

Saudi Arabia: Difficult choices

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We must keep our country safe and united at a time of regional upheaval

I realize that Saudi Arabia has many challenges and issues of concern in light of recent political upheavals in the region. Yemen is next door and remains a troublesome neighbor; Bahrain has significant domestic challenges which cannot be ignored, given its strategic importance to the Kingdom; and Syria and Lebanon have always been a source of worry. The events in Egypt erupted like a volcano that no one was expecting and it needs more time to recover after the fall of Mubarak. Tunisia is another unexpected development and Libya seems to be on the verge of a difficult political transition. Iran poses a threat not only for Saudi Arabia and the region but for the entire world.

As the undisputed leader of the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia has a great responsibility, especially with its strategic location, oil and other natural resources. Saudi Arabia is not a Zaire or Myanmar, but a country of immense size and importance. Yet, the Kingdom's internal situation is very complicated and demands that we examine the choices facing the country. The religious establishment still lives in the past, but its powerful role cannot be disregarded or underestimated. Further, our young people have numerous concerns including jobs and more personal freedom. The issues of terrorism and the need to maintain safety and security in such a huge and important country require serious attention.

Now, I am fully aware that theory is one thing, but reality is quite different.

As we consider these challenges, we must always put ourselves in the shoes of the political decision-makers and the pressures they face daily. So, what can be done to maintain and advance Saudi Arabia's unity and stability while it exists in such an explosive region that is experiencing extraordinary and unprecedented turmoil? It seems that there are only three possible options.

First Option: Count fully on the United States to support Saudi Arabia in the event of any crisis that may erupt in the country regardless of its cause or nature. This option may have merit if the danger were external, but let's be clear: America will not intervene to protect our country or any other nation if the threat is internal. The proof of this is how quickly America abandoned its closest allies such as Iran under the Shah, the Philippines during the regime of Ferdinand Marcos, and now Mubarak in Egypt. This should not come as any surprise since all nations focus solely on their own interests and strategic goals. Therefore, it is not realistic for Saudi Arabia to rely on the United States, in spite of the special relationship that currently exists between our two countries.

Second Option: Try to enhance the power of the religious establishment and depend upon its support and influence on all aspects of the life of the Saudi people to protect the country from all challenges. Certainly, this option has legitimacy for two reasons: First, Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the nation was born out of the Muslim religion. Secondly, there are political, legal and ethical commitments toward the religious establishment that can never be disregarded or ignored which exist since the first day of the country's foundation. However,

although this option may be appropriate in the near future, it will pose a major danger to Saudi Arabia in the long run because of the following:

1. The religious establishment is outmoded and soon is expected to lose its control and domination over the lives of Saudi citizens, especially in light of modern technology and unprecedented international media openness. It is obvious that its approach is based on custodianship, creatorship, suppression of personal and social freedom, and infringement of the rights of women and young. The young will likely explode one day and reject the pressure on them. With time, such an attitude will engender more resentment toward religious authorities, especially among young people. Given the rapid pace of modern life, this failure to change and be flexible will harm rather than help our country.
2. The religious establishment also is likely to become too powerful, and the only goal for it is to seek more political power. Islamic history is full of evidence where power corrupts absolutely. Osama Bin Laden, for example, started as an individual who had a noble religious message but as time passed on, his political ambition was so obvious and he used (and indeed abused) Islam to try and further his political objectives.
3. If the level of religious doctrines and dosages imposed for certain purposes in everyday life increases in any society beyond the normal mental and spiritual capacity of human beings in modern life, which seems to be the case in the Kingdom, it will certainly backfire such as what happened in the 1980s during the call for jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Third Option: Rely on openness, transparency, democracy, human rights, and personal freedom in building the civil and political institutions for Saudi Arabia and speak to the new generation in truth about what is facing them today and not sometime in the past. We must also continue to maintain positive international relations with all nations, including the United States and developed nations, and de-emphasize the influence of the religious establishment over the lives of Saudi citizens so they can breathe normally and live a healthy and productive life. This can happen only if religious authorities are challenged by the Saudi government to moderate their role in society and not simply control the people. Of course, the religious establishment should be treated with respect, but it has to realize this is the 21st century, not the Dark Ages.

There is no question that the Saudi people fully support and are loyal to the royal family from the great founder, King Abdulaziz, to the age of King Abdullah. However, our country must search for alternative ways of planning to implement this third and final strategic option in order to keep the country safe, secure, stable and united while the region is going through such drastic political changes.

I sincerely hope that Saudi Arabia is ready to embrace this choice even if it takes many years.

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