

Seizure of the Holy Mosque in Mecca: Underlying Religious, Socio-economic, or Political Dimensions?

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On November 20th, 1979, two to three hundred armed men took over the Holy Mosque in Mecca for two weeks. It was the first day of the new Islamic year 1400 and around fifty thousand pilgrims were waiting to pray *fajr*, the dawn prayer.¹

To this day, the details of the attack remain hazy. The hijackers came into the Mosque and claimed that their leader, Muhammad Abdullah al-Qahtani, was the awaited Mahdi, “the one who is guided aright” and who will bring justice back to the world. They told the worshippers to proclaim him their Mahdi. Those who resisted were shot dead. The hijackers smuggled rifles and provisions, mainly dates and water, in coffins. They held some people captive, but each day, they would release some of the pilgrims. The monarchy had to receive special permission from the *‘ulama*, the religious scholars, in order to allow Saudi forces into the Mosque, for they feared for the lives of the innocent worshippers and the destruction of the building. Once the *‘ulama* authorized the counterattack, the Saudi National Guard regained the Mosque after a brutal struggle.² By the time al-Masjid al-Haram was recaptured, 130 people had died and at least 200 were wounded.³ The Mahdi was killed and photographs of his corpse circulated in the Muslim world.⁴

¹ Extract from Lacey, Robert. *The Kingdom*. Hutchinson: London, 1981. Cited in *Records of the Hajj*. Vol. 8. Pg.639. Chippenham: Archive Editions, 1993. Pg. 590-609. Here in after cited as RH.

² Ibid.

³ Hall, Michael J. “130 Were Killed as Saudis Recaptured Mosque.” *The Washington Post*. Dec. 5, 1979. Pg. A21.

⁴ Extract from Lacey, Robert. *The Kingdom*. Hutchinson: London, 1981. Cited in *HR* pg. 590-609.

Was this event simply a small-scale insurrectionary movement or did it have the backing of the larger Muslim Saudi community? Were the demands that the attackers made purely religious in nature or did they have underlying political and economic incentives? In order to find answers to these questions, I trace Saudi history and policies two years before and two years after the attack on the Grand Mosque to observe social trends and to discern whether or not this incident was part of a wider religious movement in Saudi Arabia. The reasons behind the attack appeared to be mostly religious, but there were also some political and economic dimensions to the siege. Anti-American sentiment and grievances regarding disparity, social turmoil and unequal distribution of wealth were also pervasive and may have played a big role in influencing the attackers.

Saudi Arabia before the Attack

Saudi's Rapid Development

Saudi Arabia was experiencing a period of great economic growth. Its ever-valuable oil industry was booming, and the revenues thereof allowed the state to start massive industrialization projects and economic reforms. Saudi Arabia was supposedly spending \$142 billion in its five-year plan, “on everything from oil refineries to chicken farms”.⁵ Eighty percent of the \$142 billion was going into the development of infrastructure: raw materials, housing, electricity, roads, etc.⁶ In addition, the Saudi government wanted to supply its citizens with free education, free medical care, and subsidized imported food. It brought in the best contractors, scientists and soccer coaches, sparing no expense. In order to get its construction projects underway, the Saudi government employed one million migrant workers.⁷ Saudi Arabia seemed

⁵ Cody, Edward. “Saudis Raid Mosque to End Siege.” *The Washington Post*. Nov. 25, 1979. Pg. A1.

⁶ “SAUDI ARABIA: The Desert Superstate.” *Time Magazine Archive*. May. 22, 1978.

⁷ Ibid.

to be going in the direction of a welfare state, but these expenditures and what they brought with them would later be criticized by the rebels.

In the process of this economic growth, a strong symbiotic relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States began to form. The United States was becoming increasingly dependent on Saudi Arabia for petrol, and the largely undefended Saudi Arabia became dependent on the U.S. for its weapons and protection. Saudis, however, were not only buying weapons and planes from the U.S.A, the rich bought luxury goods and manufactured products of all sorts. Their purchases from the U.S.A. were so high, in fact, that 600,000 American factory laborers were “directly dependent on those sales”.⁸ But something even bigger was making Saudis keep their customers content: in order to safeguard all the petrodollars, they invested in Western Europe and the United States, for example, \$14 billion were spent on U.S. financial securities alone.⁹ As a concession to the United States and in order to cement the relationship further, Saudi Arabia agreed to expand its yearly oil production far beyond the amount needed to be sold to meet Saudi’s development needs.¹⁰ But the U.S.A. also needed its Saudi Arabian ally to remain a stable and stabilizing power in the Middle East. Since it was largely compliant, Saudi Arabia acted as the moderating force in the Arab world, promoting peace settlements between other Middle Eastern states and Israel.¹¹

Saudi during and after the Attack

The Event

No one knew what was going on. Saudi had completely cut off all means of communication with the outside world. Very little information left the Kingdom. During the two

⁸ “POLICY: Saudi Arabia's Growing Petropower.” *Time Magazine* Archive. Jul. 11, 1977.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “SAUDI ARABIA: The Desert Superstate.” *Time Magazine* Archive. May. 22, 1978.

¹¹ Ibid.

weeks of the siege, the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* had nothing substantial to add to this research and, quite surprisingly, the little information that it had was all derived from Western sources like the *Associated Press*. Only after the hostages began returning home did information of the attack and the attackers' motives become revealed.

Reports of the first few days of the siege all made the same claim: Saudi authorities say that the dissidents were protesting against "the spread of football, video machines and working women in Saudi Arabia."¹² The protest against television was especially highlighted, since the assassination of King Faisal in 1975 was a direct result of the violent rioting of Muslim extremists who highly disapproved the introduction of television in the Kingdom.¹³ But the Saudi government's keenness on making the attack seem solely based on religion was quite puzzling. Maybe the government did so in order to prevent political upheaval and mobilization of other Saudis.

It eventually became clear, however, that what drove the true leader of the attackers, Juhaiman Otaybi, to lead the attack was not just religious but also economic and political in nature. He openly criticized the Saudi monarchy, reprimanding the princes for their alcohol consumption, for their involvement in big businesses and for employing the "infidels" who, with their different culture and religion, altered the traditional way of life of the natives.¹⁴ Furthermore, by attacking the very heartland of Islam, the Muslims' most sacred place of worship, Juhaiman and his followers defied the monarchy and made people skeptical about the ability of Al Saud to protect and care for the Grand Mosque.

¹² Extract from Lacey, Robert. *The Kingdom*. Hutchinson: London, 1981. Cited in *RH*.

¹³ Cody, Edward. "Saudis Raid Mosque to End Siege." *The Washington Post*. Nov. 25, 1979. Pg.A1.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

It was too difficult for the Saudi government to completely silence reports on the incident. After their release, the hostages reported everything they witnessed and recounted the hijackers' demands, many of which were not simply religious in nature:

Liquidating ... education, customs and values imported from the West and spreading just Islamic education and values and ending the relationship with Western Imperialist countries [sic]; bringing about the downfall of the hereditary royal reign, trying the treacherous family of Al Saud and confiscating the properties having been stolen from people's living; stopping oil exporting because of its hostile attitudes to Islam and Moslems and reducing the produce of oil in a way that would go with the country's need and prevent property's squandering; announcing the infidelity of King Khalid and his family, who reigns contrary to what Allah had revealed, and made the country a pasture for foreigners and imperialists; driving out all the foreign experts and military counselors who control the Arabian Peninsula and liquidating all the foreign bases in the Peninsula.¹⁵

They resented foreign intervention and feared Western encroachment. Although these demands largely employed religious rhetoric, political dissent and social upset were present as well. They were angered by the squandering of the royals, the increased dependence on the West, the imprudent production of oil, and the monarchy's supposed deviation from the rulings and teachings of Islam. Some Saudi officials later claimed that the attackers included very few religious zealots, but the majority were "politically motivated guerrillas who were trying to destabilize the country."¹⁶

Analysis

Reasons for the attack remain elusive, but it appears that the event was an isolated incident that did not have much backing. It was a small-scale movement of a group of people,

¹⁵ Extract from *Al Haram Revolt*. pg. 51-77. Islamic Revolution Organization 1981. Cited in RH Pg.639.

¹⁶ "MIDDLE EAST: Proceed with Caution." *Time Magazine* Archive. Dec. 31, 1979

namely Juhaiman and his entourage, distraught at the encroachment of Westernization and industrialization.¹⁷

One of the ploys that the attackers used was proclaiming the arrival of an awaited religious leader. But this Messianism seemed to play a very marginal role in this episode. Juhaiman hoped that the proclamation of the Mahdi would “inspire thousands of worshippers to join him and overwhelm any troops which the Al Saud might bring against him.”¹⁸ The idea of the Mahdi was used to solicit support. However, against Juhaiman’s expectations, it was a complete failure. Some Muslims actually contest the notion of the Mahdi itself. Two days after the siege, *Al-Ahram* issued an article called “The Awaited Mahdi is a Myth which Islam Denounces”, in which ‘ulama of al-Azhar say that the idea of the Mahdi was picked up from other religious traditions and incorporated falsely into Islam.¹⁹ It is believed by some that if the Mahdi were to arrive, he would come at the turn of the Islamic calendar century, which, if true, would have legitimated the attackers’ timing. But few, if any at all, believed that Muhammad Abdullah al-Qahtani was indeed the awaited Mahdi.

Anti-American sentiment also seemed to be a big part of the attackers’ agenda, especially when it came to the United States’ exploitation of the Saudi oil reserves, but there is not enough evidence to suggest that this was necessarily a grievance many other Saudis had at the time. Several reports stated that there was no consensus on how deep this anti-American sentiment was in the Kingdom.²⁰ Moreover, some scholars of the time said that the Anti-American feelings some people harbored were largely due to “the times and the ills that... accompanied the

¹⁷ Extract from Lacey, Robert. *The Kingdom*. Hutchinson: London, 1981. Cited in *HR* pg. 590-609.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ “The Awaited Mahdi is a Myth which Islam Denounces.” *Al-Ahram*. Nov. 22, 1979. Pg. 6.

²⁰ Branigin, William. “Islam’s Tense Militants Testing Strength.” *Washington Post*. Nov. 22, 1979. Pg. A20.

industrialization efforts of many Moslem countries”, and which brought about social inequalities and unequal distribution of wealth.²¹

Government Response

Though the incident did not solicit too much social change, it made the monarchy realize just how vulnerable and fragile the regime was. The government quickly took what it saw as necessary steps to appease the dissidents and those who might have sympathized with their cause but not with their desecration of al-Haram mosque. A great deal of reforms took place: security in Mecca was tightened; in response to the accusations of corruption, Crown Prince Fahd enacted even more welfare projects, “including a manpower training program to reduce the country's alarming dependence on foreign labor”; even more roads, schools and universities were built.²² The monarchy also sought to appease the religious leaders by enacting stricter Islamic codes in the Kingdom and limiting the amount of job opportunities for women.²³ King Fahd also promised to set up a *majlis*, a consultative assembly, in order to better represent the people and create wider participation in the government. The plan was that “three-quarters of the assembly's members would be modern, educated Saudis, and the remainder would be unschooled but respected tribal leaders.”²⁴ This was seen as a way to appease those who accused the monarchy of corruption and absolutism. And finally, to set an example for others, the regime beheaded 63 of the surviving insurrectionists.²⁵

The event does not seem to have very much significance in Saudi history. Saudi policy did not change much in the two years following the attack.²⁶ And the attack was not part of a

²¹ Ibid.

²² “SAUDI ARABIA: Change in a Feudal Land.” *Time Magazine* Archive. Feb. 18, 1980.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Johnson, Marguerite. “Saudi Arabia: Shoring Up the Kingdom.” *Time Magazine* Archive. Mar. 16, 1981.

larger significant religious movement, but it did serve as a wake-up call for the monarchy. It was clear that the rebels had explicit religious concerns but also cited political and economic grievances, many of which resonated with other Saudis. Their actions were delegitimized and highly condemned by the Muslim world. Saudi officials made a point to circulate the picture of the dead al-Qahtani to the world to thwart any suspicion that he was indeed the Muslim messianic leader. All in all, it is the socio-economic problems, which arose as the result of rapid oil production and the consequent industrialization of the country, that are cited in almost all sources on the subject and seem to be the most important. Ironically, the Saudi monarchy ended up further strengthening its ties with the U.S.A. in order to ensure stability within and without the Kingdom.²⁷

²⁷ "SAUDI ARABIA: Change in a Feudal Land." *Time Magazine* Archive. Feb. 18, 1980.