

Making Excuses for Saudi Misbehavior

Exclusive: Saudi-Israeli apologists are doing back flips to justify why the U.S. interest in having peaceful relations with Iran should take a back seat to sectarian and regional desires of Riyadh and Tel Aviv, including that peace with Iran will cause the Saudis to misbehave even more, notes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

As the former publisher of the *The Wall Street Journal*, Karen Elliott House is as close to journalist royalty as they come. But that doesn't make her all bad. Her 2012 book, *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines and Future*, is actually well worth reading. The product of years of behind-the-scenes reporting, it provided readers with a fascinating tour of a kingdom drowning in sleaze, decadence and hypocrisy.

"Islam as preached is not practiced," House wrote. "Jobs are promised but not delivered. Corruption is rampant, entrapping almost every Saudi in a web of favors and bribes large and small, leaving even the recipients feeling soiled and resentful. Powerful and powerless alike are seeking to grab whatever they can get, turning a society governed by supposedly strict Sharia law into an increasingly lawless one, where law is whatever the king or one of his judges says it is or people feel they can get away with."

The result is a grotesque combination of oppression, regimentation, and street-level anarchy. In other countries, for instance, young people are free to drink beer, see movies, go to all-night raves, or do any of the other dumb stuff that young people the world over like to do. But in Saudi Arabia, where all such activities are forbidden, young men have one option only: steal cars.

As House puts it: "Nearly 80 percent of all cars are stolen by Saudis between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. Most use the cars for *tafheet*, or spinning, a favorite after-midnight pastime of thrill-seeking young Saudi men. Groups of young men gather on isolated roads and accelerate their cars, spin them sideways, sometimes overturn them, or more often smash them into the parked vehicles of the scores of other young men who gather to watch. Not surprisingly, those who engage in *tafheet* prefer to spare their own vehicles by using stolen cars. Some 90 percent of stolen cars are found abandoned by thieves after joyriding or spinning."

YouTube is thus filled with amazing videos showing young Saudis drifting, crashing or changing tires while speeding along on two wheels rather than four.

Corruption also leads to massive economic dysfunctionality. As House writes, the

kingdom's "many webs of patronage and multiple layers of bureaucracy evolved over the years to accomplish some purpose or another, but rather than enable, they increasingly disable Saudi citizens in their daily lives."

Paradoxically, it also leads to bigotry and fanaticism. Although one might think that nothing could be more enjoyable than burning through millions of dollars in unearned oil revenue, in fact it leaves growing numbers of petro-sheikhs feeling guilty and confused, particularly in a kingdom that pays endless tribute to Islam's martial virtues.

Thus, King Fahd, who ruled from 1982 to 2005, took time off from his splendiferous lifestyle, according to *On Saudi Arabia*, to build 200 Islamic colleges, 210 Islamic centers, 1,500 mosques, and 2,000 madrassas around the globe at a total cost of \$75 billion all for the purpose of spreading the kingdom's ultra-intolerant form of Islam to as many countries as possible.

Decadence and unearned oil wealth thus leads to a hankering for the austerities of jihad. In a follow-up visit last November, House told of a Saudi imam who informed her "that his son is begging to go to Syria to join ISIS. While the imam says he is discouraging the teenager, he acknowledged that he finds the ISIS call for a caliphate 'exciting.' Like all too many Saudis, he sees the Al Saud as too worldly."

Bowing to Saudi Desires

On Saudi Arabia is thus a powerful indictment of a rentier state whose sole non-energy export at this point is jihad. Now that the same state is upset because the U.S. has reached a nuclear accord with Iran, one would think that House's answer, given the scathing portrait she has drawn, would be roughly the same as Rhett Butler's in "Gone With the Wind": "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

But, no, House is beside herself with indignation that Barack Obama would do such a terrible thing to an old friend. Obama says he is bringing peace, she writes in the Wall Street Journal, but "the near-term consequence will be more and even bloodier sectarian violence in the Middle East."

"Under the deal announced Tuesday," she adds, "Iran stands to have \$100 billion of assets unfrozen by late this year. That, coupled with the bizarre U.S. decision to unfreeze the ban on selling Iran conventional weapons and ballistic missiles down the road, means that Tehran can use those billions of freshly available assets not to enhance its economy, as the Iranians promised negotiators, but rather to buy deadly new arms for its nefarious partners across the region. These include Shiite militias in Iraq, Syria's Bashar Assad, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen."

The result is a “nightmare” that “puts Saudi Arabia in the cross hairs of Iran, but also of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As Iranian-backed Shiites across the region increase efforts to exploit turmoil in failing Mideast states for Tehran’s benefit, so too will their Sunni opponents in ISIS, who are no friends of the Saudis.”

The accord, she adds, will also destabilize Saudi Arabia from within by fostering jihad: “Some 60% of the Saudi population is under 30 years old, and unemployment among those young Saudis is about 30%. Saudi Arabia has made it a crime for its citizens to join ISIS, but the Saudi Interior Ministry has acknowledged that in recent years some 2,200 young Saudis have gone to Syria to fight. As Saudi Sunnis watch their Sunni coreligionists being killed by Iranian-backed Shiites across the region with little opposition from any force other than ISIS, that terror organization’s appeal grows, especially among deeply religious young Saudis.”

Even though Iran and ISIS are arch-enemies, peace with one will foster the spread of the other. Unemployment will rise, young Saudis will flock to the Islamic State in greater numbers, while bloodshed and terrorism will all increase, yet, according to House, it will be all the fault of Obama and Iran.

As hard as Riyadh tries to fight back, moreover, there is little it can do. It has been unable so far to drive Syria’s Bashar al-Assad out of office, its air war in Yemen is turning into a quagmire, and while it has undoubtedly hurt Iran by allowing oil prices to slide, it is harming its own economic prospects as well.

“So,” House concludes, “while the nuclear agreement is being cheered in Tehran, while Obama aides are fist-pumping in the White House, while Europeans are salivating at the prospect of doing business in Iran, and while the Israelis are trying to lobby the U.S. Congress against the deal, the Saudis are left grinding their teeth in Riyadh, surveying a bleak future and no good options to change it.”

Enabling ‘Wolf of Wall Street’ Behavior

This is all very strange, especially since House, in *On Saudi Arabia*, describes the kingdom as “fundamentally a family corporation” and not a very admirable one:

“Call it Islam Inc. The board of directors, some twenty senior religious scholars who theoretically set rules for corporate behavior, are handpicked by the Al Saud owners, can be fired at royal whim, and have nothing to say about who runs the company. Al Saud family members hold all the key jobs, not just at

the top but right down through middle management, even to regional managers. (The governors of all thirteen Saudi provinces are princes.) At the bottom of the company, ordinary employees are poorly paid and even more poorly trained because management doesn't want initiative that might threaten its control."

If so, then one would think that the Journal would be cheering its demise. After all, any company that mistreats its employees while allowing executives to cheat, steal and throw wild parties in the boardroom — la "Wolf of Wall Street" deserves to go down the drain or so countless *Wall Street Journal* editorials have assured us.

But since Saudi Arabia is a U.S. "ally," different rules pertain. It may be teetering on the edge, but Washington, House now writes, should do everything in its power to keep it from going over the precipice. It must tolerate its wars, its sectarianism, and its dysfunctional economic system because to do otherwise would be to violate a sacred trust although why that trust is so sacred is left unexplained.

House's latest op-ed foray speaks volumes about how not only conservatives but nearly the entire foreign-policy establishment has painted itself into a corner over the need to cater to Saudi Arabia.

While decrying religious sectarianism, the U.S. has tied itself hand and foot to the two most sectarian regimes in the Middle East, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Washington claims to believe in democracy and regularly upbraids Syria, Iran and other countries for their human rights failings. Yet Israel is a racial-supremacist state that grants superior status to the 48 percent of the population under its control that is Jewish, while Saudi Arabia is the single most illiberal society on earth, one that bans all religions other than Wahhabist Islam, mandates capital punishment for non-violent offenses (including sorcery), treats women like property, and subjects an estimated nine million foreign workers to "abuses and exploitation, sometimes amounting to conditions of forced labor."

While the U.S. is supposedly the super-power in charge, it is so over-extended by this point and its commitment to such countries so open-ended that it is difficult to tell who's on top and who's not. Tel Aviv and Riyadh are obviously unhappy with the Iranian accord. Yet rather than showing irritation, the U.S. has responded with greater obsequiousness than ever.

When Obama called Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on July 14 to inform him about the Iran deal, he offered what *The New York Times* called "a consolation prize: a fattening of the already generous military aid package the

United States gives Israel.” In order not to ruffle the Israeli PM’s feathers, the Times noted that the Obama administration “could be reluctant to put any additional pressure on Israel” to enter into peace talks with the Palestinians.

As for Saudi Arabia, the Times observed that “the United States, Britain and France are likely to want to soothe the kingdom’s fears and in turn refrain from exerting a great deal of pressure on the Saudis’ crippling airstrikes over Yemen.”

The U.S. thus tiptoes around its so-called clients more delicately than ever for fear of setting them off. Washington is less likely as a result to buck Saudi Arabia’s air war against Yemen despite the increasingly horrendous consequences: twenty million people in need of humanitarian assistance, 15.2 million in need of basic health care, and more than one million internally displaced, not to mention a death toll that now tops 1,670.

It is also less likely to make a fuss over the fact that Yemeni militias backed by the Saudis and the other Arab gulf states are now fighting alongside Al Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula, the group that claimed credit for January’s Charlie Hebdo massacre.

Dangerous Oil Dependency

Of course, the real reason the U.S. keeps silent, the reason underlying all others, is the fact that the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council sits on top of 40 percent or more of the world’s proven oil reserves and 23 percent of its proven gas reserves.

Although the U.S. strategic policy in the Middle East is predicated above all else on safeguarding access to Persian Gulf energy supplies, in truth all that energy is less vital than the U.S. realizes since it is capable of weaning itself off fossil fuels through a combination of carbon taxes and strategic industrial investments. Yet global capitalism is too tenuous at this point to undertake anything so concerted even though it would conceivably be for its own good.

So the contradiction remains. Because the U.S. is unable to do the rational thing by weaning itself off oil, it finds itself doing the bidding of Saudi Arabia and other countries that are equally reactionary. It stands reality on its head by accusing Iran of destabilizing the Middle East when the guilty parties are obviously in its own camp. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “US/Israeli/Saudi ‘Behavior’ Problems.”]

Washington also accuses Iran of spreading the poison of religious sectarianism when, as *The New York Times* has admitted, it is the Saudis who are in fact

obsessed with the putative Shi'ite threat. The U.S. decries war, yet joins with Riyadh in unprovoked assaults on countries like Syria and Yemen. By remaining dependent on energy from the Persian Gulf, the U.S. depletes its own energy political, moral, and intellectual.

Karen Elliott House has done some good reporting over the years. But the nightmare she describes from the Saudi reaction to the Iranian nuclear deal is not one that the U.S. is imposing on Saudi Arabia, but one that petro-capitalism is imposing on the world.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).
