

Lines in the sand

The British establishment has long enjoyed a special relationship with Saudi Arabia's ruling Al Saud family, but what do the Windsors offer Riyadh and should the UK conduct business with a country of notorious brutality?

WORDS JOE HARMSTON



ROYAL WARRANT Prince Charles and wife Camilla greet Saudi's late King Abdullah

January 2015: Prince Charles arrives in Riyadh to pay his respects to the late King Abdullah and endorse new King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. In February, while protest against UK flags being lowered for a Saudi royal with a dubious record on human rights continues at home, Charles is filmed in full Arab dress taking part in a traditional sword dance

with fellow princes. Simultaneously, social media across the globe buzzes with horror at a Saudi liberal blogger being sentenced to 1,000 lashes and ten years in prison. A "special relationship" between the British establishment and the House of Windsor has created the bizarre spectacle of our Queen, who is reported to have driven Abdullah around Sandringham in a Land Rover, praising the late king for working towards "peace and understanding" while our media reports on Saudi women being sentenced in anti-terrorism courts for flouting the

ban on women driving. It has also seen the UK Ministry of Justice's catchily named commercial wing, Just Solutions International, negotiating contracts to advise the Saudi "justice" service while YouTube shows them beheading a Burmese woman in a Mecca street (it took three hacks) as she protested her innocence. One reason for the dichotomy is obvious. Since 2008, Saudi Arabia has spent £5.5bn on British defence contracts, most of it with BAe Systems. And the special influence spreads to neighbouring Sunni states, with Oman, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain spending a further £3.6bn on British hardware quite apart from the ongoing relationships to supply maintenance and training. The Gulf is one of the UK's few growing markets. A vast staff of MoD and Civil Service personnel is therefore devoted to serving these vital trade relationships, but former British Ambassador to Riyadh, Simon Collins, is not alone in pointing out the huge significance of "royal to royal" links in "making an impact". While the House of Windsor can trace its lineage through European thrones for centuries, the House of Saud was farming dates in the desert little over a century ago. It was not until the late Forties that black gold transformed the fortunes of the family forever. So why is there such a connection? The Bush family is (in)famously close to the Al Sauds but even their relationship seems trumped

GETTY, PA IMAGES



ROYAL ACADEMY Prince Charles' ties help smooth the way for Saudi's £60bn investment in the UK

by the Windsors.

The answer lies in the nature of the dynasty. New King Salman, at only nine years younger than Queen Elizabeth, has been alive for all but three years of his country's short history and is the son of the nation's founder and first king, Abdulaziz, who died in 1953 (the first year of Elizabeth's reign). At his death, Abdulaziz had 40 sons and 60 grandsons from many wives (he is said to have had 300 wives altogether). Consequently succession has hardly been the simple logic of primogeniture. Add to this the Wahhabi deal that lies at the heart of the Al Saud success story and you have a future which is as precariously unstable as the Windsors' is solid.

Saudi Arabia has three distinct geographic parts, which represent the problem inherent in the country today: the oilfields in the east, the ancient religious cities in the west, which are at the centre of the Islamic world, and the desert in between. To turn this vast land of disparate, warring families into a coherent nation took Abdulaziz not only decades of bloody fighting but also the unswerving support of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi sect, whose interpretation of Islam inspires the Taliban and ISIS. The



FATHER OF A NATION

Abdulaziz, the founder and first king of Saudi Arabia, sired 40 sons

criticism for un-Islamic conduct.

Amid all this, the Al Sauds need stability. Islam frowns on hereditary rulers so when former ambassadors refer to "royal to royal" contact, this is no fairy-tale notion. The image of Prince Charles, the future king of one of the oldest monarchies in the world, at the side of King Salman is a potent symbol of legitimacy. The Danish throne could offer this. What it could not offer is Prince Charles' encyclopaedic knowledge of Islamic culture, art and politics, which makes him stand out against world leaders who have seemed to make ignorance of Islam a creed.

Charles' interests are part of a tradition that stretches back to the British Empire's involvement in Arabia. It was the endeavours of the Arab-speaking Islamophiles like TE Lawrence that secured the acquiescence of Abdulaziz during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire and aided him in the early years of his kingdom.

So what good is Prince Charles' relationship beyond cultural exchange and trade? Anecdote suggests that he does use his visits to raise human rights issues and encourage reform, but the Saudi royals dare not upset the delicate balance they have with their Wahhabi partners who call the shots on law and punishment.

His visits may be securing some of the £60bn of Saudi investment in the UK and saving BAe jobs but they are unlikely, however much Amnesty ask that he intervene, to be saving any Saudis from flogging or execution. The truth is that if we don't sell them weapons, someone else will. As much as citizens may tweet their horror, politicians and princes have to ask if principle is worth British jobs.

The last words should go to an Arab academic. Naraf Obaid wrote of the Afghanistan campaign: "In the Taliban, the US will have the chance to witness a Wahhabi government without the moderating presence of Al Saud, and perhaps a glimpse into what Saudi Arabia could become if the traditional balance of power is disrupted in favour of the

“
Saudi royals dare
not upset the delicate
balance they have with
their Wahhabi partners
who call the shots on
law and punishment
”

Wahhabis agreed to support Abdulaziz but only if he made their version of Islam the state religion. This was all well and good while Saudi Arabia was a poor country of drifting tribes but once oil wealth made it one of the richest places on earth, dangerous contradictions were exposed.

A new deal was struck: Saudi Arabia would lavishly fund Islamic fundamentalism outside its borders in return for stability and freedom to enjoy Western-styled wealth at home. Bluntly, crown princes could gamble, drink and f*** their way round Europe as long as the madrasas were funded in the Middle East.

Since 9/11 flushed out Saudi involvement with violent fundamentalism, the tensions have become greater still. Their closeness to the USA makes their position in the Arab world desperately complicated, especially over Israel, and their exposure to Western trade and culture makes them vulnerable to endless



EMPIRE OF THE SUN UK-Arabian ties go back to the 1916-'18 Arab Revolt