

Saudi king's death threatens to deepen US crisis in Middle East

Bill Van Auken
24 January 2015

The death of Saudi Arabia's 90-year-old King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, the head of one of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies, has been met with profuse tributes and open mourning by Washington and its allies, along with the Western media.

Abdullah, who has effectively ruled Saudi Arabia since his predecessor and half-brother, Fahd, suffered a debilitating stroke in 1995—becoming king upon his death in 2005—has maintained the country's theocratic dictatorship as a lynchpin of regional counterrevolution and US oil interests for the past two decades.

His death introduces another layer of uncertainty and potential crisis into a Middle East already reeling from political eruptions that are directly tied to the role of the US-Saudi axis in the region, from the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to the collapse of the regime that they both backed in Yemen.

World leaders have rushed to the Saudi capital of Riyadh to participate in the three days of official mourning proclaimed by the monarchical regime, among them US Vice President Joe Biden, French President François Hollande, Britain's Prince Charles, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and many others. All of them are anxious to see their interests in the kingdom—which sits atop the second largest proven petroleum reserves in the world and is the number one producer of crude oil—preserved.

The tributes paid by Western government officials and the corporate media were nothing short of obscene.

Barack Obama praised Abdullah as a leader who “had the courage of his convictions.” The US president added, “One of those convictions was his steadfast and passionate belief in the importance of the US-Saudi relationship as a force for stability and security in the Middle East and beyond.”

The courage of Abdullah's convictions—always essential for an absolute monarch—found its expression in his regime's beheadings last year of at least 87 people, in some cases with their headless corpses publicly crucified after death. Among the crimes punished by beheading were “sorcery,” adultery, drug possession and political opposition to the ruling monarchy.

The *Washington Post* described Abdullah as “a master politician” who “gained a reputation as a reformer without changing his country's power structure,” adding, with no substantiation, that he was “popular with his subjects.” The *New York Times* described him as a ruler who had “earned a reputation as a cautious reformer” and was, “in some ways, a force of moderation.”

It was this “moderation” that was on display, no doubt, in the postponing last week—for medical reasons—of the second round of 50 of the 1,000 lashes to which the Saudi blogger Raif Badawi was sentenced. He also received a 10-year jail term for the crimes of “adopting liberal thought” and “insulting Islam.”

The intimate US-Saudi relationship, which Obama praised Thursday as “a force for stability and security in the Middle East and beyond,” stands as an unanswerable indictment of the hypocrisy of US imperialism's attempt to justify its predatory policies in the Middle East and internationally in the name of “democracy” and “human rights.”

The heart of this relationship has been US military protection of Saudi Arabia in return for tying its domination of the world oil markets to American interests. This was solidified in 1973 in a deal brokered by then US President Richard Nixon in which he pledged to ensure US defense of and arms sales to the Saudi monarchy in return for all of the kingdom's oil

sales being denominated in US dollars, giving rise to the recirculation of “petrodollars” into US financial markets and arms purchases.

With a population of 28 million—fully one third of it made up of migrant workers who do virtually all of the labor—Saudi Arabia has the fourth largest arms budget in the world.

US imperialism has likewise long relied on Saudi Arabia’s propagation of Wahhabi Islamic religious ideology as a counter to secular nationalist and socialist movements in the region. King Abdullah provided unstinting support to Hosni Mubarak against the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and then to the coup of Egyptian General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2013. He sent troops and tanks across the causeway into Bahrain to crush mass protests in that Gulf kingdom in 2011.

Significantly, among those praising Abdullah Thursday was Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, who said he had “contributed greatly to Middle East stability.”

The Saudi succession has only underscored the sclerotic character of the ruling monarchy. The new king, Salman bin Abdulaziz, is 79 and reportedly in ill health, suggesting that real power will be wielded by others. His successor, the new crown prince Mugin bin Abdul Aziz, at 69 is described as “relatively young” for a Saudi ruler.

The successor king and those behind him confront a series of deepening crises for the regime. Next door in Yemen, the unpopular regime that both Riyadh and Washington backed has collapsed in the face of a revolt by the Houthis, a population that Saudi Arabia had repeatedly attacked and which it sees as an ally of its regional rival, Iran.

In Syria, the monarchy’s bankrolling and arming of Islamist “rebels,” again in alliance with the US, has produced ISIS, which has overrun much of that country and Iraq, bringing its forces to Saudi Arabia’s own borders. The implications of this were driven home earlier this month in an ISIS suicide attack that claimed the lives of General Oudah al-Belawi, the commander of all Saudi forces in the northern part of the country, along with two border guards. Nurtured on Saudi money and Wahhabi ideology, ISIS is now turning its sights on its former patrons.

Meanwhile, there is the fall of oil prices, which, by refusing to cut production, the Saudis have promoted in

a deal worked out with Washington with the aim of weakening both Russia and Iran. The halving of oil revenues as a result, however, has ominous implications for Saudi Arabia itself, which has used its petroleum export surpluses to pacify the population with public spending on housing, education, salary hikes and other forms of public welfare. Next year, it is projected to run a deficit of \$39 billion, amounting to 5.2 percent of GDP—the largest in the kingdom’s history. Resulting cuts in salaries, benefits and public spending in a country where 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line can spell social unrest.

There are also indications of strains in the relations with Washington, which have increased since Obama backed off his threat to bomb Syria in 2013 and moved instead toward a halting rapprochement with Iran. Abdullah, who was eulogized repeatedly Thursday as, in the words of US Secretary of State John Kerry, “a proponent of peace,” had called upon the US administration to “cut the head off the snake” by launching a military intervention against Iran.

Finally, the Saudi regime will undoubtedly face internal tensions as the struggle over succession and division of the spoils develops among the thousands of princes and princesses and their entourage. While Abdullah had based his rise to power on his role as commander of the National Guard, a post inherited by his son, the rival Sudairi faction of the ruling family, to which the new king belongs, will undoubtedly attempt to fill positions with their own supporters. How this faction fight works out will affect not only internal politics, but potentially the disposition of major contracts with the oil conglomerates, arms dealers and other transnational corporations.

The fact that US imperialism counts the Saudi regime as a key pillar of its interests in the Middle East only underscores the reactionary role that it plays throughout the region as well as the fundamental instability of the system of hegemony that it is attempting to impose there.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact