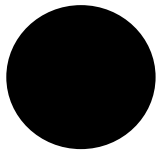


## CODA



## The Mother of All Nightmares

It is difficult to conceive of any exit strategy from Iraq that is honorable, that advances U.S. national interests, or that redeems the war's terrible toll in Iraqi and American lives. Having plunged the United States into a quagmire, the Bush administration may be able to stall for time and turn the mess over to a new president in 2009 (and, if he or she is a Democrat, it is easy to guess who will be blamed for "losing" Iraq). But that is not the worst outcome, however disastrous its consequences for Iraqis who have either fled or who have lived in a state of siege since March 2003.

The warning lights are flashing for a regional proxy war in which Shiite Iranians and Sunni Saudis will fight over Iraq's bloody carcass, with violence lapping into Syria and Lebanon, and with Turkey poised to intervene should Iraqi Kurds proclaim their independence. Given the region's fathomless capacity for rage, one can imagine reciprocal terror attacks on Saudi and Iranian oil fields, or the sinking of tankers to block the Straits of Hormuz, sending the global economy into a tailspin.

Should any of this happen, one can readily guess whom the Islamists on all sides will blame: the United States and Israel (where hawks are already sorely tempted to strike preemptively at Iran's nuclear installations). These reflections may seem excessively gloomy, yet I have not even referred to Afghanistan, where resurgent Taliban fighters bloom like poppies, or to perennially wobbly Pakistan, where Islamists have twice come close to slaying a secular-minded military dictator. Or Osama bin Laden, who is now probably scheming to send his suicidal acolytes to Somalia, whose fragile government of warlords was placed in power by predominantly Christian Ethiopians—now aided by U.S. air strikes—and currently confronts determined Islamic guerrillas. With each upward ratchet of sectarian violence, the greater the pressure on jittery Muslim minority communities in the West to affirm their identity by veiling their women or, far worse, by murdering infidels.

In short, for much of the world it could be back to the jolly ways of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, complete with holy wars, heresy hunts, witch burnings, the rack, and pogroms. We already have a foretaste of this regression in the filmed decapitation of hostages by Islamist fanatics and the thuggish jeering that preceded the rowdy hanging of Saddam Hussein—which, in a modern touch, everyone can view on a personal computer.

A warning signal of a potential sectarian regional war was lobbed in an op-ed article in the *Washington Post* on November 26, 2006, by Nawaf Obaid, described as an advisor to the Saudi government. Should the U.S. withdraw from Iraq, he cautioned, "one of the first consequences will be massive Saudi intervention to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis." Saudis are already weighing plans, he elaborated, to provide Sunni military leaders ("primarily ex-Baathist members of the former Iraqi officer corps") with the same assistance—funds, arms, and logistical support—that Riyadh believes Tehran has given Shiite armed groups for years.

Additionally, he warns, King Abdullah “may decide to strangle Iranian funding of the militias through oil policy. If Saudi Arabia boosted production and cut the price of oil by half, the kingdom could still finance its current spending. But it would be devastating to Iran, which is facing economic difficulties even with today’s high prices.” Nawaf Obeid’s article stirred a furor that cost him his Saudi consultancy. Some pointed out that in any such conflict Saudi oil fields are vulnerable to sabotage by a mostly Shiite work force, a “doomsday scenario” elaborated a few years ago by Robert Baer, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer, in *Sleeping With the Devil* (New York: Crown, 2003). And Saudi Arabia possesses the U.S.-made advanced bombers and rockets capable of striking back at Iran’s Abadan installations.

In a puzzling sequel to the *Washington Post* op-ed, the Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Turki al-Faisal, abruptly resigned after serving some 18 months, purportedly for personal reasons. Prince Turki left behind unpaid bills totaling millions of dollars owed to lobbyists, contractors, publicists, and hotels. James Gallagher, a Saudi lobbyist for a decade who was owed \$100,000, expressed the baffled consensus to the *Washington Post*: “There are people who are owed more than I am. I haven’t been able to figure it out.”

Did all this signify a backstage dispute over Iraq between the envoy and his predecessor, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who for 22 years was the highly visible Saudi face in Washington? Some guessed that there was “poor chemistry” between Turki and King Abdullah; others noted that the flamboyant Bandar has retained his home in Aspen, and flies monthly from Colorado to Washington to confer with senior White House officials, without consulting the ambassador. Yet who can say for sure what Riyadh is thinking? This is a kingdom where the number of princes (totaling at least 7,000) remains a state secret; where the king, reportedly unhappy with official census returns, simply doubled the population figures; and where Swissair had to remove its trademark cross from its airplanes because the public display of Christian symbols is unlawful. This is a twenty-first-century country where women are forbidden to drive, show their faces in public, or shop or dine without a male escort.

It is surely worth asking again why and how Washington became locked into its unseemly alliance with this medieval autocracy. Indeed, a crowning irony is that, in the event of a Saudi-Iranian struggle for supremacy of the Persian Gulf, the United States, for lack of a serious energy policy, would be directly or indirectly ensuring revenue to both sides. Directly, in the case of the Saudis, since American purchases of Saudi oil fuel Riyadh’s foreign policy. Indirectly, in the case of Iran, a country second only to Saudi Arabia within OPEC in its annual output, since the stability of the global oil market requires Iran’s contribution—ruling out any punitive sanctions that would curtail Iranian production and send global prices soaring ruinously. And if Saudi Arabia arms and aids Iraqi Sunnis in a civil war with Shiite militias, both sides will be firing American bullets. How to explain this black irony, and what if anything can Americans do?

#### *A Contract, a Meeting, and a Memo*

Three events sealed the Saudi-American alliance: a contract, a shipboard meeting, and a State Department memorandum. On May 29, 1933, at the Kazam Palace on the outskirts of Jiddah, a contract was signed between King Ibn Saud’s treasurer and a lawyer representing Standard Oil of California. The contract gave Socal exclusive rights for 60 years to extract oil in eastern Saudi Arabia, thereby breaking Great Britain’s stranglehold on Middle East oil production. Socal drillers struck oil in 1936, and very soon it was apparent that Saudi oil fields, onshore and offshore, were the world’s most bountiful, beyond the

investment resources of a single oil company. In time, Socal fused with Texaco, Exxon, and Mobil to form Aramco, which in turn the Saudi government nationalized in 1980 but which remains under American management.

Yet, unbeknownst to the British, the dice were loaded in Socal's favor because of a secret arrangement the company reached with Harry St. John Philby, father of the notorious Kim. "Jack" Philby was a disgruntled rebel who, in 1925, resigned from the British imperial service to become an adviser to Ibn Saud, the founder and absolute ruler of Saudi Arabia. A British colleague remarked of him in 1923, "Philby *simply* must feel that he's a sort of Prometheus, defying the gods for the general good." An outstanding linguist and explorer, he opposed Britain's colonial policies and admired America's professed dedication to national self-determination. Thus, when bidding began for the Saudi concession, he covertly promoted the U.S. cause, for which he received a \$1,000 monthly payment from Socal.

In his memoir, *Arabian Days* (London: Robert Hale, 1948), Philby related with relish the immediate British reaction to Socal's coup. Meeting with Sir Andrew Ryan, the chargé d'affaires in Jiddah on the day the pact was signed, Philby found him still confident that the British contender would prevail. "When I told him what had happened that morning," Philby writes, "he was almost speechless with rage and disappointment." (According to the State Department, the Saudi concession proved to be "the greatest commercial prize in the history of the planet.")

Philby died in Beirut in 1960. His epitaph was chosen by his son Kim: "Greatest Arabian Explorer." Kim Philby's role as a Soviet counterspy became publicly known in 1963. Yet, on balance, "Jack" Philby had a greater impact on history as the midwife who yoked Americans amorally and indissolubly to the desert kingdom. The misalliance was solemnized on February 15, 1945, aboard the *USN Quincy*. En route home from the Yalta summit, President Roosevelt became the first Western chief of state to meet with King Ibn Saud. FDR could not have been more accommodating. After vainly seeking Saudi sympathy for resettling Jewish refugees in Palestine, Roosevelt assured Ibn Saud that he would take no steps adverse to Arab interests. Full notes on the meeting were taken by Col. William Eddy, a former intelligence officer and an Arabist who served as interpreter and who, in what became a common practice, soon joined Aramco as a consultant.

Roosevelt's solicitude confirmed Saudi Arabia's petroleum primacy. In 1944, Aramco extracted 7.8 million barrels of oil, and a year later that output nearly tripled, to 21.3 million barrels. Aware of this remarkable surge, Wallace Murray, chief of the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern and African Affairs, drafted a top-secret memorandum in 1945 that warned, "If the Saudi Arabian economy should break down and political disintegration ensue, there is a danger that either Great Britain or Soviet Russia would attempt to move into Saudi Arabia to preserve order and thus prevent the other from doing so. Such a development in a country strategically located and rich in oil as is Saudi Arabia might well constitute a *casus belli* threatening the peace of the world."

The urgent need, in Murray's view, was to establish a military relationship with Saudi Arabia that ideally should include the right to construct airfields. His memorandum presaged what became a bipartisan consensus. On the plus side, America and much of the world have indisputably benefited from cheaper energy made possible by the abundance of Saudi oil. Yet less admirably, a Saudi-U.S. military complex has materialized, giving a wide range of American contractors a vital stake in arming the kingdom. Since the 1970s, the Saudis have purchased upwards of \$100 billion in U.S. military equipment and related construction, making it the single biggest buyer in the American arms bazaar. The political

muscle of this relationship became evident during the early Reagan years when, by a close vote, Congress approved an \$8.5 billion sale of AWACS radar planes equipped with extra fuel tanks, bomb racks, and air-to-air missiles—the first such big-ticket, high-tech sale to the Saudis. The deal was approved despite full-court opposition by the supposedly impregnable Israeli lobby.

Yet of the \$100 billion in military sales, a credibly estimated \$12.5 billion has been paid in bribes that flout the spirit, if not the letter, of corrupt practices legislation. The colossal scale of corruption in turn generates a sense of outrage that threatens the regime from within and without. To defuse anger, Saudi authorities use oil profits to propagate their brand of militant Islam throughout the Muslim world. Yet, rather than placate disaffected Saudis, this official show of piety has stoked their fury. Osama bin Laden, the privileged son of a wealthy Saudi contractor, personifies this impassioned alienation, as did the 15 Saudis among the 19 militants who perpetrated the 9/11 terror attacks.

If indeed the Saudis begin fueling a sectarian war in Iraq, what will happen to the whole rickety structure, rooted in an oil industry that itself is so vulnerable to attack?

### *The Road Not Tried*

Still, so it seems to this writer, there is one matter on which there is a common American interest with Saudi Arabia. In recent years, Saudi diplomats have tried to break the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock. Former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft has insistently argued that there is agreement on most essential elements for establishing an independent Palestinian state within secure borders. King Abdullah has stated that the Saudis would support a two-state compromise based on pre-1967 borders. In the Clinton years, Prince Bandar strenuously urged a compromise during the failed peace talks at Wye Plantation.

There is a catch. Even as the Saudi government supports compromise with its pragmatic left hand, its worried right hand permits or encourages ostensibly private charitable foundations that support Islamic militants, notably including Hamas, in Palestinian territories. When President Carter approved the sale of advanced F-15 jet fighters to Saudi Arabia in the mid-1970s, he anticipated a quid pro quo in the form of Saudi support for the Camp David accords. It didn't happen. Instead, the state-supported Saudi press and clergy vilified Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, abetting the hate campaign that led to his subsequent assassination.

Even so, the potential of a regional sectarian war, like an impending capital sentence, can wonderfully concentrate the mind. One way political leaders can exit from quagmires is to change the subject. Reviving the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process offers a symbolic olive branch that an imaginative leader could flourish with effect. The specific and feasible steps were carefully outlined by the Israeli diplomat Daniel Levy and by Michael Shtender-Auerbach in the fall issue of this journal.

Indeed, there are encouraging stirrings. Remarkably, just this year, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* reported that Syrian and Israeli private citizens have shamed their respective governments by seriously discussing peace terms that provide for a phased withdrawal from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Every day brings tidings of developing debate in Iran on the follies of the country's wild-swinging president. Is it an impossible dream that ordinary people can reach across boundaries of sect and tribe to demand an end to perpetual bloodletting? Or are we doomed to stumble blindly into the mother of all nightmares? ●

—Karl E. Meyer