

With Riyadh, How Much Longer Can Washington Look The Other Way?

Political Analysis



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Saudi Arabia and the United States’ long-standing friendship is undergoing an unprecedented stress test. The two allies, which have weathered decades of wars, one Arab Spring movement and the rise of Islamic radicalism, find themselves at a difficult crossroads following [the death of 90-year-old King Abdullah](#) last month.

With Abdullah’s half-brother, former Crown Prince Salman, 79, now at its helm, Saudi Arabia is not the same kingdom it was only a few weeks ago. With Abdullah gone, new players are set to rise, each bringing a new dynamic to the table. How Washington will engage and relate to these new political currents remains to be seen.

If Salman’s changes in Riyadh so far are a sign of things to come, Saudi Arabia is poised for sharp change in its political tone. Within days of assuming the crown, Salman swept through Abdullah’s court, [bringing down the old guard](#) to make way for the new king’s men.

With 30 royal decrees issued back to back, Salman demoted and promoted officials in key positions — military, religious and government. Those changes saw Princes Mishal and Turki bin Abdullah, two of Abdullah’s sons, relieved of their responsibilities, as well as the heads of intelligence and other key agencies replaced alongside a cabinet shuffle.

Most noticeable was Salman’s decision to raise the profiles of two the House of Saud’s third-generation princes: Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the deputy crown prince and minister of the interior; and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the king’s 30-year-old son, who is now defense minister and head of the royal court.

As Salman consolidated his hold on the throne by sidelining Abdullah’s bloodline in favor of his own, the country could soon engage in a new direction. Yet what that direction is, exactly, no one yet knows.

With rumored tensions between the sons of the founder of Al Saud dynasty, the mighty kingdom could fall victim to infighting and deep family feuds.

Yet if past frictions between those two hegemonies are anything to go by — Syria, Iran and Egypt have all been difficult diplomatic chokepoints — the Middle East and to a greater extent the world could be in for a major policy shift, especially since Saudi Arabia’s own footing in the region appears to be faltering.

“Washington’s friendship with Riyadh is tied up to Al Saud’s abilities to rule over not just Saudi Arabia but the greater region. Changes inside the kingdom and a shift in power dynamics across the Middle East and Asia has meant that Al Saud is losing its footing to other rising stars — Turkey, Iran and to a certain extent countries like Qatar,” Mojtaba Mousavi, an Iran-based political analyst and editor in chief of [Iran’s View](#), told MintPress News.

“Should the House of Saud fall, Washington could find itself friendless in the region,” Mousavi continued. “This is a reality U.S. officials are wrestling with.”

“The more influence Saudi Arabia will lose to rising regional powers, the greater the divide

in between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia will appear. It is important to remember that this particular friendship is interest-based. Politically, culturally and ideologically, those two powers stand on polar opposites, and therefore, their alliance will shift or dissolve based on each player's needs."

In 2007 Saleh al-Kallab, Jordan's former minister of information, compared the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to "a Catholic marriage where you can have no divorce," but it appears an annulment shouldn't be counted out.

What began some six decades ago as an alliance made in heaven, a perfect alignment of geo-strategy, political interests and financial betterment, has devolved into a diplomatic and political dichotomy, in which Washington's friendship toward Riyadh has prevented its officials from cultivating new friendships and striking new strategic partnerships in the increasingly fluid Middle East and North Africa region.

In the fast-moving post-Arab Spring world, Saudi Arabia's absolute theocracy stands an endangered political species. Western governments — and, in particular, the U.S. — have been trapped in a suffocating policy straightjacket. From the pull of history to the inertia of bureaucracies or the power of political lobbies, officials have relied on old thinking and antiquated alliances to solve new problems. Here lies America's Saudi paradox, but here, too, lies too an opportunity for change.

The president and the king

The bond which has united the U.S. and Saudi Arabia over the past six decades was sealed during a clandestine meeting between U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in February 1945. Less than a decade after [large reserves of oil](#) were found in modern day Dhahran, east of the kingdom, in 1938, the U.S. secured a key alliance against Soviet Russia — a move which would secure its standing as a supra-regional superpower. Every American president and Saudi king since have stood by this alliance, united in the understanding that each has needed the other to assert themselves as a political giant.

Yet time has a way of eroding even the tallest mountain.

Under the [agreement](#) brokered by Roosevelt and Abdul Aziz, the U.S. promised to act as a military ally and bodyguard to the House of Saud, providing a security umbrella for Saudi Arabia against any non-American foreign influence, especially the Soviet Union. The U.S. continues to hold up its end of the deal with arms sales and related security program coordination.

"Since October 2010, Congress has been notified of proposed sales to Saudi Arabia of fighter aircraft, helicopters, missile defense systems, missiles, bombs, armored vehicles, and related equipment and services, with a potential value of more than \$90 billion," [a January report](#) by the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. Congress' think tank, said.

Meanwhile, a report from the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) puts Saudi Arabia as the world's fourth largest military spender, just behind Russia and ahead of France. In 2013 Saudi Arabia's military spending hit \$67 billion, representing a 118 percent rise since 2004.

In return, Saudi Arabia assured the U.S., and the soon-to-be NATO alliance, of a reliable source of energy at reasonable prices to help implement what was to become the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe. It would also ensure American postwar leadership through NATO and unparalleled U.S. economic growth.

[This alliance](#) was recently put into play against Russia, when Riyadh eagerly drove oil prices to the floor to bankrupt Moscow's economy to secure NATO-U.S. supremacy east of the Caucasus.

Even earlier, though, keen to secure itself a buffer against the rising power of Soviet Russia, the House of Saud was more than happy to fill America's coffers with petrodollars, thus

securing a lasting friendship with a power that was too distant to pose an immediate hegemonic threat.

As author and journalist Stephen Kinzer recalled in his 2010 book, [“Reset Middle East,”](#) Abdul Aziz admitted that he had willed an alliance with the U.S. over one with other, closer Western powers based on geography. “You are very far away,” the king reportedly told an American official.

It is on the back of this Saudi royal friendship that the U.S. was able to stretch the span of its political and military empire — an empire made strong by the constant flow of petrodollars and Saudi Arabia’s willingness to play into its energy policy through [OPEC](#).

Meanwhile, because Saudi Arabia’s checkbook proved so useful to a petrodollar-dependent America, Washington and its Western allies have long turned a blind eye to Riyadh’s terror games.

Yet six decades on, Roosevelt’s post-WWII policy has shifted from its axis, revealing a split which could soon prove far too wide to bridge. While there have been Saudi-U.S. rifts before — the 1973 oil embargo, for example — the fallouts of the Arab Spring combined with the rise of Islamic radicalism could prove too great for both players to handle.

Jon B. Alterman, director of the Middle East program at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington, explained to [The New York Times](#) in January: “The Saudis are hard pressed to think of any country or collection of countries that can do what the United States can do.”

“At the same time, they are worried that the United States’ intentions are changing at a time when they don’t have an alternative or even the structure to find an alternative,” Alterman continued.

A strained friendship

Cracks forming in the Saudi-U.S. partnership became most visible in October 2013, when Abdullah took the unprecedented step of [refusing to take the coveted temporary seat](#) to which it had been elected on the U.N. Security Council. The snub was followed by warnings from [Prince Bandar bin Sultan](#), Saudi Arabia’s spy chief at the time, that the kingdom would move its pawns out of the White House lawn in view of President Barack Obama’s failure in attacking Syria to bring down President Bashar Assad as well as disputes over supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt versus Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, Egypt’s army chief, and placing pressure on Iran over its supposed nuclear ambitions.

As far as Riyadh is concerned, Obama has proven too timid in his backing of [moderates](#) in Syria, thus failing to act as a barrier to an increasingly powerful Iran, Saudi Arabia’s arch nemesis.

“This was a message for the U.S., not the U.N.,” Bandar told European diplomats about Abdullah’s refusal to chair the UNSC.

Now, with Abdullah gone and the old alliance on shaky ground, U.S. officials face an increasingly complicated conflict of interest vis a vis Saudi Arabia, whereby the two old friends have wildly different views on what the post-Arab Spring Middle East should look like and what policies to pursue to achieve their respective visions.

Although both partners might seek the same immediate goals — the removal of Assad and a non-nuclear Iran — they don’t agree on how to get there.

As noted by David Gardner in a piece for the [Financial Times](#) in 2013, “If they [the Saudis] want to retreat into full-throated Wahhabism and pursue a reactionary and sectarian agenda turbocharged by petrodollars, then this is perhaps a good moment for the west to review this relationship.”

Yet foreign policy is only one aspect of the problem.

Saudi Arabia’s friendship has become more than just a political conundrum or the

manifestation of American exceptionalism — it has devolved into a toxic political liability. Looking at America's war on terror and its pursuit of a democratic new world order, it is difficult to imagine Saudi Arabia as a valid partner, especially when its leadership stands as the very negation of democracy.

How does one extract oneself from the embrace of financial realities, though?

“The United States finds itself at an awkward crossroads with regards to its long-standing strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia. If Washington were to continue backing Riyadh unequivocally, the negative impact of Saudi foreign policy on U.S. interests in the Middle East could soon outweigh the positives,” Anthony Biswell, a London-based political analyst on the Middle East and external Yemen consultant for IHS Global Limited, told MintPress.

How much longer can Washington look the other way?

While U.S. officials may have been keen to overlook Saudi Arabia's democratic and human rights issues in the past for the sake of regional stability and a thriving world economy, the American public has grown increasingly less complacent.

As Adam Taylor wrote for the [Washington Post](#) on Monday:

“Americans and other Westerners seem to have grown more and more skeptical about the true nature of their ally. In particular, an unusual set of circumstances – including the fearsome rise of the Islamic State, the death of Saudi King Abdullah and renewed concerns about Saudi links to the 9/11 attacks – have lead to a significant public debate about Saudi Arabia's true values.”

And there lies a faultline U.S. officials might no longer be able to rationalize to their nationals. Indeed, if Washington feels it can paint Assad as a ferocious anti-democratic despot whose presidency needs to be deposed, how can it justify the House of Saud's beheadings and public floggings?

One of the [most oppressive](#) and dictatorial regimes in the region, Saudi Arabia's human rights track record is as appalling as it is bloody.

In a [January report](#), Adam Coogle, a Middle East and North Africa Researcher with Human Rights Watch, lists some of Abdullah's human rights offenses, highlighting some of Al Saud's worst best-kept secrets: systematic repression, harsh corporal punishments and abuses against migrant workers.

Most shocking was the 2014 sentencing of Saudi blogger [Raif Badawi](#) to public flogging. A pro-democracy activist, Badawi was condemned to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison for speaking out against the Saudi regime.

Where Washington might have found “[a cautious reformer](#)” in Abdullah, Salman's narrative appears decisively more reactionary. [On Jan. 26](#), three days after Abdullah was set to rest, Salman ordered his first beheading.

[Mousa bin Saeed Ali al-Zahrani](#), a teacher convicted of raping several young girls (a crime he denied up to his death), was publicly beheaded in Jeddah. Al-Zahrani is just one of an estimated five people who have been beheaded since Salman took the throne. Against this backdrop, more people and the media are drawing disturbing parallels between Al Saud's practices and that of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Speaking to International Business Times this month, [Ali Al-Ahmed](#), a Saudi expert and the director of the Washington-based Institute for Gulf Affairs, emphasized, “Both ISIS and Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy rely on the same ideology and system of religious interpretation in their approach to punishment.”

“The Saudi judicial process, if we can call it that, is the same as ISIS’,” he added.

This may be the very straw which might break the camel's back: Saudi Arabia's political ideology can never reconcile with Americans' democratic idealism. Yet Washington's dependency on Saudi oil and Saudi money has forced the political class to be an accessory to

human rights violations.

“It is time it stopped being a relationship dripping with deference by the west and dollars by the Saudis, a spectacle of liberal democracies sucking up to an absolute monarchy governed by the precepts of medieval theologians,” [Gardner asserted](#) in the Financial Times in 2013.

As U.S. officials evaluate their standing in the kingdom with Salman now in charge, this transition of power might lead to a change in policy or, as Biswell termed it, “tactical political distancing.”

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