

(The National Interest, March 21, 2011)



Saudia Arabia: the ultimate test of Washington's dedication to democracy. Riyadh greets protests with force, handing Shiite Iran a powerful...

The democratic currents sweeping the Middle East have created unease, even consternation, in Washington and European capitals. These democratic governments all formally welcome democracy in the Arab world, but fear losing friendly tyrants with whom the West long did business. Libya was an easier case, at least in the U.S., since American support for Muammar Qaddafi was minimal. Despite the lack of U.S. security interests at stake, a no-fly zone seemed to offer the possibility of defenestrating a corrupt and anti-Western tyrant.

The real test of American commitment to democracy is long-time ally Saudi Arabia. U.S. and Saudi Arabian troops conducted a joint military training exercise in early March. Riyadh acts as the critical “swing” oil producer, upon which Washington long has relied to stabilize the international oil market. Saudi Arabia also is a major arms buyer. Perhaps most important, the Saudi royals have spread their wealth around Washington, collecting many influential friends.

Unfortunately, Riyadh also is essentially a totalitarian theocracy. A handful of feeble gerontocrats rule and 7,000 princes mulct a nation of 27 million. There are no elections or civil liberties and non-Muslims cannot even freely worship at home. The Saudi government underwrites fundamentalist Islam around the world and Saudi citizens have provided substantial financial support for terrorism. Yet U.S. officials say little to encourage the Saudi royals to adopt democratic reforms. Not that the well-heeled princes are interested in American political values. “They’re not in a mode for listening,” one administration official recently told the *New York Times*. The regime in Riyadh always has used whatever force was necessary for self-preservation. Now Saudi Arabia has adopted Washington’s strategy of imposing its values abroad, moving troops into neighboring Bahrain. Riyadh intends to stifle Bahrain’s growing democracy movement and preserve the Khalifa family dictatorship.

Riyadh Scores One for Tehran

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уторак, 29 март 2011 19:46

