

Thomas Friedman of the New York Times: A sycophant in the House of Saud

Bill Van Auken
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Thomas Friedman, the chief foreign affairs commentator of the *New York Times*, can safely be relied upon to produce hypocritical and cringe-inducing pieces of state propaganda journalism on offer from an American corporate media that specializes in this field.

In the past quarter century of Washington's unending wars, Friedman has offered himself as the unflagging cheerleader for every act of US imperialist aggression.

Most infamously, on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, Friedman justified the impending war in the name of everything from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction to US control of oil. The *Times* columnist readily acknowledged that it would be a "war of choice," or, in legal terms, a criminal war of aggression. He insisted, however, that "removing Saddam Hussein and helping Iraq replace his regime with a decent accountable government that can serve as a model in the Middle East is worth doing."

Nearly a decade and a half later, over a million Iraqi lives have been lost, and much of the Middle East has been plunged into bloodshed and destruction that trace their origin to the 2003 invasion. Friedman, who used his position as the lead columnist for the most influential newspaper in the US to promote the war, bears no small degree of moral responsibility for this carnage.

None of this stops him, however, from continuing in the same vein, unfailingly promoting the policies of American imperialism from the standpoint of the thin layer of multi-millionaires and billionaires who constitute its beneficiaries.

Now he has discovered a new and even more wildly improbable font of democracy in the Middle East and "model" for the region, the monarchical dictatorship of Saudi Arabia.

Friedman's latest column in the *Times*, titled "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring," is based on a whirlwind VIP tour of the House of Saud, where, as he smugly recounts, he was a guest at Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "ornate adobe-walled castle," fêted there by "senior ministers" with "different lamb dishes."

"I never thought I'd live long enough to write this sentence: The most significant reform process underway anywhere in the Middle East today is in Saudi Arabia," Friedman begins. This, as most everything else in the column, is a lie. By this point, there is virtually nothing new in Friedman's columns, merely a

recycling of yesterday's platitudes.

"Unlike the other Arab Springs—all of which emerged bottom up and failed miserably, except in Tunisia—this one is led from the top down by the country's 32-year-old crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman," he writes.

Comparing the 2011 heroic mass uprisings of the masses of Egypt and Tunisia against US-backed dictatorships to the palace shakeup in Riyadh is nothing short of obscene.

Friedman makes it clear that he much prefers a "Spring" orchestrated by an autocratic crown prince than one arising from a mass popular revolt. That the Saudi regime responded to the events of 2011 with savage repression, carrying out mass arrests, imposing strict censorship, outlawing all demonstrations and public gatherings and executing its opponents, goes unmentioned by Friedman, as does its invasion of neighboring Bahrain to militarily suppress a mass revolt of its Shia majority against a Sunni monarchy.

Affectionately referring to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—soon expected to become king—as M.B.S., Friedman gives a glowing and unquestioning account of bin Salman's self-description as a selfless reformer.

"We started with the obvious question: 'What's happening at the Ritz?'" Friedman writes, referring to the Riyadh luxury hotel that has been turned into a makeshift prison for bin Salman's rivals within Riyadh's venal ruling clique. The columnist uncritically records bin Salman's dismissal of any suggestion that he is using corruption—which is the overriding characteristic of the entire House of Saud—as a pretext for consolidating power as "ludicrous." Friedman doesn't bother with any follow-up on reports that the prince's prisoners are being tortured, including by American contractors linked to the successor company of Blackwater.

Acknowledging there are fears within some quarters in Washington that the purge could turn the House of Saud into a House of Cards, Friedman writes, "But one thing I know for sure: Not a single Saudi I spoke to here over three days expressed anything other than effusive support for this anti corruption drive."

What a revelation! In interests of full disclosure about this informal poll, it would have been helpful for Friedman to tell his readers that those expressing anything but "effusive

support” for the crown prince can find themselves detained indefinitely and, like those at the Ritz, being hung upside down and beaten with hoses.

The brutal war that bin Salman has overseen against the people of Yemen is given similarly short shrift. He quotes the prince as bragging that the Saudis and their puppet regime are “now in control of 85 percent” of the impoverished country. Friedman then refers to the firing earlier this month of a missile that was brought down near Riyadh’s airport, stating, “anything less than 100 percent is still problematic,” a tacit support for Saudi escalation.

That this lone missile, fired in response to a relentless US-backed campaign of Saudi airstrikes that have killed at least 10,000 Yemenis over the last two-and-a-half years, was seized upon as a justification for a total blockade of the country, does not feature in Friedman’s hagiography of the crown prince. That UN and humanitarian aid groups have warned that Riyadh’s actions of collective punishment threaten to claim the lives of millions through famine and disease likewise goes unmentioned.

Even more than the so-called “anticorruption campaign,” Friedman praises bin Salman as a courageous religious reformer, quoting uncritically his claim to be a proponent of a “moderate, balanced Islam that is open to the world and to all religions.” This, from the de facto head of a Sunni monarchy that is waging a virulently sectarian crusade against Shia Muslims throughout the Middle East. In the same interview, bin Salman refers to Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the “new Hitler of the Middle East,” with no objection from his interviewer.

Friedman unabashedly declares: “Someone had to do this job—wrench Saudi Arabia into the 21st century—and M.B.S. stepped up. I for one, am rooting for him to succeed in his reform efforts.”

What nonsense! Amnesty International summed up conditions in Saudi Arabia 2016-2017 as bin Salman began consolidating his grip on the monarchy:

“The authorities severely curtailed the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, detaining and imprisoning critics, human rights defenders and minority rights activists on vaguely worded charges. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees remained common, particularly during interrogation, and courts continued to accept torture-tainted ‘confessions’ to convict defendants in unfair trials. Women faced discrimination in both law and practice and were inadequately protected against sexual and other violence. The authorities continued to arrest, detain and deport irregular migrants. Courts imposed many death sentences, including for non-violent crimes and against juvenile offenders; scores of executions were carried out. Coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia committed serious violations of international law, including war crimes, in Yemen.”

On the eve of Friedman’s pilgrimage to Riyadh, the Saudi

regime imposed a new counterterrorism law that provides for criminal penalties of five to 10 years in prison for portraying the king or crown prince “in a manner that brings religion or justice into disrepute” and includes under the rubric of “terrorism” any act “disturbing public order,” “shaking the security of the community and the stability of the State” or “exposing its national unity to danger.”

Bin Salman’s “reforms” are aimed at consolidating support among the most privileged layers of Saudi society as the ruling regime prepares to face mounting social discontent under conditions in which a fifth of the Saudi population lives under conditions of severe poverty and roughly one third of young people, between the ages of 20 and 24, are unemployed.

Friedman’s lionization of the Saudi royal is nothing new. In fact, just two years ago, he wrote in a similar column praising bin Salman: “I spent an evening with Mohammed bin Salman at his office, and he wore me out. With staccato energy bursts, he laid out in detail his plans.”

In his latest column he writes: “It’s been a long, long time, though, since any Arab leader wore me out with a fire hose of new ideas about transforming his country.” Apparently, not that long, unless the fire hose was more taxing than the energy bursts.

It is not just Friedman. On his Twitter account, Georgetown history professor Abdullah Al-Arian responded to Friedman’s latest column by reproducing clippings from the *New York Times* over the past seven decades lauding nearly every monarch, from Saud to Faisal, Fahd and Abdullah, as “reformers,” “modernizers” and “progressives.”

If the *New York Times* columnist is once again reviving this long and ignoble tradition of prettifying the ugly regime in Riyadh, it is because the Trump administration and the predominate layers within the US military and intelligence apparatus have made the Saudi monarchy a lynchpin of their preparations for confrontation with Iran, threatening a region-wide war that would eclipse the devastation wrought by the invasion Friedman promoted 15 years ago.



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