

An Open Letter by Senior Middle East Scholars to the New York Times Regarding “Saudi Arabia’s Arab Spring, At Last.”

Thomas Friedman's Column

By [Senior Middle East Scholars](#)

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We write as scholars of the Middle East and the Muslim world with long, collective experience on Gulf and Arabian Peninsula policy issues to express our amazement, concern and anger that the New York Times would publish Thomas Friedman’s recent essay “Saudi Arabia’s Arab Spring, At Last.”

We understand that opinion writing allows for some degree of license in the interpretation of events and issues. But Mr. Friedman’s description of the situation in Saudi Arabia is so divorced from reality as to call into question his competence as a journalist or opinion writer. The so-called “Arab Spring” was an attempt by young people and, soon thereafter, large sections of the population of several Arab countries to force their governments to democratize their political systems; to resist stifling of speech and expression; and to halt large-scale systematic torture and physical abuse of citizens by security forces. Not only has the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman not addressed any of these issues, all the evidence points to the opposite conclusion—that his growing power has been accompanied by a ramping up of censorship, arrests, imprisonments without (fair) trials and other forms of violent repression against dissent.

Even worse, Mr. Friedman has nary a word on the unmitigated disaster that is the Saudi war in Yemen, which has now surpassed Syria as the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe. The evidence for bin Salman’s leading role in executing this illegal, murderous war that has done immeasurable harm to tens of millions of Yemenis and thrown the entire Arabian peninsula and Gulf region into chaos is incontrovertible. We cannot understand how any professional journalist (which Mr. Friedman describes himself as at the start of the article) could engage in a long-form interview with bin Salman and avoid interrogating the issue in any detail, essentially giving him a pass for being the mastermind of an illegal war that has devastated the lives of millions, and today borders on genocide.

In this context, Friedman’s focus on the possibility of bin Salman’s “reform” and rebranding of the extremist Islam long fostered by the Saudis betrays either a complete ignorance of the history, religious and political dynamics, and present geostrategic ambitions of bin Salman’s agenda; or, worse, complicity in a completely false narrative of what is really happening on the ground. At the same time, his gullibility regarding bin Salman’s alleged efforts to fight corruption in his country defies credibility—as the *New York Times* itself

reported last year, this is a prince who bought a \$500,000,000 super yacht on a whim while vacationing in the Mediterranean. And while a Saudi woman might soon be able to drive, bin Salman has shown no willingness to clamp down on Saudi funding of many of the most extreme religious forces in the Muslim world.

Mr. Friedman's empirically, factually and logically challenged columns have long provided a bit of comic relief for scholars of the Middle East and broader Arab/Muslim world. But with a horrendous war continuing apace in Yemen and a proxy conflict with Iran entangling the entire region in potentially explosive conflicts, the world's paper of record must do better to ensure its readers and the global public get the most accurate and grounded reporting and opinions available. Friedman's column, particularly in the context of decades of *New York Times'* faithful reporting of faux-Saudi "reform," "modernization" and "anti-corruption" efforts (as documented in detail by Georgetown scholar Abdullah al-Arian [here](#)) continues a dangerous history of the *Times* passing off the Saudi regime's PR as if it represented at least a plausible and comprehensible take on reality. Indeed, it's hard not to wonder whether there was some sort of quid pro quo between the writer and the prince for publishing such a ridiculous piece. This is not opinion writing; it's pure propaganda.

The *New York Times* should be ashamed of itself for printing Friedman's column; and Friedman should be investigated and perhaps even suspended for writing it.

Signed,

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