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# The Power of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Leaders

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Even those Americans who watch Saudi Arabia the most closely admit to being baffled by the country. Ronald Neumann, deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs admits that "we don't understand how the Saudis make decisions."[1] Likewise, John Gannon, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), acknowledges that his agency lacks intelligence on Saudi Arabia.[2] As a result of these limitations, the U.S. government has been only moderately successful in assessing trends or predicting events in the kingdom.

How can the U.S. government—and other interested parties—improve their understanding of Saudi Arabia? One way is by developing a deeper appreciation of the role the religious establishment plays in the political decision-making process. To make this point, it is instructive to examine the role of the ulema (Islamic men of religion) in four key decisions: to institute the oil embargo following the Yom Kippur War of 1973, to allow U.S. troops onto Saudi soil in 1990 and then permit them to remain, and to support the Taliban since 1994.

## The Saudi Ulema

Since the eighteenth century, the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula have shared power with their religious contemporaries, and this remains the case in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia today. While the monarch is technically the country's supreme religious leader and custodian of Islam's two holiest mosques at Mecca and Medina, in truth, he shares authority with a powerful group of spiritual leaders, the ulema. For nearly 300 years, the Al Saud has controlled the state while the Al ash-Sheikh,[3] the descendants of Sheikh Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), has controlled the religious institutions. This cooperative and consensual relationship has provided the kingdom with one of the most stable societies in the region and has allowed it to avoid the war and revolution that has wracked nearly every one of its neighbors.

In reaction to what he considered Islam's degeneration, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Wahhab founded what is generally known as Wahhabism, a movement based on a particularly strict interpretation of Islamic law. Among their many regulations, Wahhabis sought separation from non-Muslims; indeed, the strictest of them eschew all contact with Christians, Jews, or other infidels.[4] The Saudi ulema today, as in the past, see themselves as guardians of this legacy.

While the ulema hold a variety of positions in Saudi institutions—they are judges (*qadi*s), lawyers (*muhama*), and prayer leaders (*imam*s)—only a few of them wield real power.[5] Appointed by the king, these latter individuals staff several leading organizations.[6]

Lacking as they do formal control over policymaking, the power of the ulema is missed by many observers in the West, who mistakenly assume that their influence is limited to the religious sphere. In fact, the ulema exercise their sway in subtle, silent ways. While their input varies depending on the domestic circumstances and the strength of the Saud family, the king can never completely ignore them but must take their views into consideration in every choice he makes. The following four political decisions, which baffled many Western analysts at the time, become a bit clearer when the ulema are factored into Saudi decision-making.

## I. Imposing an Oil Embargo

On October 6, 1973, the combined forces of Egypt and Syria simultaneously attacked Israel, much to Israeli (and American) surprise. While this oversight did not directly threaten U.S. interests, the Saudi decision to implement an oil embargo against the United States, coupled with a 10 percent production cut, deeply wounded the American economy.[7] Despite repeated warnings by the Saudi government and the logic of the decision, the embargo met with surprise among the general populace and policymakers in the United States.[8] Just two days earlier, for example, a *New York Times* headline captured the general sense of confidence: "Analysts Doubtful Major Oil Dislocations Loom."[9] A better understanding of the religious establishment and its impact on policy formation would have helped to predict what did happen.

The causes of the embargo can be traced to the Six-Day War of June 1967, when Israel won a devastating victory over the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, occupying substantial territories. As late as October 1972, King Faysal dismissed the prospect of a boycott, saying that it was useless to talk about oil as an instrument of pressure against the U.S., indeed, that it was dangerous even to think along those lines.[10] But by April 1973, the king began sending signals to the U.S. government that unless some progress was made with regard to Israel withdrawing from the lands it took in 1967, the Arabs would use their oil for political leverage.[11] What he meant by this was not clear. At first, Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Zaki Yamani merely argued that Saudi Arabia would not increase production.[12] Then, on July 6, 1973, King Faysal announced that Saudi Arabia would like to continue friendly ties with the United States, but that this would be difficult unless the latter adopted a more even-handed policy in the region.[13]

As President Anwar as-Sadat of Egypt prepared to assault the Israeli lines along the Suez Canal in a bid to regain lost land, he visited King Faysal in August 1973 to discuss his plans and to win his support. The Saudi monarch quietly agreed to contribute $500 million to Egypt's war chest and to weigh in with the oil weapon.[14] In September, Deputy Oil Minister Prince Saud al-Faysal stated that "Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly now prepared to use its key position as a major world supplier of crude oil to bring pressure on the U.S. government to moderate its pro-Israeli policy."[15] The following chronology helps to understand the evolution of Saudi thinking after hostilities began on October 6:

> October 7: The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) calls for an immediate halt to the pumping of all Arab oil;[16] Saudi Arabia continues negotiations with Western oil companies; neither an embargo nor production cuts are mentioned by the Saudi government at this time or during the next week.

> October 17: A Kuwaiti-sponsored conference of Arab oil-producing countries agrees to a 5-percent cut in production each month until Arab demands are met. A proposal to impose a total embargo on the United States is set aside due to Saudi opposition.17 Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, ‘Umar as-Saqqaf, meets with President Richard Nixon and calls the meeting "friendly and constructive."[18]
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> October 18: The Saudis cut oil production by 10 percent; King Faysal's government says it will cut off all oil supplies to the United States if Washington continues aiding the Israeli armed forces.[19]
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> October 19: The Nixon administration asks Congress for $2.2 billion in aid for Israel.
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> October 20: Saudi Arabia implements a total oil embargo of the United States. The official announcement read: "In view of the increase in support for Israel, the Saudi Arabian Kingdom has decided to stop the export of oil to the United States of America for adopting such a stand."20

In other words, King Faysal seems until the last minute to have been ambivalent about actually using the oil weapon, a step he took only on the evening of October 19.

Much has been written about the change in policy between October 17 and October 20.[21] At first glance, it would seem that the $2.2 billion appropriations bill was the deciding factor. Or was the embargo a fulfillment of King Faysal's promise to Sadat? In fact, neither of these factors fully explains the king's decision: he knew the United States was merely supplying the Israelis to counter similar efforts by the Soviets to supply the Egyptians; and if he was motivated primarily by a promise to Sadat, why did he wait until two weeks after the war had begun to implement the embargo?

Understanding Saudi decisions is never a simple matter. William Quandt of the University of Virginia lists nine separate factors to take into account when interpreting Saudi oil policy: market conditions, revenue requirements, technical problems, internal politics, expectations (of price, inflation rate, security of foreign investment, etc.), Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) pressures, associated gas needs, relations with the United States, and the Palestinian problem.[22] While all of these factors are important, Quandt errs in not mentioning Saudi Arabia's religious responsibilities and the role of the ulema. This absence is indicative of American policy analysts' general misunderstanding and underestimation of the role these elements play in Saudi decision-making.

Pressure from the ulema (and the rapidly changing military situation in the war's final days) helps to explain the Saudi government's decision to implement an oil embargo. This move accomplished two of the ulema's objectives: increasing the kingdom's stature as a leader in the Muslim world while distancing the country from the West. As a former senior official in the Saudi land forces told me, there was a tacit agreement between the king and the senior ulema along the following lines: if the war goes badly in Egypt, King Faysal would implement an oil embargo.

Specifically, Grand Mufti and Chief Qadi Sheikh Muhammad Al ash-Sheikh (born ca. 1895), one of King Faysal's closest advisors, had great influence on the king's concept of his political

role in the Arab world and Saudi Arabia's importance as guardian of Islam's holiest shrines and cities. Many observers attribute his influence to King Faysal's famous proclamation: "My dream is to pray in the morning in Mecca,
in the afternoon in Medina, and in the evening in Jerusalem—without ever leaving Arab land."[23] This statement shows that King Faysal shared the ulema's devotion to the Palestinian cause and their strong objection to Israeli control of Jerusalem.

Yet the Saudi monarch realized that an embargo might hurt Saudi interests, knowing of the country's need for U.S. support. Also, he may have been worried about the long-term implications of the rise in oil prices that would accompany an embargo. These tensions exist during any period in which Arab-Islamic interests seriously conflict with U.S. interests: Saudis are at once fearful of Western secular contamination and acutely aware of its need for U.S. support. King Faysal had ample reason to be cautious in the use of the oil weapon and to delay its use as long as possible. He could afford to ignore the pressure from the ulema as long as the Egyptians seemed not to be losing the war. By October 19, however, news that the Egyptians faced a near total defeat reached the Saudi king, tilting the balance in favor of the ulema. The next day, he announced the embargo.

Thus, the Saudis implemented the embargo not primarily to fulfill a promise or a threat, nor to increase the price of oil, nor even as a weapon to help destroy Israel, but to satisfy the growing frustration of the ulema and preempt internal demands that the United States be punished for its role in the Israeli victory.[24]

The Ford administration could have better predicted the embargo had it kept in mind the unique balance Saudi leaders must make between secular and religious forces and the limitations that are imposed on them by their country's role as a leader of the Arab world. As is, the Americans did not fully understand the forces at work in the Saudi decision-making process; specifically, they lacked an appreciation of the Saudi monarch's religious responsibilities. Had they understood this more fully, they could have dealt more effectively with Riyadh, perhaps even avoiding the embargo. For instance, the U.S. government could more forcefully have announced its intention to secure a fair peace or even to work toward implementation of the spirit of U.N. Resolution 242 (returning Israel to its 1967 borders). Either of these moves would have given King Faysal more room to maneuver, while neither would have gone against U.S. policy (which was to support a limited but not total victory for the Israelis). In fact, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was en route to Moscow to discuss cease-fire terms when the embargo news hit, and even his travel itinerary might have been sufficient to prevent the Saudis from implementing the embargo.[25]

## II. Inviting Foreign Troops

The special relationship between the kingdom and the United States was put to the test in August 1990, when Saddam Husayn's troops invaded Kuwait and began massing along the Saudi border, representing an immediate threat to the Saudi kingdom. The imminent threat meant that when King Fahd decided to invite in U.S., British, French, and other foreign troops, he gained the necessary consensus, which did indeed protect the kingdom. However, to maintain the consensus so vital to Saudi cohesion, it was necessary to make serious concessions to the ulema.

When the U.S. government first offered troops in August 1990 to protect the kingdom and free Kuwait, its plans met with enormous domestic opposition. According to a highly-placed official, King Fahd called the ulema and senior members of the Sheikh family before making a decision. He raised with them the question of allowing foreign non-Muslim troops onto Saudi soil. At first, the idea met staunch opposition, with all the senior ulema categorically against the idea and refusing to consent to such a decision.

Only after long discussions with the king and other senior members of the royal family did the grand mufti, Sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz, reluctantly endorse the idea, and even so only on condition that the government provide solid proof of a threat. It did, and the ulema relented in part because satellite images delivered by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and General Norman Schwartzkopf clearly showed thousands of Iraqi troops massed at the border. At the same time, reports from the Saudi armed forces inspired little confidence in the kingdom's ability to defend itself. King Fahd called together 350 Islamic leaders and scholars to Mecca to debate this topic. This effort resulted in the following edict (*fatwa*), issued by Sheikh bin Baz:

> Even though the Americans are, in the conservative religious view, equivalent to non-believers as they are not Muslims, they deserve support because they are here to defend Islam.[26]

But the ulema also extracted several agreements from King Fahd in exchange for their blessing. He had to offer assurances that non-Muslim troops would respect the traditions of the kingdom and that, once no longer needed, those troops would immediately leave.[27] In particular, they won more authority for the Committee for the Prevention of Vice and Propagation of Virtue, better known as the morality police.[28]

The war against Iraq was won, to be sure, but it brought charges of dishonor that in a tribal society are not easily expunged. It also incurred the serious Islamic accusation of *fitna*—dissension, setting Muslim against Muslim. Years later, the king was still pondering his decision to invite in non-Muslim troops. "The Lord of glory and grandeur helped us with soldiers from all parts of the world," he told the Consultative Council. "Many said that the presence of foreign forces was wrong. But I say ... it was [a case of] extreme necessity."[29]

## III. Hosting American Troops

The U.S. government also did not understand how the continued presence of American forces in Saudi Arabia after the end of hostilities in February 1992 would have a deeply insidious long-term significance. Again, this was because of an underestimation of the Saudi religious establishment and a failure to appreciate the hostility that foreign troops would create. Underestimating the extent of the dissatisfaction among the ulema and the religious establishment, the U.S. government grew complacent and kept troops in the country.

The negative impact was not only long term and theoretical; the depth of these feelings were shown in the bombings that took place in Riyadh on November 13, 1995, at the Saudi National Guard communications complex, killing five American military trainers and two Indians; and in Dhahran on June 25, 1996, at the Khobar Towers, a U.S. military housing compound, killing nineteen American servicemen.

Had the Clinton administration paid more attention to the warning signs and had a better assessment of the extreme elements in the Saudi religious establishment, they might have better prepared for these assaults. Following the Kuwait war, most of the senior ulema resisted the presence of U.S. troops on Saudi soil, leading to an upsurge in anti-Western rhetoric. Many preachers built a following by specifically decrying the presence of foreign infidels and denouncing Saudi leaders for their dependence on the United States.[30] The two most vocal of these were Sheikh Salman al-'Awda and Sheikh Safar al-Hawali. The former compared members of the royal family to the last sultans of the Ottoman Empire and the Americans to an occupying force. His and other extremist groups gained enormous popular support through statements directly targeting U.S., French, and British troops. Significantly, he drew his support largely from Burayda, a town known as a bastion of Islamic extremism.

The government arrested the most disruptive of these individuals after the Kuwait war. When it detained Sheikh al-'Awda in 1994, his followers took the dangerous step of intervening in an attempt to prevent him from losing his freedom; the sheikh's arrest only took place when he decided to go to the precinct with his followers, all of whom also turned themselves in to the police.[31] All were placed under house arrest. His followers were released after several weeks but the sheikh remained under house arrest until June 1999.

Lapses in U.S. security at the base prior to the attack made things worse. After the Khobar explosion, the American task force studying the situation, headed by General Wayne Downing (former commander of the Special Operations Command), found many problems.[32] The report cited no less than ten suspicious incidents in the ninety days before the attack. Despite the fact that Khobar Towers had been identified to Brigadier General Terry Schwalier, commander of the U.S. Air Force Squadron at the Dhahran airbase, as one of the three most likely targets in the area, he did not make counterterrorism a top priority there. Although Schwalier was the only American blamed for the bombings, the failure should be understood as a result of the general gaps in U.S. understanding of the Saudi situation, both military[33] and political.[34]

## IV. Supporting the Taliban

The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan assisted by resources and an ideology exported from Saudi Arabia and with training and money from the United States. The American goal in supporting Afghan fundamentalists during the 1980s had been to contain the Soviet Union; unexpectedly, this support also led to the establishment of a strict Islamic regime violently hostile to American interests.

In the 1980s, the United States and Saudi Arabia both funded Afghanistan's *mujahidin* (warriors of *jihad*, or sacred war), rebels fighting Soviet troops backing the puppet regime in Kabul. Soon after the Soviets pulled out in 1989, an alliance of seven Islamic *mujahidin* parties defeated Najibullah, the leftist leader of the Soviet-backed regime. This alliance, however, quickly disintegrated, its members fighting among themselves.[35] By mid-1994, the Taliban had emerged as a powerful new force and soon began to gain victories across the country. By mid-1999, they controlled some 90 percent of Afghanistan and may be on the verge of complete victory.

The Taliban have brought an end to the fighting in much of the countryside, but at a tremendous cost in human freedom. Their government has been criticized around the world for the human rights violations that spring from its purist interpretation of Islamic law. Women must wear a *burqa*, which covers nearly

the entire body; they are not allowed to work or attend school and cannot leave their homes without a male guardian. Men must not shave. Music and television are forbidden. Punishments considered severe by Western standards are common and include the cutting off of the hands of thieves and the stoning to death of women found guilty of committing adultery.

The stunning success of the Taliban could not have happened without direct support from Pakistan and financial backing from Saudi Arabia.[36] In addition, the U.S. government played an important role. A former high-ranking Pakistani civil servant with close ties to his country's intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), told me that "the U.S. provided the weapons and the know-how; the Saudis provided the funds; and we provided the training camps and operations bases for the *mujahidin* in the early 1980s, then for the Taliban." A senior Saudi military officer confirmed this: "The first government formed after the departure of the Soviets proved to be intractable; therefore, the Saudis and the United States chose the Taliban, with the firm belief that the Taliban would be able to take over the country." Henry Kissinger writes that although the U.S. and the Taliban had nothing in common, they shared a common enemy and that made them allies.[37]

The fundamentalist Taliban state now poses a threat to U.S. interests. First, it may well attempt to export its brand of fundamentalism to the neighboring states of Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. "Since we have lit the torch of truth in Afghanistan," said Haji Mawin, the Taliban's Supreme Council Vice-Chairman, "naturally it will light the torch in other countries."[38]

Second, the Taliban host Usama bin Ladin, the Saudi patron of fundamentalist Islamic movements. Though Saudi and U.S. intelligence fingered him as a suspect in the bombings of American targets in Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and Tanzania, the Taliban have shown little intention of expelling him (though they reportedly did urge him to end his support for terrorism).[39]

The U.S. government's policy analysis in Afghanistan was flawed; had it more clearly understood the nature of the Saudi religious establishment, it might have seen the warning signals sent off by Saudi support for the Taliban. An analysis of Saudi aid could have predicted the emergence of a threatening regime in Afghanistan. The origin of this support goes back to the early eighties, when the Saudi government provided backing to the *mujahidin*. By mid-1994, when the *mujahidin* had splintered, that support focused on the one element that had emerged from the disintegration: the Taliban.

While the kingdom's technical and financial support are well known, the religious elements are not. That the Taliban favors a brand of Sunni Islam close to the Wahhabi variant tends to confirm this connection.[40] A high-ranking official in the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Guidance told me that once the Soviets were defeated, the Saudi ulema focused on funding and promoting the Taliban. The Taliban are largely composed of the children of Afghan refugees educated at Pakistani theological schools[41] run by Pakistanis who received their degrees from Saudi Arabia and taught a strict form of Wahhabi theology and law. Far from being merely a recipient of Saudi aid and moral support, the Taliban are a creature of the kingdom.

## Conclusion

American analysts have underestimated, overlooked, or misunderstood the nature, strength, and goals of the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. This led to a failure to predict the oil embargo, the ferocity of anti-American sentiments after the Kuwait war, and to understand what the Taliban would become.

This overly sanguine assessment of Wahhabism may result from the creed's relatively innocuous manifestation in contemporary Saudi Arabia. Aside from intermittent denunciations of America and nebulous links to terrorism, Wahhabis do not seem to represent a serious threat, especially when contrasted with the Iranian or Sudanese fundamentalists. This is largely due to their historic power-sharing relationship with the secular authorities, which dictates that the clergy in most cases defer to the government. However, government decisions can often be best understood with reference to the power of the ulema and from the conservative masses from which that power derives.

This misunderstanding has until now had only limited negative consequences for the United States, but miscalculations could prove far more dangerous in the coming years, as the kingdom enters a period of rapid and deep change. The government is likely to be challenged on public policy issues as the population quickly expands and oil revenues decrease. These developments will likely permit the religious establishment a louder voice in the consensual power sharing relationship in the kingdom. The Taliban government offers a chance to witness a Wahhabi-style government without the moderating presence of the Saud royal family; as such, it offers a possible glimpse of Saudi Arabia if the traditional balance of power is disrupted in favor of the religious establishment.

[1] Interview with the author, Nov. 1997.

[2] *Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 17, 1997.

[3] "Al" here is Arabic for "family," not "the."

[4] Liesl Graz, *The Turbulent Gulf* (New York: St. Martins, 1992), p. 127.

[5] Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society, and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 25.

[6] Such as the Council of the Assembly of Senior Ulema (*Majlis Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulama'*), the Higher Council of Qadis (*Al-Majlis al-'Ali li'l-Qada'*), the morality police (known as the *Mutwawa'in*).

[7] *U.S. News and World Report*, Oct. 24, 1983.

[8] David Long, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 69.

[9] Oct. 18, 1973.

[10] David Golub, *When Oil and Politics Mix: Saudi Oil Policy, 1973-1985* (Cambridge: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 1985), p. 8.

[11] Long, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, p. 69.

[12] Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1985, p. 154.

[13] Ibid., p. 155.

[14] Ibid., p 156.

[15] Golub, *When Oil and Politics Mix*, p. 71.

[16] Ibid., p. 10.

[17] Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, p. 157.

[18] Golub, *When Oil and Politics Mix*, p. 11.

[19] *The New York Times*, Oct. 18, 1973.

[20] Ibid., Oct. 21, 1973.

[21] Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, p. 155.

[22] William B. Quandt, *Saudi Arabia in the 1980s: Foreign Policy, Security and Oil* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1982), pp. 126-128.

[23] Benoist Mechin, *Faiçal: Roi d'Arabie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986), pp. 40-42.

[24] Golub, *When Oil and Politics Mix*, p. 12.

[25] Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, p. 160.

[26] Abir, *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society, and the Gulf Crisis*, p. 178.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), p. 37.

[29] *The Economist*, Mar. 18, 1995.

[30] *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 24, 1996.

[31] "Revolt in Buraydah," videotape released by the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) in London, 1996.

[32] The Downing Commission's main allegations concerned the insufficiency of the base security system: "leaders failed to provide clear standards, adequate funding and attention to protect American forces." *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 17, 1996.

[33] U.S. government experts apparently misjudged the bomb-making capabilities of Saudi Arabian militants, assuming they could not build a bomb larger than a 200-pound device. (In fact, the bomb that exploded at Dhahran contained around 5,000 pounds of high explosive.) Air Force experts sent to Dhahran to improve the security environment after the Riyadh bombing did not recommend that the Dhahran base expand its eighty-foot perimeter. U.S. commanders in Dhahran decided not to appeal to the Pentagon for blast-resistant glass. Further, they chose not to press the Saudis to expand the defense system at the base. Finally, even though they believed that the base needed more defense, they failed to move soldiers away from the rooms and buildings that were in greatest danger. *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 17, 1996.

[34] "The Cracks in the Kingdom," *The Economist*, Mar. 18, 1995.

[35] InterPress News Service, June 5, 1995.

[36] *FT Intelligence Asia Wire*, May, 28, 1997.

[37] *The Economist*, Apr. 25, 1998.

[38] Peter Willems, "War Without End," *The Middle East*, Dec. 1996, p. 7.

[39] Agence France Presse, Apr. 8, 1997.

[40] *FT Intelligence Asia Wire*, May 28, 1997.

[41] InterPress News Service, June 5, 1995.