

Endgame for the House of Saud

By Laurent Murawiec

In the Summer of 1916, it became apparent to all that Tsar Nicholas II was failing to keep together his regime. The combined weight of external events and internal pressure was becoming too strong to be sustained by the fragile ruler. As a result, every single Grand-Duke, members all of the Royal House of the Romanovs, started conspiring and plotting on his own. Power was there for the picking.

All major powers and their intelligence services sent in their agents to co-plot and co-conspire with the Grand-Dukes, and buy local help. The Japanese, Austrian and German intelligence services bought up Bolsheviks, the British and the French bought up the Mensheviks and the Social-Revolutionaries, etc. A few months later, a fortuitous incident set off what became the “February Revolution.” An interregnum followed, a civil war, new rulers: a major, new strategic reality had arisen, with vast international ripples that shook the world indeed.

The Fall of the House of Saud will not have consequences lesser than the 1917 collapse of Russia and its later descent into Hell.

In the early 1960s, then Crown Prince, later King Faisal bin Abdulaziz, launched the Wahhabite Grand Design in earnest. He established a string of international organizations designed to assert Wahhabi hegemony over world Sunni Islam. In so doing, Faisal was implementing the ultimate design of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the founder of the creed endorsed by the Al-Saud clan, a bizarre and primitive offshoot of Islam.

In 1973, the Al-Saud successfully conspired with other oil owners to gouge gigantic amounts of petrodollars from the consumers. There was a repeat performance in 1979. Ever since, the raiding of the world economy through the mechanism of oil prices has continued in a more

managed, but no less rent-exacting manner. This gave the AI-Saud-Wahhabi nexus the leverage needed for the religious-imperial expansion.

It also gave Riyadh the means of purchasing itself a powerful Saudi Lobby in Washington, D.C., under the cheeky guidance of the Saudi Minister for American Affairs, Bandar bin Sultan. With America under control, safely fastened to a strategy which placed the pseudo-“stability” offered by the Saudi princes at the center of U.S. policy, the AI-Saud were able to move on.

If recent history offers a clear-cut case of imperial overstretch, the Saudi Empire is it. The war against the Soviets in Afghanistan gave rise to Jihad and the establishment by the Saudi authorities and secret services of the international army of the jihad. Osama bin Laden stands as a principal symbol and figurehead of that process. Suddenly, the quiet subversion of world Sunni Islam by Wahhabi money, missionaries, books and teachers, gave way to a hyperactive, overambitious and frenetic arousal. Pakistan, Algeria, Indonesia, West Africa, North America even, Bosnia and Kosovo, Chechnya, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the vast mosques of Western Europe – the world was the stage where the Wahhabi acid was corroding societies, proselytizing new converts to extremism and terrorism, setting up new madrasas, new nodes the international army of jihad, new cells.

Thousands of feverish fanatics were churned out day after day by Islamic schools and universities within the kingdom, with their burning hatred for all non-Wahhabis: Shiites, non-Wahhabi Moslems, Christians, Jews, Westerners, modernizers, Americans. The regime was happy to export them to wreak the havoc of jihad elsewhere, The deal was firmly sealed whereby the satiated princes could enjoy their riches why their lean and hungry offsprings went off to battle elsewhere.

The Saudi giant had clay feet, or feet of sand, as you wish. It is now tottering, like the statue of Ozymandias in Shelley’s poem.

Ironically, it is the Saudis themselves who set off their own tumbling down. It was the Saudi bin Laden, funded by official, princely and private (“charity”) money from the upper levels of Saudi

society, who launched a plurality of Saudi subjects against the Twin Towers in Manhattan and the Pentagon building. America's response first toppled the Saudis' puppet regime, the Talibans. It next turned to the greatest impediment to an American strategy to face the terror threat: the State Department-imagined doctrine sometimes known as the "Eisenhower Doctrine." In short: in order to protect and secure the gas station, the Arab despots and dictators that own the real estate where the oil is located must be our friends, and we must set no conditions of any sort.

President Bush had the bravery of revoking the failed policy – which had brought about 9/11 – of unconditional support to despots and dictators. He proceeded to overthrow one of the egregious examples, Saddam Hussein, by force of arms. This justified and necessary action in turn – a lawful, legitimate, necessary effect of fighting a serious war on terror – has vastly increased the regional and internal pressure weighing on the Saudi regime. The desperate attempt by Riyadh to save the hide of the monster of Baghdad – as King Fahd did in 1991 – has worsened U.S.-Saudi relations, already strained by the brazen ill-will manifested by the Saudi authorities whenever U.S. authorities ask for help in fighting terror.

Internally, the oil wealth, huge as it is, has proven insufficient to allow the Royals to keep on buying everybody's loyalties. Cracks have been audible throughout the power structure. Since the 8,000-strong family ("princes") has operated somewhat like the Soviet Communist Party, as the structuring element of Saudi society, excluding all others since no totalitarian structure can tolerate autonomous power centers, cracks in the family shatter the entire house.

The Al-Saud family is hopelessly tangled in its internal disagreements. It has become incapable of taking any major decision. King Fahd has been in a quasi-vegetative state for years. Failure by contending clans to come to terms has resulted in paralysis. The last years of Leonid Brezhnev, of Yuri Andropov, of Konstantin Chernenko come to mind, with the same deleterious consequences. It simply means that Saudi Arabia is either on automatic pilot, or that contradictory decisions are taken and implemented by different clans and factions as and when they temporarily gain the upper hand. Concretely: one day, some prominent prince receives a group of reform-minded Saudis. Fanfare in the Western press: "Reform is on the march." Next day: reformers arrested on orders of other prominent prince. State Department deafeningly silent.

Reform? Too little too late. Flight forward into Islamism? Very likely, and playing into the hands of the challengers.

How can terrorists be caught when three of them are besieged in a compound, and escape the friendly clutches of the security forces? Crown Prince Abdallah's National Guard is riddled with extreme, xenophobic forces, encouraged in this by the Crown prince and his sons. There are also many, extremely suspicious connections between the majlis of this and that prince in the upper, uppermost crust of the Al-Saud family, and individuals and groups very close to al-Qaeda. The leading Wahhabi clerics have not broken their links either with their best disciples. Saudi "charities" continue to fund London-based and other extremist groups, media outlets, etc.

How do we understand the rise in terrorist hits in the Kingdom in the last six months? Let us first remember that the Royal Family, so far, has only been a rhetorical target of the killers, the real casualties being primarily Americans, Britons, other Westerners and Lebanese Christians, and some unfortunate average Saudis. I am proposing to you that the forces identified with the – perhaps alive – Osama bin Laden have become convinced that the weakness of the dynasty is such, and that their jihad inside Saudi Arabia has reached a point where they can shoot for the sky, or rather the jackpot: topple the House of Saud and pocket the oil fields, the oil wealth, the Holy Places and the high-tech weaponry stored in the kingdom.

Externally, senior members of several Gulf dynasties have told me in recent months that they are extraordinarily worried: they feel the ground shake across the desert. They need protection – not from a dynasty that cannot protect itself.

Internally, the dynasty does not control much. The dynasty is bleeding. Its manifest inability to subdue or even contain terror within the kingdom is a sure sign: they cannot even protect the oil fields. Imagine the effect of a mass exodus of Western managers, engineers and technicians! The standard calculus of power, practiced by every family head in the country and in the region, reveals a tottering dynasty.

Signs have been growing that the component parts of the Saudi Empire – the Shiite provinces of Hajjar on the Gulf, the Yemenite province of Asir on the Red Sea, and, first and foremost, the ancient, sophisticated Hijazi bourgeoisie, now remember their ancient independence in an active fashion, and the Al-Sauds' betrayal of promises of religious pluralism in Mecca and Medina. The eastern Shia looks north, across into Iraq's Shia and Grand Ayatollah Sistani. It is most likely too late for the kind of "national dialogue" between Wahhabi and non-Wahhabi forces – decades too late.

If the foregoing analysis is essentially correct, the prognosis I issued six months ago – that the dynasty would collapse within 18 to 24 months – has been overtaken by events. Unsurprisingly, a crisis is a self-accelerating regime. James Baker, as I was told, was stating to visiting Arab dignitaries that he gave the Al-Saud 5 years of survival. That was 18 months ago. A member of the Saudis' lobbying firm in Washington, D.C., told me of his agreement with my timeline – two months ago. Events are moving fast.

Where does that leave us?

We are not arguing whether the Saudi regime will collapse. We're trying to discern when. Timing is a difficult question: some fortuitous incident, a mutawayeen accidentally kills the son of some tribal chieftain. Zoom! Events cascade into an insurrection, loyalties clash, civil war looms, provinces secede, al-Qaeda tries a power-grab...

The U.S. administration should be in the business of talking to all potential "Gorbachevs" in the Royal Family; to all non-extremist opponents in and outside the kingdom; of consulting with U.S. friends and allies in the Gulf; of preparing policies with a coalition of the willing in the West and elsewhere: for it is in nobody's interest that the oil fields be either destroyed or grabbed by Islamic extremists.

We ought to dust up military contingency planning to secure the oil fields in case of need – within minutes of any threat being detected. Diplomatic rationales, agreements with forces within the kingdom and the Gulf – we'd need that, and we need to prepare that – now – not after

the fact. We need to be proactive, not reactive. Of course, those in the Administration and the bureaucracy who insist that the Saudis are our friends and they buy us stability, are hopelessly outmaneuvered by events. Let them babble on: national interest is at stake, at the highest strategic level.