

**Saudi-US Cooperation and War Against Terrorism**

*Riyaz Punjabi\**

*Prof. Riyaz Punjabi is President, International Centre for Peace Studies, New Delhi, and Editor, Journal of Peace Studies.*

The US policy makers have not left the task of reviewing the state of Saudi polity and society unattended even in the face of continuing focus on Afghanistan in the post September 11 carnage in New York. The US perception reflected in its deeper concerns regarding the opportunities the Saudi society provides for outfits like the Al-Qaeda to flourish has been a constant theme of the continuing dialogue between the US officials and the Saudi government for a long time, especially after the Gulf War. It may be mentioned here that in view of the special relationship, which is described as 'historic' between Washington and Riyadh, such concerns are not generally publicised and remain closely guarded secrets conveyed only through proper official and diplomatic channels.

**The Concerns and the Responses**

The US concerns that the elements in Saudi Kingdom have been abetting and aiding Muslim extremism appear to have been further sharpened on two counts in the post September 11 carnage: Firstly, as revealed in the US media, most of the suspected hijackers involved in September 11 attacks carried the Saudi passports. The inference drawn is that there are strong elements present within the Saudi society, which have been providing logistical support to the fundamentalist groups to carry on their extremist activities across the globe. Second, the Saudi-based charities and Saudi-funded seminaries, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, have been the backbones to the violent and extremist Muslim groups in carrying on their terrorist activities with impunity. These charities are reported to have provided large funds to the seminaries in Pakistan to recruit students as foot soldiers for Al-Qaeda and Taliban.

The Saudi government does not have a uniform response to these concerns. A section of the Saudi government, whose views are articulated by crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, describes Osama bin Laden and his Saudi followers as "deviants" who were trying to "drive a wedge between Riyadh and Washington". On the other hand, the Saudi Intelligence Chief admits that a large number of young Saudis have their sympathies with Osama bin Laden and the cause he espouses.

## **Special Status and Special Duty**

In the Muslim world, the two holiest Islamic Shrines are situated in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi leaders claim to be the custodians of these holy places. Therefore, they have a special responsibility in addressing the challenges posed by the September 11 attacks and their consequences on the international relations. It needs to be recognised that Saudi government has to do a tight-rope-walking in dealing with Muslim radicals and extremists who might still be present in the Kingdom disguised as normal citizens. In view of the religious sensitivities of the Muslims in general and its own populace in particular, Saudi Government's dilemma needs to be understood dispassionately in dealing with extremist and fanatical religious elements from within. In case, the Kingdom takes harsher measures in dealing with these elements, it runs the risk of being dubbed as oppressive and tyrannical, apart from enhancing the levels of estrangement of its own young populace. On the other hand, if it takes a lenient attitude towards these elements, it may be accused of harbouring and facilitating extremists and terrorists. Ironically, many a Muslim state in West Asia and North Africa, particularly, the non-democratic and theocratic states, are facing this very dilemma. Be that as it is, these states will have to reassess their positions and build a new framework in the changing international scenario of the global war against terrorism.

Saudi Arabia has a special significance for the Muslims across the globe because of the holy sites situated on its land. The Kingdom attracts millions of Muslims from all over the world throughout the year, apart from the millions who visit the Kingdom annually to perform the obligatory *Haj*. Generally, the average Muslims look towards the scholarship in the Kingdom for guidance on religious issues.

The political leaders of Saudi Arabia owe a special duty in intervening in the situations in which Islamic precepts are distorted and Islam as a religion is sought to be projected as a weapon of terror. In the ongoing war against international terrorism, Saudi Government has vehemently condemned the phenomenon of terrorism, and has in fact been a partner in the US-led coalition against global terrorism. The Saudi Government recently organised an important conclave of religious scholars from different Muslim States in addressing the challenges thrown up by the tragic events of September 11 in US. The conclave concluded with the note that terrorism was an antithesis to Islam, hence it was reprehensible. Be that as it is, Saudi rulers need to look afresh inwardly and formulate a definite and transparent policy on certain issues on urgent basis. In this regard, two issues deserve their immediate attention.

## **The NGO Networks**

The several Islamic Organisations, ostensibly non-governmental in nature, with a large international network, have been operating from the Kingdom for a long time, some of them for more than four decades now. Most of these Organisations claim to be engaged in the researches in Islam, disseminating Islamic *Dawah* (invitation) and ‘defending Islamic causes in a manner that safeguards the interests of Muslims and solves their problems’, as enlisted in their catalogue of the objectives. Some Organisations even profess to be working towards ‘promoting peace, cooperation and solidarity among mankind’. These are indeed laudable objectives and the Organisations are free to pursue them. Moreover, these objectives are in conformity with the principles of UN and ECOSOC.

However, the Saudi Government has to ensure, in the face of the threat posed by global terrorism that these Organisations are not hijacked by individuals, groups and even governments in promoting international terrorism. The instances can be quoted where the individuals and groups engaged in promoting terrorism in some parts of the world have succeeded in obtaining the patronage and securing financial help and exploited these Organisations for terrorist and diplomatic purposes. In this age of war against International terrorism, the Saudi Government needs to investigate the functioning of these Organisations, scrutinise their membership and deeply look into their global networks. That these Organisations are not funded by the government and they draw their financial support from the individuals/groups in the Kingdom is not a sound justification to leave them outside the official scrutiny.

The second issue which deserves the immediate attention is also linked to the issue elaborated in the aforementioned paragraph.

## **Charity as source of terror**

It cannot be disputed that *Zakaat* (Charity) is one of the pillars of Islamic faith and it is an obligatory charge upon every adult Muslim. The abiding force of this obligation can be gauged from the fact that a Muslim who is incapable of paying *Zakaat* in material terms can teach another Muslim Holy Quran and he would be deemed to have paid *Zakaat*. However, as long as Muslims remained a small community dispersed on small tracts of land it was easy to perform this obligation at the local levels and also monitor the functioning and objectives of this system.

With the growth and expansion of Islamic faith and building of Islamic Empires and later with the emergence of varied Muslim states, some in the form of modern nation states, the monitoring of charity funds and the purposes for which it is expended has become a complex task. Some Muslim states have devised a structured mechanism of monitoring the *Zakaat* funds collected by individuals, groups and organisations. However, most of the Muslim states have left the entire matter outside the official sphere of scrutiny. In view of the prosperity of Saudi citizens and the reverence the visiting pilgrims from all over the world hold for the Kingdom, *Zakaat* collections have become a huge affair and these along with charity donations amount to millions of dollars.

The investigations carried out during the war against terrorism in Afghanistan and reported in the international media have established linkages between Saudi charities, the terrorist networks and seminaries in Afghanistan and Pakistan who have been recruiting students on behalf of Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Generally, it is not an unusual sight to find donations boxes meant for the collections for *Jehad* in the street corners, shops and restaurants in the Saudi Kingdom particularly in Mecca and Madina. The labels on these collection boxes vary and change, depending on the emergence of conflict zones around the world. Thus, at one point, if it mentions *Jehad-i-Kashmir*, the other day it is *Jehad-i-Afghanistan* and the third day it is *Jehad-i-Chechnya*. The identity of fund-raisers and objectives for which the funds are spent or the destination of these funds remain well-guarded secrets. The donors of such charities might be donating well with the intentions that they were contributing towards the cause of alleviating the economic problems of their fellow Muslim brethren in need. But there is no mechanism available to ensure that these funds are actually spent to realise the objectives for which they are collected.

During the course of informal interactions, many a Saudi residents admit, that there are no mechanisms available to monitor the expenditure of charity funds. Some of them even say that on many occasions they did collect large donations meant for the rehabilitation of Muslim victims of violence in different conflict zones of the world, which actually never reached them. On the contrary, according to them, they would receive discreet messages to collect funds, which would be spent for the purchase of small arms to be used in *Jehad*. Ultimately, the farsighted ones amongst them admitted to have abandoned the collection of funds or donating towards the charities. It is high time that Saudi Government deals with this situation effectively in a transparent manner.

### **Countering Fundamentalism**

The Saudi government has been organising the conclaves of Islamic scholars in the Kingdom from time to time to reflect upon the issues concerning Muslims as individuals or collectivities in the ever-changing international situations. The non-governmental Islamic Organisations in the Kingdom too organise such meetings and debate issues pertaining to Islam and Muslims. However, the proceedings and resolutions of such conclaves do not reach Muslims at large across the world. The debates in these conclaves could help the average Muslim minds to comprehend the processes of reconstructing the Islamic percepts according to changing social situations. In absence of this information, as experiences reveal, the extremists and lumpenised Muslim zealots are having a field day in advancing their own reinterpretations and reconstructions and this phenomenon has resulted in promoting conflicts and terrorism. The concept of *Jehad* as promoted by extremists provides an illustration to the point. This pre-occupation has also provided flourishing opportunities to jobless extremists to reap rich dividends without any investments. The vitality of Al-Qaeda and the impregnable profile of Taliban in Afghanistan, the clout enjoyed by extremist groups in Pakistan operating with impunity in Kashmir and the terrorist groups active in the Independent Republics of Central Asia may be seen in this very perspective.

The leaders of these organisations have been drawing ideological oxygen from the distorted versions and reinterpretations of Islamic principles carefully devised to suit their strategies. The exhortations and clarifications issued by Saudi religious leaders and the scholars of repute are rather muted and they do not reach the average Muslims across the world. The voices and opinions of Islamic scholars from the Kingdom should not only be audible enough, but in view of the challenge of global terrorism, these voices should reach the vulnerable Muslim minds all over the world.

### **Look Inwards**

The rulers of Saudi Kingdom should intensely look inwards at this juncture of history. During the last two decades the Saudi population has increased three-fold reaching 22 million. According to studies by the US Energy Information Administration (USEIA), half the Saudi population is under the age of 18 years and 60 per cent of University graduates fail to find gainful employment. The Saudi Kingdom derives 70 per cent of its revenues from oil and these revenues have remained flat for the last two decades. In fact, the modern day Saudi Kingdom was built basically on oil. Most of the Saudis with jobs have been adjusted at various levels in the overstaffed government departments, which is a great strain on the economy of the Kingdom. The Saudi Private Sector is operated by foreign workers whose number is estimated at 7.2 million. They constitute 90 to 95 per cent of the workforce of the Saudi private sector. Thus, the rising number of educated unemployed

youth who are used to higher living standards has the potential of creating enough social unrest which can provide the opportunities for militant fundamentalists waiting in the wings in the Kingdom. The Saudi rulers have to plan the productive opportunities in accommodating this growing section of its population. The Saudi rulers are equally confronted with another dilemma. The new generation of Saudis move to Europe and US for higher learning, for the technical and professional trainings. The youthful Saudis witness a new social and political paradigm and at times find the two, one at home and the other abroad, incompatible. This incompatibility, which creates distortions and confusions, needs to be addressed and adjusted.

### **The Lessons for US**

It is being argued that US should avoid the situations, which are perceived as interfering in Saudi affairs and offending the sensibilities of the people of the Kingdom. In this vein it is to be judged whether the presence of US forces after the Gulf war was over, which reached 6000 before September 11, was a right decision. It is equally being argued that a military force meant to stabilise the region has actually subverted it and strengthened the forces of fundamentalism in the region. In the same vein, the new 'axis of evil' formulation propounded by George Bush has not found any support from Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Interior Minister, Prince Naef bin Abdulaziz has announced that his government would not participate in any offensive against Iraq. The US government should read the message that alliances have their own limitations and Saudi cooperation is not unqualified. The US policy-makers may have to reassess America's bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia with lot of circumspection and stop looking at any policy renewal as a dishonourable retreat. And the Saudis, standing at the vanguard of the Islamic world ought to strive hard to defuse the forces that give a bad name to Islam— a living faith.