

Saudi Arabia is an excellent example of how complex our alliances can be. I have heard from quite a few people that we should dump them as an ally. In the past, even I have muttered that after 9-11, we invaded the wrong countries (Afghanistan and Iraq) and should have taken down Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Of course we could not do this in a world of complex issues and even more complex relationships. We have needed each other for certain things over the past 60 plus years. Some of those needs have changed, but we still have others that bind us into what has become a chilly relationship.

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that is named for the family that runs (owns) it, the Al Sauds. The Al Sauds were the winners of a long tribal civil war in the early 20th century. They secured their military victory through marriages binding the losing tribes to them and made a deal with their religious establishment, the Wahhabi sect of Islam. They promised to support that cult if the clerics would support their right to rule.

None of this mattered to the world: a backward and primitive country with a small population and a primitive and fundamentalist form of Islam. Their country was naked desert, disinterested in trade with the rest of the world, and certainly without anything to sell themselves---until oil was discovered.

World War I broke out in 1914, and war required petroleum for navy ships and all military vehicles. Suddenly, every major country in the world was scrambling for petroleum, much of it newly discovered in the most backward parts of the world, the Arab world, Indonesia, and Persia. The British moved quickly to secure Middle East oil; the French found it in their colonies, Muslim Indonesia and Algeria; the Russians found it in the former Persian Caucuses (colonized by Russia). The Germans, who did not have it, were ready to fight to get it from those who did.

The United States was fortunate enough to be awash in our newly discovered petroleum. We did not need to create an empire to get it. With our petroleum and awesome industrial capacity, we would up at the end of both World Wars I and II as the only major powers not devastated by warfare.

The Cold War between the US and USSR followed World War II, with each side collecting allies. The USSR was hoping to colonize the world and spread their particular revolutionary Communist ideology. We promoted capitalism and democracy. Neither our lesser-developed allies nor those of the USSR were capable of adopting either of these sophisticated ideologies, but they were all ready to be bought off. If Communists were atheists, then our allies must be religious, no matter how awful the religion. That is how we and the Russians split up our alliances in the Muslim Middle East. The Russians sold them atheism (which they could not honestly follow) and we sold them democracy (which they were incapable of practicing).

So much petroleum was needed by the post-World War II world that Saudi Arabia became a prized ally. We promised them security and they promised us cheap oil. (We kept most of our own from then on in the ground as reserves.)

Saudi Arabia became enormously rich, a transformation in barely one generation from pauper Bedouin to billionaires.

The Saudi government did not use that money to transform their backwater into an educated, modernizing member of Western Civilization. Instead, they shared enough of that money to keep their population happy with basic welfare and a barebones religiously-poisoned educational system.

They shared the wealth with the Wahhabi clergy, who then set about a takeover of the World's Islam, transforming it from a stagnant religion with numerous forms to one with a monopoly of power. Wahhabi "schools" were established throughout Islam, manned by teachers "educated" in Saudi religious institutions. Islam's early militant structure had a revival, being reborn as terrorist cults ready to take on the world.

Next week: Part 2.

677 words

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