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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Our Friends the Saudis

There was a day when those words didn't invite cynicism. Since World War II, the mutual interests involved in America's need for Saudi oil and the Saudis' need for American protection created a happy marriage of convenience. Recent events on Capitol Hill, however, suggest that too many inside the U.S. and Saudi governments have not yet grasped that this old model was forever buried in the rubble of 9/11.

It's not just that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals. It's that subsequent investigations have exposed the nastier aspects of a Saudi regime that has tried to straddle the fence between an America it knows it needs and an extremist Wahhabi Islam movement it only now seems to realize it can't buy off.

A hearing last Thursday before the Senate Government Affairs Committee exposed the two large public questions at issue: Whether the Saudis are doing all they should to crack down on terrorists and their support network, and whether our own government has been too inclined to look the other way when they don't.

Let's start with two uncontested facts. The first is that Saudi Arabia is the "epicenter" of funding for terrorism in general and al Qaeda in particular. That's not our word. That was the Senate testimony only a month ago of David Aufhauser, general counsel for the Treasury Department.

The other disturbing fact is that two years after 9/11 the Saudis still have not yet done all they need to do to stop the flow of Saudi money to the world-wide terror network. Again this is not our judgment. Secretary of State Colin Powell said as much in a radio interview earlier this week in which he applauded the Saudis for their "especially aggressive" cooperation but noted America still has "issues" with them on terrorist financing.

Now, we're prepared to believe the Saudis when they say they're helping us more than most Americans know. In recent weeks, they have arrested or killed a number of al Qaeda operatives and cracked down on extremist clerics. The FBI's acting director for counterterrorism, John Pistole, confirmed to the Senate that Saudi cooperation has been "unprecedented," though he says "the jury's still out" on terror financing.

Mr. Pistole, moreover, was careful to date Saudi cooperation to very recently -- the May 12 bombing in Riyadh. Like others, he saw the bombing as a "wake-up call" to the House of Saud. And he added that a particular FBI sore spot was the Saudi government's continued willingness to pick up the legal tab for Saudi citizens charged here in connection with terrorist investigations, something the FBI views as "tantamount to buying off a witness."

Richard Newcomb, director of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, raised equally disquieting questions. Essentially he confirmed that in a number of instances where Treasury had recommended that specific Saudi charities be placed on the terror watch list, its recommendation was rejected by the U.S. interagency group responsible. Sometimes this was for appropriate reasons, such as an ongoing FBI investigation. But frequently, he confirmed, it was because of objections from the State Department.

Mr. Newcomb made clear that Treasury does not recommend a charity for the terror list without ironclad evidence that can stand up in federal court. No doubt there are legitimate law-enforcement and intelligence concerns about making all of this public. But there's no reason for the Bush Administration not to make good on

Mr. Newcomb's promise, stated at an open hearing, to give Maine Republican Susan Collins an answer to her more telling question: How often were Treasury's recommendations about Saudi charities vetoed?

The larger point is that America's post-9/11 relationship with Saudi Arabia is no longer a matter of private diplomacy that can be resolved by President Bush and Prince Bandar at the Crawford ranch. To the contrary, the American public and its representatives are now involved, and properly so given the consequences of terror.

The White House is simply not going to be able to get away with the same old secrecy. The furor over the Administration's recent insistence on redacting 28 pages of a 9/11 report related to the Saudis has made that clear enough. The Saudi question has finally given opportunistic Democrats a chance to get to the President's political right on fighting terror.

We are not indifferent to the worry that destabilizing the regime in Saudi Arabia could lead to its replacement by one far more hostile to U.S. interests. But if Saudi foot-dragging these last two years has taught us anything, it's that the divided royal family in Riyadh will never be able to muster the resolve to assist on terror without more or less constant U.S. pressure.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, President Bush vowed that henceforth nations will have to choose between America and its enemies. Right now Americans need an equally public demonstration that this applies to the Saudis too.

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