

A Lethal Saudi Mix of Cash and Conceit

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Oct 24, 2010

Also published in Sunday Times (London)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker Senior Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Articles & Testimony

A recently concluded sexual assault and murder case is a reminder of how massive wealth has corrupted a significant slice of the Gulf Arab elite—though sadly, this trend is hardly new.

To misquote F. Scott Fitzgerald, Saudi princes are different from you and me. For a start, they have more money. Lots more money. Indeed, as shown in the murder trial that concluded in London last Wednesday, so much money that at least one of them thought he could sexually assault and murder his servant and get away with it.

The details of last week's case make gruesome reading. Fuelled by champagne and "sex on the beach" cocktails, the playboy Saudi prince Saud Abdulaziz bin Nasser al Saud beat and strangled Bandar Abdulaziz in a plush suite at the Landmark hotel in central London in February.

It was the culmination of a campaign of sadistic violence waged by the 34-year-old royal against his manservant. The court heard that CCTV footage showed the prince punching Bandar 37 times in the hotel lift, and that the servant had suffered a cauliflower ear and swollen lip in earlier beatings. There were also mobile phone photos of the 32-year-old in compromising positions on the prince's bed.

"So worn down by the violence, so subservient and submissive had Bandar become that he was incapable of any effective resistance," Jonathan Laidlaw, the prosecutor, told the Old Bailey.

Several thousand Saudis can title themselves Prince, but Saud's pedigree is premier division. He is a grandson of the late half-brother of Saudi Arabia's ruler, King Abdullah, so perhaps it's not surprising that his reaction when the Metropolitan police turned up was to claim he had diplomatic immunity (wrongly, as it turned out).

It is all rather horrifying to those new to the field of Saudi watching but, sadly, for old-timers, it is not surprising. I can recall being told, perhaps 30 years ago, that the predilection of one senior Saudi was for little boys. What was

their compensation, I remember asking. "A Rolex watch," was the reply.

Confirmation of sorts came many years later when a former American ambassador to the kingdom told me I was only half right: the Saudi liked little girls as well.

"It's not that they feel that the rules -- legal or religious -- don't apply to them," according to a businessman based in Saudi Arabia. "They think there are no rules at all.

"The prince must have known that there would have been a CCTV camera in the lift at the Landmark that would have recorded his attack on his servant but, insofar as he thought about it at all, he would have figured that the tapes could be 'lost' or that he would have immunity from prosecution."

A former British ambassador acknowledges the problem: "I was forever getting woken up in the middle of the night by the Metropolitan police, saying that they had arrested this Saudi man who had driven his Ferrari into a lamppost on the King's Road, drunk, and that he was claiming he was a member of the Saudi royal family and had immunity from arrest.

"Did I know who he was? What should they do -- arrest him or let him go? Saudi diplomats do indeed have immunity from prosecution. But not even a diplomat could get away with murder in the UK."

Last week's case was particularly grim but it doesn't signal, as some have suggested, a deterioration in Saudi behaviour abroad. Sex scandals and even murders after which the foreign perpetrators have tried to flee the country have been rare but far from unheard of in London over the years.

Nor are such crimes confined to Saudis. Two years ago the body of Martine Vik Magnussen, a Norwegian student, was found in a central London apartment rented by a wealthy young Arab. Farouk Abdulhak, 23, who is suspected of raping and murdering Magnussen, remains free after he fled to Yemen, where his billionaire father is a powerful businessman.

The risk is that such horrors will continue as long as there's the perception that British authorities might be persuaded to turn a blind eye to all but the worst excesses of rich and irresponsible foreigners. Of course, the explanation for why we might be tempted to do so is simple: Britain enjoys lucrative trade links with Saudi Arabia, with the arms industry a key element. The risk is that Saudi Arabia might pull multi-billion-pound defence contracts if members of the royal family are embarrassed by foreign states.

In truth, smooth-talking the British police to drop minor charges could almost be said to be a rite of passage for younger officials at the Foreign Office.

A British businessman in the Gulf (nobody speaks on the record about the Saudis) claims: "There have been plenty of times when members of the Saudi royal family and sheikhs from other Gulf states have misbehaved in London, but on every occasion the perpetrators were somehow magically spirited out of the country and the details never emerged.

"I remember a few years ago a Saudi sheikh had run up huge debts -- around £10m -- at a London casino. There were also claims that he had been taking cocaine in the toilets. The casino called in the police. He denied the drugs charges and refused to pay up.

"Eventually, some money appeared and the police dropped the matter. In the summer, when Gulf Arabs come to London, something like that happens every month but you'd never know."

To a lesser extent, it's an attitude manifested in the recklessness of Gulf royalty towards our parking restrictions: witness the clamping of two supercars outside Harrods this summer. They were left there illegally by members of the Qatari royal family, new owners of the London store, who were seemingly happy to pick up whatever ticket they got.

Of all the lurid details to emerge in court, gay sex is perhaps the most embarrassing for the Saudi royals. It might even be the reason last week's case has not been reported in Saudi Arabia or in any of the pan-Arab newspapers that the Saudis own.

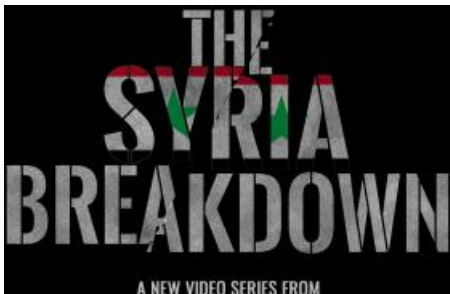
Homosexuality is a taboo subject in Saudi Arabia. Another businessman says: "It's sometimes said that because the sexes are strictly segregated in Saudi Arabia that Arab men are more likely to be gay. I don't see any evidence of that. What is true, however, is that the repression in Saudi society means that if you are gay, you are likely to indulge more when you are overseas."

Of course, there are many sheikhs who take their privileged position and responsibilities seriously. But, like any society, there are others who don't. What makes Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states different is that those who want to be playboys have the wherewithal to do so.

"It's not that Saudi young men do all of this because they are Arabs," says another Gulf businessman. "They do it because they have more money than God and zero responsibility. They are kids with a big bag of money, often a big bag of drugs and no one to say when enough's enough. It's a toxic combination."

Simon Henderson is a senior fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute and author of After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia. ❖

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