



Asking 'Why'



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By Michael Klare

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I. Introduction

This essay is by Michael Klare, Five College Professor of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College, and is based on a talk he gave at Smith College on September 13, 2001.

Klare argues that the September 11 attacks stemmed from opposition to the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia and its relationship with the US. He states that the best way to respond is to carry out coordinated international police action against the perpetrators of the attacks while pushing the Saudi regime to allow a more open political system.

II. Essay By Michael Klare

Asking "Why"

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Ever since Tuesday, Sept. 11, I have been asking myself "why?" --Why did they do it? What could possibly drive a dozen or so people to such a fever pitch of rage and anger that they would not only kill thousands of ordinary American people but also kill themselves in the process? Consider that the perpetrators of the attack (about 20 or so) got up that day and said to themselves, today we will die. I think its almost impossible for us in this country to conceive of what would drive people to this state of rage. And we are certainly getting no help on this from government officials or the usual crowd of pundits, who seem to be avoiding this very question. Instead, all we hear is talk of unidentified "terrorists" and "enemies." But we have to understand these people, if we are to protect ourselves and the world from this type of slaughter.

Simply on the basis of what we witnessed on September 11 and what is known of the likely

perpetrators, I believe that the people who took over the planes were (from THEIR point of view) engaged in a holy war to drive the United States out of the Persian Gulf area. This is a war, as they see of it, of the strong and resolute in spirit but weak in military power against those who are weak or corrupt in spirit but strong in military power. Throughout history, the weapon of those who see themselves as strong in spirit but weak in power has been what we call terrorism. Terrorism is the warfare of the weak against the strong: if you have an army, you wage war; if you lack an army, you engage in suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism. (Remember: this is exactly what the American Revolution looked like to the British, the strong force in 1775.)

So what is it they seek? What are the goals of this war against the United States?

To understand their goals, we have to look at the Middle East, and particularly at the U.S. role and presence in the region - especially in the Persian Gulf area. From the point of the United States, the Persian Gulf - or more specifically, Persian Gulf oil - is essential to the security of the United States. This was made explicit in the "Carter Doctrine" speech of January 23, 1980, issued just after the Iranian Revolution. Carter declared: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America [and] will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." This was the basis upon which President Bush senior launched Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and upon which President Clinton vastly expanded the U.S. military presence in the Gulf area over the past eight years.

In examining the U.S. military role in the Gulf, special attention has to be paid to the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is not just another oil country - it alone possesses one-fourth of the world's known oil reserves. No other country comes even close to Saudi Arabia in terms of total oil reserves. The Western world would not be able to enjoy the level of growth and prosperity we have seen over the past few decades without the cheap and abundant oil of Saudi Arabia, and we will be even less able to do so in the future, as other supplies run out. For this reason, U.S. policy in the Gulf has always centered on Saudi Arabia, with which the United States maintains a very special relationship.

This relationship was first forged in 1945, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with King Abdel-Aziz ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi regime. In that meeting, President Roosevelt concluded an extraordinary bargain with ibn Saud: in return for unlimited and perpetual U.S. access to Saudi oil, the United States would protect the Saudi Royal family against its enemies, both external and internal.

This bargain has shaped U.S. foreign and military policy ever since. At first, we relied principally on the British (the original hegemon in the region) to protect our interests, but, since 1972 (when the British departed), we have assumed direct responsibility for the protection of the Saudi regime. This was most evident in August 1990, when the Iraqis invaded Kuwait: it was not the occupation of Kuwait that drove the original Bush Administration (meeting at Camp David on August 3-4, 1990) to decide to intervene in the Gulf, but the fear that Saddam Hussein was aiming to take over Saudi Arabia. All of the original plans for Operation Desert Shield - the prelude to Operation Desert Storm - were aimed at inserting a protective force between Iraqi forces in Kuwait and the major oilfields in Saudi Arabia. Since then, the United States has maintained (and steadily expanded) a military presence in the Gulf whose primary purpose is to prevent any future attack on Saudi Arabia, whether from Iraq or Iran.

But while such actions, focused on EXTERNAL threats to Saudi Arabia, have been the most visible expression of U.S. involvement, the United States has also gone to great lengths to defend the Saudi regime against its INTERNAL enemies. The primary instrument of Saudi internal security is the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), which is almost entirely armed, trained, and managed by the

United States (largely through a network of military contractors). When anti-regime elements in Saudi Arabia staged a brief revolt in 1981, SANG was sent in to crush the rebellion. When asked about this incident, then President Ronald Reagan told reporters: "I will not permit [Saudi Arabia] to be an Iran," meaning the U.S. would not stand by and permit the overthrow of the Saudi regime, as it had in Iran in 1979.

This remains the basis of U.S. policy in Saudi Arabia. And this is where our current troubles begin. The government we back in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi royal family, is an autocratic, totalitarian regime that allows no public expressions of dissent. There is no constitution, no Bill of Rights, no political parties, no freedom of the press or assembly, no parliament. Those who express any forms of dissent are arrested and put in jail, exiled (as in the case of Osama bin Laden), or executed. In this environment, any form of opposition to the regime, whatever its orientation, must operate underground, and in secrecy.

It was in this environment of repression and secrecy that the milieu of Osama bin Laden and his followers emerged. From what we know of their beliefs, these rebels believe that the Saudi regime is fundamentally corrupt and evil - corrupt both in the economic sense, that it has squandered the wealth of the Arab nation on palaces and other forms of conspicuous consumption (thereby denying the Arab world of essential resources), and in the moral sense, that it has allied itself with the United States (which is the primary backer of the anti-Islamic regime in Israel) and allowed infidels (American soldiers) into the holy land of Islam. Because it is corrupt and evil in this way, they believe, it is anti-Islamic. Because it is anti-Islamic, it must be swept away by a jihad, a holy war. Because the United States is the primary protective force of the Saudi regime, it must be driven out of the region so that the true Islamists can clear out the corrupt Saudi regime and establish an authentic Islamic state (like that of the Taliban in Afghanistan). And because the soldiers in this holy struggle to oust the American military are very weak (in the military sense), they must rely on terrorism to accomplish their objectives.

And so: to accomplish their ultimate goal, the bin Laden network (and others with which it is linked) must make war against the United States, so as to drive them out of the region. Initially, this war effort focused on U.S. military assets within Saudi Arabia itself. This was the genesis of the November 1995 bombing of the SANG headquarters in Riyadh (in which five U.S. servicemen attached to SANG were killed) and the June 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, which killed 19 U.S. military personnel. When this failed to drive out the United States, they attacked U.S. facilities outside the region, such as the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. And because this didn't produce the desired effect, they have brought the war to the United States. In all cases, however, the goal is the same: to drive the United States out of Saudi Arabia. By attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I believe, they hope to diminish America's will to retain its forces in Saudi Arabia. I do not think that they will succeed at that, but I do think that this was the intended aim of the attacks on September 11.

What does all this mean? There are no quick and easy answers. I do think that the people behind the September 11 attacks will strike again and again, until they achieve their ultimate objective. So we cannot expect the attacks to stop (though, no doubt, the form of the attacks will change). And so we will have to take action to protect people against further outbreaks of violence.

Does this mean conducting a war in the Middle East, as proposed by the current Bush Administration? No doubt such action will severely impede the operations of bin Laden's networks, but I doubt very much that it will eliminate his capacity to attack, in that his forces are widely dispersed and demonstrably capable of operating independently from multiple locations. Much more serious, a war of this sort will produce enormous numbers of Muslim casualties, further discrediting the conservative monarchies aligned with Washington and producing thousands of fresh volunteers

for bin Laden's jihad against the United States.

So I think that we have to take a different approach, based on coordinated, unrelenting international police work aimed at identifying bin Laden's cells and eradicating them one by one. To gain international support for this effort and to give it widespread legitimacy, such an effort should be conducted in the context of a U.N.- mandated war crimes tribunal, such as that now operating in The Hague to try perpetrators of war crimes in Bosnia and Kosovo.

At the same time, we will have to conduct a moral crusade against bin Laden, portraying HIM as the enemy of Islam, on the grounds that no TRUE believer in the Islamic tradition could take innocent human lives in this manner. To succeed at this, however, we will have to reassess U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf, showing more sympathy for the Arab Muslim masses and calling on the Saudi regime to announce a timetable for democratization and the provision of basic human rights. Only when Saudi citizens are allowed to express their grievances in a lawful, peaceful manner will it be possible to eliminate the threat of anti- American jihad.

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