

IA-Forum Interview: Mr. Tarik Allagany

International Affairs Forum speaks with Mr. Tarik Allagany, Public Affairs Supervisor for the Royal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Embassy in Washington, D.C about issues facing Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. By Winston Harris. (6/21/2005)



International Affairs Forum: Recently his Majesty, King Fahd, has been seriously ill with pneumonia, how is his current condition?

Mr. Tarik Allagany: He's been quite ill for awhile. He's had a series of strokes. A lot of the responsibilities that the King normally does are now being undertaken by the Crown Prince, Prince Abdullah. But King Fahd is still officially our king. He's slowly getting better, he's still in the hospital, but hopefully he'll be back home resting sometime soon. But his health is kind of precarious at this time.

IA-Forum: Not long ago, Saudi Arabia had its first Municipal Elections, what was the official reason that these elections were held?

Mr. Allagany: This was the first time we had elections so we felt it was going to be a learning experience for us. We prefer to do it at the Municipal level before we take it to the big national level, for the Consultative Council. It went smoother than we thought it was going to go and hopefully next time around when we have these elections it will be for the appointments at the Consultative Council. In my opinion, I don't know if it will really make any difference as to who is selected to these posts. Right now it's just done in an informal matter, where each region or each tribe nominates the person they want representing them. It's usually the elder statesman within the group, but we're just going to go through the process of doing it through formal elections, rather than the informal matter, the way we've been doing it, and hopefully that will appease some of our detractors. A lot of people have been saying, "you don't have elections"; so I think it's mostly for people outside the country, rather than within the country that we're doing this for.

IA-Forum: Do you believe that democratic progress in places such as Iraq, Palestine, and now Lebanon are forcing the Saudi Royal Family to allow for elections?

Mr. Allagany: Probably not as big a reason as some people might think. I think it was just trying to keep up with the times, people had said you don't have elections so we just went and did it. A lot of people have said we are scared of democracy but we're not. There are other democracies in our region, our neighbor to the south, Yemen, is a democracy.

We don't have a traditional Western style democracy but we are traditionally a tribal society. We're used to doing things in a different manner. I think there are many forms of government in this world and, by and large, all these different forms of government work for the people who use them. It's just a matter of different strokes for different folks as they say. I don't know if we'll ever have the same exact type of government as in the United States or in the West. But I don't know if we really expect the whole world to adapt to one system. Variety is the spice of life.

IA-Forum: How long do these elected officials retain their office, and are they permitted to run again?

Mr. Allagany: At the Municipal level, I don't believe there is a term limit, and even with our cabinet, we don't get a new cabinet every time a new head of state comes in. It's usually someone who has worked their way up through the ranks to achieve the top position within that particular ministry. But this may be something that will be coming up in the next elections.

IA-Forum: Is the Saudi Government considering allowing for the formation of political parties in the upcoming elections?

Mr. Allagany: It's not on the drawing board right now.

IA-Forum: Do you foresee a time when Saudi Arabia could transform into a Constitutional Monarchy?

Mr. Allagany: I think that we probably already are. Our official Constitution is the Holy Koran, we're an Islamic state and there is a whole Islamic legal system that comes with it. But I don't know if we'll really be the same, besides that we already have a basic system of government and the Consultative Council that we established around twelve years ago. It serves as our type of civil constitution if you will. But I think just because we have a monarchy doesn't mean our citizens don't have a voice in government or that our leaders aren't in touch with the needs of citizens. There are methods that people can go through to seek redress on any issues or air any grievances.

IA-Forum: On October 11, 2004 Prince Naif bin Abd al-Aziz, the Saudi Interior Minister announced, with regards to the elections, to a Kuwaiti newspaper that “I do not think that women’s participation is possible.” What will it take to make women able to vote and run for office?

Mr. Allagany: We do plan on having women voting in the next elections. From what I understand, the reason they didn’t vote this time around was mostly logistical. There weren’t enough women who had National ID cards or picture IDs to go down and register to vote. There weren’t enough women volunteers to work at the voter registration booths or at the polling booths. But hopefully next time there will be enough women. This is also one of the reasons why we did it at the Municipal level.

IA-Forum: Saudi Arabia has come under fire a lot from various Human Rights groups, in fact the Freedom House has given Saudi Arabia a ranking of 7, or least free nation, how does the Saudi Government react to such charges?

Mr. Allagany: That report it was disappointing to us. I think a lot of information that was in that Freedom House report was inaccurate. As far as Human Rights go, I think we’ve always felt that Human Rights are in the eye of the beholder. There are certain rights and privileges that citizens have in Saudi Arabia that may not be available to other countries and there maybe things people take for granted in other countries that we don’t have in Saudi Arabia. I think a lot of this is culturally based.

One of the things we take a knock for is freedom of the press. Some people have said we don’t have freedom of the press, I think in our culture if someone has any issue they wouldn’t necessarily splash it across newspaper headlines, they’d take it directly to a person and settle their problem face to face, in our type of a culture.

But like I was saying, you can look at the United States, this is a great country, the last remaining superpower, and there are so many great things going on in this country. But some people in Saudi Arabia might say there’s some lack of Human Rights here in the United States. If you walk through the streets you see people sleeping in cardboard boxes, bag ladies, crack addicts, women forced to walk the streets as prostitutes, teenage runaways, people putting their elderly mothers in old age homes, all these gang wars, people wanting to go to school and they can’t afford it, people who need medical treatment and can’t afford it. You can say where are these peoples’ Human Rights? We don’t have those issues in Saudi Arabia. So I guess a lot of it is just from the perspective that you take a look at it from. I won’t be so quick to judge the United States in that regard because I realize that it’s a different culture over here and things are done

in a different way. If we judge each other by one another's cultural standards, there are always going to be shortcomings.

IA-Forum: In a recent speech to the Washington Center, you roughly stated that "everyone in Saudi Arabia everyone is Muslim, so there is no religious discrimination." I acknowledge that nearly every Saudi citizen is Muslim, but there is a Shiite Muslim minority, and there have been repeated allegations that there has been discrimination and even violence towards the Shiite Minority. How do you respond to such allegations?

Mr. Allagany: Well, if they have had these kinds of problems, especially violence, it hasn't been carried out by the government. There might be isolated cases where there is this kind of trouble among individuals; but it is against government policy to discriminate against Shiites in this manner. There are Shiites who hold government positions and there are Shiites who have been successful in their chosen fields. Shiites are entitled to the same educational opportunities, the same rights to own property, land, to worship how they please. It is illegal for someone to discriminate against them that way. If they feel they have been discriminated against, they can take legal recourse.

IA-Forum: In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the religions of Judaism and Christianity have been banned. Yet in the Koran, Surat Al-Maidah 5:82, it says: "Verily, those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." So if these religions are ok in the Koran, why are they banned in Saudi Arabia?

Mr. Allagany: Right, absolutely. A lot of people have said Islam, Saudi Arabians in particular, teaches that anyone who is not a Muslim is an enemy and must be hated, attacked, and killed. This is preposterous. You quoted one verse from the Koran but there are actually several verses which say all believers in God, specifically Christians and Jews, must be respected. We don't refer to these people as infidels, since Christians and Jews believe in the same God as Muslims believe in. It would be an insult to ourselves to refer to them in such a derogatory term, but we do want to maintain the Islamic identity of Saudi Arabia.

I think certain places are of special significance to certain religions. It is true that we don't have any other public houses of worship in Saudi Arabia other than Islamic Mosques. But then again if we go to a place like say Vatican City, you're not going to find any house of worship besides Christian Churches, or more specifically Catholic Churches. I don't think I would be welcome to build a Mosque and walk the streets and proselytize in a place like an Amish town in Pennsylvania or a Mormon town in Utah, or a Hasidic town in upstate New York.

And I'm not upset about that, I understand these places are of special significance to the people who follow the religion there.

Saudi Arabia is the Cradle of Islam, if you will; it is where the religion originated, where the prophet Mohammad was born; it's where the Holy Cities are. Islam is very intertwined with the culture there. I don't see that changing. It's not even a situation where the government is forcing this on the people. I think it's quite the contrary. If the government took measures to make Saudi Arabia less Islamic, it would be the citizens who would be up in arms about not wanting the Islamic identity of this land to change. There are people who have been living an Islamic lifestyle for centuries before Saudi Arabia was ever established. Hopefully, that won't change. I think for the most part, expatriate workers who go there have understood this. The only people who really complain about religious freedom in Saudi Arabia are missionaries who insisted on coming over and converting us; and to them we are saying thanks but no thanks. Now if they don't accept that maybe they're the ones trying to deny us our religious freedom. It's a delicate issue, but I don't really see the Islamic nature, identity of Saudi Arabia ever changing.

IA-Forum: Although women in Saudi Arabia are slowly receiving more education, they still are restricted in many ways. For example they are segregated from men in public gatherings, are forced to have a male family escort at all times, and are forbidden to drive...

Mr. Allagany: I can give you good answers to everything except the driving issue. I think women should be allowed to drive, and hopefully that will change. It might be done in stages where women of a certain age who work might be allowed to drive first and then hopefully, women of all ages.

I think in many ways, women in Saudi Arabia are entitled to rights and privileges that men don't have; they are put on pedestals. For instance, if a woman works, she's not obligated to spend money supporting the family; that is the man's obligation. Any salary a woman earns she can use as she pleases. But there again, it's another one of those cultural things where Saudi women have certain rights and privileges that women don't have here (U.S.); and there are things women can do here that they can't do over there.

I think a lot of this isn't really a religiously based thing; it is more of Saudi culture. There are Muslim women living in 57 predominately Muslim countries around the world today and if you look at the role of women in a Muslim country, say Indonesia or Nigeria, or Turkey, you'll find that it's different than the role of women within Saudi society. I think the role of women has changed a lot in Saudi Arabia over the years. Education is going to be the key to this type of change. We have more women enrolled in schools and universities in Saudi Arabia than we have men. As this younger generation of women becomes more

educated, we're finding more and more women become career orientated and getting out of the house and working.

One of the things we want to do is move along the changing role of women and all types of social change. But we've got to move it along slowly at a pace that our citizens can deal with. We don't want to go through the experience that Iran had back in the days of the Shah, where in addition to advancing technologically, they tried to change the society overnight and had a revolution. I think we tried to learn from that mistake, and move things along at a slow pace. Sometimes that pace isn't quite fast enough for our friends in the West, and sometimes people in our part of the world criticize us for changing too quickly. There really is no pleasing everybody when it comes to this. I think we really got to focus on maintaining peace and stability within the country regarding this issue rather than what our image is with people thousands of miles away. So it is definitely better to go the slow and steady route.

IA-Forum: Since the Mutawwa'in, or religious police have been described as being semi-autonomous, in what ways are they autonomous and what ways are they regulated by the government?

Mr. Allagany: They have lost a lot of their power over the years. They started out as people who did things like making sure that stores were closed during prayer time, or making sure that people were dressed in a conservative manner, and were not wearing clothes that were inappropriate with the culture there. They gained more and more power over the years, but it got to the point where I think they started to harass people and the government did a lot to curtail a lot of their power. This is especially been true since the War on Terror began a over the past few years. A lot of the people were found even to maybe have given sermons or preaching things that weren't in line with our vision of peace, so scores of them have been dismissed. So right now I think the Mutawwa'in will ever be completely gone but they certainly don't have as much power as they once had a number of years ago.

IA-Forum: What is the current Saudi position on the current crisis in your northerly neighbor, Iraq?

Mr. Allagany: Oh that's a big issue. We were initially opposed to having a military confrontation in Iraq; we really felt the diplomatic route hadn't been allowed to run its course. And there were other reasons too. We were for military confrontation back in 1991, in the Gulf War. But the Iraq of 1991 was not the Iraq of 2003 on many levels. Anyway, the war did take place and we can't really go back and change the past.

I think it would really just serve us best to focus on the future right now. We do want to see the transition to the new Iraqi regime happen as quickly and as smoothly as possible. I guess it was only to be expected that there would be some resistance, there would be some insurgency. But I think it will be best if the transition was made as smoothly as possible, with as little amount of bloodshed or no bloodshed if at all possible. We do want to help Iraq rebuild the country's infrastructure, financially, as much as possible and get its oil industry back up and running. They are a fellow member of OPEC so that's something that's going to make the cartel as a whole stronger.

We severed relations with Iraq back in the 1991 Gulf War, and we maintained it was not the Iraqi people we had a problem with but just the Iraqi regime, headed by Saddam Hussein. Once a new regime comes into place we are looking forward to reestablishing relations with them. Right now we are opening an embassy in Iraq and Iraq is opening an embassy in our country. This is a major new trading partner that we can have relations with. Overall we know Iraq is our neighbor and it would serve us better to be on good terms with them. I think at this point Iraq is ready to mend fences with a lot of people it wasn't on the best of terms with in the past, including Iran and the United States. So it's a new day for the Iraqi people and we wish them well.

IA-Forum: Would it be possible for Saudi Arabia, working through the Arab League to establish a multinational Arab force to assist in sealing Iraq's borders to prevent insurgents from entering into Iraq, especially since instability in a nation can easily spread to its neighbors?

Mr. Allagany: Yes, this is going on and it's a big issue. I don't know if an Arab League coalition could be put together to do something like this. It's probably too big an undertaking, maybe on a smaller level that's something that could be discussed at among the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council). Right now we, along with the United States, are definitely involved in trying to stop this. But I'm not sure what to think if we have a lot of countries doing that, there's always the old saying, "too many chefs spoil the broth". If we get so many people going in there, getting involved in this, it's tough to coordinate them all. So I would be inclined to think that an Arab League coalition to do this wouldn't be a good idea.

IA-Forum: Has the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had any problems with Saudi citizens who have gone to Iraq to join the insurgency, returning home and attempting to cause trouble?

Mr. Allagany: No, I don't think there has been a problem with them trying to come back. There have been people within Saudi Arabia who have indeed been trying to bring instability to the country, and there have been Saudi Arabians who have gone into Iraq. We have a long porous border with Iraq, and it's not just Saudi Arabians who have tried to cross the border to go in there; there are people from

a lot of countries. There might be people who come into Saudi Arabia on Hajj, Omra, or on work visas, or to visit somebody; and while they're there they figure that this is a good launching point to get into Iraq from. So we really have our hands full trying to stop this. But I don't think there's been a big issue of them coming back, they don't seem to have come back. A lot of these people have a martyrdom mentality, where they might not even plan on coming back.

IA-Forum: What steps is the Saudi government undertaking to prevent terrorists in Saudi Arabia from attempting a coup of the Royal Family?

Mr. Allagany: It's an on going battle and has been going on for a long time. We've done a lot, in terms of things like finances, to track and freeze the assets of anyone suspected of funding terrorism. And we have teams from the US FBI, IRS, Treasury Department in Saudi Arabia, doing this with us. Right now we're overhauling our banking system to ensure that all charitable contributions go to the purposes they were intended for. One of the Five Pillars of Islam is to donate money to charity, and in the past most of this money has been donated in cash, which is all but impossible to trace. We definitely want a more high tech banking system so we can trace this; and we've set up a special government agency that all charitable contributions go through.

There's also things like dismissing clerics, overhauling the materials in our education system to ensure that all, especially in this day and age of political correctness, there isn't anything that would excite any kind of hatred or violence towards other groups. I think we also want to focus on prevention, rather than a cure. I think a lot of the people who are inclined to groups, such as Al Qaeda, are young impressionable Saudis who might buy into these twisted ideologies of seventy two virgins in heaven and being a martyr. We want to teach them that no, this isn't a philosophy that you should be buying into and it's not what Islam teaches; they might have their own twisted interpretations of Islam, but this isn't the way anybody should be thinking. It's not something that we advocate, so we try to reach these people in Saudi Arabia's remote provinces, where they are away from the big cities and where they might be more vulnerable in that type of environment. But when it comes to stopping this kind of activity, I think all that can really be done is to weed out potential trouble makers and stop them in their activities before they harm anyone. For years before the September 11th attacks the Saudi government had been doing that. Back then the media here criticized us for not allowing dissidents their rights; after the September 11th attacks happened these people who used to be called dissidents are now called terrorists and this same media is asking why Saudi Arabia hasn't done more to stop them. So it's kind of been a situation of damned if we do, damned if we don't. But we've never condoned this type of action as justifying any ends and we definitely do want to do all we can to stamp it out.

IA-Forum: Roughly twenty years ago, the Saudi Government was deeply opposed to the Soviet Union, due to their official atheism and cruel record towards Muslim dissidents. Yet now, Saudi Arabia exports large quantities of oil to China, who too is an atheist state with a cruel record towards Muslims in its western provinces. What is the justification for this economic alliance?

Mr. Allagany: I don't know if there is a specific reason for this. The main reason we didn't have relations with these people wasn't just because they were atheist, but also we are staunchly anti-communist ourselves. We were afraid, maybe more of the impact that having relations with them and the influence they would have on the economy. But we do trade with China and there are lots of countries we trade with now. I guess the Winds of Change have just blown over and maybe the communist system doesn't seem as big a threat as it used to be after the fall of the Iron Curtain. I don't know if them being atheist is that would necessarily cause us to not have trade relations with them. I'm sure there are lots of atheists out there, not atheist nations, but atheist companies that may be owned by an atheist individual, atheist business man. So its something that in these days we've just gotten past.

IA-Forum: Beyond the strong oil trade relationship the US and Saudi Arabia enjoy, how do you view the US-Saudi relationship?

Mr. Allagany: There are lots of other relations we have with the US. A lot of people have said that the US-Saudi relationship was based on oil; I think that would be greatly oversimplifying the relationship. Politically I think we've always both thought of ourselves as stabilizing forces in a volatile part of the world. Specifically, the 1991 Gulf War further solidified US-Saudi relations. Even on the economic front, Saudi Arabia does over \$21 billion a year in commerce with the United States with most of it being non-oil. I really don't think oil is as big an issue as a lot of people thought it was going to be. There's the educational ties, most of the young Saudi college graduates we have gone to school here in the United States. One thing most people aren't aware of is that Saudi Arabia is home to the largest civilian American community outside the US. There's probably a good fifty thousand Americans living and working in Saudi Arabia, and there's been large numbers of them since back in the 1930s. Most of these Americans working in Saudi Arabia aren't working in the oil industry. Relations exist even on a social and cultural level: if you go to Saudi Arabia and turn on our TVs you'll find American TV shows, go to the video store and you'll get the latest American movies, go to the record store and you hear the latest American Top 40 music on sale there. We have English language newspapers and TV stations with American news. Our teenagers wear Nike Air Jordans; our wives shop at Pottery Barn, we all watch the Super Bowl on TV. If we didn't like these people, if we thought Americans were evil, the way some journalists would have you believe, I don't think we'd let their culture be so predominant in our country the way it has been. So the value of our relationship is way beyond oil. The vast

majority of our citizens value the relationship we have with the US, as our government certainly does. We're not about to let some individuals who are on the radical fringe drive a wedge in that relationship, that is one of their goals. We're not about to let them succeed in that.

IA-Forum: Last Summer I was at the OPEC headquarters in Vienna, Austria; and an OPEC official of Saudi citizenship, claimed that the worldwide oil supply would be depleted in 80 years. Firstly, does the Saudi government dispute his claims? And secondly, if either this fuel supply should run out or an alternative fuel source be discovered, what effect would this have on the Saudi US relationship?

Mr. Allagany: There might be more than that, but it's tough to say because we're still exploring and drilling for more and we're still finding more. It could go on a couple hundred years. This is something we've also had to be thinking about for quite awhile. I don't think the problem will be that Saudi Arabia runs out of oil, but what I think is much more likely is that alternate sources of fuel will be harnessed and that's already moving at a fast pace.

One of our major economic goals is to diversify and become as least dependent on the oil industry as we can. We've been trying to go about that in through variety of channels. One way has been by placing a high emphasis on education, if we can educate and train our citizens to be bankers or journalists or doctors; we can start getting into all these other fields and be less dependent on oil. Another way has been by providing long term, interest free loans to citizens who want to open up businesses. We have a government organization called the Saudi Industrial Development Fund, and if any citizen has a business plan, he or she can submit it to this agency and they can receive a long term interest free loan to do this. And I think we've made pretty good strides towards that end. If we go back thirty, forty years ago, maybe 80% of our government revenue came from the oil industry; now it's down to about 40-45%, which is still higher than we'd like it to be, but we've been able to chip away at it and we've just got to keep doing that over the next decade or two. If we can take the figure down to 20-25% we're going to be in pretty good shape. But this isn't going to be easy and we definitely are going to have our work cut out for us. It's going to take a lot of hard work but that's just one of those challenges that we got to try and meet.

IA-Forum: Except for a few advisors the US military is out of Saudi Arabia. How does this change the relationship between our two states, especially since many Saudis took offense to US troops in the Land of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina?

Mr. Allagany: During the Gulf War there were half a million US troops that came over. About five thousand of them remained in Saudi Arabia after the war to enforce the No Fly Zones (Northern and Southern No Fly Zones in Iraq) that

were part of the UN Ceasefire Resolution to the war. Once the Iraqi regime was overthrown, the No Fly Zone no longer applied and there was no reason for these US troops to remain in Saudi Arabia; so they came back on home. That certainly didn't mean that there wasn't any deterioration in US-Saudi relations, it just meant that the particular project had been completed. If there is a need for US troops to come to Saudi Arabia in the future, they will most certainly be welcomed. But I don't think our citizens really had any problem with the US troops being there.

Osama bin Laden did, the Al Qaeda network did, and that actually was the beginning of the source of friction between him and the Saudi government. He didn't want what he considers Infidels or Westerners coming and defending the Holy Lands of Saudi Arabia. At that time he had just got through leading the Afghan Mujahedin to their victory over the Soviet Union; he was high on himself and he felt that he could take on anybody at that point. He wanted to bring these people in to fight the Gulf War. We didn't want to go that route, because it would have been a land war rather than an air war, it would have taken a lot longer, it would have cost a lot more lives, and we don't see Americans or Westerners as Infidels. We also disagreed with his thought of not wanting Westerners to defend the Holy Lands, as well as the Holy Cities, particularly Mecca and Medina, that are all the way in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia - this war was being fought in the western part of Saudi Arabia, a thousand miles from the Holy Cities. So we never really bought into his ideas, which was the source of his trouble, and caused more and more dissent within Saudi Arabia at that time. Awhile later he left and took however much money he had. We really had no reason to hold him at that point, he clearly didn't have the rap sheet he accumulated later on. So we just let him go, he went to Sudan; he caused problems there and they asked him to leave, and then he went off and hid in the mountains of Afghanistan. I guess he's either there or in Pakistan still at this point.

IA-Forum: What steps do you think the government of Saudi Arabia and the United States must undertake to increase the stability of their relationship?

Mr. Allagany: That one I think is easy to answer. A lot of this comes down to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I think that's at the heart of most problems in the Middle East and I think that once we get this issue resolved, we'll see most of the problems of the Middle East dissipate. We would like to see an even handed US foreign policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. I think a lot of people have taken umbrage with a lot of what they perceive as a lot of double standards when it comes to Israel and Iraq.

There are only two countries in violation of UN Security Councils Resolutions. Iraq, which was in violation of sixteen and Israel which is in violation of over thirty. Now people in the region have seen the US repeatedly bomb Iraq ostensibly for being in violation of these UN resolutions, without even getting

approval from the UN beforehand, yet they do not even admonish Israel for its transgressions with the UN. To the contrary, US pours billions of dollars into fortifying the military of Israel so these violations can continue. I think it would be unrealistic to think some people won't take umbrage with this double standard. We understand Israel is a good ally of the United States, but we'd like to see the Americans show some tough love, if you will, towards the Israelis. We know violence isn't going to solve the problems of the Middle East and particularly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There's been violence going on between these two groups for sixty years now. If this conflict is going to be resolved, it must be done by observing international laws, specifically UN Resolutions, the Geneva Convention, and President Bush's Roadmap to Peace in the Middle East; all of which Israel is in grave violation of. We feel that the only people who can make the Israelis toe the line are the Americans. So if this would happen, I think it would work wonders for America's image in the Middle East.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Allagany.

Comments? Send them to editor@ia-forum.org

