

IF THE SAUDIS TAKE THEIR TOYS AND GO HOME, HAVE THEY STILL WON THE ARAB SPRING?

David Ignatius adds something to the reporting on the Saudis' snit that has been missing: situating it in America's decision in 2011 to let Hosni Mubarak fall.

The bad feeling that developed after Mubarak's ouster deepened month by month: The U.S. supported Morsi's election as president; opposed a crackdown by the monarchy in Bahrain against Shiites protesters; cut aid to the Egyptian military after it toppled Morsi and crushed the Brotherhood; promised covert aid to the Syrian rebels it never delivered; threatened to bomb Syria and then allied with Russia, instead; and finally embarked on a diplomatic opening to Iran, Saudi Arabia's deadly rival in the Gulf.

Of course, Ignatius depicts the Saudi version here, not reality. US condemnation of Bahrain's crackdown has been muted, and the US has started shipping arms again. This litany doesn't mention the Saudi-favored policies the US supported: overthrowing long-time Saudi annoyance Muammar Qaddafi, resolving the Yemeni uprising in such a way that largely maintained the status quo. And it's not the Brotherhood so much troubles the Saudis (indeed, they're supporting Islamic extremists elsewhere), but the notion of popular legitimacy (which is not to say Morsi had that when he was overthrown).

But it does reflect what I think is genuinely behind Saudi disengagement. After some setbacks in 2011 – notably, Mubarak's ouster, but also the need to increase its bribes to its own

people to ensure stability – the Saudis found a way to use the rhetoric of popular uprising selectively to pursue their own hegemonic interests. They believed they were on their way to do so in Syria, as well.

With the coup in Egypt and Obama's tepid response to it, however, the cost of popular legitimacy started to rise again. And with the US backing out of its efforts to use "rebels" (including foreign fighters) to oust Assad, Saudi's feigned support for popular legitimacy disappeared. That notion reverted to being just another force that might endanger the throne. And as the US gets closer to a deal with Iran – a development that significantly threatens Saudi leverage in our "special relationship" in any case – I suspect the Saudis decided a temper tantrum was necessary. More importantly, I worry they disengaged from the UN because they are considering alternative means of pursuing their interests, means that would be loudly condemned in that body.

The Saudis are running out of money and oil to ensure their own stability, and asserting greater hegemony over the Middle East presented a way to retain it. I assume they intend to keep pursuing that greater hegemony with us or against us.