

PolicyWatch #397

## Saudi Arabia Releases Leading Islamists

By Joshua Teitelbaum

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Crown Prince Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz, who has run the affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the ailing King Fahd since November 1995, released four of the country's leading Sunni radical fundamentalists on June 25; they had served nearly five years. The most well-known of them, Shaykhs Salman bin Fahd al-Awdah and Safar bin Abd al-Rahman al-Hawali, were arrested in September 1994 after anti-government demonstrations in the central Arabian city of Burayda. The release of the dissidents indicates that Abdallah, as he prepares himself to become king, wants to begin a new chapter in the regime's relations with the Islamic opposition. Although these Islamists pose no direct threat to the United States, Abdallah's decision to release them indicates that the crown prince is interested in improving relations with the Saudi populace. This preference means, *inter alia*, that the future king may not always be as supportive of American policy as King Fahd has been.

**Background: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition.** Although widely conceived as already being one of the most strictly Islamic and even fundamentalist states, the kingdom has had its share of troubles from Islamic oppositionists, both majority Sunni and minority Shii, who challenge the way in which the Saudi royal family has applied Islam. The Sunnis among them have also called into question the regime's marginalization of popular *ulama* (religious leaders) while taking under its wing those of the *ulama* who are more pliant.

> The history of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is partially one of competing tendencies: the centralizing tendencies of the Saudi family, and the centrifugal tendencies of more conservative forces interested in preserving traditional, tribal state structures. The Al Saud succeeded in coopting religious forces and thereby gaining needed religious legitimacy, but the family kept them out of politics. Yet those opposed to centralization, and wishing a political role, have often reappeared during the course of the Saudi state. For instance, in November 1979, influenced by the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, former Saudi Arabian National Guard soldier Juhayman al-Utaybi led an attack and occupied the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Juhayman and his followers were finally removed after a battle lasting several days.

**The Awakening Shaykhs.** The Gulf War was a vortex in Saudi politics, an event so cataclysmic that it sucked in all and sundry. It led to a questioning of long-held views of the nature of the relationship between state and society, as well as the role that Islam should play in this relationship. Leading the questioning were Shaykhs Hawali and Awdah, both *ulama* and charismatic preachers in their forties. "It is not the world against Iraq," stated Hawali. "It is the West against Islam. If Iraq had occupied Kuwait, then America has occupied Saudi Arabia. The real enemy is not Iraq. It is the West." Awdah maintained that Americans were coming to harvest the failure of the Saudi state, which believed more in President George Bush than in God. The two shaykhs soon earned the sobriquet "Awakening Shaykhs," demonstrating their leadership of a movement for Islamic revival.

Awdah and Hawali were instrumental in formulating two radical fundamentalist protest manifestos that were submitted to the Saudi authorities. The first of these became known as the "Letter of Demands" of May 1991. It called, *inter alia*, for a consultative council, a foreign policy based on the sharia, an independent judiciary, and the reform of religious institutions. The document represented the first organized

attempt by the radical ulama to increase the power of religious figures in political decision-making and was a rejection of their marginalization. Publication of the letter also violated the established norm, wherein public criticism of the state is not allowed. Many radical fundamentalists were arrested.

> Government attempts to placate the opposition by such moves as announcing a hamstrung consultative council in March 1992 did not satisfy the radicals. In the summer of 1992, the Awakening Shaykhs and their followers submitted a comprehensive program, the "Memorandum of Exhortation." It elaborated on the Letter of Demands, and added that the radical ulama demanded access to official radio and television to preach their views. Thus they sought to remove the government and the official ulama from their role as arbiters of Islam in the state, returning religion to the more decentralized character it had enjoyed many years ago.

**The Burayda Demonstration.** Although asked by the authorities to halt their activities, the Awakening Shaykhs continued to preach against the government, defending their right to make what they called dawah, calling the people and the state to the proper Islamic path. Awdah, for instance, attacked a particularly sacred cowthe kingdom's soccer team, which had made it to the 1994 World Cup tournament in the United States. He appealed to Saudi students at U.S. universities to ignore the "soccer farce." For his antigovernment preaching, Hawali was detained in early September, and fearing he might be next, Awdah went into hiding. He reappeared in Burayda, in central Saudi Arabia, at the head of an unprecedentedly large demonstration, after which he too was arrested. Hundreds of supporters were also detained.

The two shaykhs have never called for violence, as has the much more radical Usama bin Ladin. Nor are they connected to the November 1995 bombing of the Office of the Program Manager/Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM/SANG) facility in Riyadh, or the more deadly attack on the barracks of the 4404th Fighter Wing (Provisional) in Dhahran better known as Khobar Towers in June 1996. Even so, these men represent and speak for a deeply held anti-American sentiment; the extent of this sentiment, however, is a matter of debate.

**Why Release the Shaykhs?** The shaykhs may have been under house-arrest for some time. After their release, they were free to return to their home towns and they are apparently receiving telephone calls; indeed, their supporters have posted their telephone numbers and e-mail addresses on the internet. It is not clear if they have agreed to remain outside politics this was a condition they rejected in the past but they may have agreed to keep the authorities informed about their activities.

Crown Prince Abdallah has already demonstrated that he intends to follow a different path than that of King Fahd. His Iranian policy is a *volte-face*; relations between Tehran and Riyadh are now the best in years. He has invited foreign investment in oil and has undertaken many visits overseas to make his presence felt. His recent statements suggest he will allow local authorities discretion to allow women to drive (albeit with certain limitations).

> It appears that Abdallah deemed the time right for turning over a new leaf with the opposition as well. The Awakening Shaykhs have, after all, scrupulously avoided criticizing the crown prince; their attacks have all been on the king and his full brothers, known as the Sudairi seven after their mother's clan (Abdallah is one of Fahd's half- brothers). Perhaps to forestall those brothers' criticism of his action, Abdallah had the interior minister, a Sudairi brother, meet the shaykhs upon their release.

Despite that release, however, the shaykhs remain on probation. Should they stir up trouble, Abdallah would not hesitate to send them back to prison.

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