

Contradiction in Action: The Eulogies for Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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What a spanner in the works of international relations he proved to be. The late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia was always the spoiler in the morality plays of Western powers keen to back him. Oil was always the greatest deterrent against getting on his wrong side, but it also meant the most intolerable of inconsistencies. For most governments, however, these were tolerated.

Those inconsistencies were there for all to see in the eulogies for the monarch. US President Barack Obama gave a description of someone who was distinctly different from a member of the House of Saud. Abroad, he pursued the Arab Peace Initiative. “At home, King Abdullah’s vision was dedicated to the education of his people and to greater engagement with the world” (Politico, Jan 22).

It was precisely such behaviour that gave David Pryce-Jones room for a vital observation. “The world will remember one thing only of King Abdullah, the late king of Saudi Arabia” ventured Pryce-Jones, “and that is how President Barack Obama bowed before him in obeisance. Democracy was seen paying dues to absolute monarchy” (*National Review Online*, Jan 23).[1]

Such a prostrate position was similar adopted by other US officials. US Secretary of State John Kerry used his twitter account to suggest that he was a “man of wisdom & vision. US has lost a friend and Kingdom of #Saudi Arabia, Middle East, and world has lost a revered leader.” Former US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel seem to be channelling another spirit in describing Abdullah as, “a powerful voice for tolerance, moderation and peace,” having advanced “the lives of his people at home as well as his country’s leadership abroad.”

Former British prime minister, Tony Blair, added the predictable icing sugar, claiming that Abdullah was “loved by his people and will be deeply missed” while the British incumbent, David Cameron, mystified with his statement that the late monarch would be remembered “for his commitment to peace and strengthening the understanding between faiths.”[2] The cynics were certainly getting their fill, and even publications such as the *New York Times* would strive to find a streak of modernity lurking somewhere in that being which had governed Saudi Arabia as essentially a tribal CEO.

The Guardian’s editorial found room to admire the late sovereign’s efforts to curb the export of Wahhabism, minor moves towards democratisation in introducing elections to municipal councils, and proved “good, if slow” in his efforts to court the growing grouping of “educated commoners” needed to keep Saudi Arabia stable.[3] The editorial had to also concede to the Saudi ability, not merely to weather the stormy onslaught of the Arab Spring, but turn it against itself in various Middle Eastern states.

It did not take long for various news agencies to pick up that Saudi Arabia, prior to a 2013 law banning terrorist financing, had been at the forefront of Sunni funding for a colourful assortment of so-called enemies of the free world. A US cable from the WikiLeaks Public Library of US Diplomacy, titled “Terrorist Finance: Action Request for Senior Level Engagement on Terrorism Finance” (Dec 30, 2009) is illuminating on that precise point.[4]

“General talking points for all Embassies” are noted, including the theme of, “Cutting off the flow of funds to terrorist organizations and achieving stability in Af/Pak [Afghanistan and Pakistan]” as “top US priorities.” Specific countries mentioned in connection with terrorist funding include Saudi Arabia, whose donors “constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.” Recipients include al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, LeT, and Hamas, “which probably raise millions of dollars annually from Saudi sources, often during Hajj and Ramadan.”

The cable further conveys a certain meekness in dealing with the Saudi government. The Treasury attaché office in Riyadh was meant to provide a “robust interaction and information sharing on the issue.”

It is hard to imagine what the appearance of such robustness could have been – another US cable (Apr 20, 2008) made available by WikiLeaks revealed the sentiments of the monarch as conveyed by the Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel al-Jubeir.[5] Riyadh was getting tetchy over Iran, which it was itching to strike. “[Abdullah] told you to cut off the head of the snake.” The Iranian head remained in tact, though a few others may well have rolled.

The gender side of the commemorations were also somewhat skewed. Head of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, was a test case that silence can, indeed, prove golden – when exercised with judiciousness. Instead, she decided to volunteer a view that King Abdullah had been “a strong advocate for women. It was a very gradual, appropriately so probably for the country.” The great moderniser was, after all, averse to letting his daughters out, keeping them under lock and key for taking issue with stifling, and overwhelming male guardianship.

It all proved a bit much for the former British MP and conservative Louis Mensch, who made a few ripples with a resounding, albeit social media driven “F***K YOU” to Cameron’s ingratiating behaviour to the House of Saud.

“It is so unacceptable to offer deep condolences for a man who flogged women, didn’t let them drive, saw guardian laws passed, & STARVES THEM” (emphasis in original).

As for the issue of preventing women from driving in the kingdom, *The Independent* found it fitting to publish a story taken from former Saudi Ambassador Sherard Cowper-Cole’s memoir, *Ever the Diplomat*. When visiting Balmoral as a Crown Prince in September 1998, Abdullah was greeted to an astonishing spectacle: the Queen of England taking the wheel of a Land Rover.[6]

While it would be remiss to point out that no single leader can dictate the entirety of a political system, it remains difficult to call King Abdullah, by any stretch of the imagination, a great, let alone subtle “moderniser”. Public beheadings, the sentencing of Raif Badawi to a thousand lashes and ten years in prison for being critical of the state, and injunctions on

the construction of non-Islamic places of worship within the country, suggest the workings of a distinctly anti-modern entity rooted in firm tribalism.

The most striking contradiction of all came in how sworn enemies could also share similar, commemorative ground on the subject of the grovelling eulogy. *The Pan-Arabia Enquirer* (Jan 23) noted the similarity between the official statements of both the US and ISIS. Abdullah was praised for having “vision and leadership”; he “had the courage of his convictions” and “constantly strived for unity across borders in the Middle East.” Unnamed sources claim that ISIS has requested that its representative not be seated next to Joe Biden.[7]

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

- [1] <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/397037/king-abdullah-and-bow-seen-round-world--david-pryce-jones>
- [2] <http://rt.com/uk/225503-saudi-king-abdullah-cameron/#.VMNXZIKsQI.twitter>
- [3] http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/23/guardian-view-saudi-arabia--king-abdullah-death?CMP=tw_t_gu
- [4] https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09STATE131801_a.html#efmBvYBxO
- [5] <http://www.wikileaks-forum.com/cablegate/7/wikileaks-cable-saudi-king-abdullah-and--senior-princes-on-saudi-policy-toward/25476/>
- [6] <http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/the-best-story-about-the-queen-and-king-abdullah--you-will-read-today-ejYX859rsI>
- [7] <http://www.panarabiaenquirer.com/wordpress/embarrassment-us-isis-tributes-king--abdullah-almost-identical/>

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