

The New York Times and the dirty secret of US-Saudi relations

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29 October 2001

An editorial in the October 14 *New York Times* (“Reconsidering Saudi Arabia”) partially lifts the veil on one of the dirtiest secrets of US foreign policy: the sordid nature of the relationship that Washington has maintained for more than half a century with the semi-feudal Saudi Arabian regime.

The *Times* editors, like a number of other US editorialists and politicians, have in recent days addressed the problem of US-Saudi relations because in the present crisis American and Saudi interests have come into conflict. The Riyadh regime has refused American requests to freeze the assets of Osama bin Laden and his associates, and has blocked the US from using Saudi air bases for strikes against Afghanistan.

It is well known that elements in the Saudi establishment have links to the Islamic fundamentalist groups against which the US government is waging war. According to a recent article by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* magazine, “American intelligence officials have been particularly angered by the refusal of the Saudis to help the FBI and CIA run ‘traces’—that is, name checks and other background information—on the nineteen men, more than half of them believed to be from Saudi Arabia, who took part in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.”

Such political considerations—of an entirely opportunist character—underlie the timing of the *Times*’ decision to “get something off its chest.” Arguing for a reconsideration of Washington’s ties to Saudi Arabia, the newspaper’s editorialists write: “Over the decades, the United States and Saudi Arabia have benefited from the cold-blooded bargain at the core of their relationship. America got the oil to run its economy and Saudi Arabia got the protection of American military might whenever the kingdom was threatened by its violent neighbors, including Iraq and Iran.”

They go on to state: “Washington’s embrace of the Saudi royal family dates back to the era of Franklin Roosevelt. It has always been primarily about oil, but other factors have played a role, including Saudi investments in American Treasury bonds and the purchase of expensive American weapons systems. ... Until now, the stream of Saudi oil and money has all but silenced serious American criticism of the royal family’s pervasive corruption, its contempt for democracy and the appalling human rights abuses carried out in its name.”

This is a remarkably damning admission of the reactionary and destructive role played by the US in the Middle East. The *Times* editors acknowledge, first, that US policy in the Middle East is driven by a ruthless determination to maintain control of the region’s oil resources—not the hypocritical cant about peace and democracy given out for public consumption.

They admit, moreover, that Washington has maintained its supply of

Middle Eastern oil in a manner that has produced catastrophic consequences for the Saudi population and the people of the region. The *Times*’ statements, furthermore, amount to an admission that the 1991 Gulf War was fought to protect the regime in Riyadh (and the flow of oil to the US) from more nationalist-minded forces.

Wittingly or not, the *Times* is also confessing its own complicity, since the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the October 14 editorial is that the newspaper has been well aware all along of what it now describes as America’s “deeply cynical relationship” with Saudi Arabia.

The two principle foundations of US policy in the Middle East, at least since the fall of the Shah’s dictatorship in Iran, have been the use of Israel to suppress the Palestinian masses and serve as a beachhead for imperialist interests, and support for the Saudi monarchy. The latter is one of the vilest governments on earth. According to Amnesty International, “Secrecy and fear permeate every aspect of the state structure in Saudi Arabia. There are no political parties, no elections, no independent legislature, no trades unions, no bar association, no independent judiciary, and no independent human rights organisations. Anyone living in Saudi Arabia who criticises the system is harshly punished. After arrest, political and religious opponents of the government are detained indefinitely without trial or are imprisoned after grossly unfair trials. Torture is endemic. Foreign workers are always at risk.”

Saudi Arabia’s medieval social policies, enforced by a religious police force, are not radically different from those imposed by the Taliban on the Afghan people.

The US State Department itself, in background notes provided in 1998, was obliged to note: “Despite close cooperation on security issues, the United States remains concerned about human rights conditions in Saudi Arabia. Principal human rights problems include abuse of prisoners and incommunicado detention; prohibitions or severe restrictions on the freedoms of speech, press, peaceful assembly and association, and religion; denial of the right of citizens to change their government; systematic discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities; and suppression of workers’ rights.”

Amnesty International reports 123 executions in 2000 in Saudi Arabia, some on charges of sodomy and “sorcery.” The body of one of those put to death, an Egyptian national, was reportedly crucified following his execution. There were 34 reported cases of amputation last year, seven of which were cross amputations (of the right hand and left foot). Another Egyptian national had his left eye surgically removed as a punishment handed down by a court in Medina. Flogging continued to be widely imposed. Two teachers, arrested

following demonstrations in Najran, were reportedly sentenced to 1,500 lashes each, with the sentence carried out in front of their families, students and other teachers. Torture of prisoners, including the use of electro-shock, is common.

The relationship between the US government and the Saudi royal family goes back, as the *Times* editorial indicates, to the Roosevelt era. Bilateral ties between the two countries were formally established in 1942. The first Saudi Arabian legation was opened in the US in 1944 (the same year the Arabian American Oil Company [Aramco] was founded).

A year later King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud (known as Ibn Saud) met with Franklin Roosevelt on board a US cruiser in the Suez Canal. Successive American administrations courted the Saudis. King Saud and Dwight D. Eisenhower met at the White House in 1957, and the king returned to confer with John F. Kennedy in 1962. Saudi monarchs held talks with Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter.

According to Seymour Hersh's *New Yorker* piece, the Saudi regime was a "major financial backer" of the Reagan administration's "anti-Communist campaign in Latin America," as well as its efforts to destabilize the Soviet Union by supporting the Islamic fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan. It was not for nothing that Reagan, during a 1985 visit by King Fahd (who remains, officially, the reigning monarch, despite being entirely incapacitated) declared that "the friendship and cooperation between our governments and peoples are precious jewels whose value we should never underestimate."

Lubricating this "precious jewel" since the 1940s has been petroleum, millions of barrels of it. Saudi crude oil production increased by an average of 19 percent a year from 1945 through 1974, reaching 8 million barrels a day that year. Aramco estimates that Saudi Arabian oil reserves account for 25 percent of the world's proven reserves, an estimate many consider to be conservative.

In 1999, Saudi Arabia—the world's leading oil producer and exporter—supplied the US with 1.4 million barrels of oil a day, or nearly 16 percent of US crude oil imports. Ties between the Saudi elite and figures in the administration of George W. Bush (and that of his father) have been well documented. Hersh notes that Haliburton, the oil-related business formerly headed by Vice-President Dick Cheney, "was operating a number of subsidiaries in Saudi Arabia" at the end of last year.

The value of US-Saudi trade is enormous. In 1999 Saudi exports to the US were estimated at \$7.9 billion and imports from the US at \$7.6 billion. These figures reflect a two-way traffic dominated by oil flows to the US and arms shipments back to Saudi Arabia. The total value of US arms agreements with Saudi Arabia from 1950 through March 1997 was some \$94 billion, while arms agreements in the period 1991-97 alone amounted to nearly \$23 billion. A brief from the Congressional Research Service places the number of US personnel in Saudi Arabia (military forces and contractors working with the local armed forces) at between 35,000 and 40,000.

US arms and military assistance have gone largely to protect the corrupt royal family (7,000 members strong, who receive as much as 40 percent of the country's oil revenues) from internal and external enemies.

Just as the liberation of Kuwait was the pretext for the Gulf War a decade ago, the pursuit of bin Laden and the eradication of "Islamic fundamentalist terrorism" are pretexts for the present war. The arguments of the *Times* editors and the other supporters of the Bush administration's war drive are hypocritical and self-serving. Having

admitted that US policy toward Saudi Arabia has always been cynical and driven by the lust for oil, why should the *Times*—or any other segment of the American media—be believed when they present the most altruistic explanations for the present conflict in Afghanistan? In fact, this is a war for the reorganization of the Middle East and Central Asia—the next major reservoir of oil and natural gas—in the interests of American imperialism.

The September 11 terror attack cannot be explained simply as the work of "evil-doers" and madmen. It was a deeply reactionary response by weak and politically disoriented nationalist elements to the apparently overwhelming strength of imperialism, whose most powerful and aggressive representative is the United States.

The crisis of the workers' movement, the vacuum of revolutionary leadership principally caused by the criminal policies of Stalinism (including the reactionary invasion of Afghanistan in 1979), have contributed to the rise of fundamentalism. While the October Revolution of 1917 had a galvanizing effect on the region, the actions of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy in subsequent decades squandered the political capital accumulated by Bolshevism, and discredited a socialist alternative to the semi-feudal and bourgeois exploiters, as well as to colonial and neo-colonial rule. Islamic fundamentalism has temporarily reaped the benefits.

From the point of view of the social physiognomy of Saudi Arabia, the emergence of bin Laden and Al Qaeda reflects deep divisions within the society and, specifically, the resentment felt by sections of the Saudi bourgeoisie over their comprador relationship with the US. Al Qaeda expresses the outlook of a section of the Arab ruling elite itself. It derives a certain amount of support from the middle classes and, to the extent that the oppressed masses see no socialist alternative, from the working class and the most downtrodden layers of the population as well.

The *Times* editorial confirms the basic fact that has been stressed by the *World Socialist Web Site*—that the principal political responsibility for the September 11 attacks rests with successive US administrations that have carried out brutal and aggressive policies toward the various peoples of the region (Iraqi, Palestinian, Somalia and others), incited Islamic fundamentalism when it served Washington's purposes, and maintained venal relationships with the most corrupt elements in the Middle East.

From a more fundamental historical standpoint, the present crisis is a product of the entire imperialist system, which is based on private ownership of the means of production and the drive for profit, as well as the defense of the nation-state system within which world capitalism developed. This system, with its inherent inequities, irrationality and explosive contradictions, leads inevitably to war.

According to the *Times*, the American relationship with Saudi Arabia must be "refashioned." This is pure sophistry. What the present crisis raises is the need to put an end to imperialism itself. For this task there is no solution other than the unification of the working class of all countries around the program of international socialism.



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