

Saudi Kingdom Rocked by Protests

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On February 14, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt met with Saudi King Ibn Saud on the USS Quincy. A nearly seven decade relationship followed.

America was guaranteed access to what the State Department called “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history.”

It explains much about Washington’s obsession with controlling the region. It has around two-thirds of the world’s proved oil reserves and major natural gas supplies.

Little wonder America supports what some observers call the world’s most repressive regime. State terror is policy. Freedom is prohibited. Authority rests solely with the ruling Al Saud monarch and members of the royal family.

Currently King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz holds power. Nearly aged 88, he’s in poor health. Salman bin Abdul Aziz is crown prince. He also has health problems. A stroke left him bedridden for weeks. They and other family members rule despotically.

Democracy is strictly forbidden. The nation’s Constitution affords ordinary citizens and other residents no rights. Women are especially marginalized and denied.

Political parties and national elections are prohibited. Saudi kings appoint a Council of Ministers. It includes a prime minister, first and second deputies, 20 ministers, various advisors, and heads of major autonomous organizations.

The Kingdom has 13 provinces. Ruling monarchs appoint governors. They’re either princes or close royal family relatives. In 1993, ministers became subject to four-year term limitations. In 1997, a Consultative Council was expanded from 60 to 90 members.

Media are tightly controlled. Most web sites are blocked. Islam is the Kingdom’s state religion. Observing others is prohibited.

Anyone dissenting is subject to arbitrary arrest and detention. Political critics, bloggers, academics, foreign nationals, and humanitarian activists are especially vulnerable.

Saudi journalist Khaled al-Harbi said annual Kingdom revenue exceeds \$400 billion. Amounts fluctuate depending on oil prices. At the same time, the average Saudi citizen earns around \$400. Al-Harbi says 60% of the population live in poverty.

Official Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia (Shura) figures claim 22% of Saudis are impoverished (around three million people). Including migrants and other non-residents, it’s believed the true figure approaches al-Harbi’s estimate.

A wealth disparity chasm between rich and poor exists. Income depends on how royal family members distribute it. They and privileged elites get most of it. Most Saudis go begging. Migrants and other non-citizens fare worse.

Unemployment is high. Official figures mask its severity. Young people comprise two-thirds of the Kingdom's 26 million population. An estimated 40% of 20 to 24 year-olds have no jobs. Even well educated Saudis are affected. So are most women.

Around 80% of workers are non-nationals. Most are regional migrants. With no rights whatever, they work for near slave wages. Saudi citizens are shut out.

The Kingdom is largely Sunni. Minority Shiites are marginalized and persecuted. Deep-seated social tensions result. Eastern Province areas are especially affected. Around 90% of proved Saudi reserves are located there.

Significant human rights abuses are commonplace. They include extreme injustice, arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detention, torture and other physical abuse, public whippings and executions, radical Sunni Wahhabism, corruption, lack of transparency, violence against women, human trafficking, and total lack of freedom.

The combination of poverty, monarchical privilege, and despotism is combustible. Protests erupt. They began principally in Qatif. They spread to other parts of the country.

Last March, large-scale ones followed the arrest and detention of senior cleric Sheikh Tawfiq al-Amer. At issue was his call for constitutional monarchical rule. Security forces responded brutally.

At the time, political analyst Mohamed al-Massari told Press TV that "counter-force" would respond to state repression. "We still have people who are willing to defend their honor with arms," he said. Expect thousands to take to the streets.

Attacking women is especially "stupid," he added. It will have "dire repercussions," he predicted.

Protests and public displays are strictly forbidden. Increasingly Saudis are expressing public anger anyway. July 9 provided another reason. Prominent Shiite cleric Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr was arrested after being shot in the leg.

He was wanted for sedition. Police confronted him. Saudi state media said:

"When the aforementioned person and those with him tried to resist the security men and initiated shooting and crashed into one of the security patrols while trying to escape, he was dealt with in accordance with the situation and responded to in kind and arrested after he was wounded in his thigh."

Interior Ministry spokesman Major General Mansour Turki was cited as the source.

Allegedly he sparked Awamiya village protests. Thousands participated. Security forces confronted them. Numerous injuries and arrests followed.

Al-Nimr's brother said he was wanted for his political views. He supported Shiite issues and

spoke out prominently. He demanded long denied rights. As a result, he was targeted. Twice before (in 2004 and 2006) he was arrested and detained.

In January 2008, he spoke publicly for creating a “righteous opposition front.” He represents views growing numbers of Saudis support. As a result, he and others like him threaten established rule.

Increasingly the House of Saud resembles a house of cards. Royal family members and Washington allies are worried. They have good reason.

After winter 2011 Bahraini protests erupted, similar ones began in the Kingdom’s Eastern Province. “Iron Fist” repression confronted them. Nonetheless, they continue and spread.

The holy city of Medina is affected. So are Jeddah, Ar’ar, and Abha. Major demonstrations erupted in Saudi’s capital, Riyadh.

Frequent ones occur. Anti-regime slogans are chanted. Unemployed Saudis demand jobs. People across the Kingdom want political freedom, social justice, release of political prisoners, and the end of Al Saud rule.

At issue are longstanding grievances. The regime itself is targeted. Western media scoundrels largely suppress what’s going on. US television ignores it. On July 10, a rare New York Times article headlined “Angry Throngs at a Funeral in Saudi Arabia,” saying:

Thousands attended a funeral of a killed Eastern Province protester. It’s “long been a focal point of anger at the rigidly conservative Sunni monarchy, and for Shiite complaints about a policy of entrenched, official discrimination.”

Unrest persists. Detaining dissidents fuel it. So do “growing calls for political freedoms and civil rights.” Official Saudi sources downplay what’s happening. The Times article left much unexplained. A snapshot only was provided. Context was omitted.

September 23 is Saudi National Day. In 2009, Hillary Clinton “salute(d) King Abdullah for his leadership on key regional and global challenges.”

He “established a powerful dialogue that seeks to promote the principles of moderation, tolerance and mutual respect – core values that we all share.”

She made similar comments in 2010 and 2011. The Kingdom’s alliance with Washington is more than about oil. It’s a partnership furthering imperial lawlessness. Deep Saudi pockets help fund it.

Recycled petrodollars also buy US weapons, Treasuries, and other American investments. Preserving the relationship is prioritized. Putting lipstick on Saudi monarchical despotism tries to bolster it.

On July 17, this writer appeared on Press TV’s News Analysis program. So did analysts Ali al-Ahmed and Kamel Wazne.

According to Wazne, Washington cares only about keeping Saudi oil flowing. It has utter “disregard for the people of Saudi Arabia and those people who are demonstrating on the streets.”

People have no say, he stressed. Repression and social inequality are rife. Royal family members have no interest in their own people. Sheikh al-Nemr “called outright for the downfall of the monarchy and he called for the downfall of Al Saud.”

Eastern Province winter 2011 protests mushroomed to many others across the Kingdom. “These people marching in the streets are determined” to achieve change. They want “a different political system.”

This writer added that perhaps the fuse was lit last year. What Eastern Province Shiites began, Saudis across the Kingdom continue. Analyst Ali al-Ahmed predicts an “inevitable collapse.” The fullness of time may prove him prescient.

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