

Geopolitics and the Wahhabist Regime in Saudi Arabia: House of Saud Announces its Own Funeral

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Global Research, October 28, 2013

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Among the things known to get Saudi Arabia's ruling monarchy worked up into a lather—such as the idea of democracy or women driving cars—add to the list an American foreign policy that isn't recklessly aggressive and militaristic.

Top Saudis have recently been throwing a diplomatic temper tantrum, making political and rhetorical moves that rebel against the United States' Middle East foreign policy. Last week, Saudi Arabia turned down a seat in the United Nations Security Council. This week, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the kingdom's intelligence chief, and Prince Turki al-Faisal have made public and not-so-public remarks denouncing American policies and threatening that a "major shift" in bilateral relations is in the pipeline.

These unprecedented maneuvers are, apparently, a result of the Obama administration's policies toward Syria, Iran, Bahrain, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Saudi establishment's grievances, while understandable when seen from their perspective, are laughable and only demonstrate the kingdom's quickly fading political relevance.

Syria and Iran represent extreme ideological and geostrategic rivals to the Wahhabist regime in Saudi Arabia, and it only makes sense that the country would wish to hasten their demise. Washington's willingness to engage in diplomacy, negotiation, and general peacemaking with these two countries has now become a thorn in the side of the kingdom.

The United States' reluctance to rain down cruise missiles on Damascus in support of their rebel proxies, many of whom are international jihadists supported by Saudi Arabia, has allowed the Assad regime to—at least temporarily—survive, continue quelling the uprising, and work toward the conflict's resolution. Meanwhile, the West's and the United States' commitment to continue multinational negotiation with Iran's new president Rouhani over the country's nuclear program has given that regime a similar lease on life.

In Bahrain, the ruling Sunni monarchy has brutally cracked down on the Shiite majority's version of the Arab Spring uprising, with significant security assistance from Saudi Arabia. Again, the Saudi establishment's extreme Wahhabi ideology predisposes them to contempt for the Shiite sect, and means they have no qualms about intervening in a conflict in which numerous human rights violations against the country's population have been documented. The United States' reluctance to explicitly support this crackdown is not only reasonable, but morally necessary.

Finally, Prince Turki's complaint of U.S. "dithering" on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is ludicrous. Secretary of State Kerry has already dedicated a large amount of time during

his tenure to restarting negotiations. Toomuch, some officials and commentators have even said, arguing that it has come at the expense of other policy priorities.

Following meetings with the Saudi Arabian foreign minister, Secretary Kerry worked to address concerns about a fissure in U.S.-Saudi relations, saying, "I think there's a clear understanding in our relationship going forward, and I have great confidence that the United States and Saudi Arabia will continue to be the close and important friends and allies that we've been." [1] Despite such assurances, these recent Saudi actions seem to point to serious misgivings within the regime about their relationship with the U.S.

In the words of one Saudi analyst, "The message is: You need us. And we are not going to play ball with you until you wake up." [2] Unfortunately for the kingdom, the relationship flows in just the opposite direction, and Saudi Arabia desperately relies on the U.S. to maintain its security and influence.

Ever since the Saudi kingdom's formation at the behest of the British Empire, the West's underwriting of the Saudi regime has played a large role in sustaining the kingdom's legitimacy, viability, and regional influence. By threatening to withdraw from this relationship, the House of Saud has taken another step toward solidifying its position as a strategic liability and hastening its own downfall. If the kingdom begins uncoupling its foreign policy from Washington's, especially at a time when the United States is working toward energy independence, it risks becoming a much less important ally and falling by the wayside.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/10/215737.htm>

[2] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/23/us-saudi-usa-diplomacy-analysis-idUSBRE99M0XJ20131023>

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