—firmly allied to the one in Saudi Arabia. Which, or even whether, different Sunni fundamentalist regimes would fall out with each other can obviously not be predicted when we don't even know where such regimes might arise. But previous experience with Marxist-Leninist, Arab nationalist, and even Islamic fundamentalist regimes indicates that revolutionary regimes espousing the same or similar ideologies often become bitter enemies. When this occurs, the hostility of these regimes becomes redirected away from the United States and its allies, and toward each other. While the United States may not be able to engineer this process, Washington can certainly take advantage of its occurrence.

Conclusion

An Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Saudi Arabia, should it occur, will have profoundly negative consequences for America, the West, and much of the rest of the world. There are basically two reasons for this: 1) such a revolution there could lead to a sustained rise in the price of oil; and 2) an Islamic revolutionary regime in the country containing Islam's two holy cities could do much to encourage the spread of Islamic revolution to other Muslim countries either through supporting this with its oil wealth or just serving as a powerful role model. Attempting to prevent this through direct military intervention against Saudi Arabia would not be productive since such a step would inflame the entire Muslim world against America and the West indefinitely. On the other hand, there are three containment strategies outlined here that the United States can adopt to contain the threat that this will pose.

The containment strategies outlined here would allow America and its allies to take advantage of some of the natural divisions existing in the Arab and Muslim worlds: the interior/coast divide in the Arabian Peninsula, the Sunni/Shia animosity even among the Arabs of this region, and the pan-nationalist/narrow nationalist rift that characterizes international revolutionary movements. While few Muslims, if any, would willingly cooperate with the United States in attacking a revolutionary Saudi Arabia, each of these divisions offers the prospect of yielding partners within the Arab and Muslim worlds willing to cooperate with the United States in the containment of this regime.

But as the Cold War demonstrated, containment may have to be pursued for a considerable period of time before the country it is directed against ceases all efforts to export revolution. This might seem unacceptable to many who fear that much higher oil prices would prevail for however long a revolutionary regime in Saudi Arabia remained in power, and that the world economy would suffer unacceptable damage while waiting for the containment strategies outlined here to work. But as the experience of the "oil crises" of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated, high oil prices over a prolonged period lead to the discovery and development of oil in places where this was not profitable at lower prices. As more oil comes on to the market (from Russia, Central Asia, West Africa, and elsewhere), oil prices are likely to drop dramatically, as they did in the mid-1980s even at the height of the Iran-Iraq war. While damaging to the West initially, these high oil prices, if sustained, will work more to the disadvantage of the Saudi position in the oil market over time. This is surely a far brighter prospect than the deleterious effects on oil prices and the world economy that a prolonged conflict between the United States and the Muslim world as a whole which direct military intervention against a revolutionary Saudi Arabia might lead to.

Like the Soviet Union was before Gorbachev, a revolutionary Saudi Arabia would pose an enormous threat to America and its allies. Dealing with this threat through direct military intervention, though, would be far too risky—just as it would have been against the USSR. But also just as during the Cold War, containment offers a less risky means of dealing with the type of challenge from Saudi Arabia posited here which has not yet come into being, but soon may.

Notes

1. Frank Gardner, "Saudi Monarchy Looks to Troubled Future," *BBC News*, November 24, 2001.
2. Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

3. Richard Burkholder, "The U.S. and the West—Through Saudi Eyes," *The Gallup Poll Tuesday Briefing*, August 6, 2002. See also Robin Allen and Peter Spiegel, "Saudi Arabia 'Risks Backlash' if it Allows U.S. War Base," *The Financial Times*, November 5, 2002, p. 15.

4. For a fuller discussion of this subject, see Mark N. Katz, "Assessing Saudi Susceptibility to Revolution," in Joseph A. Kechichian, ed., *Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 95-110.

5. Charles M. Sennott, "Doubts Are Cast on the Viability of Saudi Monarchy for Long Term," *Boston Globe Online*, March 5, 2002.

6. Even what the country will be called after a revolution cannot be predicted, except that it is most unlikely to have the word "Saudi" in it after the overthrow of the royal family it was named after. I will, though, refer to "Saudi Arabia" here since this is the familiar term for the country.

7. For a discussion of why relations deteriorate between revolutionary regimes and the external allies of the old regimes they replace, see Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 33-37.

8. An analysis of how new revolutionary regimes seek to transform the existing international order—and how they eventually come to abandon this goal—can be found in David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

9. Mark N. Katz, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), ch. 2.

10. For a discussion of the impetus to export revolution, see Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), chs. 3-4. See also Walt, *Revolution and War*, pp. 37-43.

11. The analysis of this relationship is the focus of Walt, *Revolution and War*. For a differing view of the relationship between the two, see Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*, ch. 9. See also Forrest D. Colburn, *The Vogue of Revolution in Poor Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), ch. 6.

12. For a discussion of how Saudi "radicals" assess the religious shortcomings of the Saudi state, see Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000), pp. 119-121, 128-230. See also Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*.

13. See *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* (June 2001), pp. 10, 18.

14. Halliday notes, though, that while both the Iranian and West European governments hoped that Iranian-West European relations could be cooperative during the Khomeini era even when Iranian-American relations were deteriorating sharply, these hopes were largely disappointed. Fred Halliday, "An Elusive Normalization: Western Europe and the Iranian Revolution," *The Middle East Journal* 48:2 (Spring 1994), pp. 311-316.

15. On how differently Americans and Europeans view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see "Foreign Policy: It Works at Home," *The Economist*, April 20, 2002, pp. 27-28.

16. Robert S. Snyder, "The U.S. and Third World Revolutionary States: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 43:2 (June 1999), pp. 265-290.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Snyder's *ISQ* article was heavily criticized by many leftist scholars. One of the most important points they made was that Snyder "ignored" the impact of previous American support for the old regime on the new regime's view of the United States. Snyder responded that whatever degree of support the United States had given to the old regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Iran notwithstanding, Washington did, in fact, try to establish good relations with the new revolutionary regimes in each of these cases, and that these regimes rejected America's overtures. On the debate over Snyder, see "Confronting Bias in International Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 2:4 (November 2001), pp. 416-437.

19. Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*,³ ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), chs. 5-6; Jack A. Goldstone, "An Analytical Framework," in Jack A. Goldstone *et al.*, eds. *Revolutions*

of the Late Twentieth Century (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 44-47; Colburn, *The Vogue of Revolution in Poor Countries*, ch. 4; and Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, "Structural Theories of Revolution," in John Foran, ed., *Theorizing Revolutions* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 59-64.

20. This point is made in Theda Skocpol, "Social Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization," *World Politics* 40:2 (January 1982), pp. 147-168; Walt, *Revolution and War*, p. 42; and Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*, pp. 256-258.

21. J.B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West: A Critical View of the Arabs and their Oil Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980); and John C. Wilkinson, "Britain's Role in Boundary Drawing in Arabia: A Synopsis," in Richard Schofield, ed., *Territorial Foundations of the Gulf States* (London: UCL Press), pp. 94-108.

22. Richard Schofield, "Down to the Usual Suspects: Border and Territorial Disputes in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf at the Millennium," in Kechichian, ed., *Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf States*, pp. 213-236.

23. While Bahrain's Shia majority has frequently expressed its displeasure with the country's Sunni ruling family, the former might find the latter's relatively mild, liberal rule preferable to that of an anti-Shia Sunni fundamentalist regime based in Saudi Arabia. While deeply religious, both the Shias and the Sunnis of Yemen are likely to resent and resist the effort of any Saudi government to stop them from chewing *qat*. The Ibadis of Oman will have little reason to welcome a Sunni fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia since, even now, "In the eyes of the Saudis, Sultan Qaboos is not a Sunni but an Ibadi—a movement Saudis believe is only loosely connected to Islam and will never be recognized by Saudi Arabia's puritanical Wahhabi movement." Nawaf E. Obaid, *The Oil Kingdom at 100: Petroleum Policymaking in Saudi Arabia* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), p. 88-89.

24. While Saudi Arabia was estimated to possess 25.0% of the world's proven oil reserves at the end of 2000, Kuwait was estimated to have 9.2% and the UAE 9.3% of them. While Qatar only had 1.3% of the world's proven oil reserves, it was estimated to possess 7.4% of the world's proven natural gas reserves. *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* (June 2001), pp. 4, 20.

25. Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, pp. 172-3; and Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 194-195.

26. On this episode, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 203-205.

27. Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a*, p. 87.

28. The proportion of the Shi'a population in Saudi Arabia as a whole and the Eastern Province in particular is not clear. According to Fuller and Francke, "in their main region of concentration, the Eastern Province, or al-Hasa', the Shi'a are believed to make up 33 percent of the overall population." *Ibid.*, p. 180.

29. For a discussion of the circumstances under which revolutionary regimes espousing the same or similar ideologies remain allied to each other and those under which they do not, see Katz, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves*, ch. 3.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-129.

Copyright © 2003 EBSCO Publishing