



Saudi Arabia As America's Frenemy: Obama To Visit 'Ally' Which Makes World More Dangerous

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The king has died. Long live the king. Saudi Arabia today is a medieval system whose horrid human rights practices match its antiquated political system. King Abdullah died Thursday; King Salman ascended the throne Friday. Official Washington breathed a sigh of relief at the swift and smooth transition. President Barack Obama will visit Riyadh on Tuesday to pay his respects—or, some would say, demonstrate his obeisance.

Abdullah's body was still warm when the plaudits began to roll in. A "moderate" and "man of moderation," he was a "shrewd" and "wily" operator and "cautious reformer." Despite his access to great wealth he was "ascetic" and spoke plainly to commoners. Abroad the king talked of encouraging greater "tolerance" and "sincere dialogue" among different religions. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) called the late monarch "a vocal advocate for peace." Secretary of State John Kerry termed the departed king a "man of vision and wisdom." President Barack Obama declared of Abdullah: "he was always candid and had the courage of his convictions."

U.S. officials long have celebrated their friendship with the Saudi royals, who sit atop vast oil reserves. Presidents have brought Saudi kings to intimate meetings at secluded retreats, walking hand-in-hand to address the press. President George H.W. Bush called then-Crown Prince Abdullah a "dear friend and partner." Indeed, there was little the Bush family would not do for the House of Saud. Despite Riyadh's unhelpfulness in the aftermath of 9/11, committed by a gaggle of Saudi terrorists, the George W. Bush administration spirited a planeload of Saudi nationals out of the country.

Even more important, the American military continues to act as the Saudi royals' bodyguard. President George H.W. Bush inaugurated the first Gulf War as much to safeguard Saudi Arabia as liberate Kuwait. He left a garrison later targeted by the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Dharan. And America's presence on sacred Saudi soil was one of Osama bin Laden's

grievances: Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz even justified the invasion of Iraq in part as allowing Washington to remove the U.S. forces which had caused so much trouble.

However, Riyadh has become more independent internationally as it has found it tougher to influence American policy. U.S. officials are conflicted by the tension between democracy and stability. The Saudis suffer no such indecision. Essentially a totalitarian dictatorship at home, the House of Saud favors whoever and whatever reduces threats to the monarchy abroad.

As a result, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has suffered turbulence in recent years, especially after the Arab Spring. The Sunni kingdom fears Iran's Shia revolutionary state and would prefer Washington to bomb rather than negotiate with Tehran. Autocratic Riyadh developed convenient humanitarian sensitivities in Syria and urged America to oust the Iran-backed Assad government. The kingdom then sent arms to insurgents far and wide, including radicals now on Washington's enemies list.

Saudi officials ignored Washington's squeamishness in Cairo by advocating repression in Egypt, supporting the military's coup and subsequent suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and campaign against all dissent. Riyadh directly intervened in neighboring Bahrain, providing troops to sustain the Sunni al-Khalifa monarchy as it crushed protests from the oppressed Shia majority. The Obama administration's half-hearted criticism was ignored.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia joined the U.S. against the Islamic State. But it is an uncomfortable pairing. The Sunni monarchy is on the same side as foreign infidels, Shia Iraq and Iran, and Alawite Syria, backed by Iran, in fighting Sunni insurgents/terrorists. And many of the latter likely attended extremist mosques and were educated in radical madrassas funded by Riyadh.

In fact, the House of Saud for years has helped spread radical and violent Islam by subsidizing fundamentalist Wahhabi teachings at home and abroad. This theology celebrates hostility to modernity and creates an environment conducive for extremism and terrorism. Along with Pakistan Riyadh supported Taliban rule in Afghanistan, indirectly aiding al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden.

Ironically, the Saudi royals, whose ostentatious hypocrisy and lascivious living is evident outside of their country, have been targeted by the forces they helped unleash. The kingdom's first reaction to 9/11 was to denounce foreign criticism. For instance, then-Crown Prince Abdullah denounced the American media for expressing "its hatred toward the Islamic system." But once al-Qaeda challenged Saudi Arabia two years later the royals struck back brutally, demonstrating that they were corrupt, not indolent. So far the regime has spared no effort to suppress any threat at home. Indeed, the most important form of King Abdullah's vaunted "moderation" was to repress militant Islamic activities and combat radical Islamic interpretations which threatened the royal system.

With the onset of the Arab Spring the king opened the regime's purse strings a bit, sharing a little more of the people's money with the people. He also introduced a host of micro-reforms, such as professional education for Shari'a judges, job training programs, more school spending, marginal reductions in restrictions on women, and scholarships to attend foreign universities. However,

the Saudi kingdom remains a system of organized plunder by an estimated 7000 princes and their families against the Saudi people.

Indeed, the government imposed new restrictions on dissent, ensuring that most wealth and all influence remained tightly held within the royal family. The regime comes near the bottom of any international human rights ranking.

For instance, the State Department's latest assessment reported that the most important human rights problems included "citizens lack the right and legal means to change their government; pervasive restrictions on universal rights such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and freedom of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and a lack of equal rights for women, children, and noncitizen workers." Other than that everything is fine, except for "torture and other abuses; overcrowding in prisons and detention centers; holding political prisoners and detainees; denial of due process; arbitrary arrest and detention; and arbitrary interference with privacy, home, and correspondence." State's analysis runs a depressing 47 pages.

Saudi Arabia is even more restrictive when it comes to religious liberty. There is none. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded that "Saudi Arabia remains unique in the extent to which it restricts the public expression of any religion other than Islam."

State offers more detail in its report on religious liberty: "Freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law and the government severely restricted it in practice." No faith other than Islam can operate publicly. Private worship is at risk if discovered. Even revised school textbooks promote intolerance, including "justification for the social exclusion and killing of Islamic minorities and 'apostates'," explained State. The only good news is that things used to be worse. For instance, the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevent of Vice, which employs the *Mutawaa'in*, or religious police, to enforce religious law is a bit more accountable.

A recent example of "moderate" King Abdullah's reign is last May's sentencing of blogger Raif Badawi to ten years in prison and 1000 lashes for allegedly insulting Islam back in 2012. But he should count himself lucky. Two months later his lawyer, Waleed Abul-Khair, received a 15 year sentence for "undermining the regime and officials" and "inciting public opinion." Saudi Arabia is as quick to behead as is the Islamic State. The main difference is that Riyadh does not target foreigners.

However, the consensus-driven gerontocracy—for decades the top post has been passed among a group of elderly half-brothers—is not well-positioned to meet future challenges. The new king is 79 and rumored to have early stage dementia and other health problems. Designated successor Crown Prince Muqrin is 69. The new deputy Crown Prince, a position first created for Crown Prince Muqrin, finally moves the line of succession to the next generation, though a King Muqrin could alter that. How can such a system meet the needs of a population 70 percent of which is under 30?

President Obama lauded King Abdullah's "steadfast and passionate belief in the importance of the U.S.-Saudi relationship as a force for stability and security in the Middle East." Of course. It's cheaper to borrow U.S. troops than hire bodyguards. The House of Saud needs America far more than America needs the House of Saud.

Riyadh's transition offers Washington an opportunity to relax its embrace of medieval theocracy. Saudi Arabia matters internationally for one reason, oil, and that matters less in a dramatically changing marketplace. Anyway, a successor regime would continue selling oil. Otherwise it would not survive. And the West has better answers to reliance on unpleasant suppliers, such as Saudi Arabia: drop manifold barriers to domestic energy production and innovation.

U.S. support for Riyadh may not even encourage stability. The Islamic State already has targeted the kingdom. In early January a suicide team struck a Saudi border post and killed a visiting Saudi general tasked with securing the country's northern border. Blogger John Robb pointed out that the attackers must have relied on inside intelligence to hit the station Gen. Oudah al-Belawi was visiting.

The Saudi regime's vulnerabilities are only likely to grow. The more authoritarian and corrupt the monarchy, the greater the popular resentment. At some point ruthless repression might not be enough, and if the kingdom falls, as did the Peacock Throne in Iran, the denouement will be messy. Many of the royals are likely to end up hanging from lampposts. In contrast, neighboring Kuwait has established an elected legislature, allowed women to vote, and enabled a generally free press. Kuwait has its problems, but is more likely to survive the forces released by the Arab Spring.

In an imperfect world America always will have cause to work with dubious partners like the House of Saud. However, as my Cato Institute colleague Emma Ashford observed, U.S. leaders should "look more closely at our relationship with Saudi Arabia." It is not America's job to guard the Saudi monarchy. Moreover, Washington should drop the faux intimacy. Riyadh is a moral deadweight and an ally in interest, not friend in values. The administration would better send a file clerk rather than the president to Saudi Arabia to offer America's condolences on King Abdullah's death. Washington should stop celebrating what is just another ugly pact with a foreign devil.

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