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Obama and the House of Saud: a New Skepticism?

By Patrick Cockburn
March 17, 2016

Commentators have missed the significance of President Barack Obama's acerbic criticism of Saudi Arabia and Sunni states long allied to the US for fomenting sectarian hatred and seeking to lure the US into fighting regional wars on their behalf. In a series of lengthy interviews with Jeffrey Goldberg published in *The Atlantic* magazine, Mr Obama explains why it is not in the US's interests to continue the tradition of the US foreign policy establishment, whose views he privately disdains, by giving automatic support to the Saudis and their allies.

Obama's arguments are important because they are not off-the-cuff remarks, but are detailed, wide ranging, carefully considered and leading to new departures in US policy. The crucial turning point came on 30 August 2013 when he refused to launch air strikes in Syria. This would, in effect, have started military action by the US to force regime change in Damascus, a course of action proposed by much of the Obama cabinet as well by US foreign policy specialists.

Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies were briefly convinced that they would get their wish and the US was going to do their work for them by overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad. They claimed this would be easy to do, though it would have happened only if there had been a full-scale American intervention and it would have produced a power vacuum that would have been filled by fundamentalist Islamic movements as in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Mr

Goldberg says that by refusing to bomb Syria, Obama “broke with what he calls, derisively, ‘the Washington Playbook’. This was his liberation day”.

The US has been notoriously averse since 9/11 to put any blame on the Saudis for creating salafi-jihadism, at the core of which is Sunni sectarian hatred for the Shia and other variants of Islam in addition to repressive social mores, including the reduction of women to servile status.

President Obama is highly informed about the origins of al-Qa’ida and Islamic State, describing how Islam in Indonesia, where he spent part of his childhood, had become more intolerant and exclusive. Asked why this had occurred, Mr Obama is quoted as replying: “The Saudis and other Gulf Arabs have funnelled money, and large numbers of imams and teachers, into the country. In the 1990s, the Saudis heavily funded Wahhabist madrassas, seminaries that teach the fundamentalist version of Islam favoured by the Saudi ruling family.” The same shift towards the “Wahhabisation” of mainstream Sunni Islam is affecting the great majority of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world who are Sunnis.

Arab oil states spread their power by many means in addition to religious proselytism, including the simple purchase of people and institutions which they see as influential. Academic institutions of previously high repute in Washington have shown themselves to be as shamelessly greedy for subsidies from the Gulf and elsewhere as predatory warlords and corrupt leaders in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and beyond.

Mr Goldberg, who has had extraordinary access to Obama and his staff over an extended period, reports: “A widely held sentiment inside the White House is that many of the most prominent foreign-policy think tanks in Washington are doing the bidding of their Arab and pro-Israel funders. I’ve heard one administration official refer to Massachusetts Avenue, the home of many of these think tanks, as ‘Arab-occupied territory’.” Television and newspapers happily quote supposed experts from such think tanks as if they were non-partisan academics of unblemished objectivity.

It will be important to know after the US election if the new president will continue to rebalance US foreign policy away from reliance on Sunni powers seeking to use American military and political “muscle” in their own interests. Past US leaders have closed their eyes to this with disastrous consequences in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Mr Goldberg says that President Obama “questioned, often harshly, the role that America’s Sunni Arab allies play in fomenting anti-American terrorism. He is clearly irritated that foreign policy orthodoxy compels him to treat Saudi Arabia as an ally”.

What is truly strange about the new departures in US foreign policy is that they have taken so long to occur. Within days of 9/11, it was known that 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudi, as was Osama bin Laden and the donors who financed the operation. Moreover, the US went on treating Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan and the Gulf monarchies as if they were great powers, when all the evidence was that their real strength and loyalty to the West were limited.

Though it was obvious that the US would be unable to defeat the Taliban so long as it was supported and given sanctuary by Pakistan, the Americans never confronted Pakistan on the

issue. According to Goldberg, Obama “privately questions why Pakistan, which he believes is a disastrously dysfunctional country, should be considered an ally of the US at all”. As regards Turkey, the US President had hopes of its President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but has since come to see him as an authoritarian ruler whose policies have failed.

A striking feature of Obama’s foreign policy is that he learns from failures and mistakes. This is in sharp contrast to Britain where David Cameron still claims he did the right thing by supporting the armed opposition that replaced Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, while George Osborne laments Parliament’s refusal to vote for the bombing of Syria in 2013.

Not surprisingly, Obama sounds almost contemptuous of Cameron and the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who played a leading role in demanding the Nato air campaign in Libya. The US went along with President Sarkozy’s bragging as the price of French support, though Mr Obama says that “we [the US] had wiped out all the air defences and essentially set up the entire infrastructure” for the intervention. Despite all the US efforts not to make the same mistakes it made in Iraq in 2003, Obama concedes that “Libya is a mess” and privately calls it a “shit show”, something that he blames on the passivity of US allies and Libyan tribal divisions.

Three years later, the collapse of Libya into anarchy and warlord rule served as warning to Obama against military intervention in Syria where he rightly calculated that the Libya disaster would be repeated.

The calamitous Libyan precedent has had no such impact on Cameron or the Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, who continue to advocate armed action using arguments which President Obama has abandoned as discredited by events as well as being a self-serving attempt by others to piggy-back on American power.

It will become clearer after November’s presidential election how far Obama’s realistic take on Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan and other US allies and his scepticism about the US foreign policy establishment will be shared by the new administration. The omens are not very good since Hillary Clinton supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003, intervention in Libya in 2011 and bombing Syria in 2013. If she wins the White House, then the Saudis and the US foreign policy establishment will breathe more easily.