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Fikra Forum

The United States and Saudi Arabia Do Not Share Values

by [Christian Bischoff](#), [Amy Hawthorne](#)

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Brief Analysis

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In his July 13 *Fikra Forum* article, [“The United States and Saudi Arabia Have More In Common Than Mere Common Interests,”](#) Fahad Nazer makes the jarring claim that U.S.-Saudi relations are now based not only on well-known security and economic interests, but also on shared “core values” of religious tolerance, civil rights, and women’s rights. He argues that Saudi Arabia has undergone an “important shift in political culture” to become more open and inclusive, and references Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman’s “ambitious” reform plans. All this, Nazer says, bodes well for enduring ties with America. In reality, the kingdom — an absolute monarchy and one of the world’s most repressive countries — bears zero resemblance to the United States, even as American democracy is buffeted by many challenges.

Nazer contends that Saudi institutions today propagate a narrative of “peace, tolerance, and moderation.” But intolerance lies at the heart of the Saudi system, which is based on an alliance between ultraconservative Muslim clerics and the al-Saud royal family. The legal system severely discriminates against anyone who is not a Sunni Muslim. As documented by [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#), systematic prejudice against the country’s minority Shia population takes the form of legal and social discrimination, arrests, and even [executions](#) under the guise of counter-terrorism. Saudi clerics have called for the [killing of Shiites](#). In April 2015, an [audio recording](#) surfaced of Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, the current Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, declaring all-out war against Shiites.

There is no freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia: the [law requires](#) all citizens to be Muslim. Expatriate non-Muslims are forbidden from practicing their faith publicly. According to the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#), the religious police continue to abuse and detain expatriate workers who follow faiths other than Islam (of

whom there are at least a million in the kingdom) for holding private religious services in their homes; the government does not, as Nazer suggests, turn a blind eye. Those who dare to criticize Islam can be punished by flogging, imprisonment, or death. As has been widely reported, blogger Raif Badawi is serving a sentence of ten years and 1,000 public lashes for “insulting Islam through electronic channels” as a result of writing on his website, Free Saudi Liberals. Moreover, the law deems any public declaration of atheism as terrorism, punishable by up to twenty years in prison.

Building on his depiction of alleged growing inclusivity, Nazer then discusses what he calls the Saudi authorities’ “sincere effort” to overhaul the education system and official religious discourse. But Saudi high school-level **textbooks** continue to feature much inciteful language, **promote intolerance**, vilify non-Sunni Muslims (**including forbidding friendship with “infidels”**), and spout vile anti-Semitism. According to recent expert **testimony** before the U.S. Congress, textbooks include “directives to kill people in response to their non-violent personal life choices” and contain “several other passages encouraging violence.” The *New York Times* has reported that the Islamic State used official Saudi textbooks to teach children in the territory they have controlled. This is just one indication of the convergence between aspects of the kingdom’s official religious discourse and jihadist ideology.

The narrative of the religious establishment, dominated by ultraconservative clerics who **promote and export** intolerant interpretations of Islam, remains deeply disturbing as well. Firebrand clerics like Mohammad al-Arefe, who holds a place at King Saud University, and Muhammad al-Munajjid preach **anti-Semitism** and **the inferiority of women**. The former Imam of the Grand Mosque, Adil al-Kalbani, **declared** in January 2016 that the Islamic State “draw[s] their ideas from our own books, from our own principles.”

Nazer also argues that the status of women has improved. To be sure, a few elite females have been appointed to prominent posts, Saudi females now outnumber men in the kingdom’s universities, and women – and men – can now **vote for and be elected** to local councils, although these councils **have almost no power**. But the system of women as second-class, inferior human beings remains **firmly in place**. Gender inequality is actually codified in Saudi law. As described by **Human Rights Watch**, women are legal minors and rendered dependent on men in nearly every aspect of their public lives. The **system of male guardianship** requires that all Saudi women have male guardians – their husband, fathers, brothers, or adult sons – who make decisions on their behalf. A woman must obtain her guardian’s permission to get married, acquire a passport, travel, open a bank account, and receive medical treatment, among other basic actions. In April, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud **issued an order** to review and possibly lift a few of the guardianship rules; it remains to be seen if this will lead to tangible change. Women **are forbidden to drive** and are **obligated by law** to wear an abaya in public. Strictly enforced gender segregation is a norm in Saudi society.

Finally, Nazer claims that the kingdom “has taken concrete steps to raise awareness about the many civil rights that are protected under Saudi law and regulations.” In fact, there are precious few human rights protections in Saudi Arabia. Freedom of expression, association, and belief simply do not exist. Criticism of the government is **effectively illegal** and is met with prison time and flogging. Political parties, trade unions, and independent human rights organizations are strictly forbidden, and Saudis involved in such unrecognized groups are routinely **arrested and prosecuted**. As of recently, Saudis can form NGOs, but the authorities can **dissolve** any association that fails to meet exceedingly vague standards of harming public morality or national unity. The kingdom’s criminal justice system lacks even the **most basic** due process and is marked by **arbitrary arrests**, a **lack of fair trials**, and blatant disregard for international judicial standards. According to numerous human rights reports, **torture** is used to obtain “confessions.” The death penalty is carried out through **public beheading**. So far in 2017, forty-four people have been **executed**, reportedly 41 percent of whom were for non-violent actions such as attending a **political protest**. Nazer asserts that in the kingdom’s top-down governance system, “Saudi kings have always been keen on

consensus-building.” But in an absolute monarchy, “consensus” has little meaning when the populace has no actual rights and is reduced to being subjects of unaccountable family rule.

Nazer is correct to note that Saudi Arabia is undergoing social and economic change in some areas. The Crown Prince’s “Vision 2030” reform agenda plans to shrink dependence on oil, trim the massive state bureaucracy, expand the private sector, and grant a bit more social freedom (such as by building the country’s **first amusement parks**). Such social initiatives, in particular, appear to be welcomed by young Saudis (**70 percent of the population is thirty or younger**). Obviously, Saudi Arabia, like every country, will change at its own pace and in its own way, and it is much too soon to assess what deeper impact, positive or negative, Vision 2030 will have. Respected analyst Jane Kinninmont, however, **cautions** that rather than opening things up, the royal family may double down on authoritarian rule to maintain control as the economic system evolves.

In any case, the United States is likely to keep pursuing long-standing political, security, and economic interests in Saudi Arabia, an important country owing to its immense oil wealth (even as U.S. dependence on foreign oil diminishes), status as the birthplace of Islam, and custodianship of the faith’s holiest sites. But the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have nothing whatsoever in common when it comes to values. Beneath its present quasi-modernizing discourse, Saudi Arabia is a deeply conservative, often shockingly repressive monarchy that continues to propagate a dangerously intolerant interpretation of Islam –one that has much in common with the Salafi-jihadist ideology that Western counterterrorism policies ostensibly aim to discredit. To claim as Nazer does that Saudi Arabia shares our prized principles of religious tolerance, civil rights, and women’s rights is not only misleading but offensive to democratic societies and advocates of human dignity everywhere. U.S. relations with such a country will never have the same deep roots and enduring benefits as our ties to democratic allies do. ❖



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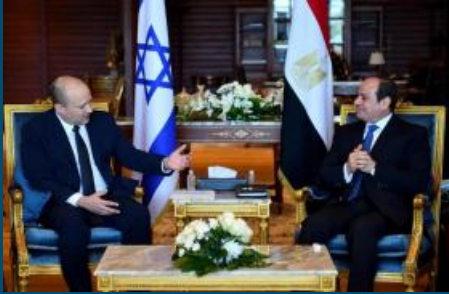


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