

WAR of Ideas

The political wars being waged with Saudi Arabia over terrorism and oil prices are well-known. But battles are being waged on two other key fronts, as well.

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After their recent meeting in Crawford, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah and President Bush issued a statement calling on those who teach and propagate the Islamic faith, as well as those of all faiths and practices, to adhere to peace, moderation and tolerance. They reiterated the principles enshrined in the February "Riyadh Declaration" calling for "fighting any form of thinking that promotes hatred, incites violence and condones terrorist crimes, which can by no means be accepted by any religion or law."

These were important words that needed to be spoken. Now, real action on the ground in Saudi Arabia must follow.

The 9-11 Commission's final report notes that Saudi Arabia funds organizations that promote an exclusivist branch of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism, which has been exploited by extremists to further their goal of violence. Earlier this year, Freedom House released a report analyzing Saudi government publications found in the U.S. These publications exhort Muslims to manifest contempt for Christians, Jews and other "infidels" and condemn Muslims who disagree with or fail to conform to the Saudi state ideology as "apostates," putting them at risk of capital punishment in the kingdom and vigilante violence elsewhere.

These Saudi state publications also denounce democracy and elected legislatures on the basis that they are ruled by the people, not Allah, whose unmediated will the Saudi government claims to enforce. The Saudi state works to disseminate this ideology throughout the world, while invalidating more moderate traditions and expressions of Islam.

In Saudi Arabia, the consequence of denying religious freedom is widespread and brutal political repression. Within the kingdom, dissenting moderates and political reformers are crushed by the government on religious grounds. Muslims and non-Muslims alike are denied freedom of conscience and belief in Saudi Arabia. This, together with the Saudi government's global propagation of Wahhabism, impedes the development of voices of toleration and debate and foments extremism.

The 9-11 Commission's final report concluded that the war on terror requires U.S. engagement in the struggle for ideas in the Muslim world, and Saudi Arabia's exportation of Wahhabi extremism is working against us. Promoting religious freedom in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere is critical for encouraging reform, freedom, democracy and dissent within Muslim-majority countries.

In September, the U.S. for the first time named Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for severe religious freedom violations. The president is required by congressional statute to act on this designation within 180 days by imposing measures that can include the suspension of economic assistance. To date, no such action has been taken. On March 15, the State Department asked Congress for an extension, asserting that there had been "real engagement" with Saudi Arabia, though no specifics were offered.

The bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended CPC status for Saudi Arabia since the commission's formation in 1999. The commission has monitored Saudi Arabia's religious freedom record for several years and has seen no evidence of real progress.

To the contrary, this February - the same month it issued the "Riyadh Declaration" - the Saudi government named the former head of the World Muslim League - a government-supported charity that is the world's largest publisher of Islamic extremist literature, and which is now enmeshed in a U.S. terrorism investigation - as the new minister of education, the key cabinet post for reform. And last month's announcement of a national campaign against extremism designed to educate Saudis about the importance of tolerance and moderation was followed by the destruction of a Hindu temple by the state religious police.

The 9-11 Commission concluded that the problems in the U.S.-Saudi relationship must be

confronted openly. The International Religious Freedom Act, which establishes the CPC designation process, provides important tools by which such problems may begin to be addressed openly. In accordance with its mandate under the act, the commission recommends specific actions for the U.S. government in this regard. They include:

- Denying entry into the U.S. of any Saudi government official who was responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations;

- Barring U.S. entry for Saudi government officials who have been responsible for propagating globally an ideology that explicitly promotes hate, intolerance and human rights violations; and

- Ceasing the export of items such as thumbcuffs, leg irons and shackles, which the U.S. now exports to Saudi Arabia and could be used to perpetrate human rights violations, such as torture.

A high-level joint U.S.-Saudi committee has just been established to deal with issues of strategic importance to the two countries. Ending the global propagation of Saudi-financed terrorism should be among those issues. This would signal a major policy shift to Riyadh that the United States values religious freedom, seeks to undermine the roots of terror and extremism, and is serious about the president's State of the Union challenge to Saudi Arabia to expand the political freedom of its people.

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