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Trouble in the Kingdom

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Threaten the stability of Saudi Arabia, as the Shi'a upsurges are now doing in Qatif, and al-Awamiyah in the country's oil-rich Eastern Province and you're brandishing a dagger over the very heart of long-term U.S. policy in the Middle East for over half a century.

In 1945 the chief of the State Department's Division of Near Eastern Affairs, wrote in a memo that the oil resources of Saudi Arabia are a "stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest material prizes in world history." The man who steered the Saudi sheikhs towards America and away from Britain, was St. John Philby, Kim's father, and with that one great stroke Philby Sr. wrought far more devastation on the British Empire than his son ever did. The fall of America's ally, the Shah of Iran in 1979 only magnified the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia.

These days the U.S. consumes about 19 million barrels of oil every 24 hours, about half of them imported. At 25 per cent Canada is the lead supplier. Second comes Saudi Arabia with 12 per cent. But supply of crude oil to the U.S. is only half the story. Saudi Arabia controls OPEC's oil price and adjusts it carefully with U.S. priorities in the front of their minds.

The traffic is not one-way. In the half-century after 1945, the United States sold the Saudis about \$100 billion in military goods and services. A year ago the Obama administration

announced the biggest weapons deal in U.S. history – a \$60 billion program with Saudi Arabia to sell its military equipment across the next 20 to 30 years.

The US trains and supplies all Saudi Arabia's security forces. US corporations have huge investments in the Kingdom.

Say the words "Saudi Arabia" to President Obama or to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the high-minded prattle about the "Arab spring" stops abruptly. When the Saudis rushed security forces across the Causeway and into Bahrain, counselling the Khalifa dynasty to smash down hard on the Shi'a demonstrators in the homeport of the US Fifth Fleet, the public noises of reproof from Washington were mouse-like in their reticence and modesty.

Could the uprisings in Saudi Arabia spiral out of control? We're talking here about two different challenges. The first are the long-oppressed Shi'a, making up ten per cent of the population. The second is from the younger generation — youth under 30 account for two-thirds of the Saudi population— in the Sunni majority, living in one of the most thorough-going tyrannies in the world.

In February of this year, perturbed by the trend of events in Egypt and elsewhere, the 87-year King Abdullah announced his plan to dispense about \$36 billion in welfare handouts – about \$2,000 for every Saudi. He correctly identified one of the Kingdom's big problems, which is that nearly half those between 18 and 40 don't have a job.

A few days ago Abdullah offered Saudi women a privilege – to participate in certain entirely meaningless municipal elections (if approved by their husbands.) What municipal elections can be meaningful amid resolute repression under an absolutist monarchy?

As the international rights lawyer Paul Wolf remarked on PressTV, "In Saudi Arabia, cell phones with cameras are illegal. All telephone conversations are monitored. The government controls the TV and the print media. In 2009 an election was cancelled.... So I mean it is great if they are taking action to try to include women in the political process but really, no one is included in the political process."

The American Empire has lost Iran and Iraq. What of Saudi Arabia? Suppose, fissures continue to open up in the Kingdom itself? I doubt, at such a juncture, that we would hear too much talk from Washington about "democracy" or orderly transitions. Aside from anything else, the downfall of the Saudi regime would have terrible consequences in Washington, since hundreds of heavy-hitters there are on the Saudi payroll, starting with virtually all the ex-ambassadors, with the exception of James Akins who once told a friend of mine he was the only one who wasn't. No way will Washington let the money flow from Riyadh to K street be endangered. Send in the 101st Airborne!

One cherished British imperial rule, handed down to the Empire that displaced it, is: When in doubt, break it up. There have been recent western advocates of break-up of Saudi Arabia, Two well-known neo-cons, Richard Perle and David Frum wrote in their 2005 book, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* that the U.S. should mobilize the Shi'ites living in eastern Saudi

Arabia, where most of the Saudi oil is: “Independence for the Eastern Province would obviously be a catastrophic outcome for the Saudi state. But it might be a very good outcome for the United States. Certainly it’s an outcome to ponder. Even more certainly, we would want the Saudis to know we are pondering it.”

Perle was once head of the Defense Policy Board, advising the Defense Department. As Robert Dreyfus reports in *Devil’s Game*, In 2002, a Defense Policy Board briefing argued that the US should work to split Saudi Arabia apart so the US could effectively control its oil. Other neoconservatives like Michael Ledeen expressed similar views. In early 2003, Akins, former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, mentioned the possibility that Osama bin Laden could take over Saudi Arabia if the US invaded Iraq. “I’m now convinced that that’s exactly what [the neoconservatives] want to happen. And then we take it over.”

I guess the current model is the Kurdish sector of Iraq.