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## How the Saudis Wag the Dog

Even Without a Bomb or a Lobby

by ANDREW LEVINE

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American diplomacy favors (majority) white, English-speaking countries (the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and non-Hispanic European settler states (Canada, Australia and New Zealand again, but also Apartheid South Africa and, of course, Israel).

South Africa eventually fell out of favor, thanks in part to boycott, divestment and sanctions efforts in Western countries.

Similar efforts now underway directed towards Israel are beginning to change public opinion too; though elite opinion, in the United States and the other settler states especially, has, so far, hardly budged.

Thanks to its lobby and its strategic location, Israel is still, for America, the most favored nation of all.

Western European countries are also favored, though to a lesser extent – thanks, again, to cultural affinities and historical ties. Those that sent large numbers of emigrants to North America generally have a leg up. France didn't send many emigrants, but it is also favored, at

least some of the time, for philosophical and historical affinities dating back to the American and French Revolutions.

With Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies, there are no deep or longstanding cultural and historical ties; quite the contrary. Nevertheless, those nations, Saudi Arabia especially, receive favored treatment too.

The events surrounding the death of Osama bin Laden provide a window into this strange and revealing state of affairs.

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When Barack Obama lied about how Navy Seals murdered bin Laden, he blew apart a carefully constructed cover story concocted in Washington and Islamabad intended to conceal the role of Pakistani intelligence and the Pakistani military.

According to Seymour Hersh's account in *The London Review of Books*, bin Laden had been in Pakistani custody at least since 2006. American intelligence learned of this some four years later, when a "walk-in" gave them information that checked out.

The raid itself took place a year after that, in time for the 2012 Presidential election in the United States.

The Pakistanis had reasons for keeping bin Laden in custody and out of American hands. It gave them leverage with the Taliban and with the remnants of Al Qaeda, as well as with other radical Islamist groups.

The Saudis wanted bin Laden kept in Pakistan too; away from the Americans. According to Hersh, they paid Pakistan generously for their trouble.

Hersh's article does not dwell on their motives, but, in interviews he has given after his article went on line, he is less reticent.

The Saudis didn't want the United States to get its hands on bin Laden because they didn't want him to talk about Saudi involvement in 9/11 and other operations directed against Western interests.

This is only a conjecture, but it makes eminently good sense. It isn't even news. Like the fact that the Israeli arsenal includes nuclear weapons, everybody knows about the Saudis' role, but nobody in official circles or in the media that toes its line talks about it.

Since his article appeared, official Washington and mainstream media line have gone after Hersh with a degree of vehemence reminiscent of their attack on Edward Snowden.

They hate it when their bumbling is revealed, almost as much as when the hypocrisy of their claims to respect human rights and the rule of law is exposed.

But, for all the sound and fury, they have not effectively rebutted a single one of Hersh's contentions – nor, for that matter, any of Snowden's.

If Hersh is right, as he surely is, then two of America's closest allies were, to say the least, not acting the way that allies should.

Capturing bin Laden was officially – and probably also really – a high priority for the United States. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia kept him from being captured.

However, none of this appears to have harmed U.S.-Pakistani or U.S.-Saudi relations.

The rulers of both countries depend on American support to survive. And yet, when they choose, they defy their protector with impunity. Israel isn't the only country that wags the dog.

Pakistan gets carte blanche because, like Israel, it has the Bomb. Keeping the Bomb out of the hands of anyone who might use it – especially, against the United States or its interests abroad — is, understandably and legitimately, a goal of American diplomacy.

And so, the United States will do what it must to keep the Pakistani military and intelligence communities happy and on board.

This is not easy: the Pakistanis have been involved with radical Islamists from Day One. By all accounts, contacts survive to this day.

The United States encouraged these connections, especially when the prospect of getting the Soviet Union bogged down in Afghanistan clouded the thinking of diplomats in the Carter and Reagan administrations.

But, since even before the Americans became involved, the Pakistanis have been going their own way in Afghanistan – partly for cultural and historical reasons of their own, and partly to keep India at bay.

For all these reasons, the Americans have found it expedient to buy off the leaders of the Pakistani military and intelligence communities. Therefore, whenever possible, in light of the totality of their concerns, they give them what they want. What the Pakistanis wanted with the bin Laden killing was plausible deniability.

This was the point of the story that Obama blew. Therefore when he, or his political operatives, decided that, with the 2012 election looming, the moment was opportune to announce bin Laden's death, they had to concoct a different story that would also keep the Pakistani role secret.

The one they made up had the added benefit of reinforcing the swashbuckling image that the Navy Seals, Obama's Murder Incorporated, try to project. Hollywood got the message, and made the most of it. So did the Obama campaign.

But, for reasons Hersh explains, the fable they concocted was transparently implausible; a point not lost on observers at the time.

To point this out, back in the day, was to risk being taken for a “conspiracy theorist” – or, worse, a Romney supporter.

Now that a definitive account of what happened has appeared, it is plain who the real conspirators were.

And so, by now, only the willfully blind – and the Washington press corps — believe the tale Obama told.

Needless to say, it is not exactly news when Obama lies; in the “man bites dog” sense, it would be news if he didn’t.

And neither is the duplicity of Pakistan’s military and intelligence leadership surprising. Politics in the Indian sub-continent is as devious and convoluted as anywhere in the world.

In Pakistan, as in Iraq and Syria, the stewards of the American empire – the ones who worked for Bush and Cheney, and the ones who have worked for Obama and his hapless Secretaries of State — are in way over their heads. They are like the proverbial bull in the china shop; powerful and therefore destructive, but ultimately clueless.

American obeisance to the wishes of the Saudi royal family is not unusual either. The United States has been toadying up to them since the days of Franklin Roosevelt. They have oil, and we want to control what they do with it.

However, the fact that the American public, and its counterparts in other Western countries, goes along, almost without dissent, is puzzling in the extreme.

The American way, after all, is to villainize first, and ask questions later.

The Saudi royals, and the ruling potentates in the other Gulf kingdoms, are prime candidates for villainization. They are characters out of central casting.

One would think that a public that loathes, or has been made to loathe, Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad – and that still goes livid at the very thought of the Iranian Ayatollahs and Saddam Hussein — would be out with pitchforks demanding the heads of each and every member of the Saudi ruling class.

They were, after all, if not the perpetrators, at least the protectors of the perpetrators, of 9/11, a “day of infamy,” our propaganda system tells us, equal only to the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

And yet the public’s ire seldom turns the Saudis’ way.

This is all the more remarkable because they have neither a Bomb nor a domestic lobby that the entire American political class fears.

All they have is a massive public relations operation. Evidently, the flacks they hire know their trade. No matter how much money they are paid, they earn every cent.

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Ironically, the Saudis' hold over America's political and economic elites is an unintended consequence of American diplomacy in the days when the United States was, or seemed to be, on the side of the angels.

When Britain or France wanted Middle Eastern oil – in Iraq or Iran, for example, — they took it. They were colonial powers; this is what colonial powers do.

Before World War II, American diplomats cultivated a different image. Washington's cupidity may have been no less than London's or Paris'; but, in the White House and at Foggy Bottom, the idea was to present the United States as, of all things, an anti-colonial power.

Never mind Puerto Rico or the Philippines or, for that matter, Hawaii and the several other Pacific islands that the U.S. Navy coveted; and never mind America's obvious collusion – before, during, and after World War II — with the British and French empires.

It is true, though, that in the Middle East, American domination took a different form. When American oil companies wanted Middle Eastern oil, they didn't seize it; they bought it from the rulers of the peoples who live on top of it.

And, if there weren't rulers willing or able to sell, the Americans created them.

The House of Saud made out like bandits. For the oil companies, it was a small price to pay.

The U.S. got control of the oil without having to administer rebellious colonies. Meanwhile, local elites got rich. All they had to do for the money was give the Americans free rein and enforce the order that made American domination possible – with American help, of course, and with arms purchased from American corporations.

And so, until reality made the pretense unsustainable, the U.S. could present itself, throughout the Middle East, as a defender of anti-colonial, independence movements.

As other Gulf states broke free from British rule, the U.S. took over, applying the same model. This worked well — for a while.

Before long, though, the Saudi regime, and the others, became too big to fail.

This is why, even as the Clinton State Department floundered about cluelessly when the Arab Spring erupted, the prospect of allowing those regimes to fall was never seriously

considered. For official Washington, this was as unthinkable as allowing nuclear Pakistan to “go rogue,” or not kowtowing to the Israel lobby.

When there is a disconnect between public and elite opinion, elites generally win, but not always: not when too many people care too much. American elites, eager to maintain the status quo, like the PR people the Saudis hire to keep public opinion from getting out of control, therefore have their work cut out for them.

Some of the reasons for this reflect poorly on the moral probity of public opinion in the West.

In their appearance, manner and demeanor, the Saudi ruling class epitomizes the Western idea of the Arab.

Even before Europeans inserted themselves into the Arab world, Arabs have occupied a special place in the imaginations of Western peoples.

Like many of the other peoples of the East, they were deemed mysterious and exotic, highly sexualized, and vaguely dangerous.

But, unlike Turks and Persians or the peoples of South Asia and the Far East, and like Africans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australasia, Arabs were never quite regarded as fully human.

The Saudi PR machine therefore has deeply racialized attitudes to counter. The Saudis epitomize “the other”; this makes them a hard sell.

They also epitomize the retrograde, which makes them a hard sell for reasons that have nothing to do with racial or cultural stereotypes — and everything to do with modern political morality.

There is hardly a reactionary trend in the Muslim world that the Saudis haven’t supported financially; and there are few that they did not actually instigate or help shape.

Also, there are few places on earth where human rights and gender equality are less respected, or where liberal and democratic norms hold less sway, than in Saudi Arabia.

Elites in that country and in the other Gulf monarchies are rich and idle because they are sitting on top of vast oil reserves, and because they have accumulated so much wealth that they can exploit “guest workers” in the ways that masters exploit slaves. No one holds them to account for this or anything else untoward that they do.

In a world that permits, indeed encourages, private ownership of natural resources and the limitless accumulation of wealth — and that is largely indifferent to the harm petroleum extraction does — they won the lottery.

This could make them objects of envy, of course; and envy tinged with racial animosity is a lethal brew. Yet, for all practical purposes, the Saudis get a pass – not just in Western elite circles and within the political class of Western countries, but in Western public opinion too.

It has been this way ever since the phasing out of the short-lived Arab oil embargo brought on by American support for Israel in its 1973 war against Egypt.

The Saudis' immunity from public rancor is all the more amazing because it would be easy to rationalize – indeed, to justify – turning them into objects of scorn.

Inasmuch as our moral intuitions took shape over many centuries, under conditions in which nearly everything everyone wanted was in short supply, we are inclined to think that, where the distribution of income and wealth are concerned, principles of fair play apply; and therefore that “free riding” on the contributions of others is morally reprehensible.

In existing capitalism – and, indeed, in all class divided societies – plenty of free riding nevertheless occurs. It is so commonplace that people often don't notice it or don't care. Sometimes, though, when people get something for nothing, it can be enough over the top to cause consternation. When the free riders stand out conspicuously, the level of consternation is typically enhanced.

Saudi Arabia's feudal rulers, and their counterparts in other Gulf states, are about as over the top as it gets.

Other than maintaining the profoundly oppressive order that makes the status quo possible in the territories they control, it is hard to think of any contributions, productive or otherwise, that they make to justify the riches they receive.

But, as finance has superseded industry as the driving force behind the world's overripe capitalist system, Western publics have become more accustomed than they used to be to rewarding unproductive people.

The robber barons of old, and the “industrialists” who succeeded them, at least played a role in increasing society's wealth. The enterprises from which their riches derived made things. The money people at the cutting edge of capitalism today make money out of money, an activity even more useless than collecting rents for drilling rights.

Yet, hostility is seldom directed towards them. Quite the contrary: the richer they are, the more they are esteemed.

Could the sort of confused and obsequious thinking that has made hedge fund managers the heroes of our age account, in part, for how Saudi elites escape vilification? Is this yet another situation where, if you are rich enough, everything is forgiven?

No doubt, this is part of the explanation. But a government intent on keeping public and elite opinion on the same page is a more important factor. Add on a lavishly funded PR campaign and an entire category of miscreants gets off scot-free.

That there is no group of people on earth today to whom the epithet “malefactors of great wealth” more justly applies hardly matters. The Western public may not like them much or respect them; but, so long as they don’t flaunt their wealth too blatantly, hardly anyone complains when Western politicians let them call the shots.

Meanwhile, Islamophobia rages and a gullible public lives in mortal fear of terrorist bogeymen. And yet the Saudi elite gets a pass, notwithstanding the fact that nearly all the perpetrators of 9/11 — of the event that, more than any other, boosted Islamophobia and got the so-called war on terror going — were Saudi nationals. It is an amazing phenomenon.

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In real democracies, governments would do what the citizens who put them in office want them to do. The United States and other Western democracies make a mockery of that ideal. But, even so, there are limits; governments cannot defy public opinion on matters of great moment indefinitely.

It is also the case, at least in the United States, that public opinion is affected significantly by the very government that is supposed to do what the people want – and therefore, ultimately, by the demands of the corporate and financial forces that corrupt democracy.

This is why propaganda matters. Keeping public opinion in line is a function, perhaps the main one, of propaganda systems. In America in the Age of Obama, that is one of the few things that works well.

We underestimate its effectiveness at our peril.

Enabling the Saudi ruling class, and the rulers of the other Gulf states, to direct American foreign policy to the extent that they do, and to get away with whatever they please, is hardly the least of it; but neither is it the only cause for concern.