Imperialist mourning for King Abdullah

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In its disgusting fawning and hypocrisy, little could top the outpouring of praise from the major imperialist powers in response to the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who died Friday at age 90.

Tributes have poured in from governments around the world. In London, the British government flew flags at half-mast at government buildings and at Buckingham Palace, prior to a trip by Prince Charles and Prime Minister David Cameron to Saudi Arabia over the weekend.

As for the US, the Obama administration announced that it was upending the travel plans of the president, currently in India, to make a special trip to Riyadh to visit Abdullah's successor, his 79-year-old half-brother, Salman. The White House issued a statement noting the "genuine and warm friendship" between President Obama and the departed monarch.

It is perhaps a fitting expression of the nature of the government he will rule that Salman, the sixth son of Ibn Saud to succeed the founder of the semi-feudal regime, is reportedly afflicted with Alzheimer's. Simon Henderson, director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at the Washington Institute on Near East Policy, wrote last month, "Salman's brain is evidently ravaged by dementia. Visitors report that after a few minutes of conversation, he becomes incoherent."

It is, of course, possible for a ruler of such diminished capacity to occupy a figurehead role for a significant length of time, as Ronald Reagan did throughout most of his presidency. But these reports make it clear why it was all-important, in the view of the White House, Pentagon and State Department, that the new king's first action was to confirm as his successor and crown prince the youngest son of Ibn Saud, Prince Muqrin, age 69.

Even more critical, from the standpoint of American imperialism, was the designation of Prince Mohammed ibn Nayef, the interior minister, as deputy crown prince and presumed successor to Muqrin. At age 55, the prince is the first potential occupant of the throne chosen from the generation of grandchildren of Ibn Saud. As chief of Saudi Arabia's antiterrorism operations, he has worked closely with the American CIA and Pentagon. The *Wall Street Journal* noted in a column, "Prince Mohammed was long seen as Washington's preferred candidate among the younger princes who aspired to be king."

The close collaboration between Washington and the Saudi regime speaks volumes about the nature of American intervention in the Middle East. Despite claims by countless administrations that US foreign policy promotes democracy, American imperialism has long relied on the most reactionary and oppressive regime in the Middle East. For 70 years, there has been an agreement that the US will back the Saudi monarchy, arming it to the teeth against both domestic and external threats, in return for Saudi oil supplies and Saudi backing to US foreign policy generally.

While for more than a decade US administrations have embraced the "war on terror," now described by the Obama administration as the "struggle against violent extremism," the basis of American foreign policy in the Middle East has been an alliance with a state that espouses Islamic fundamentalism and finances and arms right-wing Islamic fundamentalist groups throughout the region.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration and Saudi Arabia jointly sponsored the Afghan mujaheddin, the guerrilla force of Islamic fundamentalists recruited by the CIA and sanctioned and paid for by Saudi Arabia, to fight the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. The US-Saudi collaboration in Afghanistan gave rise to Al Qaeda, headed by Osama bin Laden, son of a construction magnate made wealthy by his contracts in Saudi Arabia. Saudi money—including some from the monarchy itself—financed the 9/11 terrorist attacks in

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the United States, and 15 of the 19 suicide hijackers were Saudis.

But the Bush administration whitewashed these connections, first invading Afghanistan, then fabricating a connection between Saddam Hussein and 9/11 in order to justify its criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. While the Saudis offered verbal opposition to the US intervention, (because they regarded Saddam Hussein as a bulwark against Iran), the US military had full access to Saudi bases to carry out military and intelligence operations during the war.

More recently, Saudi Arabia backed the US-NATO war against Libya and intervened heavily within Syria as part of the US-orchestrated campaign to destabilize the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which is allied with Iran, the Saudis' main regional rival.

The US-Saudi alliance has been an unmitigated disaster for the people of the Middle East. Iraq, Syria, Libya and now Yemen, on Saudi Arabia's southern border, have been destroyed as functioning societies, devastated by military onslaught (either directly, as in Iraq and Libya, indirectly as in Syria, or remotely, via drone missiles, as in Yemen).

Saudi military forces invaded the sheikdom of Bahrain—the headquarters for US naval operations in the Persian Gulf—to suppress popular opposition to the ruling family. In 2013, Washington and Riyadh backed the coup of General al-Sisi in Egypt and the reimposition of military dictatorship on the most populous Arab state.

In Syria, Saudi dollars and Saudi-supplied American weapons helped fuel the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), leading to last summer's debacle, when ISIS fighters conquered most of western Iraq, including the country's second-largest city, Mosul. Now Saudi pilots have joined in the US-led bombing campaign in Syria, the forerunner of a much broader and bloodier conflict.

The latest example of US-Saudi collaboration is the Saudi-led decision by OPEC to reject any reduction in oil production as prices have plunged. This action is aimed at bankrupting Iran and Russia, the two main allies of Assad in Syria, by slashing the oil export revenues on which the governments of both countries depend.

This is something of a double-edged sword, however. In the US, the oil price plunge has devastated the fracking industry and begun to create mass unemployment in Texas, North Dakota and other states. In Saudi Arabia, the drop in oil prices has put a hole of nearly $40 billion in the national budget, forcing it to draw down international reserves.

Both poverty and unemployment are spreading in the country, despite its oil wealth. A recently cited CIA country study estimated that 506,000 young people will enter the job market in Saudi Arabia in 2015, where more than half the population of 27 million is under 25 years of age. Given that only 1.7 million out of the 8.4 million wage earners in Saudi Arabia are actually Saudi citizens—the vast majority are immigrants—the regime faces what one imperialist strategist described as "an incredible challenge in terms of internal stability."

The most reactionary force in the region—the Saudi monarchy—is aligned with the most reactionary force on the planet—US imperialism. The result is a noxious combination of economic convulsions, widening sectarian and tribal conflicts, and escalating imperialist military intervention.

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