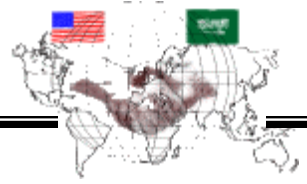


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THE ATTACK IN ALKHOBAR, SAUDI ARABIA: REFLECTIONS ON "TOLERANCE"

By John Duke Anthony

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Earlier this week, I was struck when reading the letter below, published on June 4 by *Arab News*, that was written in the wake of the recent terrorist attack in Alkhobar, Saudi Arabia. Written by Faisal Alzamil, titled "Our Alkhobar, and reproduced here with permission, the letter stated the following.

"After the days of horror in the Oasis Compound, Alkhobar is sad and terrified. We have lost our city. Alkhobar was never the empty streets, beaches, restaurants and shops it is now. It was always welcome smiles, friendly faces and respect - for all and from all. Since the 1930s, Alkhobar has been hosting people of different nationalities, races, religions and backgrounds. We Saudis have always been a minority in our city. Every newcomer met a welcome when he entered our city. They all melted into our society. I remember Americans, Pakistanis, Indians, Italians and others coming to our homes and neighborhoods to greet us on our weddings, Eids and Ramadan and to share our sorrow at losing a relative or suffering other tragedies. Since the 1950s and 1960s, all of them have been part of our society. Many of them lived in the same neighborhoods with us. We played with their children. I remember the boy scouts and girl scouts of Aramco schools coming to visit our Arabic schools and sharing our games and classes.

"I remember King Khalid Street in the 1960s. You would see a Bedouin woman in a veil pulling her stubborn goat next to an American woman in a skirt leading her poodle on a leash. They would greet each other, exchange friendly smiles and keep on going their ways, leaving behind a warm sense of given and received love and respect. People came to Alkhobar from all over the Kingdom and all Gulf states attracted by one of the cleanest, friendliest and most modern cities in the region, to shop in its malls and taste the variety of international cuisine offered by its restaurants. What went wrong? What is happening to our great city? We want our Alkhobar back the way it always was. We should not, and will not, let some despicable individuals ruin our little town for us. Expatriates have been a part of Alkhobar for years. We love the expatriates in our town and we will protect them against any evil. We want them to stay to share their knowledge, experience and love with us."

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS

The author makes an interesting point in recalling a more innocent time when violence of practically any kind in Alkhobar, or for that matter anywhere else in Saudi Arabia, was an exceptionally rare occurrence. Underscoring the point is the extraordinary degree of mutual respect, and the bridging of a multiplicity of cultures amidst a mutuality of benefits, that Saudi Arabians and expatriates from many nationalities and different walks of life have long shared in Alkhobar. Indeed, one could add that such sharing has more often than not been a hallmark of cultural interaction from virtually one corner of the Kingdom to the other over a period spanning most of the past two generations.

Many of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations' Malone Faculty Fellows in Arab and Islamic Studies have visited Alkhobar, where invariably their accommodations have been located. As a result, they have seen and been able to vouch for the authenticity of this remarkable display of multinational acceptance and tolerance firsthand. In so doing, they have witnessed directly a countrywide societal norm in action. The norm is the exact opposite of much that the mainstream Western media has depicted with regard not just to Alkhobar and its people but to other areas throughout the country as well.

Two additional and related points may also be worth noting. Each reflects a perspective that one could argue is equally as valid as the one above despite its being largely absent in the writings of most Westerners. The first point has to do with the extended period of intercultural relations between Saudi Arabians and people from other countries to which the author refers. Throughout this period, in more than half a dozen areas throughout the country, the Kingdom's citizens have been a minority among peoples in their midst from elsewhere with their different nationalities, faiths, social mores, and related backgrounds. In the United States, for as long as anyone can recall, the reverse has been the case.

In Saudi Arabia, the officially stated population figures cite 16 million citizens and 6 million from other countries. In certain areas of the Kingdom, for the citizenry to be in the minority is not a recent aberration. The exact same phenomenon has existed for quite some time in almost all of the country's fellow GCC member-states.

This is particularly the case in such centers of urban concentration and international ambiance, trade, investment, and commercial joint ventures as Alkhobar, Dhahran, Dammam, all of which are in the Eastern Province, together with the Red Sea coastal city of Jeddah, and the capital, in the Central Province, of Riyadh.

INTERPERSONAL RESPECT AND TOLERANCE

In these and other population centers, the day-to-day practice of interpersonal respect and tolerance among millions of Saudi Arabians towards citizens from other countries and backgrounds has been present for more than half a century. It is deeply ingrained in the overall fabric of the Kingdom's society.

Notwithstanding popular ongoing myths in the United States that relate to the subject, it is debatable as to whether or when, since before and after 9-11, there has been a comparable acceptance of and respect for peoples from other countries ingrained in or recognized as a signature of American national life.

In every country, there are of course exceptions in this regard. One exception in the United States has long centered on highly skilled foreign professionals of all kinds. These are continuously in great demand but scarce supply among the American working class. Another exception has long been U.S. employers' insatiable need for unskilled workers of practically any nationality. These include the millions willing to perform the kinds of labor that most Americans regard as either socially repugnant or physically arduous and hence prefer that someone else perform.

INTER-COMMUNAL AND INTRA-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE COMPARED

The second point has to do with the sheer number of foreigners among Saudi Arabia's inhabitants versus, proportionally, the far smaller number of their counterparts in the United States. For at least five decades and counting, the Kingdom's expatriate population has continuously approached nearly half the number of the native citizenry. Yet the frequency with which either inter-communal or intra-communal violence has occurred during this extended era has been minimal in comparison to the United States.

In addition, the frequency with which such violence occurs in the Kingdom is also minimal when compared to most other industrialized and developed countries and societies. Yet here again the facts are in stark contrast to the largely Western media-fostered imagery of the exact opposite. Lacking too is an American awareness of the implications for Saudi Arabia being able to maintain an overall domestically secure environment when, in sharp contrast to the United States, it has a total of thirteen neighbors and in size is larger than all of Western Europe combined.

An effort to analyze comparatively the phenomenon of societal tolerance within Saudi Arabia and the United States in terms familiar to Americans who have never studied other cultures or traveled abroad would appear to have merit. For example, in terms of U.S. equivalency, were Americans to have the same percentage of foreigners in their midst as Saudi Arabia, this would mean that among the nearly 300 million people presently living and working in the United States, close to 130 million would be foreigners. This is not the case, of course.

CRIMES OF VIOLENCE AND VARIETY

Even so, giving reason for pause is the degree of continuous year-round violence in the United States despite its far smaller ratio of foreigners-to-citizens than Saudi Arabia. In comparing the volume and categories of crime between the two countries, what becomes readily apparent is as follows. The United States, for as long as anyone can remember, has experienced vastly greater amounts of crime, especially violent crime.

In addition, a far larger variety of crimes occurs regularly in the United States than in Saudi Arabia. Within this variety, again to a substantially greater degree than in Saudi Arabia, are hate crimes. In the United States such crimes are frequently related to the "otherness" of people's national origins, their manner of dress or speech, and/or the pigmentation of their skin. This category of crimes is one that, in the United States, had to be legislated against. In Saudi Arabia, there was no need to do so, for crimes of this nature have been few and far between.

MATTERS OF PERSONAL SAFETY AND PEACE

Indeed, for as long as records have been kept, and despite the acceleration of politically-focused violence in the Kingdom within the past year, citizens and non-citizens in Saudi Arabia across the board have been living safer and far more peaceful lives in their homes, business and physical persons than is the case, on average, with their counterparts in the United States.

In these regards, a question seldom asked is the following. From a clinical, detached, and objective perspective, what might all of this say about which of the two countries has been the more tolerant of "others" and of "cultural differences" with regard to overall behavioral attributes and values?

Based on the facts included herein, which of the two countries has long been the more accepting of people in its midst whose nationality, ancestral moorings, race, and/or religious orientation -- whether through conversion or for reasons having to do with where the stork dropped them -- happen to be different from the majority who are citizens?

Would it be the United States, itself largely a nation of immigrants, with its nowadays proportionally far fewer foreigners, most of whom share the same faith as America's citizens? Or might it be Saudi Arabia, with its far greater proportion of foreigners, less than a majority of which share the same faith as the Kingdom's citizens?

If it is the latter, what does this say about the U.S. media and film industry, and the country's educational and governmental institutions, in terms of their role in fostering knowledge of and respect and tolerance for, Arab and Islamic culture? Or of U.S. book publishers and radio "hate" talk shows that have been bashing Saudi Arabia practically non-stop since 9/11? More specifically, what does it say about the charge that all six American national institutions - yes, six, regarding which no national leader is known to have rebuked a single one -- have done much to spawn and sustain such misinformed imagery?

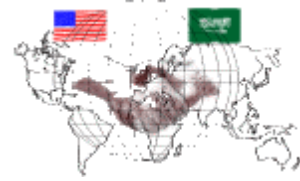
And what does it say about the allegation that various prominent figures in both countries, inclusive of various politicians and some that tend to robe their prejudices in the raiment of religion? Again, more specifically, what does it say about their role in trampling upon and tearing up the tapestry of tolerance? And what does it say about their record of conveying and perpetuating false and defaming stereotypes about other countries and peoples -- false in the sense that they are largely at variance with a ton of observable and documented facts?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. John Duke Anthony is President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, Secretary of the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, and Publisher of the GulfWire, Saudi-American Forum, and Saudi-U.S. Relations Information Service family of electronic newsletters. All three are nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations based in Washington, D.C. Their mission is to educate Americans and others about U.S. interests and involvement in the Arab countries, the Mideast and the Islamic world.

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The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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