

By George Friedman
This article ♦ reproduced with permission of Strategic Forecasting, Inc. (www.stratfor.com) discusses the connection between three apparently discrete events.
The al-Askariyah mosque -- a significant Shiite shrine in As Samarra, Iraq -- was bombed, triggering intensifying violence between Shiite and Sunni groups. A group linked to al Qaeda claimed responsibility for attacking a major oil facility in Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia. And a furor broke out in the United States over the proposed purchase, by a government-owned United Arab Emirates (UAE) firm, of a British company that operates a number of important American ports. Apart from the fact that all of these incidents involve Muslims, the stories don't appear to be linked. They are. All three stories are commentaries on three things. First, they are measures of the current state of the U.S.-jihadist war. Second, they are measures of the Bush administration's strategy of splitting the Islamic world against itself, along its natural fault lines, and using that split to contain and control the radical Islamist threat against the United States. And finally, they are the measure of U.S. President George W. Bush's ability to manage public perceptions of his plans and operations.

The fault lines in Iraq
Begin with the bombing of al-Askariyah, or "the Golden Mosque," in As Samarra. After the failures of U.S. intelligence and operations in Iraq in spring 2003, the United States adopted a long-term strategy of using the natural split between the country's Shiite and Sunni populations to first stabilize its own position, and then improve it. During the first phase, Washington tilted heavily toward the Shia, doing everything possible to assure that there would be no Shiite rising to accompany that of the Sunnis. Since the Shia had no love for the Sunni minority, given their experiences under Saddam Hussein's anti-Shiite regime, this was not overly difficult. In addition, the Shia were able to take advantage of the U.S.-Sunni war to shape and dominate post-Hussein politics. The Shia and Americans suited each other.

In the second phase of this policy, the United States reached out to the Sunnis, trying to draw them into a Shiite-Kurdish government. Washington had two goals: One was a Sunni counterweight to the Shia. Whatever it had promised the Shia, Washington did not simply want to hand Iraq over to them, out of fear that the country would become an Iranian satellite state. The second goal was to exploit fault lines within the Sunni community itself, in order to manipulate the balance of power in favor of the United States.

By the time this phase of the policy was being implemented -- at the end of the first battle of Al Fallujah, in 2004 -- the U.S.-Sunni war had developed a new dimension, consisting of jihadists. These were Sunnis, but differed from the Iraqi Sunnis in a number of critical ways. First, many were foreigners who lacked roots in Iraq. Second, the Sunni community in Iraq was multidimensional; Sunnis had been the backbone of support for Hussein's regime, which had been far more secular than Islamist. The jihadists, of course, were radical Islamists. Thus, there was the potential for yet another rift; the stronger the jihadists grew, the greater the risk to the traditional leadership of Iraq's Sunnis. The jihadists might increase their influence within the community, marginalizing the old leadership. The U.S. success in manipulating this split reached a high point in December 2005, with Iraq's national elections. The jihadists opposed Sunni participation in the election, but the Sunni leadership participated anyway. The jihadists threatened the leadership but could not strike; as foreigners, they depended on local Sunni communities to sustain and protect them. If they alienated the Sunni leadership without destroying them, the jihadists would in turn be destroyed.

Thus, after the disaster in December, the jihadists embarked on a different course. Rather than focusing on American forces or Shiite collaborators, the goal was to trigger a civil war between the Shia and Sunnis. The brilliantly timed attack on the Golden Mosque, much like the 9/11 attacks, was intended to ignite a war. There would be an event that the Shia

could not ignore and to which they would respond with maximum violence, preferably against the Sunnis as a whole. In an all-out civil war, the Sunni leadership would not be able to dispense with the jihadists, or so the jihadists hoped. Their own position would be cemented and the Americans would be trapped in a country torn by civil war.

The Sunni leadership, of course, understands the situation. If the Sunnis protect the jihadists who carried out the attack -- and we are convinced they were jihadists -- they will be in a civil war they cannot win. Given their numbers compared to the Shiite majority, the Sunnis -- if they were to break with the Shia -- eventually would have to come back to the table and make some sort of a deal. The jihadists are betting that the terms the Shia would impose would be so harsh that the Sunnis would prefer civil war. The United States has an interest in limiting what terms the Shia can impose, and the Iraqi Shia themselves understand that if there is civil war, they will need Iran's help. Getting caught between the United States and Iran is not in their interest.

There is, interestingly, the possibility of what passes for peace in Iraq embedded in all of this. The jihadists, marginalized and desperate due to American maneuvers, have tossed up a "Hail Mary" in the hope of disrupting the works. It is certainly possible that the maneuver will work. But a more reasonable assumption is that the bombing of the Golden Mosque achieves merely a shift in the time frame the Sunnis thought they had for negotiations. What might have taken months now could take much less. Certainly, the Sunnis have been forced to a decision point.

Attempt at strategic attack

The al Qaeda attack against the Abqaiq facility has similar roots. Prior to 2003, the Saudi position on al Qaeda was one of benign neglect. The Saudi regime tried to limit both its exposure to the American war against the jihadists, and to intelligence cooperation with the United States, out of fear of the consequences from al Qaeda.

After the invasion of Iraq, however, and the realization that the United States was rampaging just to the north, the Saudis shifted their position, and significant intelligence cooperation began. There were two consequences of this shift: One, the United States was receiving Saudi intelligence and became much more effective than before in blocking al Qaeda attacks and disrupting their operations; and two, the jihadists went to war against the Saudi regime, launching a series of strikes and counterstrikes over the next two years. The United States had split the Saudi government off from the jihadists, and the Saudis absorbed the price of collaboration. Al Qaeda has been relatively quiet in Saudi Arabia since June 2004. It had appeared to many observers that al Qaeda was finished in Saudi Arabia. Thus, just as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's faction in Iraq had to assert itself or be marginalized, the al Qaeda faction in Saudi Arabia had to demonstrate its continued capability to mount operations -- however dangerous and difficult that task might be. It was Hail Mary time in the kingdom as well. The result was the Feb. 24 attack against Abqaiq, a critical oil processing facility.

This was intended to be a strategic attack. A strategic attack differs from a tactical attack in several ways:

1. It shifts the political equation dramatically by demonstrating capabilities.
2. It involves a strike against a target or resource that, if destroyed, changes the economic or political scene definitively.
3. It requires a substantial commitment of resources.

The Sept. 11 strikes amounted to a strategic attack; a suicide bombing by jihadists in Iraq normally does not. The Abqaiq operation was an attempt at a strategic attack. It was designed to be a shocking demonstration of al Qaeda's continued capabilities -- and to massively affect world oil supplies. Such an operation would involve a great deal of planning and, we suspect, a substantial proportion of trained and available al Qaeda personnel in Saudi Arabia (as opposed to sympathizers).

But the strike was a fiasco. Rather than demonstrating al Qaeda's capabilities in Saudi Arabia, the attackers barely penetrated the first

security cordon before they were gunned down by security forces. Certainly, they demonstrated that al Qaeda still has operatives who are willing to attempt a strategic attack, but they failed to demonstrate that they still have the ability to actually execute one. Special operations are always difficult, but it now appears that either the group had been penetrated by Saudi security from the beginning, or the cell was not trained in the arts that al Qaeda previously dominated. All three cars used in the strike appear to have been identified and destroyed before there was any possibility they could reach their targets inside the Abqaiq compound.

In Iraq, two divisions in the Muslim world revealed themselves and were manipulated. The first was the Sunni-Shiite split, the second was the rift between the jihadists and mainstream Sunnis. In Saudi Arabia, the split was between, on one side, the state apparatus and the leaders of the royal family -- who had lost their ability to remain neutral in the face of the Iraq invasion, U.S. bellicosity and the fear of a U.S.-Iranian entente over Iraq -- and an increasingly radicalized faction of the religious establishment that was supporting al Qaeda. Within the kingdom, the latter could not withstand the weight of the former, and the result showed itself last week, with a feeble al Qaeda effort that was followed by bombastic rhetoric.

The debate on the ports deal

The third dimension in all of this became apparent with the ports issue. Washington has tried to draw a line between Muslim states that have cooperated with the United States in due course -- regardless of what their earlier behavior might have been like -- and those states that it still doesn't trust. It distinguishes in this way between, for example, Syria and Kuwait. The former has always been seen as hostile to the United States, the latter has been a mainstay of American strategy since its liberation by the United States in 1991. The rest of the Muslim world is distributed along a continuum between these poles. Washington's only hope for something approaching a satisfactory outcome in Iraq was to work with factions it never would have spoken to prior to 2003. Its hope for a satisfactory outcome in the global war with the jihadists was in getting Saudi intelligence to work with the United States. That also required actions and compromises that would not have been made before 2003. Finally, in order to reshape the Muslim world, the United States needed to have relations with countries that did not have immaculate records but which, on the whole and for a variety of reasons, now found it in their interest to work with Washington. For Saudi Arabia, the motivating factor was fear. For the UAE, it was greed. To be more fair, the UAE is something like a Switzerland: Its business is business, and it tilts its politics in such a way that business is likely to be good. The Islamic world is a complex place, and there are many players. If the United States is to be successful, it must divide, manipulate and conquer that world along the lines of its complexity. The Sunni-Shiite fault line is one axis, but the division between countries that are motivated by mercenary considerations, as opposed to those that have more complex motives, is another.

The UAE wants to do business, and it is good at it. One of its businesses is managing ports. Purchasing a British company in the same industry is a natural thing to do in business; the fact that the purchase in question would give the UAE company oversight of ports in the United States is another attraction of the deal. The attraction is not that the UAE could facilitate the movement of al Qaeda operatives into the United States; that is not what the UAE is after, since it would be bad for business. What it is after is the profits that come from doing the business.

Now, some argue that this business deal will make it easier for al Qaeda operatives to get into the United States. We find that doubtful. Al Qaeda operatives -- the real ones, not the wannabes -- if they are out there, will get into the United States just fine by a number of means. And if they try to slip a bomb into a container ship, it won't be one sent from a Muslim country -- the level of scrutiny there is too high. It would be from a place and under a

flag that no one would suspect for a moment, like Denmark. At any rate, given what it means to "operate a port," the risk to the United States from having a British company manage its ports is about the same as that from the UAE: Has anyone noticed that holding a British passport these days is no guarantee of loyalty to Western ideals?

The Administration's strategy

The point here is not to argue the merits of the Dubai ports deal, but rather to place the business deal in the context of the U.S. grand strategy. That strategy is, again, to split the Islamic world into its component parts, induce divisions by manipulating differences, and to create coalitions based on particular needs. This is, currently, about the only strategy the United States has going for it -- and if it can't use commercial relations as an inducement in the Muslim world, that is quite a weapon to lose.

The problem has become political, and stunningly so. One of the most recent opinion polls, by CBS, has placed Bush's approval rating at 34 percent -- a fairly shocking decline, and clearly attributable to the port issue. As we have noted in the past, each party has a core constituency of about 35-37 percent. When support falls significantly below this level, a president loses his ability to govern. The Republican coalition consists of three parts: social conservatives, economic conservatives and business interests, and national security conservatives. The port deal has apparently hit the national security conservatives in Bush's coalition hard. They were already shaky over the administration's personnel policies in the military and the question of whether he had a clear strategy in Iraq, even as they supported the invasion.

Another part of the national security faction consists of those who believe that the Muslim world as a whole is, in the end, united against the United States, and that it poses a clear and present danger. Bush used to own this faction, but the debate over the ports has generated serious doubts among this faction about Bush's general policy. In their eyes, he appears inconsistent and potentially hypocritical. Economic conservatives might love the ports deal, and so might conservatives of the "realpolitik" variety, but those who buy into the view that there is a general danger of terrorism emanating from all Muslim countries are appalled -- and it is showing in the polls. If Bush sinks much lower, he will break into territory from which it would be impossible for a presidency to recover. He is approaching this territory with three years left in his presidency. It is the second time that he has probed this region: The first was immediately after Hurricane Katrina. He is now down deeper in the polls, and it is cutting into his core constituency. In effect, Bush's strategy and his domestic politics have intersected with potential fratricidal force. The fact is that the U.S. strategy of dividing the Muslim world and playing one part off against the other is a defensible and sophisticated strategy -- even if does not, in the end, turn out to be successful (and who can tell about that?).

This is not the strategy the United States started with; the strategy emerged out of the failures in Iraq in 2003. But whatever its origins, it is the strategy that is being used, and it is not a foolish strategy.

The problem is that the political coalition has eroded to the point that Bush needs all of his factions, and this policy -- particularly because of the visceral nature of the ports issue -- is cutting into the heart of his coalition. The general problem is this: The administration has provided no framework for understanding the connection between a destroyed mosque dome in As Samarra, an attack against a crucial oil facility in Saudi Arabia, and the UAE buyout of a British ports-management firm. Rather than being discussed in the light of a single, integrated strategy, these appear to be random, disparate and uncoordinated events. The reality of the administration's strategy and the reality of its politics are colliding. Bush will backtrack on the ports issue, and the UAE will probably drop the matter. But what is not clear is whether the damage done to the strategy and the politics can be undone. The numbers are just getting very low.