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Violence and Political Change in Saudi Arabia

JOE STORK

For the past year, I and colleagues from Human Rights Watch have met in various Arab countries with civil society activists, to discuss attacks against civilians as serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law. Our goal is to gauge to what extent such attacks enjoy public support, particularly in opinion-shaping circles that may be sympathetic to the professed objectives of the perpetrator groups. We then explore ways of raising in those circles critical voices against such attacks, as a way of influencing the perpetrator groups to end those policies.

Together with a colleague from our Cairo office, I spent the first week of December 2006 meeting with a range of individuals, for the most part persons out of favour with the government and representing Islamist perspectives.¹ Many had been active in the establishment, in 1993, of the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate (Sharia) Rights (CDLR), as well as the different public petitions calling for political reforms. Many had spent years in prison for their efforts, lost their jobs, and today remain banned from media appearances and travel.

We stressed that our concern was with attacks that target or indiscriminately harm civilians, and that there is a broad convergence between international human rights and humanitarian law standards and Islamic principles that traditionally govern the use of violence. Under international law, such attacks constitute war crimes when carried out in conditions of armed conflict and crimes against humanity when carried out as organization policy.

Those we met agreed on two points. First, public support for violent opposition groups, or at least reluctance to condemn such violence, is politically motivated by the close relationship between the Saudi government and the United States despite the latter's policies in Iraq and the Palestine-Israel conflict. Second, the Saudi government must end its systematic suppression of basic civil and political rights, especially freedom of expression, to allow peaceful challenges to the status quo. There was also widespread agreement, though not consensus, on a third point: that the state's accommodation of a religious establishment whose intolerance toward non-Muslims and Muslims who do not subscribe to the official Wahhabi interpretation of Islam has nurtured violent dissent, and that any successful political liberalization requires religious reform as well, especially in the education sector.

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"Only civil society can fight terror"

Virtually all our interlocutors agreed that "behind the violence is oppression, injustice, and occupation," referring to conditions in the Arab world. With regard to Saudi Arabia itself, they stressed as well the "zero framework for civil society and no independent judiciary," in the words of Matruk al-Falih, a political science professor at King Saud University. The state, he and others said, was just as hostile to their peaceful criticisms as to the challenge of the violent groups. "A nine-year prison term for suggesting a constitution!" said Abdullah al-Hamid, a former

Few societies are more identified with Islamist armed violence than Saudi Arabia—country of origin of Usama bin Laden and 15 of the 9/11 hijackers, as well as more than a thousand insurgents in Iraq, and itself the site of attacks on expatriate housing compounds. The author draws on discussions with Saudi activists and intellectuals to reflect on ambivalent public and elite attitudes toward this violence. The author's interlocutors attribute this "neutrality" to the accommodating relationship between a repressive state and an intolerant religious establishment, and argue that only a vibrant civil society can combat such violence.

professor of literature and reform activist, referring to jail terms handed down to himself, al-Falih, and another activist.² "Proponents of violence point to that and say, see what your peaceful petitions get you. Our main demand is, protect civil society. Only civil society can fight terror."

In the view of a former newspaper editor, "the culture of radicalism here is not new, so what has empowered this murderous violence now?" Most of those we met agreed with his view that "the essence of the [violence] problem is political. Its widening character

derives from the U.S. occupation of Iraq, U.S. policy towards Palestine, and the perceived submission of the Arab regimes to the U.S." A university professor and a student at King Saud University confided that there is virtually no discussion of the violence or other political issues in the university for fear of the consequences of speaking out. To the extent that these things are discussed, the professor said, students do not condone the violence but "they do ask why it is happening."

Accommodating intolerance

Most also attributed the absence of public opposition to violent attacks that have harmed civilians to a complex and largely accommodating relationship between the state and a religious establishment imbued with zealotry and intolerance toward non-Muslims and Muslims that do not subscribe to the official Wahhabi version of Islam. Religious reform needed to be an integral part of, if not a prerequisite for, political reform.

A lawyer who defends non-violent dissidents, and has himself been jailed for his efforts, said top officials are content to attribute the problem to outside forces and insist that the domestic culture is fine, while "those who see a built-in problem, who pose deep criticism of Wahhabi ideology and its role in the state, who think military suppression is not enough—we have no outlet in the Saudi media. Electronic forums advocate violence but these were not blocked, unlike those of us reformists." Authorities "look the other way" when extremists threaten intellectuals and reformers and only respond when they target the state itself, he claimed, citing an incident the previous week at Al-Yamanah College when militants violently disrupted a theatre production but faced no investigation or prosecution.

Another factor explaining public tolerance for these attacks, according to the former newspaper editor, who has been close to *Sahwa* circles, is "the Wahhabi legacy" of providing religious rulings (*fatawa*) to expedite the conquests of the Al Saud.³ "How can we [the forces led by the Al Saud] attack this peaceful settlement? With a ruling that says villages that refuse to ally with us are *kafir*. How can we fight the last [Ottoman] Caliph? Get a ruling that declares him to be *kafir*." "These rationalizations go counter to Islamic culture," he claimed, but they have now helped re-define the culture—a culture reproduced in schools and much of the Saudi media.

"The *Sahwa* never approved of the pro-Afghanistan policy of the state," the former editor added, "but they also didn't confront it. Why did some *Sahwa* adherents join those 'Afghans'? One reason was their louder voice, and then there was the fantastic mobilizing impact of September 11 [2001], which exposed the *Sahwa* as ineffectual, with nothing to show for our boycotts and petitions." In his view, the current atmosphere of reform has left the *takfiriyyin* [those who proclaim others to be apostates and therefore subject to killing] more isolated, "but they still have the louder voices. And the issue of killing civilians is never discussed in Saudi Arabia. It is kept under the table."

"People don't support violence or nonviolence, but fight for rights. Those harmed by the state will not criticize those fighting the state, even violently."

“Neutral” about violence

Although all of those with whom we met asserted a strong opposition to attacks against civilians, several Islamist activists challenged our characterization of particular attacks, claiming the attackers targeted military contractors or secret police and therefore suggesting these attacks were legitimate. The groups responsible, they said, were responding to heavy-handed policies of the Saudi security services and the government’s close association with the U.S. One interlocutor claimed that the perpetrators of such attacks see “the U.S. fighting Muslims the world over, not distinguishing between civilians and military. Those allied with the U.S.”—i.e., the Saudi government—“are just as responsible.”

“Most of us [Islamist activists] don’t agree with these attacks, killing innocents, Muslims or Westerners,” this person continued. “This is forbidden, unacceptable.” But, he claimed, most Saudis are “neutral” regarding attacks on Westerners. He characterized the 12 May 2003 suicide car bombings in Riyadh as “against military consultants”—and therefore not in the same category as the attacks targeting civilians that were our concern.⁴ A former university professor at one point closely associated with Shaykh Safar al-Hawali, a prominent cleric with the Sahwa movement, said, “people don’t support violence or nonviolence, but fight for rights. Those harmed by the state will not criticize those fighting the state, even violently.”

These two individuals also disputed the view that the prevailing political culture in Saudi Arabia, particularly as reflected in the education system, lays at the root of the armed groups’ violence and public support for them. “Millions of students have passed through our schools” without becoming armed militants, one said. Criticism of education policies was part of what he claimed many Saudis saw as “a comprehensive liberal campaign against conservative masses.” Popular perceptions of this “campaign,” he said, “helped make people neutral”—i.e. uncritical—about the use of violence.

Challenging the system

Two other meetings underscored the critical need for educational and religious reform in addressing public attitudes towards political violence. These were with men I would characterize as Islamic but not Islamist—religious scholars but not adherents of clerical rule or governance oversight. Hassan al-Malki grew up near the border with Yemen and was already a prayer leader there when, at 21, he left to attend Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University. There, he told us, he was shocked by the intolerance, especially against Shia, and he became a critic of this *takfiri* ideology. Al-Malki said that at the time when he was a student the curriculum, in contrast to the growing trend among students and teachers, was moderate, “but the Wahhabis have rewritten it. The educational system now produces 200,000 radicals a year.” You can criticize the radicals, he said, but not the system that produces them, and the state tolerates radicalism “as long as it doesn’t directly challenge their legitimacy.” Al-Malki wrote a critique of Saudi curricula, which coincidentally appeared just after September 2001, and the then-minister of education enlisted him as a consultant on curriculum reform. The minister “liked what I came up with, but it was killed by others in the ministry and I was dismissed.” Al-Malki’s own books are banned, and the ministry of interior prohibits him from lecturing. Many share his views, he believes, some even among state officials and in the religious establishment. But there is not much critical discussion in the universities, where “discussions head in more extreme directions.”

Al-Malki recommended we meet with a younger religious scholar who has suffered a similar fate for criticizing the religious establishment on its own terms. In this man’s view, it is easy enough to identify those proponents of an Islamic state who physically attack their critics. It is more difficult to know those who hold similar views but, in his words, “use the cover of religion and the law to get their way.” He said his troubles began a year or so before September 2001. He was preparing his MA thesis and teaching at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh when he spoke at an event on issues of belief, tolerance, and “equality of voices” in Islam. Because “these were considered taboo,” the university suspended him from teaching and refused to let him continue to work on his degree. He said he was unable to determine who was actually responsible for his dismissal. “It’s easier to come out against the government than to oppose this shadow group,” by which he meant the religious establishment embedded in the state. He has since applied to finish his degree, but said that no university



PHOTO BY BILAL QABLAN / © AFP, 2004

Security services’ headquarters partially destroyed by an explosion, Riyadh, 21 April 2004

would accept him, and the authorities have banned him from working and from speaking in mosques. Those who practice violence are arrested or killed and are forgotten, he said, but those who promote the intolerance that feeds this violence “leave [behind] their teachings and their books.”

Abd al-Aziz al-Gassim, a religious scholar and former judge whose involvement with the CDLR in the mid-1990s led to his arrest and dismissal, saw that period as a high point in public interest in human rights issues in the kingdom. “As our confrontation with the authorities cooled down, so did interest in human rights.” Suppression of the CDLR was followed in 1995 and 1996 by bombings against U.S. military contractors and soldiers—the onset of opposition armed violence. Prevailing values, he said, include the idea that “you can spill the blood of an innovator without committing a crime.” It was no great leap for armed groups to assume “they could decide whom it was permissible to kill.” The attacks of 9/11 brought to the fore the issue of the legitimate use of violence, “but the debate showed the weakness of human rights beliefs and standards here.” This accounts, in his view, for the high level of support in Saudi Arabia at that time for Bin Laden and Al-Qaida. “Islamic thought hasn’t developed legal reasoning for peaceful resistance,” he said. “It’s either unquestioning obedience, even to a corrupt state, or armed revolt. So we need to treat the crimes of armed groups in a framework that includes political rights, and where the space is wide enough to exercise those rights. We can see here that when there is a positive response to demands for reform, support for armed groups subsides.”

Notes

1. Human Rights Watch issued a public statement on the visit on 18 December: “Saudi Arabia Blocks Promised Access to Prisons,” <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/12/18/saudia14892.htm>.
2. Al-Falih, al-Hamid, and writer Ali al-Dumaini were detained in March 2004 after refusing to sign a pledge to cease all public criticism of the government. A court sentenced them in May 2005 to six, seven, and nine years respectively. In August 2005, King Abdullah pardoned them but they still are banned from travel and from access to Saudi media.
3. The *Sahwa Islamiyya* (Islamic Awakening) is the term adopted by the Islamist opposition that took shape in universities in the 1970s and 1980s and attained a public profile in the early 1990s under influential Wahhabi shaykhs.
4. One of the three simultaneous Riyadh bombings on 12 May 2003 was against the housing compound of the U.S.-based Vinnell Corporation, which provides military training and other security-related services; the other two attacks killed and maimed dozens of Europeans, South Asians, and Saudis at other residential compounds.

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