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COMMENTARY

Arabia's Civil War: The Saudis vs. The Extremists

By DANIEL PIPES

The four bombings in Saudi Arabia Monday, which killed dozens, including 10 Americans, are symptomatic of a deep fissure in that country. The argument is over religion, politics and foreigners -- and it goes back a long way. The West must react by helping the Saudi family win this dispute, while putting pressure on it to reform.

Saudi Arabia's origins lie in the mid-eighteenth century, when a tribal leader named Muhammad al Saud joined forces with a religious leader named Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab. The first gave his name to the kingdom that (with the exception of two interim periods) still exists; the second gave his name to the version of Islam that still serves as the kingdom's ideology.

On first appearance, the Wahhabi version of Islam was seen as wildly extreme and was widely repudiated. Its fanatical enmity toward other Muslims and its rejection of long-standing Muslim customs made it anathema, for example, to the Ottoman rulers who dominated the Middle East. The Saudi kingdom disappeared twice because its military and religious aggressiveness made it so loathsome to its neighbors.

The current iteration of the Saudi kingdom came into being in 1902 when a Saudi leader captured Riyadh. Ten years later, there emerged a Wahhabi armed force known as the *Ikhwan* (Arabic for "Brethren") which in its personal practices and its hostility toward non-Wahhabis represented the most militant dimension of this already militant movement. One war cry of theirs went: "The winds of Paradise are blowing. Where are you who hanker after Paradise?"

The Ikhwan served the Saudi family well, bringing it one military victory after another. A key turning point came in 1924, when the father of today's Saudi king captured Mecca from the great-great-grandfather of today's Jordanian king. This victory had two major implications. It vanquished the last remaining rival of the Saudis and established the family as the leading force on the Arabian peninsula. And it brought under Saudi control not just another town but the holiest city of Islam and a cosmopolitan urban area that hosted divergent interpretations of Islam.

These changes turned the Saudi insurgency into a state and brought a desert movement to the city. This meant the Saudi monarch could no longer give the Ikhwan and the traditional Wahhabi interpretation of Islam free reign, but had to control it. The result was a civil war in the late 1920s which ended in the monarchy's victory over the Ikhwan in 1930.

In other words, the less fanatical version of Wahhabism triumphed over the more fanatical. The Saudi monarchs presided over a kingdom extreme by comparison with other Muslim countries but tame by Wahhabi standards.

Yes, the Saudi state deems the Koran to be its constitution, forbids the practice of any religion but Islam on its territory, employs an intolerant religious police, and imposes gender apartheid. But it also enacts non-Koranic regulations, employs large numbers of non-Muslims, constrains the religious police, and allows women to attend school and work.

The Ikhwan may have lost the fight in 1930, but its way of thinking lived on, representing the main opposition to an ever-more grandiose and corrupt Saudi state. The potency of this alternative became startlingly evident in 1979, when an Ikhwan-inspired group violently seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca. On a larger scale, the Ikhwan spirit dominated jihad efforts against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980s. And the Taliban regime that ruled Afghanistan in the period 1996-2001 embodied the Ikhwan in power.

Osama bin Laden, a Saudi who spent formative years in Afghanistan, is the leading representative of the Ikhwan movement today. He wants to depose the corrupt and hypocritical Saudi monarchy, install a Taliban-like government, evict non-Muslim foreigners, and return women to the harem. His vision has real appeal in Saudi Arabia; it's widely reported that in a fair election, he would handily defeat the current ruler, King Fahd.

Thus, the recent violence in Riyadh ultimately reflects not just a hatred of Americans but a titanic clash of visions and a struggle for power; in this, it recapitulates the civil war of the 1920s. Is Saudi Arabia to remain a monarchy that at least partially accommodates modernity and the outside world? Or is it to become the Islamic Emirate of Arabia, a reincarnation of the Taliban's completely regressive rule in Afghanistan?

For the outside world, the choice is clear; however unattractive, the Saudi monarchy is preferable to the yet worse Ikhwan alternative. This implies a two-step approach: help the monarchy defeat its Ikhwan-inspired enemy and put serious pressure on the kingdom to reform everything from its school system to its sponsorship of Wahhabi organizations abroad.

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