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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional role of the media in Saudi Arabia is serving the government, which in practice means buffing the ruler's ego. Newspapers and television broadcasts typically dwell on what the King is doing that day. Tedious national occasions are celebrated at length and much airtime is given over to the shaking of hands, kissing of babies and cutting of ribbons. Until the beginning of this century the Saudi media still followed in spirit at least a decree laid down in 1865 by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire that required journalists "report on the precious health of the sultan."

There is very little media freedom inside Saudi Arabia. All news is tightly controlled by the Al-Saud family and the Higher Media Council, chaired by interior minister Prince Nayef. Self-censorship is pervasive. Foreign-owned daily papers can be established only by royal decree and their managers must be approved by the government. Even the slightest criticism of the authorities, their policies or of other Arab countries can cost journalists their job.

It is widely believed in the Arab world that Saudi Arabia tries to pacify viewers with entertainment so they do not ask questions about politics. While in the 1950s and 1960s Gamal Abdel-Nasser wanted you *fi-shari'* (on the streets) it is said the Al Saud want you *fi-sala* (in the living room).

Saudi-owned networks – such as MBC, Orbit and ART - are among the most popular in the Arab world. They broadcast mainly Arab and Western entertainment - dramas, quiz shows, comedies and films. The Saudi-owned media appears moderate, liberal and apolitically Islamic, challenging Islamists while promoting a Saudi domestic agenda. Politically Saudi-owned media is pro-Washington and her Arab allies, while opposing al-Qa'ida, Hizbullah and Iran.

## 2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE MEDIA OWNED BY SAUDI ARABIA

Prior to the early 1990s the Saudi media empire was largely confined to newspaper ownership. When satellite technology arrived, newspapers became virtually obsolete

and the Saudis lead the race to dominate Arab new media technology. From the start of the nineties, Saudi Arabia has built up a vast media empire.

One of the Saudi responses to the Gulf crisis was launching the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). In 1991 MBC was established in London as a private television enterprise, backed by the then Saudi king's brother-in-law, Sheikh Waleed Bin Ibrahim Al Brahim. The channel broadcast news and current affairs programming and became a popular family channel while strictly avoiding anything that might infringe on the interests of the Saudi government.

In 2002, the network moved operations to Dubai's Media City and moved its production houses to Beirut. Today the MBC Group has six entertainment television channels, two radio channels, and since 2003, the 24-hour news channel al-Arabiya.

MBC's shareholder list has never been revealed, but it is likely that the Saudi royal family retains a significant stake in the network, led by chairman and CEO Sheikh Waleed. MBC is so closely linked to the Saudi King it is sometimes said the initials stand for 'My Broadcasting Station'.

In 1993 the Arab Radio and Television Network (ART) was founded by Saudi businessman Saleh Abdullah Kamel, broadcasting entertainment, music and sport. In 1994 a cousin of the Saudi King set up Orbit entertainment TV network, a subsidiary of the Saudi Arabian Mawarid Group. Then based in Rome, Orbit Communications Corporation broadcast BBC Arabic Television news from 1994 until 1996, when it was abruptly pulled off air. The Orbit pay-per view network is now based in Bahrain.

In 1994 ART's Saleh Abdullah Kamel bought 49% of the Cayman Islands-registered satellite channel Fada'iyya Al Lubnaniyya (the Lebanese Satellite Channel, LBC International), the pan-Arab version of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) TV channel. In 2000 Saleh Abdullah Kamel sold his shares to Saudi Prince Al-Walid Bin Talal.

Prince Al-Walid is the biggest media mogul in the Middle East. Besides his stake in LBCI, through his Kingdom Holding Companies he controls the region's largest

music label (Rotana Records), six music TV channels (Rotana Clip, Rotana Music, Rotana Gulf, Rotana Cinema, Rotana Tarab, Rotana Zaman) and has a stake in Lebanese newspapers *An Nahar* and *Ad Diyar*. Last year the Prince announced that Rotana would merge with LBCI, although the two institutions will remain financially independent. Prince Al-Walid is the third largest shareholder in Murdoch's News Corp. with 5.46% of voting shares.

Prince Khaled bin Sultan, currently the Assistant Minister of Defense for Military Affairs, is a shareholder in LBC and the owner of both the pan-Arab daily newspaper *Al Hayat* and the London based magazine *Al-Wasat*.

Prince Ahmad, son of Riyadh governor Prince Salman, controls *Al Hayat's* London-based competitor *Asharq al-Awsat*, a publicly traded company in the Saudi stock market. The prince also controls its sister publication, *Al-Majallah*.

Domestic Saudi media include newspapers *Al Watan*, *Al Riyadh*, *Okaz*, *Al Jazirah*, *Arab News* and the *Saudi Gazette*. There are also four Saudi national TV networks, state-run national radio and the state-run Saudi Press Agency.

### 3. MEANS OF CONTROL

The Saudi government tries to control the flow of information in the Arab world to assure positive coverage of Saudi politics and society, and to respond to perceived threats to the leadership's legitimacy and stability. Criticism of Saudi domestic and foreign policy is filtered out and topics such as the Saudi royal family, friendly foreign governments, the Saudi Shiite minority, corruption, major foreign policy positions, religious issues and oil revenue allocations all remain strictly taboo.

In November 2006 King Abdullah issued a circular prohibiting government employees from "opposing the policies of the state ... by participating in any discussion through media channels or through domestic or foreign communications".

Saudi government control over the media has a negative effect on journalistic ethics, investigative reporting and balanced coverage, and it prevents the dissemination of

important information to the Arab public. Independent political reporting is almost absent from the Saudi press.

Within the Kingdom newspaper editors-in-chief all have to be government approved, a process that takes place behind closed doors under the rule of Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz. Chief editors are invariably government loyalists who hold the job for many years and who will not jeopardize their privileged positions by challenging authority. In practice, though not legally, newspapers require the financial or political backing of a member of the royal family.

The pro-government editor of *Al-Riyadh* newspaper heads the Saudi Journalists' Association, formed in 2003 with government approval. When Saudi journalists have been suspended in the past for no good reason, the Association did nothing. Without a trace of irony the Association's directors, made up of the kingdom's leading editors, told the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2006 that they have never had to deal with a single complaint. Most rank-and-file Saudi journalists have little idea of the Association's agenda.

### **Bribery and Threats**

Prior to the Gulf War the Saudi regime competed against other Arab governments for control of the media. Many Arab and foreign journalists were on the Riyadh payroll with orders to produce positive articles and commentaries about the Kingdom while countering articles that ran against the Saudi agenda. The Saudis either bribed or threatened editors and producers who ran negative reports about Saudi Arabia. Since 1991 Saudi Arabia has adopted a new tactic – simply to buy up the Arab media outright – but its coercive tactics have continued to the present day.

The Saudi secret police or *mubahith* monitor press coverage and keep tabs on writers in every major city. Over the past decade dozens of editors, journalists, writers, academics and critics have been suspended, fired, placed in detention, questioned by security authorities, banned from travel or from appearing in the Saudi press, either on the order of the government or at the instigation of religious leaders or pro-regime editors or managers.

Bans range in duration from a few days to indefinite periods. Typically they are imposed by a single fax or phone call from the Ministry of Information or the Interior Ministry. Often bans originate with a single powerful political or religious figure.

An investigation by the Committee to Protect Journalists on Saudi Arabia in May 2006 found that:

- 1) Government officials dismiss editors, suspend or blacklist dissident writers, order news blackouts on controversial topics, and admonish independent columnists to deter criticism or appease religious authorities.
- 2) The religious establishment lobbies against certain kinds of coverage of social, cultural and religious affairs.
- 3) Government-approved editors prevent controversial news from emerging. Critical voices are systematically silenced.

### **Targeting Saudi Journalists inside the Kingdom**

Recent examples of Saudi intervention in the media include journalist Fawaz Turki, of the government daily Arab News, dismissed in April for writing about the atrocities perpetrated by Indonesia during its 1975-99 occupation of East Timor. He had previously been warned for criticising Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in print.

Journalist Kinan ben Abdallah al-Ghamidi was fired from the government daily Al Watan in November 2006. He had already been forced to resign as the paper's editor in 2002 after reporting that US troops were using Saudi military bases.

Twenty-two people pardoned by the King in August 2005 after receiving lengthy prison sentences for their writings, are still subject to travel bans. Saudi theologian Hassan Malaki has been permanently blacklisted for questioning Wahhabism.

In February 2006 Batal al-Qaws the editor-in-chief of *Shams* magazine, was fired for violating sacred religious strictures after he reproduced one of the controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that caused outrage across the Muslim world after appearing in the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*. *Shams* magazine, which is owned in part by Prince Turki bin Khaled, decided to run the cartoons only after the country's highest religious authority Sheikh Abdel Aziz al-Sheikh declared it permissible. Information Ministry censors had cleared the issue for distribution but three weeks later the government moved to halt publication of the paper and the editor was fired.

In April 2007 Saudi police in Hail detained journalist Rabah al-Quwai' for 13 days for writing about religious extremism. He was compelled to sign a statement saying that he had denigrated Islamic beliefs and that he was not a true Muslim. If he had not signed, al-Quwai' said he would have faced a charge of renouncing Islam, punishable by death in Saudi Arabia.

### **Internet Freedom**

Nearly 400,000 Web pages are blocked in the kingdom because of their "immoral" content. The Internet is filtered to fight "terrorism, fraud, pornography, defamation" and "violation of religious values". Unlike in some Arab countries, censorship in the Kingdom is not dressed up as a "technical problem": censored websites are clearly indicated and the kingdom regulates the spread of news and information online officially and legally.

In March 2007 responsibility for filtering the Net passed from the Internet Service Unit in the department of science and techniques of King Abdul Aziz University to a specialised government commission.

In 2008 Saudi authorities stepped up their already highly sophisticated means of Internet control further. In February Saudi Arabia set up a special commission to take an inventory of its Internet network and improve its security and reliability. Every provider or distributor of computer software is answerable if they fail to respect the law, so a cyber-café manager can be jailed for an article posted on his premises. Saudi Arabia is on the Reporters Without Borders' list of "Internet enemies".

The Saudis also protect other Arab states. A Syrian organisation critical of the Syrian regime had its website on the Saudi network closed in January 2008. The general news site al-hora (<http://al-hora.com/>) has also been inaccessible since 25 December 2007.

In 2005 Saudi censors tried to bar access to the country's main blog-site blogger.com. They gave up after a few days but still censure blogs they find objectionable, such as "Saudi Eve," the diary of a young woman who discusses her love life and criticises government censorship, blacklisted by the government in June 2006.

In 2007 the government closed Ra'if al-Badawi's website [www.saliberal.com](http://www.saliberal.com), which addressed the practices of the religious police. In October 2007 the government closed former political prisoner Ali al-Dumaini's human rights and current affairs website [www.menbar-alhewar.com](http://www.menbar-alhewar.com).

### **Saudi Influence over Foreign Media**

It has become taboo in many Arab countries to criticize Saudi Arabia. State media in many Arab countries, including Egypt, avoids news that could offend the Saudi regime while largely going along with Saudi media campaigns, for example currently targeting Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

According to Abdul Bari Atwan, editor of the independent London-based Arabic daily Al-Quds al-Arabi the Saudi government has signed "media protocols" with the ministries of information in several Arab countries that obligate them to censor news that discusses internal Saudi politics or criticises Saudi state officials.

Saudi influence is particularly obvious in Lebanon, the recruiting pool for Arab journalists. Lebanese journalists are wary of running stories that criticise Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states for fear of jeopardizing their careers.

In January 2003 then Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, who had longstanding ties with Saudi Arabia, ordered the Lebanese private television channel New



Television (NTV) to stop satellite broadcasts just as it was about to transmit a debate examining the effect of the U.S. invasion of Iraq on Saudi Arabia's domestic political situation. The debate looked likely to be harmful to the Kingdom's reputation.

### **Egypt**

In 1994 an Egyptian physician Dr. Mohamed Kamel Mohamed Khallfa was sentenced to 200 lashes in Saudi Arabia after complaining that the principal of Saoud El Kabir School in El Bekeereya, El Qasim, Saudi Arabia had sexually abused his son, a pupil at the school. The doctor said the teacher had escorted the child to the school roof, injected him with an anaesthetic and then sexually abused him. Egypt's state-owned newspapers avoided the story for fear of offending the kingdom.

The Egyptian Ministry of Information prohibited the Cairo-based English-language weekly Middle East Times from publishing an interview with Saudi dissident Muhammad Al Mas'ari in its Sept. 15-21 issue 2006.

### **Iraq**

In January 2005 it was alleged in the high court in London that an Iraqi media mogul had secretly received millions of pounds from the Saudi regime. Documents lodged at the court alleged that Saad Al-Bazzaz - the so-called Rupert Murdoch of Iraq – had received the money to launch his newspaper Azzaman, the most widely read daily in Iraq. Bank records were produced showing transfers totalling £2.5m from Riyad Bank in Saudi Arabia to Azzaman's NatWest account in Ealing. Mr Bazzaz also controls Iraq's first private satellite TV channel.

The papers emerged during a libel action in which Mr Bazzaz, a former exile in London, was accused of running a sophisticated covert propaganda operation against Qatar funded by Saudi Arabian intelligence. Mr Bazzaz's lawyers disputed the provenance of some of the documents, which indicated that the money he received had been covertly directed by senior officials in Saudi intelligence, run by the then current ambassador in London, Prince Turki al-Faisal.

While accepting that the bank records were probably genuine, lawyers for Mr Bazzaz said the question of who financed the paper and whether the Saudis had a covert hand in its journalism were "peripheral" matters and a "pure irrelevance." They denied Azzaman had conducted a campaign against Qatar.

The judge, Mr Justice Eady accepted that "running a propaganda campaign is, in general terms, perfectly lawful ... but it is a form of activity distinguishable in kind from independent and serious journalism". He said one of the documents, if proved true, would support the charge "that a propaganda campaign has been waged without regard to objective truth".

Prince Turki said in a statement through a solicitor's firm: "None of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi intelligence or any of the Saudi officials you mention have or have had anything to do with the newspaper Azzaman."

### **Gulf Countries**

Other countries in the Arabian Gulf are sensitive to Saudi Arabia's media concerns and also limit press freedom. Government censors in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE banned the distribution of Reader's Digest magazine in July 2006 because of an article dealing with political instability in Saudi Arabia.

The Qatar-owned network Al Jazeera is a long time critic of the Saudi regime. In January 2008 it was rumoured that following an agreement between the rulers of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Al Jazeera would no longer criticise Saudi Arabia. According to the New York Times, Al Jazeera employees confirmed that Al Jazeera had agreed upon request to water down criticism of the Kingdom.

"Orders were given not to tackle any Saudi issue without referring to the higher management," the New York Times reported one unnamed Al Jazeera newsroom employee as writing in an e-mail message. "All dissident voices disappeared from our screens."

"To improve their relations with Qatar, the Saudis wanted to silence Al Jazeera," the employee wrote. "They got what they wanted."

### **Western media**

In the past Saudi Arabia has obstructed foreign news organisations by harassing correspondents and obstructing visa requests. Saudi television companies also often refuse to share footage or facilities.

Non-Arab journalists in particular are prevented from reporting about the Kingdom and are typically permitted only limited access to sources, particularly for stories relating directly to the state.

### **Satellite Jamming**

One effective means of banning unwanted television signals the Saudis have allegedly used in the past is by transmitting endless recitations of the Koran. The Koran, which is recited 24 hours a day in Mecca, has an almost constant level of modulation and if its average picture level, or APL is suitably high, it is ideal for jamming. The Saudis have portable, air-conditioned, medium-wave transmitting stations which upon receiving an unwanted signal, they can drive to the border to start broadcasting the Koran on a loop.

However jamming a satellite signal is technically more difficult than jamming a regular television signal and it is almost impossible to do this over a large area for any practical duration. Success has at best been partial and brief.

### **Punishing through Advertising**

Saudi Arabia is the dominant economic power and the largest potential market in the Middle East region. Approximately one half to two-thirds of the regional advertising budget is spent in Saudi Arabia.

To undermine the hated non-Saudi network Al Jazeera, advertising companies who might be tempted to advertise have been coerced by the Saudi government into taking their business elsewhere.

When Al Jazeera started broadcasting in 1996 its advertising was managed by a Saudi company called the al-Tuhama Advertising Company. In February 1999 al-Tuhama cancelled its contract. Al Jazeera suspected this was because of pressure from the Saudi authorities. The affair wound up in court.

‘You have to understand how the economic situation in the Gulf operates,’ Jihad Ballout Al Jazeera’s PR manager told me. ‘Let me give you an example: a luxury car dealership is controlled by one family in Saudi Arabia. Usually to be successful in business in any Arab country you have to be close to the high echelons of power. No one will get the dealership of any international brand if they are not close to the ruling power. So the boss in Munich calls the dealership and says he wants to advertise on Al Jazeera because they understand that Al Jazeera is the best vehicle for advertising. The dealership goes back to Munich saying ‘Listen this is going to jeopardise a tender that we have for 650 vehicles of motorcycles and cars for the police force.’

‘So the regional advertising budget – and Al Jazeera is deemed to be a regional medium - is really controlled by regional merchants and dealerships and the most powerful by far are the Saudis. For every two cars sold in Bahrain seventy may be sold in Saudi. If I wanted to put it diplomatically I would say that powers that be in the region have convinced major advertisers of the wisdom of not using Al Jazeera as an advertising medium.’

Nor is this the only mechanism of control the Saudis have on the where the advertising dollar goes. Technically satellite dishes are banned in the Kingdom. In practice this ban is unenforced, but in the past the Saudi authorities have made it clear to big-name advertisers that if they give custom to Al Jazeera, the ban could be implemented which would deny those same advertisers access to the large Saudi market in future permanently.

In August 2000 the Swedish telecom manufacturer Ericsson withdrew a multi-million dollar advertising campaign on Al Jazeera shortly after it won a contract for a much larger advertising campaign from a Saudi Telecommunications Company. Al

Jazeera's marketing chief blamed Ericsson's change of heart on the Saudi government.

In February 2002 Forbes magazine reported that Al Jazeera was expected to lose as much as a quarter of its current revenue due to Saudi government interference. "In the Arab world, advertisers are more concerned with politics than ratings," al-Jazeera's marketing director, Ali Kamal, was quoted as saying.

The Saudi advertising ban is one reason why despite its massive success Al Jazeera has never made a profit.

### **Editing out Sensitive Events**

Sometimes the Saudi regime uses state media to assure that there is no media coverage at all about a particular incident. During the first Gulf War the Saudi press notoriously failed to report Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait for several days. Riyadh kept the Saudi population in the dark before realizing that most Saudis had tuned into CNN to find out what was going on.

In the weeks before the run-up to the invasion of Iraq war two key meetings of Arab leaders were not covered in the Saudi media since they portrayed the Saudi regime poorly.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> March 2003 at an Arab league summit at Sharm el Sheikh, a quarrel broke out between the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah and Libya's Colonel Qadhafi, over the American military presence in Kuwait. Qadhafi had made a speech criticising the King of Saudi Arabia for permitting the American military to use his territory during the first Gulf War. Now in the run up to this war Saudi Arabia, which was politically opposed to the war, had under American pressure quietly closed a number of airports near the Iraqi border to civilian aircraft so that they could be used by the US military.

"King Fahd told me that his country was threatened, and that he would co-operate with the Devil to protect it," Qadhafi told the Arab league. Since the Saudi King has the sacred Muslim duty of protecting the shrines at Mecca and Medina, this remark

was regarded as deeply offensive. "Saudi Arabia is a Muslim country and not an agent of colonialism like you and others," Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, snapped back. He was referring to rumours that the Libyan leader had been brought to power in 1969 with help from the CIA.

Then pointing and wagging his finger at Qadhafi, the prince let forth a torrent of meaty Bedouin insults. "You! Who exactly brought you to power?" he cried. "Don't talk about matters that you fail to prove. Your lies are behind you, while your grave lies in front of you." A bewildered-looking Qadhafi stammered, "By God, I don't know how I am going to answer this man..." at which point the television feed Egyptian television were using to transmit the summit around the world live was abruptly cut off.

Four days later at a meeting of the heads of state and representatives from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Doha, in a five star hotel just down the road from Coalition Central Command, a violent argument broke out between the representatives from Iraq and Kuwait. Delegates were supposed to be finding a unified position on the impending crisis in Iraq when the Kuwaiti official interrupted the speech of the Iraqi second-in-command of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council, with the immortal line "Shut up you dog". The Iraqi delegate then shouted back at the Kuwaiti calling him a "traitor". "Shut up you minion, you [American] agent, you monkey! You are addressing Iraq," said the Iraqi. Then a general fracas broke out in which the ensuing comments became inaudible, but one Kuwaiti minister could be seen shouting and waving the little Kuwaiti flag he had on his desk. Saudi backed channels including Al Arabiya did not cover these blatant ruptures between Arab countries.

#### **4. ATTACKING AL JAZEERA**

##### **Another kind of Pornography**

When Al Jazeera began broadcasting it quickly incurred the wrath of the Saudi regime and articles in the Saudi press criticising the network quickly followed. One article entitled "Arabsat and another kind of Pornography", congratulated Arabsat on firing

CFI for transmitting 'Club Prive au Portugal' [see section 9] and went on to suggest that they should waste no time in firing Al Jazeera for the same reason.

Text of article by Dr Muhammad Bin Salman al-Ahmad entitled "Arabsat and another kind of pornography" published in Riyadh by the Saudi newspaper '*Al-Jazirah*' on 13th March 1998.

The Arab Satellite Corporation (Arabsat) took a firm and strong stand towards a French satellite television station that was transmitting via Arabsat. This station transmitted a pornographic film that violates the simplest and most basic Islamic values and principles and the norms and traditions prevailing in the Middle East, the area to which the film was broadcast. Many welcomed Arabsat's firm and unshakable stand when it barred this station from using Arabsat again, and hailed its decision that was final and non-negotiable.

For one year now, the Arab world and the Muslim world have been exposed to a certain satellite television station that belongs to an Arab country, rather a Gulf country, and that claims to be an Arabic channel that transmits from an Arab country and that uses the Arabic language. [Reference is to the Qatari Al-Jazeera satellite channel] On this station, Arab and Muslim speakers meeting on Arab land and using Arabic are subjected to vicious and ferocious attacks against their values, principles, and beliefs. In the name of freedom and freedom of expression, in the name of free opinion and counter - opinion, in the name of one direction and the opposite direction [reference to "The Opposite Direction" talk show on Al-Jazeera], this station propagates opinions that clash with all the principles and beliefs of all Arabs and Muslims. This station hosts people who are not educated enough, experienced enough and qualified enough to talk about topics that harm religion, ridicule dogma and beliefs, and cast doubts on the religious tenets God Almighty gave to man.

Some of the programmes transmitted on this satellite channel talk about the sacred divinity, whether it exists or does not exist, may God forgive us; they talk about the holy Koran, whether it was created or revealed; they talk about the principles of Islamic shari' ah, especially about the penalties for theft and

adultery, and whether these are appropriate to the spirit of the new age, describing them sometimes as abhorrent and criminal.

How does a simple Muslim in the Arab world or in the Gulf region feel, and how does any Muslim or Arab in the East or the West feel when he listens to and watches a debate going on about values, beliefs and principles he had taken for granted? How does this person feel when he hears principles he had considered indisputable, beyond argument and above debate being discussed, criticized, and objected to by people with little or no knowledge regarding such matters? How can this channel allow itself and how do those in charge of this channel allow themselves to attack and ridicule Islam? How do they allow themselves to hold comparisons and contrasts between the word of God, the Omniscient, from whom no harm or evil comes, and the word of man, who was created by God?

How can we, for instance, compare the holy Koran with the declaration of human rights? How can we allow ourselves to host an atheist who attacks Islam and ridicules Islam in the name of free expression? What would the effect of all this be on Arab and Muslim children? What impact would it have on the young from both sexes in the Muslim nation? How would this affect those who have limited education and knowledge?

If Arabsat deemed what the French station transmitted to be pornographic, corrupt, immoral and violating the standards and the principles agreed upon between it and the French station, what does it think about what this Arab channel has transmitted and is transmitting? In other words, is the yardstick in measuring the degree of pornography and corruption the picture alone, or is it also the words and the debate and the assault on Islamic values and principles and the ridiculing of God Almighty and His holy book and His injunctions? If such things are not accompanied by pictures of sexual organs, would they be permissible? Should not the station which transmits such programmes be allowed to continue to do so?



### **Poisonous Ideas**

In December 1998 Al Jazeera upset the Saudi regime by running interviews or speeches by several senior Iraqi officials, including President Saddam Husayn, Vice-President Taha Yasin Ramadan, Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz and Foreign Minister Muhammad Sa'id al-Sahhaf. On 5th January 1999 Al Jazeera broadcast, in advance of Iraqi Satellite TV and other Iraqi media, Saddam Husayn's Army Day speech in which he called on Arabs to overthrow their leaders if they were allied to the United States.

An editorial in the Saudi newspaper *Al-Jazirah* commented:

"The dangers posed by this channel are far more serious than the dangers posed by Western satellite channels. Simply speaking, the poisonous ideas that are conveyed via the Western satellite channels are easy to handle because the thought they are trying to convey is known to the viewer in advance. However, when this poisonous thought is conveyed via an Arab satellite channel, it becomes all the more dangerous because it is concealing itself behind our culture and claiming to be speaking for the sake of the overall Arab interest in general and the Arab Gulf region in particular."

### **Accusations of Deceit**

When Al Jazeera published a fax from Osama bin Laden shortly after 9-11, the London-based Saudi-owned daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* accused the network of foolishly publishing a note that was clearly fabricated. The report on the inside pages tried to cast doubt on Al Jazeera television's scoop claiming that the Al Jazeera television correspondent in Islamabad had denied that Bin Laden issued a statement, and that furthermore fax machines did not work in Afghanistan, and that it would be difficult for Bin Laden to use fax machines.

In the spring of 2001, Al Qaeda sent a new video to Al Jazeera featuring bin Laden and his lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as on a separate portion of the tape one of the 9-11 hijackers reciting his "will." The Saudi press speculated that Al Jazeera

might even have fabricated some of the tape, or at least timed its release, deliberately to make all Arabs look like terrorists to the detriment of the Palestinian cause.

### **Al Jazeera and Gangrene**

In the summer of 2002 Al Jazeera's relations with Saudi Arabia took another blow when a Saudi dissident on the ever-controversial 'The Opposite Direction' programme denigrated the Saudi peace plan for Palestine and accused the Saudi King of treachery. The host, Dr. Faisal Al Qasim let the comments pass without reprimand and for a few weeks it looked like the Saudis might let the incident slip.

Then while touring the Gulf, in a deliberate snub to the Qataris the Saudi Foreign Minister pointedly visited all the regional capitals except Doha. The Saudi press then attacked Al Jazeera, citing it as one of the region's biggest headaches. Following a meeting between the Qatari and Israeli Foreign Ministers in Paris diplomatic relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia were nearly terminated.

The Saudi daily *Al Watan* published a string of damning articles about Qatar and Al Jazeera. One article entitled "Al-Jazeera Channel and Gangrene" vividly described Saudi sentiments towards the channel.

"Gangrene is an illness that affect human beings especially those who are suffering from diabetes. Gangrene starts at the body limbs when the victim is infected with a wound in the finger, leg or hand. When this lethal disease invades any organ of the human body, the cure is no doubt, amputation or severance for fear that the disease may deteriorate and spread to other parts of the body. The outcome is ineluctably death. The human body symbolizes here the 'Gulf Cooperation Council' [GCC] and the gangrene is regrettably the Qatari 'Al Jazeera' channel. This malicious gang that made up what is called 'Al Jazeera' is working intensively with all means and ways to destabilize GCC countries, by producing artificial, self-styled and malicious programmes... In an attempt from our part to cure this gangrene and the chronic headache caused by this channel to our Qatari brothers, we suggest a remedy similar to the one used to cure gangrene, which is amputation or severance prior to the spreading of the disease to other organs of the body."

### **Birdbrain Dreams**

Another article in the same paper entitled "Birdbrain Dreams" warned,

"Most often, when the 'small' try to confront the 'big' they become even smaller and more divided and dwarfish. We tell those that the cure for the complex of 'dwarfism' does not lie in playing in the courts of giants. The cure lies in good and clean deeds and with a little bit of patience. The cure lies in steering away from arrogance, recklessness and foolhardiness. We are addressing these sincere and 'fraternal' words to the 'genius' kid Sheikh Hamad Bin-Jasim [the Chairman of Al Jazeera], the engineer of foreign policy and apparently also the engineer of domestic policy in fraternal Qatar. He has finally shown his true colours. He has finally stuck his tongue out and used it against us just he had repeatedly used it in the past against Jordan, Bahrain and Kuwait... As for the Americans, whom they accuse us of loving, all the doors leading to Doha were opened to them. The Americans are now able to do anything in Qatar with the blessing of the 'prodigal' minister and despite the nose of all honest Qataris."

"One of the constants of the Qatari new foreign policy is to try and distinguish itself in order to give the impression of being an important state at the international level, given the important services provided by this country to the new world order, which undoubtedly is led by the United States. This is where the dilemma lies, as this objective can only be achieved if Qatar adopts a policy of normalization and openness with the Zionist entity and coordinates in a clear manner with the United States, despite the fact that such a policy demands a high price..."

The article went on to accuse the Qataris of being like Saddam Hussein, who also sought seeking to divide the Gulf countries from one another. The Saudi press then tried to start a whispering campaign that Al Jazeera was shedding viewers because it had become boring.

‘Limited faces and few personalities... Repeated and reiterated slogans and issues... This is the current state of "Al-Jazeera" satellite channel lately. There is nothing new in what the channel has been broadcasting for some time. During this period, it lost many and many of its viewers who had seen a good omen in the launch of this channel, as a distinguished media platform. But it did not take long for its viewers to progressively desert it, since they started finding out about the intentions and the objectives of this channel. Since those who believe in the orientations of this channel are a minority - thank God - in the Arab world, among them a limited number of our Saudi citizens - naturally -, those in charge of "Al-Jazeera" have no alternative but to rotate these faces and names by hosting them in successive chat shows... The only thing that changes is the female presenter.’

*Al Watan's* website went on to compare Al Jazeera's talk shows to making orange juice. Each guest would be brought on squeezed, then discarded.

‘As for the "repeated reiterated" guest, he is hosted by "Faisal al-Qasim" [presenter of the Opposite Direction] who teaches him the art of abuse and insult at the headquarters of the channel in Doha. The guest then gets promoted as he leaves the Gulf to meet "Ahmad Mansur" [another Al Jazeera presenter] with all his transcendence, haughtiness and disdain to anything coming from the Gulf, especially from Saudi Arabia. The "victimized" guest is then led to the capital of fog - London - to be hosted by Sami Haddad, far from all Arab world shackles and media fences, as they pretend..! This stage marks the end of the entire "squeezing" operation. The orange is then thrown after it has accomplished its mission. The operation to find another one starts then.’

### **Public Warnings**

In June 1999 Al Jazeera broadcast an interview with Osama bin Laden. At that time, having a copy of bin Laden speeches inside Saudi Arabia was punishable by six months in prison. Up to this point the Saudi authorities had not been making life easy for Al Jazeera: the network's journalists were already banned from working in the Kingdom, except when accompanying the Qatari Emir or covering the Hajj, which is

the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, but after Al Jazeera aired the bin Laden programme the Saudis began to clamp down on Al Jazeera in any way they could.

The Saudi authorities issued public warnings, asking people to watch out for Al Jazeera's pernicious influence and the Saudi state press derided its pro-Baghdad bias. Speaking about Al Jazeera, the Interior Minister, Prince Nayif Bin Abd al-Aziz al-Sa'ud declared: "Saddam has started to make a breakthrough in the Gulf countries. That channel is of a distinguished high quality product but it serves up poison on a silver platter. We know that this channel is an offspring of the BBC and we know who stands behind it. The only difference is the location and the financier." At the same time the minister also criticized Yemen for granting a passport to prominent Saudi dissident Muhammad al-Mas'ari.

### **Messing in Saudi Internal Affairs**

An editorial published in May 1999 in the Saudi newspaper Al-Bilad' accused Al Jazeera of "fabricating" news coverage and messing with the internal affairs of other countries.

"The channel has become the only one in the Arab world where news is fabricated." "There is a question mark about this channel. The feeling is that its broadcasts interfere in the internal affairs of some countries."

"We believe that Al-Jazeera should not touch on the internal affairs of others, because this would prompt the viewer to doubt the credibility of its programmes and debate."

"It makes the viewer suspect that the speakers on those programmes and debates are hirelings because of the lies they often broadcast on the programme More Than One Opinion. This programme distorts Arab and Gulf reality."

Further, the newspaper said Al Jazeera "strays away from fact and credibility" and claims the channel has a pro-Baghdad stance.

In the mosques Saudi Imams denounced Al Jazeera for corrupting Arab morals and passed a "political fatwa" forbidding Saudis from appearing on the station's shows. The one Saudi journalist who worked for Al Jazeera in Doha was put under pressure to quit his job.

Saudi magazines were banned from speaking with or interviewing Al Jazeera staff, Al Jazeera reporters were no longer even allowed to cover the Hajj and watching satellite television in coffee shops was forbidden. Although Al Jazeera was not expressly mentioned in the coffee shop ban it was clear that it was the target because coffee shops are where young men socialize in the Kingdom, especially when they are watching the news.

### **Al Hayat Defends Saudi Arabia**

On July 21 2002 Saudi Al Hayat newspaper published an article defending Saudi Arabia against attacks on Al Jazeera.

“...Three weeks ago, Al-Jazeera's "Opposite Direction" programme discussed Saudi Arabia's stand on the Palestinian issue, portraying this stand in a way that contradicted the well-known historical facts. The programme unfairly attacked Saudi Arabia's role in several discussions.”

“This attack could have been justified on the grounds that Al-Jazeera sought to build its reputation by antagonizing Saudi Arabia and attacking its policy. However, accusing Saudi Arabia of treachery and criticizing the late King Abd-al-Aziz are more than just political excitement. This accusation and criticism angered the entire Saudi people while Saudi Arabia cannot but satisfy its people and put an end to this excess.”

“In the 1920s, King Abd-al-Aziz fought for the unity of the kingdom and it was not in his interest to antagonize Britain for the sake of Palestine, but he did just that. Moreover, the Saudi political regime's legitimacy was not based on liberating Palestine.”

“Following the events of 11 September, Saudi Arabia came under the spotlight while its reputation was tarnished. In view of this situation, it was not in Saudi Arabia's best interest to stand by the Palestinians and confront the Zionist lobby in the US political corridors, but it did so. Yet, Al-Jazeera attacked its unifier [late King Abd-al-Aziz] and accused it of betraying the Palestinian cause.”

### **Shutting Al Jazeera down “for good”**

In August 2003 articles in the Kuwaiti and Saudi press appeared claiming evidence had been uncovered proving that the US administration had decided to silence Al Jazeera once and for all. A story circulated quoting an unnamed US Gulf-based diplomat who claimed Congress had instructed President Bush to put "all possible pressure" on the Qatari government to shut Al Jazeera down for good.

The story, which was published in Saudi Arabia's state-run press, claimed that a number of meetings had taken place over the summer of 2003 at the headquarters of the Security Intelligence Committee of the House of Representatives attended by key members of Congress, the Pentagon, the State Department, the FBI and the CIA. During the meetings, which concerned "US-Qatari relations in light of the role Al-Jazeera has played in inciting anti-US sentiment," the newspaper said representatives discussed the problem of Al Jazeera's flagrant promotion of terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda. It was agreed that the network deliberately set out to harm American interests both at home and abroad, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan and that something had to be done.

The purpose of these meetings, the paper quoted the diplomat as saying, was to establish how America could pressure the Qataris into cracking down on Al Jazeera, to make the station change its editorial policy. Various possible sanctions were postulated, including cutting off US economic support to Qatar, moving the Al Udeid airbase elsewhere or annulling the fifty year US-Qatar defence treaty, leaving Qatar at the mercy of its neighbours. On the second anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the American diplomat was quoted as saying, the council unanimously decided to advise the President to instruct the Qataris to close down Al Jazeera altogether and if that

proved impossible, Al Jazeera should at least be forced to replace its current staff with journalists who were "moderate and neutral".

This poorly substantiated story was almost certainly apocryphal. For a start, the exciting sounding "Security Intelligence Committee of the House of Representatives," where the decision to shut down Al Jazeera was supposedly reached, does not actually exist. Secondly, Qatar is massively wealthy and does not receive economic support from America or from anyone else. Nevertheless the story was repeated and distributed via email and in the press and shockwaves rocketed through the Arab media and into Al Jazeera newsrooms.

## **5. AL ARABIYA – A COUNTERWEIGHT TO AL JAZEERA**

With the rise of Al Jazeera at the end of the nineties, the Saudi near-monopoly on the Arab media was threatened. After struggling with the troublesome Qatari network for many years Saudi Arabia eventually resolved not exactly trying to join Al Jazeera, but to try and provide something that looked like it. The all-news 24-hour satellite channel Al Arabiya was launched by the MBC group in 2003 in the hope of luring Arabs away from Al Jazeera's siren call and so rendering Qatar politically insignificant. The \$200 million start-up fund came from a conglomerate of Saudi, Lebanese and Kuwaiti businessmen.

At the launch Al Arabiya executives painted a picture of Al Jazeera's talkshows as 'childish', while their channel it was implied, was somehow going to be more 'mature'. These high-sounding claims turned out to be worthless. Within two months Al Arabiya had shown itself to be more or less a carbon copy of Al Jazeera, with talkshows just as divisive. Al Arabiya stopped saying that Al Jazeera was childish and started saying that it was accurately reflecting the level of debate in the Arab world. The influence of its Saudi backers was in evidence and Al Arabiya soon acquired a reputation for only shyly tackling topics close to the heart of the Saudi regime, like women's rights and issues surrounding militant Islam.

Today Al Arabiya is displayed in Saudi embassies as Saudi Arabia's official mouthpiece. But reports that Al Jazeera is more popular still irk Saudi Arabia and



when a joint University of Maryland and Zogby International poll in October 2005 found that Al Jazeera was ahead with 65 percent of viewers, followed by a host of Saudi-owned or Saudi-friendly channels, the Saudi daily *Asharq al-Awsat* attacked the poll saying it misled respondents by listing Al Jazeera first in the formulation of questions and using a small polling sample in Saudi Arabia. Oddly the *Asharq al-Awsat* article still boasted that, “Al Arabiya came first in the poll as the most-watched second choice channel”.

## **6. USING THE MEDIA FOR OTHER PURPOSES**

In Saudi Arabia it is well-established government practice to gauge public opinion on new issues by starting a debate in the newspapers. In the mid-seventies the Saudi papers debated whether or not cinemas should be legal for three months, before the King decided that those opposing cinemas were in the majority and banned them.

## **7. THE BBC ARABIC FIASCO**

In the early nineties a cousin of the Saudi King decided to set up a satellite television company called Orbit. To have access to European technicians and talent and avoid the kind of government interference that might arise if it was based in an Arab country, the Prince decided to base Orbit's operations in Rome. Besides the nineteen television channels Orbit offered paying subscribers, it approached the BBC to supply an Arabic version of the BBC World Service news.

For a long time the BBC World Service had been available in the Middle East in English, but this was to be the first time that a television news channel of this sort had been available in Arabic. Before agreeing to supply Orbit with their Arabic language news channel, the BBC insisted the new channel would have the same values as the rest of the BBC World Service. "If someone wants the BBC they have to take it as it is. Culturally sensitive, yes; but journalism on bended knee, no" said a BBC spokesman at the time. On 24 March 1994 the BBC and Orbit's Saudi backers signed a 10-year agreement, which on paper at least, looked set to benefit both parties. But there were suspicions that the cultural differences between the two would result in disaster. The Arab press wrote off the whole project from the start, dubbing it "the BBC's Petrodollar Channel".

Broadcast from the BBC studios in West London, the new Arabic BBC news service rose incrementally from two hours at the start, to 24-hours each day by the end of 1994. It was not to be long before the relationship fell apart over the perennially sticky issue of editorial control. There had been growing friction over what should be broadcast, before a blistering row in 1996 proved cultural differences in this instance to be insurmountable. Angry telephone conversations and board meetings revealed that what had been meant by "cultural sensitivities" turned out to mean editing anything with which the Saudi royalty disagreed.

The final controversy came in two halves and revolved around a Saudi dissident called Professor Mohammed Al Mas'ari. Al Mas'ari was the head of the Committee for Defense of Legitimate Rights, an influential Islamic organisation banned in Saudi Arabia, based in Britain, which vehemently opposes the House of Saud. Since his expulsion from the Kingdom, Al Mas'ari had campaigned relentlessly against the Saudi Royal family, calling for strict Islamic rule instead.

In January 1996 Al Mas'ari debuted on Orbit's BBC Arabic service, but halfway through his interview a mysterious and timely blackout occurred, embarrassingly ending the transmission. Although Orbit denied it, besides the BBC they were the only ones who could have stopped the broadcast, by cutting the power from Orbit's central command in Rome. The BBC was furious, accusing Orbit of censoring their broadcasts and breaking their agreement, which had granted the BBC complete editorial control. The BBC were faced with the painful decision of pulling out of the deal with Orbit or compromising their editorial independence. They settled on the latter. The Saudis were furious too, that Al Mas'ari had been on Arab screens in the first place and a storm erupted between the British and Saudi governments. The Saudi Ministry of Information instructed hotels in the Kingdom not to broadcast any Orbit channels at all and the Saudi ambassador insisted on Al Mas'ari's immediate deportation from Britain, thus ending his media campaign against the Kingdom. If Britain refused, he warned, Saudi Arabia would terminate arms contracts worth billions of pounds, putting thousands of jobs at risk. Shamefully, Prime Minister John Major and Home Secretary Michael Howard acquiesced to the Saudis and agreed to deport Al Mas'ari to the Caribbean island of Dominica but then to the deep

embarrassment of the British government Al Mas'ari successfully appealed against the judgment in court. The British press condemned John Major for sacrificing Al Mas'ari's human rights on the altar of Saudi arms' deals.

The second and final blow to the relationship came a few months later when a BBC panorama programme entitled 'Death of a Principle' was highly critical of Saudi Arabia's human rights record. Aired uncut in Arabic on Orbit's BBC service, the programme revisited the Al Mas'ari affair and dynamited any chance of a reconciliation. Showing pictures of a Saudi funeral, a sword-wielding executioner decapitated a man and a Filipina living in Saudi Arabia testified in an interview to having been flogged for going out with male friends. Although the actual moment of decapitation was not shown, filming executions is illegal under Saudi law. "This programme was a sneering and racist attack on Islamic law and culture," said Orbit's president. The BBC Arabic service transmission was abruptly switched off the night of Saturday, 20 April 1996, eighteen months after it had begun. A week later it was replaced with the Disney Channel.

At first the BBC thought that the show might go on, if only another rich but slightly more liberal Arab sponsor could be located. After all the operation had been conducted out of the BBC studios in London. But Orbit, it emerged, was determined to obstruct any new BBC Arabic project and was formidably placed to do so. Orbit's Saudi financiers were so influential that they had a stranglehold on any potential backer who ever wanted to do business in the Middle East ever again. After the recent scandal, the British government was in no hurry to help the BBC get the channel back up and running again either.

As if this panoply of obstacles was not enough, Orbit also owned all the computers and technical equipment that the BBC Arabic service had been using. They had supplied the lot at the start, on the understanding that this was somehow more tax efficient and now they exercised their right to do absolutely nothing with it all, nor let anyone else either. The purpose-built digital studio was left empty and unused on the BBC's premises, while executives spent a few fruitless weeks trying in vain to strike a new deal.

The sudden closure of the BBC Arabic channel left about two hundred and fifty BBC-trained Arab journalists, broadcasters and media administrators out of a job. Many of them went on to become some of the most familiar faces on Al Jazeera.

## **8. STRIVING FOR RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY**

Saudi Arabia sees itself as regional supervisor in the Gulf owed respect and deference from the smaller Emirates. From the Saudi point of view important regional decisions should not be embarked upon without consulting them first. On a personal level, the House of Saud thinks of itself as grander than the other Arabian tribes, which the other ruling families in the region strongly resent.

"There is a feeling that Saudi Arabia is an important state that has to have a presence in the media and it must not leave to others what we see and read," said Dawood al-Shirian, Saudi Arabia manager of the Saudi-owned MBC television and radio network in an interview with Reuters in August 2007. "This (media influence) has played a role in opening up the Arab world and revealing the falseness of some ideologies such as Arab nationalism, the Left and political Islam."

The Kingdom uses its media to reinforce its image as the rightful Islamic leader of the Arab world. Wahabi clerics serve the interests of the Saudi state by inferring religious legitimacy on the King's social policies, while attacking Saudi Arabia's arch-rival Al Jazeera's loquacious tele-sheikh Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Saudi clerics have often condemned Qatar's liberalization on religious grounds while Sheikh Qaradawi has sprung to Qatar's defence.

## **9. AL JAZEERA, CFI AND THE ARABSAT CONTROVERSY**

In November 1996 Al Jazeera began broadcasting just six hours a day from just one satellite, the Arabsat satellite. In January 1997 this was bumped up to eight hours, then twelve hours daily. Arabsat, which stands for the Arab Satellite Corporation, launched the satellite in 1985 and it is jointly owned by twenty-one Arab states. When Al Jazeera first started broadcasting from it, the Arabsat satellite's global 'footprint' – the area on earth from where its signal could be received – was uniquely positioned over the Middle East. Today there are plenty of other satellites whose footprints

overlap with this, but in those days Arabsat was the only one, so for a network to keep transmitting, it was crucial that they remained on good terms with Arabsat's management in Riyadh.

The Arabsat satellite's transponders were already booked up and so Al Jazeera had to settle for a Ku-band transponder, which had a weak signal. What Al Jazeera wanted was a C-band transponder, which generated a much stronger signal receivable with an ordinary, small satellite dish. To get a decent picture on the screen from a weedy Ku band signal you needed a very large satellite dish, six feet in diameter or bigger, which most of Al Jazeera's potential audience did not have.

The leaseholders of the coveted C-band transponder were a French television channel called Canal France International or CFI. One Saturday afternoon in July 1997, about 4 o' clock, CFI were supposed to be broadcasting an educational programme for children in the Middle East. Unfortunately for CFI a technical mix up at France Télécom meant that thirty minutes of a hardcore pornographic film called 'Club Prive au Portugal', destined for customers in the Pacific was beamed in its place. Contemporary CFI broadcast data suggested that a possible 33 million people across the Middle East could have been watching including plenty of school children expecting more conventional educational programming. Predictably the Saudis, who controlled the satellite, were furious. CFI had offended the most basic Islamic ideals and there was to be no compromise. Despite protestations from French diplomats Arabsat tore up the contract and expelled CFI from the Arabsat satellite, leaving the coveted C-Band slot free. Al Jazeera took their place a few months later.

## **10. ARAB STATES BROADCASTING UNION**

In December 1998 the Arab States Broadcasting Union or ASBU decided to expand from being an organisation made up solely of state-run broadcasters, to include private Arab radio and television broadcasting institutions. Saudi Arabia is an influential member of ASBU.

All the private Arab radio and TV stations were invited to become members of ASBU, except Al Jazeera, which was banned. The stated reason why, was because all

members needed to demonstrate a commitment to Arab media principles and show respect to the Arab League Charter. Al Jazeera was not the only offender, one Qatari newspaper noted cynically that some channels "which offer only nudity" had been allowed to join, but only Al Jazeera had been singled out for special treatment. The message was clear: if Al Jazeera wanted to be in the club it better start behaving.

At the Arab summit in Cairo in 2002, Information Ministers from thirteen Arab countries formulated plans to combat what they viewed as Al Jazeera's suspicious policy of interviewing Israeli officials, as well as the channel's other perceived Zionist tendencies. Resolutions in Cairo were drafted aimed at counteracting "Israeli and US attempts to portray the Palestinian national struggle as unjustified terrorism." The draft clearly had Al Jazeera in mind when it urged "Arab media not to allow Israeli officials to address Arab public opinion in their attempt to justify aggression."

## **11. DIPLOMATIC ACTION**

In July 2002 Saudi Arabia demanded an apology from Qatar over comments broadcast by Al Jazeera which it said insulted the Saudi royal family. Qatar and Saudi were in dispute after participants in a live Al-Jazeera debate criticized Crown Prince Abdallah's Middle East peace initiative and accused Saudi Arabia of betraying the Palestinian cause. They were also critical of the kingdom's founder, King Abd-al-Aziz Bin Al Sa'ud. In turn, Saudi commentators criticized Al-Jazeera for continuing contact with Israeli officials and for giving Israelis a platform to voice their views. Some Saudi newspapers went so far as to warn Qatar that Al-Jazeera could become a tool serving anti-Arab interests.

By September 2002 the Saudis had become so irate with Al Jazeera they recalled the Saudi ambassador from Qatar for consultations. No reason was given for the move, which was announced in brief reports on 29 September by Saudi TV and the official Saudi news agency SPA. It was the first time such a severe step had been taken against a fellow Gulf Cooperation Council country.

## **12. THE BRITISH AEROSPACE AFFAIR**

In June 2007 the Guardian newspaper broke a story about British Aerospace (BAE) and the British Ministry of Defense paying out some \$2 billion to Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia as a sweetener to secure a \$40 billion arms deal for BAE Systems back in 1985.

The was covered by non-Saudi owned Arab outlets, such as Al Jazeera, but not in the Saudi media, including on Al Arabiya.

"It is an absolute taboo. No-one can open their mouth about it because the Saudis control so much of the Arab media," the Guardian quoted Abdel-Bari Atwan, the editor of the independent London-based *al-Quds al-Arabi* as saying.

"If it is mentioned at all in a Saudi paper it will talk about a conspiracy, probably attributed to Zionists, to weaken the kingdom," the Guardian quoted Dr Madawi al-Rasheed, a political scientist at London University's King's College as saying.

Independent elements in the Arab press speculated that the emergence of new information about al-Yamamah may be part of a western effort to undermine Crown Prince Sultan, Prince Bandar's father, so that the next king would instead be the more forward-looking Prince Salman.

### **13. THE KINGDOM vs. MOHAMMED HASSANEIN HEIKAL**

The famous Mohammed Hassanein Heikal is arguably the most respected of all Arab journalists. In 2003 Heikal launched his new talk show on Al Jazeera called *Ma' Heikal* [With Heikal]. He said he chose Al Jazeera ahead of Al Arabiya because Al Arabiya supported President Bush. Each week the popular series examined recent historical events in the Middle East, in the course of which Saudi policy was criticised.

In 2006 Al Arabiya aired a series called *Ayyam al-Sayyid al-Arabi* [The Days of Mr Arab] in an apparent attempt to discredit what Heikal had said about Saudi Arabia on Al Jazeera.

In April 2007 Al Jazeera ran an in-depth interview with Heikal spread over two hour-long programs in which he discussed the regional political situation and the tension between Iran and the United States. He spoke about Iran's nuclear energy program and the Saudi diplomatic efforts to regulate various regional political disputes, in particular the Mecca agreement of February 2007 that established a short-lived Palestinian unity government between Hamas and Fatah.

Heikal criticised Saudi diplomatic efforts, led by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former Saudi ambassador to the United States and intimate friend of the Bush family. Heikal rejected the idea that Iran should be considered an Arab enemy and he insinuated that Saudi efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict were undertaken in the context of providing the United States with a fig leaf for military action against Iran.

Following Heikal's comments the Saudi regime retaliated with a strong rebuttal in *Al-Riyadh* newspaper, which is under the control of Riyadh governor Prince Salman. Reuters Saudi correspondent Andrew Hammond reported that an unnamed Saudi journalist working for Al-Riyadh newspaper confided in him that the newspaper editor was ordered by the newspapers owners to write the article.

The title of the *Al-Riyadh* editorial was *ajir li-ajir*, which could be translated as "from one hireling/hired pen, to another. The implication was that Heikal was paid to throw mud by a channel that is in turn also paid to throw mud. Sudairy accused Heikal of having once been one of the greatest writers in the Arab world, but now after unsuccessfully attempting to become Saudi Arabia's official scribe, he had found a new patron in Qatar.

"Finally, Heikal found an opportunity to be a 'state writer' but in a statelet with hardly half a million people, when this mole of a country [*habbat al-khal*] Qatar made him its clownish official spokesperson ... against the kingdom, which I can affirm does not pay him any attention," Sudairy wrote. "This is Heikal - pay him and he'll say anything ... It's difficult to accept any information from a hired pen who has not been deterred by the fact that he is now eighty years old. And what makes it worse is that he is a hired pen working for another hired pen."



Two regular columnists in another Prince Salman-controlled newspaper, *Asharq al-Awsat*, also laid into Heikal. Egyptian columnist Mamoun Fandy accused him of arrogance for attacking the Saudi sponsored “Arab peace initiative” and for describing Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak - a close Saudi ally - of “living in a world of fantasy” in the Sinai tourist resort of Sharm al-Sheikh.

Fandy mocked Heikal’s attack on Saudi diplomatic envoy Prince Bandar, writing: “If a camel’s leg went lame in Never-Never Land, he [Heikal] would say Prince Bandar bin Sultan was behind it.”

In his Al Jazeera appearance Heikal had claimed that he had taken former U.S. Secretary of State William Rodgers into his bathroom for secret conversations that could not be picked up by surveillance. Playing on the double meaning of the phrase *al-‘ada al-sirriyya* (literally, “secret habit” but also a euphemism for masturbation) Fandy wrote: “Heikal practiced the same ‘secret habit’ on his farm at Birqash whenever he wanted to discuss confidential affairs, as he told Al Jazeera, since the Israel Academic Bureau is located in the floor below his apartment in Cairo.”

Lebanese columnist Samir Atallah also attacked Heikal in another piece published in *Asharq al-Awsat*. “We don’t know how long Heikal will continue writing history from one perspective, repeating the same thing and the same conviction, forgetting that he has a special responsibility since he is not an ordinary historian or journalist but a political and ideological figure from a critical period during the nation’s history,” he wrote. In the last paragraph it transpired that Attallah was in fact writing to refute Heikal’s criticism of Saudi Arabia.

“Saudi Arabia entered into conflicts with Nasserist Egypt on its own borders, not the borders of Egypt, and in its own cities not those of Egypt. As for Egypt’s wars with Israel, Saudi Arabia joined them alongside Egypt in a manner that no one understands more than Heikal. Saudi Arabia also helped Egypt in its war of attrition, militarily and economically.”

This incident clearly demonstrates the power of the Saudi media to respond to criticism, its intolerance to criticism, and its use of non-Saudi writers - co-opted liberal intelligentsia - to deliver the counterpunches.

#### **14. SAUDI ATTITUDES TOWARDS DISSIDENTS**

Saudi Arabia is highly intolerant of reformists, pro-democracy activists, dissidents and any other opponents of the regime.

##### **Unfair Trials**

Detainees in Saudi Arabia are commonly the victims of systematic and multiple violations of due process and fair trial rights. Often they are not informed of the crime of which they have been accused or the evidence against them. Frequently they have no access to a lawyer and face excessive delays in having their case heard. At trial they often cannot examine witnesses or evidence or even present a defense. Sometimes detainees are held for several years without trial. Solitary confinement for extended periods, without family visits or access to lawyers is also commonplace. Torture and ill-treatment during interrogation is widely reported.

In particular the religious police are known to abuse their power and beat detainees, sometimes to death. They rarely face trial. In 2006 Human Rights Watch found numerous allegations of ill-treatment and torture in al-Ha'ir prison, and in May 2007 a video showing torture there appeared on the internet. Prisoners in Najran, Buraiman, Ruwais, Dammam, al-Hasa, and Buraida prisons have also alleged abuse.

Saudi judges commonly sentence defendants to thousands of lashes, often carried out in public. On one occasion in October 2007 the Saudi *Okaz* newspaper reported that a court had sentenced two men to 7,000 lashes for "sodomy". Executions by sword also take place and persons as young as 13 can be put to death.

##### **Kidnapping Dissidents**

Saudi dissidents live in fear of being kidnapped and forcibly repatriated to Saudi Arabia. In 1994 two Saudi diplomats went into hiding in the United States, one from the Saudi consulate in Houston, the other from the Saudi mission at the United

Nations in New York. Both sought political asylum, claiming harassment by the Saudi government.

"I join my voice to the increasing number of moderate academics from our great nation who are no longer able to tolerate the breaches of basic human rights, including the right to freedom of expression and political association, by the present regime in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia," said the absconded second secretary at the consulate in Houston, Ahmed al Zahrany.

The U.N. envoy Mohammed al Khilewi said that shortly after he denounced the Saudi regime he received a phone call from the Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Bandar ibn Sultan, who asked him to come to a private suite at the Watergate Hotel in Washington. Prince Bandar offered to convey him there by private jet.

"Based upon my experience, I understood this to be an attempt to kidnap me and return me to Saudi Arabia for the treatment accorded to vocal opponents of the regime," Khilewi said in a statement after he went into hiding.

In January 2004 the MIRA website detailed the kidnap of the Saudi king's nephew Prince Sultan. According to the website Prince Sultan Bin-Turki Bin-Abd-al-Aziz had lived outside Saudi Arabia for some time, before being kidnapped in Geneva in June 2003 after speaking out about high-level corruption in Saudi Arabia.

The website reported that the Prince was sedated before being taken aboard a Boeing 747 aircraft by a gang of masked men. The following is a translation of the report, originally published in Arabic on 31 December 2003, entitled "Details published for the first time: the complete story of the kidnapping of Prince Sultan Bin-Turki Bin-Abd-al-Aziz".

In the middle of last June, Prince Sultan Bin-Turki Bin-Abd-al-Aziz disappeared in Geneva after he launched a campaign in which he criticized the financial and administrative corruption in Saudi Arabia and after he promised to hold a special seminar about corruption in the Defence Ministry. The circumstances of the disappearance of the prince were kept very secret. First,

there were rumours that the prince had reached an understanding with the officials to return home and accept a tempting financial offer. However, reports began spreading later about a complex kidnapping operation in whose planning and execution several princes and officials were involved. A few days later, it became clear that the prince was in a coma in the intensive care unit of the King Faysal Hospital in Riyadh. Then, there were reports that he came out of his coma, his health relatively improved, and was moved to his house and placed under house arrest and strong guard.

After it gathered all the details about the kidnapping operation from intelligence and diplomatic sources and from sources within the ruling family, besides the special connections of Sharif Abd-al-Aziz al-Shanbari, the Movement for Islamic Reform decided that the public should know the complete details of this operation. The following are the details and our comments and analysis:

### Why now

The sons of Abd-al-Aziz, particularly Princes Sultan and Nayif, thought that the first statements by Prince Sultan Bin-Turki about one year ago were just an expression of anger that can be contained easily either by financial means or through the special influence of the ruling family. However, Prince Sultan Bin-Turki continued to make similar statements and began planning for a long-term activity to expose the financial and administrative corruption and the chaotic decision-making of the ruling family. Being a member of the family and close to some leading members, he had many documents to help him achieve his purpose. However, the information that really angered his uncles was his attempt to contact some credible key figures in the reform movement, which has significant public support, and then his remarks in some circles about his demand for political participation, accountability, transparency, and reform of the judiciary. His uncles thought that this development was devastating to them unless they nipped it in the bud.

### Conspiracy to exploit diplomatic facilities

The planners of the kidnapping of Prince Sultan thought that the enormous facilities provided in Switzerland for the Saudi government during the visit of Prince Abdallah to attend the meeting of the eight countries in June provided a unique opportunity to carry out the kidnapping operation. The Swiss authorities provided facilities for the ruling family to bring in and take out any supplies, including weapons and medicines. Royal aircraft landed in Geneva and took off regularly carrying people and equipment without any examination by the Swiss authorities. The Saudi government provided assurances to the Swiss authorities that it would not misuse these facilities.

Large aircraft designated for this mission

To carry out the mission successfully, a Boeing 747 medical evacuation aircraft named India Fox was sent to transport the prince after sedating him. The aircraft arrived at Geneva airport a few days before the kidnapping operation, and it was always in a state of readiness. Another aircraft was sent to carry the personal effects, papers, files, and documents of the prince, which were later confiscated from the hotel and taken to Riyadh. It is worth mentioning that these aircraft were officially registered in Switzerland as part of the entourage of Prince Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd, who was on visit to Switzerland at the time.

Islamic affairs minister inaugurates the kidnapping project

On Thursday, 5 June 2003, corresponding to 5 Rabi al-Thani 1424 AH, Prince Sultan unexpectedly received a request for a visit by Shaykh Salih Al al-Shaykh, the minister for Islamic Affairs. The minister visited Prince Sultan and talked to him at length about the need for him to stop what he is doing. Shaykh Salih Al al-Shaykh told him that he was coming to him as a mediator with guarantees that if he returned home and gave up what he is doing, he will not be harmed. Shaykh Salih, the minister for Islamic Affairs, paid a second visit to the prince, but the purpose of this visit was not to persuade him to stop what he is doing, but to win the friendship and confidence of the prince in preparation for what would happen later. Shaykh Salih also tried to convince Prince Sultan to accept a visit by Prince Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd to make further preparations.

#### Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd reassures Prince Sultan

Shaykh Salih al-Shaykh succeeded in arranging the visit, and Prince Sultan agreed to receive Prince Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd who visited him twice. The first was on 10 and the second was on 11 June. The two visits were for the same purpose - to calm the prince and invite him to the palace of King Fahd in Geneva to continue the discussion about the reconciliation issue. The invitation to King Fahd's palace was presented as a gesture of appreciation for Prince Sultan. Prince Sultan was led to understand that other people were invited to the palace to remove his suspicion and fear.

#### Followers of the prince penetrated

Meanwhile, the Saudi intelligence services succeeded in penetrating some of the associates of the prince, including his very close servant and the man in charge of the telephone exchange of the prince's wing in the Intercontinental Hotel, the receptionist, and perhaps a number of his guards. The most important result of this penetration was giving him some kind of medicine that causes him to become reckless and gives him self-confidence and encouragement to take risks. This perhaps was the reason that he agreed to go to the palace of King Fahd despite the advice of his aides not to go. The telephone exchange employee also succeeded in foiling communications from sympathizers who called to persuade the prince not to leave the hotel.

#### In King Fahd's palace in Geneva

On the morning of Thursday, 12 June, corresponding to 12 Rabi al-Thani, Prince Sultan went to the palace of King Fahd accompanied by his security guards, driver and other escorts. After arriving at the palace, he entered, and everything seemed completely normal. His security guards were allowed to enter the palace and stay in a lounge near the car park. This is a routine procedure for all those who enter the palace. To reassure Prince Sultan even more, the meeting was held at the swimming pool hall where the security guards could see all the attendants from afar and hear any appeals for help. Prince Abd-al-Aziz, Islamic Affairs Minister Shaykh Salih Al al-Shaykh, and several princes, senior royal court officials, cabinet members and Saudi

embassy staff members were present at the breakfast banquet. It was clear that gathering this large number of officials was meant to reassure Prince Sultan that everything was extremely normal and this was a meeting of love, frankness, goodwill and serious dialogue to discuss the future of the country. The discussions were indeed about these issues and the need to stop the waste of public funds, hold the officials who waste public funds to account, and control the financial and administration chaos. Prince Abd-al-Aziz complimented Prince Sultan about his seriousness in discussing these issues.

From the swimming pool session to the office of King Fahd

After a breakfast that lasted an hour during which Prince Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd felt that Prince Sultan Bin-Turki trusted him and his invitation, and on the pretext that the many guests needed to talk in private, he asked him to go with him inside the palace for more serious and private talks. Prince Sultan did not hesitate for two reasons. The first was because he was under the influence of the self-confidence boosting drug. The second was because he saw that matters were very normal and there was no hostile behaviour or evidence of bad intentions. Prince Sultan later said to some of his visitors that he thought it would be difficult for Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd, who talked about his father with admiration and respect, to use his father's palace in a crime against one of his cousins. The three (Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd, Sultan Bin-Turki, and Salih Al al-Shaykh) proceeded to one of the halls in the palace. Prince Abd-al-Aziz then said that these halls are large and it would be better for intimacy and understanding to move to the office of King Fahd, which is equipped with facilities for semi-private meetings. They went there and the discussion began taking a more serious nature. Prince Sultan felt relaxed and reassured, particularly as he went to the bathroom and returned without any problems.

The Ninja in the king's office

Suddenly, someone came to inform Prince Abd-al-Aziz that he is wanted on the telephone. He apologized politely for the interruption and left the office to answer the telephone call. A few minutes later, Islamic Affairs Minister Shaykh Salih Al al-Shaykh wanted to go to the bathroom and left the office, too. Prince Sultan remained alone in the office, self-confident, talking to

himself about the results of the understanding he would reach with those two serious good persons. While deep in thought, a door different from the ordinary door of the office opened and five large-bodied men masked like the Ninjas stormed the room in a terrifying way, hitting at the tables in front of the prince. Then all of them attacked him, held all parts of his body and placed a large piece of cloth on his face. They warned him not to resist and not to try to call for help. The prince then felt a blow to the back of his head, which rendered him unconscious. He woke up weeks later in the King Faysal Hospital.

#### A special clinic in the bedroom

The choice of the king's office was not coincidental. The reason is that this wing of the palace had something similar to a mini hospital with all the facilities for anaesthesia and surgery, and this is what the kidnappers of the prince needed. Immediately after the blow to the back of his head, which made him lose his consciousness, the prince was moved to the anaesthesia room. A special team administered an anaesthetic to him in preparation for transferring him to the evacuation aircraft where another team would take over.

#### On board the aircraft

The kidnapped prince was moved to the medical evacuation aircraft (India Fox). A team of investigators and special mission agents transferred him from the palace of King Fahd to the aircraft in his capacity as a palace resident who suffered a health problem. A team was waiting for him in the aircraft led by Dr Sulayman al-Husayni, the director of the intensive care unit at the King Faysal Hospital. The doctor was summoned to come directly from the hospital at the request of Prince Nayif. He was not informed about the identity of the patient, but told that one of the princes was sick and needs to be evacuated on the medical evacuation aircraft while under sedation. While the aircraft was in the air, the prince suffered serious complications because he was given the anaesthesia immediately after he ate breakfast, causing the food to reverse to his lungs and damage them. The effects of this damage remained even after the prince regained his consciousness. The fact that the prince suffers from



overweight, high blood pressure, and other health problems compounded the problem.

The ambassador confiscates the prince's clothes and files from the hotel

After the kidnappers made sure that the kidnapping operation had succeeded, Saudi Ambassador to Switzerland Habib Shahin went to the Intercontinental Hotel and talked to the hotel manager. He claimed that Prince Sultan authorized him to collect all his clothes, papers, documents and everything else and settle his account in the hotel because he was sick and decided to return home. Because the ambassador came to the hotel in the name of the state, the hotel management did not think that the ambassador was engaged in a fraudulent operation. Some people say that the hotel management deliberately did not bother to check because it wanted to satisfy the Saudi government more than protect its credibility. After confiscating the clothes and documents of the prince, they were sent to Riyadh on board a special aircraft under the supervision of the investigations department and placed in the custody of Prince Nayif.

Clamour in the family while the prince was on the aeroplane

Following these complications, Princes Abdallah, Sultan, Nayif, and Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd were afraid that something bad would happen to him and they would get in trouble with his father and brothers, who would demand revenge. They gave his father and brothers a distorted story before he arrived in Riyadh. They admitted that he was sedated and in an unstable condition. They said that he is being taken to a special hospital attached to the Al-Ha'ir Prison. His father insisted that he be taken to the King Faysal Hospital and put in the best department there, and if he died, something bad would happen. Indeed, it was decided to move the prince to the intensive care unit of the royal wing of the King Faysal Hospital.

At the hospital

The aeroplane landed at the Riyadh Air Base, which was full of investigation and special mission agents. The prince was quickly moved to the intensive care unit of the royal wing of the King Faysal Hospital in Riyadh. The

number of care-givers supervising the treatment of the prince was very limited. No person was allowed to enter the unit without permission. The royal wing, anyhow, is constantly under strong security guard.

#### On arrival

The medical complications increased after the arrival of the prince. It became clear that his two lungs were damaged, there was a drop in the function of his organs and there was general blood poisoning. The doctors faced extreme difficulty in stabilizing his condition because of his bad medical situation before and his extreme overweight. The doctors were unable to remove the artificial respirator and the prince remained in a coma for 10 days. During the first five days, he was in a very critical condition. After waking up from his coma and after the doctors removed the artificial respirator, the prince remained unable to move or speak for several days. He needed more than one month to regain his memory, consciousness and ability to move. During this period, no-one was allowed to visit him, except Princes Salman and Ahmad, the sons of Abd-al-Aziz, on the pretext that they were not involved in the kidnapping operation. His brothers, the sons of Turki Bin-Abd-al-Aziz were also allowed to visit him. Almost one month after he came out of his coma or about two months after his arrival, he was allowed to get out of the hospital.

#### House arrest and siege

After his condition improved and allowed him to leave the hospital, Prince Sultan was taken to a house he owned near the Lexus housing complex in Al-Muruj neighbourhood of Riyadh. He was under strong guard there, and no-one was allowed to enter the house, except his brothers from the Al-Turki family. Everyone coming in was searched so he would not use any means of communication. Furthermore, the house did not have any telephone service at the time and was like a prison. During this period, the prince suffered medical relapses, repeated rise in temperature, and an increase in his weight because of the large quantity of cortisone he received. His mind and memory remained confused and disturbed, and he was unable to regain his full mental capacity until the end of Ramadan.

Who is the decision-maker?

The person who was the most enthusiastic about the kidnapping decision was Prince Sultan Bin-Abd-al-Aziz. The main campaign of the kidnapped prince was directed against him, because of the strategic stockpile project. However, Princes Abdallah and Nayif had also approved the crime. Prince Nayif oversaw the operation in coordination with the intelligence service. Prince Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd was one of the persons accused in the kidnapping operation and in fact personally participated in carrying it out. He exploited his relationship with Islamic Affairs Minister Shaykh Salih Al al-Shaykh, as a religious leader, to trick the kidnapped prince.

Sultan says Abdallah ordered it

In tracing the way in which the kidnapping of the prince was communicated to Prince Turki and his sons, it became clear that the two sides of the family wanted to exploit the kidnapping of the prince to hit at each other. They also wanted to end the embarrassment caused to them by the activity of the prince. Princes Sultan, Nayif, Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd, and the other members of Al Fahd (the Al-Sudayriyin) suggested to the sons of Turki that the person responsible for the kidnapping was Prince Abdallah. They said that Prince Abdallah was extremely annoyed by the statements of Prince Sultan linking him to Rafiq al-Hariri and the manipulations of Rafiq al-Hariri. Prince Sultan also talked about the donation made to Lebanon following Abdallah's tour of the poor neighbourhoods, thus disturbing Prince Abdallah's steps. The purpose of Princes Sultan and Nayif was to provoke the Al Turki to take revenge on Prince Abdallah for their brother just as Faysal Bin-Musa'id did with King Faysal in avenging his brother Khalid.

Abdallah says it was Sultan's crime

Prince Abdallah, however, communicated to Al Turki clearly that he did not know anything about it and that Sultan and Nayif acted on their own initiative and that he was unhappy, but he did not wish to intervene for fear of strife. The purpose of Abdallah was to convince the Al Turki to take revenge against the two. He wished that Sultan Bin-Turki would die so that Turki and his clan

would act against Sultan and Nayif and demand the blood of Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd as the person whose actions led to the death of Turki's son.

The position of the Swiss authorities

Perhaps the Swiss authorities did not know in advance and perhaps they were not part of the plot, but they definitely knew the details after the kidnapping took place. Nevertheless, they looked the other way as if nothing had happened because of the enormous benefits they gain from the activities of the Al Sa'ud in Switzerland. Some details of this case were leaked to the opposition parties, which reportedly tried to collect the remaining details to use them as basis for criticizing the current government. Some Swiss journalists contacted the Movement for Islamic Reform, before it collected all these details, to ask what really happened.

The United States is angry

According to informed sources in the ruling family, the family was strongly reprimanded by the Americans, who regarded this operation as a form of terrorism. They told the Saudi government that it was lucky that the operation took place secretly. Otherwise, the American government would have taken a public position in considering the operation as a terrorist crime. The American government would also have faced extreme embarrassment because of its close cooperation with the Saudi government in the war on terrorism. It is believed that the American government had made some gains by blackmailing the Saudi government in this respect.

The experiment fails with Dr Sa'd al-Fagih

The regime, in general, and Prince Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd, in particular, felt confident after the success of the operation. The Al Sa'ud thought they could repeat the operation with Dr Sa'd al-Fagih in London. Prince Abd-al-Aziz left for London with his aeroplane and mercenaries following complete coordination with Princes Nayif and Sultan and the intelligence service. The plan was amended in London because the circumstances and facilities were different from those in Geneva. The plan was to take advantage of the departure of Abd-al-Aziz Bin-Fahd to bring Al-Fagih on a wheelchair semi-

semiconscious as if he were one of the drunken escorts - and there are many of them. The workers at Heathrow airport had become used to seeing them. However, unfortunately for Abd-al-Aziz and his uncles, the attempt failed from the beginning and produced an opposite result, praise be to God.

Britain follows the case at the beginning and protests at the end

Britain followed the case with extreme caution and expressed to the Saudi government its concern, but it did not have the ability or the influence to reprimand the Saudi government as the Americans did. However, after the failure of the attempt to kidnap Dr Al-Fagih and after the British discovered that members of the ruling family were behind this operation, Britain took a firmer position on this matter. Britain told the Saudi government that irrespective of the good relations and the volume of trade with it, Britain would never tolerate the use of political violence on its territory.

#### **15. DR. SA'AD AL-FAGIH**

Dr al Fagih is a key Saudi dissident, detested by the Saudi regime. The Kingdom takes his activity very seriously even though they admit that by singling him out, they risk increasing his popularity. Ferej Alowedi, deputy head of mission of the Saudi Embassy in London has in the past compared Dr. al-Fagih to a tiny mosquito that can cause massive damage by spreading malaria.

"One little mosquito carries the disease. And that's the way we look at al-Fagih. He's just one little insect, but he can do great damage," he said in July 2004.

Saudi officials admit they have been monitoring al-Fagih's activities ever since he left Riyadh. They contend he has been involved in numerous illegal activities, collecting money for terrorist causes and inciting violence. They keep tapes and transcripts of his Islah broadcasts and material from his Web site, saying he has urged listeners to take revenge for alleged crimes against dissidents by assassinating members of the royal family, including Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Nayef, the interior minister. British officials have reviewed dossiers received from the Saudis concerning

al-Fagih's activities but say that so far they have seen no evidence that would merit his arrest.

The Saudi embassy in London has expressed confidence that Dr. al-Fagih will one day be extradited to Saudi Arabia. In December 2004 Jamal Khashoggi, media adviser at the Saudi embassy in London said "We are confident that (Saad) al-Fagih will eventually be extradited to Saudi Arabia." "There is enough evidence to tie him down to al Qaeda attacks in the kingdom."

A British Foreign Office spokeswoman commented: "We have long been following Saad al-Fagih's activities and there have been some clear Saudi concerns about him, but in terms of what we can do, and why we haven't taken action earlier, we can only act in Britain when UK law is violated".

For his part Dr. al-Fagih believes that he is being constantly watched by various intelligence services and has alleged that in the past Saudi intelligence has deliberately tried to discredit or incriminate him by posting al-Qaida statements on the MIRA website. He claims that wishes to change the situation in Saudi Arabia without bloodshed.

Dr. al-Fagih refuses to reveal the identity of his backers or say from where he receives his funding. "Much of the money comes from sympathetic individuals," he has said. "We are keen for money that is politically, legally and religiously clean. In this dangerous world it's very dangerous to give any details."

In June 2003 Dr Fagih suffered a broken rib and leg injuries when two men arrived at his home claiming to be plumbers before attacking him at his London home. When he opened the door, he was sprayed with gas before the men tried to drag him outside. Dr. al-Fagih said that he called for help and fended the attackers off with a small stool. The men fled after knifing him in the leg. British authorities say two men were later arrested for assault but the charges were dismissed.

Dr. al-Fagih said that after the incident British officials told him that they had issued a strong warning to the Saudi Embassy, but that he still did feel secure. Dr. al-Fagih has

alleged that this was a kidnap attempt instigated by "one of the senior princes" in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi embassy denied any government involvement.

### **Blacklisting Dr al-Fagih**

In July 2005 the U.N. Security Council ordered governments to freeze the assets of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia following accusations that it was linked to al Qaeda. Britain, backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia, proposed adding the group's name to the council's list of organizations linked to the Taliban, Osama bin Laden or his al Qaeda network. A council committee approved the proposal days after Washington added the group to its own compilation of such organizations.

This system was established to pursue alleged terrorists and their accomplices, but it can also be used by governments to avoid due process and punish people without a trial. It is open to abuse by governments who wish to frame dissidents simply because they are disfavoured by the regime.

The United Nations Security Council did not explain why Dr. Saad al-Fagih had been put on the blacklist. Adding someone to this list involves no court process, nor is it debated by the council's member states. A government simply submits a name to the Security Council's 1267 committee, which circulates it among the 15 council members, along with supporting details and silence is considered consent. There are no formal standards of evidence required for designation and people on the list have no right to present exculpatory evidence to Security Council members, nor do they have any right of appeal.

Once on the blacklist you can be stripped of your assets and your international-travel rights without so much as a hearing, let alone a trial or appeal. You cannot apply to be de-listed - only a government can do that on your behalf. Few people have been de-listed.

In Dr. al-Fagih's case, the first he learnt of his blacklisting was from the British foreign office. His name had been put forward by Saudi Arabia, which alleged that in 2003 he received \$1 million from a man who later confessed to plotting the

assassination of the Saudi crown prince, according to the Treasury Department. Dr. Fagih has denied involvement in the alleged plot.

Dr. al-Fagih is now in an uncertain legal zone. He lives in the UK, where he has never been charged with a crime. Saudi Arabia has accused him of complicity in an attempted assassination and of helping to buy the satellite phone Osama bin Laden used to direct embassy bombings. He cannot be extradited to Saudi Arabia from the UK or from other European Union countries as he would face the death penalty. According to a U.S. Treasury Department statement Dr. al-Fagih's designation on the U.N. list "is a critical part of the international campaign to counter terrorism." But if there was substance to any of these allegations the question arises, why has he not been charged?

In 2006 the Council of Europe ruled that the 1267 process does not comply with Europe's convention on human rights because it provides no protection against arbitrary decisions, because it contains no mechanism to review the accuracy of allegations governments make, and because those targeted have no recourse against national governments which can simply say they are bound to follow the dictates of the Security Council.

## **16. OTHER DISSIDENTS**

At any one time there are hundreds or thousands of dissidents and activists in jail in Saudi Arabia, often in murky legal circumstances. The number of cases is too large to list here in full detail but examples follow.

In March 2004, Saudi authorities arrested 13 people in several cities for circulating a petition calling for a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and signalling their intent to form an independent human rights organization. In 2005 three prominent reformist intellectuals were sentenced to seven years for sowing dissent and challenging the royal family.

In January 2005 the Saudi Arab News web site reported that a court in Jedda had sentenced 15 people, including a Saudi woman, to prison terms and lashing for taking



part in an illegal demonstration arranged by Dr. al-Fagih. The state prosecutor objected to the sentences, saying they were too lenient. There was confusion at the court proceedings as some defendants retracted their confessions when brought before the judge. Some pleaded not guilty saying they were unaware of the consequences of taking part in an illegal gathering. Others alleged they were onlookers who had simply come to see what was going on.

In March 2005 a Saudi dissident named Dr Sa'id Bin-Mubarak al-Zu'ayr was evacuated from his cell in the Al-Hayir Prison to hospital, following a serious deterioration in his health. Saudi authorities had arrested Shaykh Al-Zu'ayr following a statement he made to Al-Jazeera. Zu'ayr has been on a hunger strike for two and a half months, in protest at being prevented from appointing a lawyer to defend himself.

In 2006 10 men were arrested for allegedly collecting donations to fund terrorism. A lawyer for some of the men said they were reform activists. Nine remain in indefinite detention with no charges pressed. Some are in solitary confinement. In late 2006 the government banished journalist Qinan al-Ghamdi for an article lamenting the slow implementation of reforms.

In June 2007 the Ministry of Education expelled a Shia girl from school for insulting the Prophet Muhammad's companions. Also in 2007 the Saudi government's National Dialogue platform barred Ibrahim al-Mugaitieb, president of the still unlicensed NGO Human Rights First in Saudi Arabia, from participating in its online forum because it was "a non-registered society."

In July 2007 Saudi secret police arrested five women peacefully demonstrating for the release or trial of their relatives who had been detained for over two years without trial. Human rights activist Muhammad al-Bajadi remains detained. In October 2007 Matrook al-Faleh alleged that secret police tried to run his vehicle off the road after he publicized these rights violations.

In November 2007 a court jailed two critics of the government, Abdullah al-Hamid and his brother Isa al-Hamed, to six months in jail for encouraging women to stage

protests over the detention of some 3,000 men in the government's effort to crush al Qaeda militants.

In December 2007 Saudi blogger Fouad Farhan was detained on charges of violating security regulations after running an online campaign against detentions of dissidents.

### **Other Blacklisted Dissidents**

Besides Dr. al-Fagih the U.N. blacklist includes many Afghans, three Britons, two Germans, five Saudi Arabians, at least one U.S. citizen, plus dozens more Tunisians, Moroccans, Egyptians and other individuals of indeterminate nationality.

In 2005 a court in Hamburg found a former roommate of three Sept. 11 pilots, Abdelghani Mzoudi, not guilty on all charges of logistical support for those hijack attacks. Despite his acquittal, Mr. Mzoudi, a Moroccan, remains sanctioned under 1267 for his alleged support of al Qaeda.

German citizen Mamoun Darkazanli was designated under 1267 in October 2001. Like Dr al-Fagih he has never been convicted of a crime, but was left destitute after banking restrictions made it impossible for him to run his import-export business. He survives on welfare payments authorized by the Security Council.

## **17. DISSIDENT POLITICAL RHETORIC**

It is common for Saudi dissidents to claim responsibility for all kinds of issues that might embarrass the Saudi government regardless of whether in fact this is actually accurate. Dissidents Dr al-Fagih, Kassab al-Utaybi and Muhammad al-Mas'ari have all in the past made wild claims.

Dr al-Fagih frequently claims that Saudi Arabia is on the verge of collapse, that conflict within the royal family and a looming economic crisis are about to tear the country apart, and that the next few months will be crucial. Callers and guests to his programme reinforce these messages.

According to a report published by on the Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan* website on 17 June 2006, Dr. al-Fagih uses all kinds of elaborate ruses and theatrical ploys to pretend to his audience that he is more influential than he really is.

Nasir Bin Muhammad Al-Mas'ari , a former follower of Dr. al-Fagih, was a Saudi dissident who was jailed for more than seven months in the Saudi Arabia - including 20 days in solitary confinement – before being released upon the orders of Prince Muhammad Bin Nayif, the assistant interior minister, in exchange for court testimony.

Nasir Al-Mas'ari told the *Al-Watan* website that during the seven years he worked for al-Fagih he routinely misguided listeners to Dr. al-Fagih's Al-Islah [Reform] radio station.

Al-Mas'ari said that he started working with Dr. al-Fagih while he was in Saudi Arabia, writing inflammatory statements to be posted on Saudi Internet forums. Then in 1998 he began to co-host radio programmes with Al-Fagih under the code-name "Nasim [Breeze] 2000. The programmes were broadcast every Monday by radio and by the Internet via "Pal Talk".

In the interview Al-Mas'ari , a relative of better-known Saudi dissident Muhammad al-Mas'ari, said that Dr. al-Fagih used to turn down any interlocutor with whom he held a debate via Pal Talk unless he was sure that the person was poorly educated. Al-Mas'ari claimed that Al-Fagih wanted to show listeners that defenders of the kingdom were all ignorant. Al-Mas'ari claimed that the information presented by Dr. al-Fagih in his interviews came from people inside the kingdom and that everyone involved in producing the show, including the contributors, knew that the information being broadcast was false.

Nasir al-Mas'ari said that as he became more involved with Dr. Al-Fagih they contacted one another more often in secret online chat rooms. Together with two or three other Saudi dissidents, including one named Badawi Fahim, Al-Mas'ari said they planned theatrical scenarios for broadcast on the radio.

“Sa'd al-Fagih authorized me to work in the "Al-Fagih radio station" as soon as this radio station was established. I used different names and changed my voice; Sa'd al-Fagih exploited my talent in imitating different voices,” Al-Mas’ari said.

“One funny incident I recall was the day when Sa'd al-Fagih called on the Saudi people to stage demonstrations. I was inside my home then but I appeared on the radio, pretending that I was covering the events live from the field. The listeners did not know that I was inside my house in Al-Suwaydi neighbourhood but Al-Fagih knew. I broadcast on the radio that the streets of Riyadh were blocked with thousands of demonstrators who had responded to Al-Fagih's call. Another trick we once used was when we introduced a woman on one of Al-Fagih's shows as an opponent of Al-Fagih's ideology. We gave the woman the name of "Jawahir Al Sa'ud" and we made her say on the air, "I swear by God that I am going to make them cut off your electricity." The truth is that this woman was the daughter of one of Al-Fagih's supporters who is known very well. Through such misleading chats, Al-Fagih is trying to fabricate an unsound relationship between the royal family and the people.”

Al-Mas’ari added: “On one occasion, Al-Fagih and I and two others met on Pal Talk to plan a play whose scenario was invented by Al-Fagih himself, and he distributed the roles to us. Al-Fagih turned to me and said: "Nasim 2000, you come in under a new name and with a different voice and using the common dialect. You pretend to be one of my opponents and that you wish to engage me in a debate via radio in which you defend the Saudi government and show ignorance. Al-Fagih often refers to this technique to demonstrate the ignorance of the government's supporters.”

In the article Nasir Al-Mas’ari expressed regret that he had helped Dr. Al-Fagih mislead listeners.