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## Freeing the Prophet's land

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ANYONE who reads about the House of Saud knows that the story is most unflattering to the dynasty. I have been to Makkah and Madinah 17 times, the last a decade ago. Journeys to the two Islamic holy sanctuaries were always a delight. I always looked forward to performing my religious obligations in the land where the Prophet was born, preached the glory of Allah and eventually led the exodus of the faithful from Makkah to Madinah. There he settled to form the first Islamic government and died, aged 63.

On further reading of several decades of revisionism, most enlightened Muslims have come to one assessment and conclusion: Islam has suffered at the hands of the so-called guardian of the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. My interest in Saudi Arabia, as opposed to my commitment to Makkah and Madinah, has waned and my bookshelves have yielded space to pan-Arabism, modernisation and democratisation there.

I agonise about my co-religionists in Saudi Arabia, especially in the holy cities. The problem is they do not know how to empower themselves, even in the new millennium.

Ever since he declared a victorious end to the invasion of Iraq in May, US President George W. Bush has insisted that the world had been made safer with the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Now, a guerilla or terrorist bomb blast blows a raspberry to that idea on a daily basis. An especially splattering snort was delivered on Sunday in Riyadh, when a suicide attack killed 17 and injured 120.

Terrorism is like the beast whose appetite increases every time it feeds. Its voracity means that it also dines on borrowed causes - and the cause of the Iraqi resistance against the US occupation and its collaborators is particularly nourishing. Let us not fool ourselves about this: the longer the military occupation remains unabated, the more the Baath loyalists, fedayeen, Sunni discontents and foreign insurgents begin to look like the Afghan mujahidin at the time of the Russian onslaught.

For terrorism, Iraq has been a moveable feast extending even into the fasting month of Ramadan. I thought the commemoration of the gift of the Quran would herald a respite, but there were bombings in the first weekend of the holy month in Baghdad, targeting and killing mainly Iraqis. Last weekend, the peace of Ramadan was shattered in the capital of the House of Saud itself, again murdering and maiming mostly Arab expatriates in the housing area of Al-Muhaya.

Saudi Arabia has long been suspected of complicity, conscious or otherwise, in the Sept 11 attacks. No matter how much the kingdom tried to wriggle out of it, there was no escaping the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis who were educated and of good birth. Above all, so is Osama bin Laden.

Although he might have been swayed by ideologues from countries like Egypt, there is also no escaping the fact that he provided al-Qaeda with at least the initial means to organise itself - Saudi money.

Excess oil money coupled with the ultra-conservative Wahhabi sect was bound to add up, sooner or later, to a combustible mix. Some American analysts contend that the export of radical Islam was a deliberate ploy by the Saudi elite to keep it away from their country. Many moderate Muslims agree.

By supporting the ustaz, mullah and madrasah, chiefly in the Afghan

jihad against the Soviet heathens, the rich Saudis tried to pay off the extremists to look elsewhere. But when the Saudi Government invited US troops on its soil in the Gulf War of 1991, al-Qaeda lashed round to bite the hand that fed it. It never forgave the House of Saud for violating Islam's birthplace with the presence of infidel soldiers.

Call it a CIA conspiracy to discredit the so-called custodian of the holy places, but the "export" theory is difficult to disprove.

Riyadh now readily admits that al-Qaeda is out to overthrow the Saud dynasty, for whom many Muslims do not feel sorry. The rude awakening came in triple suicide bombings in Riyadh in May, which killed 35. The Saudis refer to that day as their own 9/11.

An unprecedented crackdown was launched on Islamic militants. Suspected al-Qaeda cells were discovered in Riyadh, Makkah and other cities. Hundreds of suspects were arrested. Senior princes and top religious officials denounced extremism and intolerance. Hundreds of imam were sacked or sent for "retraining".

Even so, the running gun battles reported between terrorist suspects and the Saudi police did not silence the background chatter of an imminent attack. Both Britain and the US, who have twice the reason to feel skittish after Iraq, had warned repeatedly that a plot was afoot in the weeks before the weekend bombing.

Al-Qaeda's choice of the Muhaya compound, less well-guarded and housing fewer Westerners than the one in May, may well indicate that the terrorists are up against it. Prince Turki al-Faisal, Saudi ambassador in London, told Reuters that, "To me, it is a clear sign of the desperate group that wants to show it can do things ...after all the successes we've had in tracking these people down over the last six months."

Terrorists, however, are always burning in desperation - they wouldn't otherwise be willing to kill themselves. Their increasing preference for soft targets does not mean that they are on the retreat. I wouldn't want to undercut the prince's knowledge of his country, but governments today bear the ultimate responsibility for securing their citizens against terror. This was the lesson of Sept 11, one that Malaysia learnt a long time ago.

It is, therefore, hard to evade the suspicion that years of complacency, if not patronage, left the terrorist networks deeply dug in. The legitimacy of the House of Saud rests on its allegiance to the severity of Wahhabi doctrine, which has not only encouraged militancy and fanaticism but elevated the hypocrisy of the royals, who live alternate lives in their luxury Manhattan penthouses, London townhouses and mansions in the English countryside, and fritter away millions in the casinos of Las Vegas, Monte Carlo, Cannes, St Moritz, etc.

Wahhabi belief, even the pretence of it, makes the Saudi monarchy resistant to change and democracy. Like any other totalitarian system, an attempt at pluralism will weaken both the regime and the dogma that upholds it. Bush, at a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington last week, showed excessive optimism when he said:

"The Saudi Government is taking first steps toward reform, including a plan for gradual introduction of elections. By giving the Saudi people a greater role in their own society, the Saudi Government can demonstrate true leadership in the region." Wishful thinking.

I wouldn't hold my breath, since, like any other totalitarian system, the Saudi regime is nothing if not adept at its own preservation. It has played a double-edged foreign policy of Wahhabi proselytisation on the one hand and pro-Americanism on the other. The latter has bought it little influence in the advance of Arab and Muslim causes, particularly in Palestine. Now it is caught in the vise of a dilemma. It must distance

itself from both.

Though Arab leaders have protested at his presumption, Bush is right in his hopes for the Saudi people. He must, however, first deliver on the hopes of the people of Iraq, not his own.

The Treaty of Sevres (Aug 10, 1920) caused the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, ironically by Arab collusion with the West. Since then, Islam has lain prostrate in defeat and humiliation.

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, who has learnt much since the Iraq war, quoted and echoed Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in these pages yesterday on the indignity to which Muslims have been subjected, and their angry, thoughtless and hate-filled response.

Until the Muslims come to terms with collective unity, correct interpretation and application of their religion and with what Islam demands and defines consistent with time, I'm afraid they will remain under the sway of non-Muslims and largely Western domination.

Of course, Islam is potentially powerful but is still an undirected political force. Until authoritarian regimes everywhere are utterly destroyed and give way to a new Islamic order, the fortunes of the ummah will never rise.