



Churchill vs. May: A Revealing Study in Contrasts

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 789, April 9, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Unlike Winston Churchill, who did not hesitate to light up a cigar and pour himself a drink in the company of Saudi King Abdulaziz, modern-day Western leaders like Theresa May disdain their own cultures in deference to Islam even as they decry the Muslim world's chronic human rights abuses. The fallout from their refusal to stand up for democratic values might prove very costly over the long term.

To understand that Western emphasis on human rights is at best a fig leaf to do business with autocrats whose rule is based on repression, contrast Winston Churchill's encounter with Muhammad bin Salman's grandfather, King Abdulaziz, with British prime minister Theresa May's recent talks with the crown prince.

[Meeting the king for lunch in Cairo in 1945](#), Churchill suggested that it was the "religion of his majesty to deprive himself of smoking and alcohol," a reference to the king's adherence to a puritanical strand of Islam that has dominated the kingdom since its founding in 1932.

Churchill made clear, however, that the king's beliefs would not deter him from enjoying his own smokes and drinks in the monarch's presence. The prime minister's rule of life "prescribes as an absolutely sacred rite smoking cigars and also the drinking of alcohol before, after, and if need be during all meals and in the intervals between them," he said.

The enjoyment of tobacco and alcohol are certain not to have featured in Theresa May's talks with Prince Muhammad. Human rights and the humanitarian cost of Saudi Arabia's ill-fated military intervention in Yemen did.

In contrast to Churchill, who, perhaps insensitively and arrogantly, refused to compromise on his principles and pleasures, May's statements were no more than words in what has become a ritual in interactions between democratic and autocratic leaders. The autocrats understand the democrats' need to maintain a fig leaf. The public admonishment of their tarnished human rights records is a small price to pay for the ability to conduct political and economic business.

The contrast between the two encounters is particularly significant in an environment in which abuse of human rights is on the rise and authoritarian and autocratic rule is spreading its wings across the globe from China to once liberal democracies. Democracy is on the defensive.

It raises the question whether the refusal of democracies to stand up for their principles and pay a short-term price will contribute to their demise and brutalization in a world in which the lessons of WWII genocide and the principles of good governance in warfare can be ignored with impunity. Russia- and Iran-backed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's gassing and starvation of non-combatant Syrian civilians is a case in point.

May's fig leaf approach to standing by basic democratic principles is but the latest incident in a longstanding Western willingness to pay a heavy price for sleeping with the devil in a bid to gain short-term geopolitical and economic advantage.

The guilt is widespread. It is not just governments that must bear it. So too must non-governmental organizations such as international sports associations that for decades tolerated the pre-modern curtailing of women's sporting rights in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran by restricting their criticism to words rather than deeds.

Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and author and long-time Saudi-watcher Robert Lacey noted in [*The Guardian*](#) that "the crown prince doesn't listen to Saudis – why would he listen to Theresa May?"

Khashoggi, long closely associated with Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former head of Saudi intelligence and ambassador to Britain and the US who often voices opinions Prince Muhammad does not want to express publicly, went into voluntary exile last year on the eve of the crown prince's power and asset grab (purported to be an anti-corruption campaign).

One irony of May's approach in her talks with Prince Muhammad is the fact that the kingdom is an exemplary case study of the price democracies have paid for their toothless objections to a Saudi worldview that has long been intolerant, supremacist, and anti-pluralistic.

To be sure, Prince Muhammad has begun to shave off the rough edges of that worldview with social and economic reforms, but he has yet to convey his willingness to achieve a clean break.

Holders of tickets for a concert in Jeddah by Egyptian pop sensation Tamer Hosny were recently surprised to receive vouchers that warned that [“no dancing or swaying”](#) would be allowed at the event. "No dancing or swaying in a concert! It's like putting ice under the sun and asking it not to melt," quipped a critic on Twitter.

If anything, Prince Muhammad's reforms have been underscored by repression of any form of dissent.

The anti-death penalty group Reprieve reported that [Saudi Arabia's execution rate had doubled](#) since Prince Muhammad was appointed crown prince eight months ago. It said 133 people had been executed since June 2017 compared to 67 in the preceding eight months.

Equally fundamentally, the world is still reeling from both short-sighted, opportunistic Western support for the export of Saudi-inspired Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism and Western willingness to ignore its impact on Muslim communities across the globe.

The same can be said for support for secular autocracies like the regime of Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, whose repression, brutality, and failure to deliver public goods and services offer extremism a fertile breeding ground.

It is also true for states like Baathist Syria and Iraq, which fell into the Soviet orbit during the Cold War. Iraq, after the demise of the Soviet Union, enjoyed US support during its war against Iran in the 1980s.

In South Asia, the US went as far, during the era of conservative Pakistani president Zia ul-Haq and the US- and Saudi-backed war against the Soviets in the 1980s waged by Afghan mujahedeen, as to distribute schoolbooks that propagated Saudi-inspired jihad and precepts of ultra-conservatism. In doing so it played havoc with Pakistan, a country that has struggled with its identity since its birth.

Western democracies ignored the fact that Saudi Arabia invested heavily over decades to push its austere worldview as an antidote to post-1979 Iranian revolutionary zeal.

While not the only factor, the Saudi campaign created an environment in Pakistan and elsewhere in which militant Islam flourished, societies became ever more conservative and intolerant, and political violence increased.

Western democracies as well as other countries, including the kingdom itself, are paying a high price in terms of people's lives and vastly expanded security to counter extremism and political violence.

It is an open debate whether policies that were built on democratic values, rather than support for autocracy and intolerant worldviews, could have achieved geopolitical victories similar to the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan at a lower cost and a reduced threat to those values.

What is certain, however, is that the failure to stand up for democratic values comes at an ever-steeper cost and rising uncertainty over how the pendulum will swing.

The unanswered question is whether, in terms of cost-benefit analysis, short-term hits resulting from adopting a principled stand may ultimately be a more reasonable cost and produce greater long-term benefit than dealing with the fallout of policies that effectively ignore democratic principles and ultimately are likely to produce ever greater threats.

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family