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Whom the US cannot deny

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I HAVE meandered my way around the world, and 17 times landed myself in one of the world's most unwelcome countries. But I did what I did simply for religious reasons. One of the five pillars of Islam is the pilgrimage to Makkah, which every believer, and I am one, must take at least once in a lifetime if he is free of debt, in good health and fulfils other obligations.

In 1970 I made the haj in the company of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and the Mufti of Kelantan, Datuk Haji Mohamad Noor Ibrahim, the translator of the Quran into Malay which was sanctioned by the Government in the mid-1960s.

In all these trips, I learnt one thing - even in Islam's holiest city, money talked, talks and shall always talk.

Money can talk loud enough to brook no refusal. Oil money can do even more to lubricate assent. The West's habit of not saying no to the Arab petro-sheikh goes back at least to the first oil shock in 1973.

Saudi Arabia's King Faisal sanctioned an embargo on Oct 17 that year to punish the West for its support of Israel in the Arab-Israeli or Yom Kippur war that began 11 days earlier. Oil prices quadrupled, sending the industrial economies tumbling into recession. Muslims and most of the Third World rejoiced, until it was discovered that oil was a double-edged sword.

Made obscenely and excessively wealthy by not having to lift a finger, Gulf Arabs were and still are a byword for decadent luxury. There was a pile of baksheesh to be made from sycophancy. Gulling an Arab was a rite of passage as well as a running joke in financial and other circles in London, New York, Paris, Geneva and Frankfurt in the 1970s and 80s.

It took a while, but the Arabs eventually realised they were being taken for a high-mileage ride, to the growing resentment of those who had been left out of the money train at home.

For the West, the Arabs were and are an object of derision. Just read the following, which I quote from a documentary on Britain's Channel Four on Sunday of an interview of Denis Thatcher by her daughter Carol and reproduced in the Sunday Times: "I forget where it was, Bahrain or Abu Dhabi, somewhere like that," Thatcher said. "We arrived very late at night and we were being piled into our cars, and Barry (a police escort) whispered in my ear: 'When you get to the palace, sir, there's no water'. And I said, 'You're joking'.

"I had a bathroom half the size of the Albert Hall, vast place, all marble floors, marble walls, the lot. And a line of basins, you know, must have been about four, and there was no water. I turned them on. A tiny little drip, there's all it was. And I thought to myself, well, I'm going to need this probably. So I left the taps running all night.

"In the morning, I thought that it would be all right, there will be hot water. There was not a thing. Then I went along to Margaret's bedroom which was, you know, twice the size of the Queen's bedroom in Buckingham Palace and I said, 'You know there's no water'. She said, 'I know there's no water'. 'Well, I said, come to my bathroom and I'll give you a shower'.

"She said, 'You've got a shower there?' 'No', I said, 'I've got basinfuls of water I can scoop up with my hat. You come in'. She came in. I said, strip off, and she stripped off, and I threw the water in the air. I'm afraid it was a non-success, a complete non-success. Then she shoved off."

Still, though, the oil weapon is not what it used to be. Big Oil continues to gush into the highest corridors of power, making yes-men out of the Washington elite, up to and including President George W. Bush. Keeping the richest Arab establishment happy while nodding bountifully in the direction of their archenemy Israel is probably the most acrobatic juggling act in American foreign policy, in the past, present and future.

Most moneyed Arabs were legendarily Janus-faced - high-rolling in their second or third or holiday homes and hotel penthouses in the West, then switching to their flowing fundamentalist robes back home. It was not just a camouflage for hypocrisy.

Oil wealth encouraged its beneficiaries - out of atonement, duty or perhaps some higher calling - to devote some amounts of cash to charity, Islamic welfare and evangelism. Unfortunately, the donors didn't really care where the funds went to and had too much of it to care even less if it got into the wrong hands.

The question of diverted largesse would not have been raised if the driving force behind the profligacy of the House of Saud's mission had not been one of the most austere versions of Islam - Wahhabism.

The sect was founded in the remote Najd region of Arabia in the 18th century by the theologian Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab, who advocated a return to the sacred past of the time of the Prophet. After embracing the Najd's rulers, the House of Saud, the Wahhabis expanded through conquest and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire with the aid of the British to cover most of the Arabian Peninsula including the Hijaz, which contains Makkah and Madinah, Islam's two holiest sites.

The Wahhabi doctrine gave the Sauds the legitimacy they needed to take over the Hijaz from the Hashemite dynasty, the descendants of the Prophet who had ruled the holy land for a millennium.

To the consternation of the rest of the Muslim world, Sheikh Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, with British connivance, crowned himself King on Jan 8, 1926 and then declared the independence of the new Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, recognised immediately by London.

Four years later, his government signed an agreement with Standard Oil of California, beginning the country's hugely profitable (and profoundly demonic, according to present-day Muslim radicals) association with the world's largest oil consumer and now sole superpower, the United States.

Petrodollars, combined with the Saudi role as custodian of the holy places and protector of the pilgrimage, transformed Wahhabism from a harsh desert cult to a state religion and thence into a global export. It went much further than benign good works, seeping into madrasah and mosques across the world, often via the activism of ideologues with the fewest scruples and the most money.

Wahhabi influence even reached Malaysia, where its impact would have been greater had it not been for the solidity of our education system and religious institutions. The Indonesian Abu Bakar Bashir, alleged leader of the Jemaah Islamiyah, has a radical Wahhabi outlook, even though I believe he was never fed and clothed by a Saudi prince.

Understandably, the Saudis have denied their hand in the lifting of a Pandora's box of worldwide extremism, even after the proven infamy of Osama bin Laden and the Sept 11 hijackers, 15 of the 19 of whom were their fellow nationals. Until the Riyadh suicide bombings on May 12, Saudi Arabia, like Indonesia before the Bali attacks, was reluctant even to breathe the self-incriminating syllables of the word "al-Qaeda". Since then, however, it has arrested dozens of suspects.

The extremists continue to be busy. Yesterday, a luxury hotel in the Indonesian capital was car bombed, killing at least 10 and wounding over 100.

Not all Islamic fundamentalists are radicals. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and a majority of Malays are the former but not the latter. And not all radicals are terrorists. But vast wealth indiscriminately sowed can blur the lines between the three.

Many Muslims in Africa and South Asia and perhaps a few dribs and drabs in other parts of the world have good reasons to be grateful for Saudi generosity. But the well-financed tendrils extruded by the Wahhabi movement have plunged so deeply into the bedrock of Muslim discontent that suspicions have been aroused about Saudi complicity in the Sept 11 atrocities and Islamic terrorism.

Oil riches have created inequality and social tensions in Saudi Arabia, so there is a hunch that the lavish royal family has been provoked into sponsoring ever more fanatical Islamic causes at home and abroad in order to sustain its privileges and stay in power.

Osama finances such causes and is a hero among radical Islamists.

The deletion of 28 pages from a lengthy US Congressional report on Sept 11 has fuelled the suspicions even more. Riyadh has protested vehemently at the innuendoes raised by the missing pages. Bush came to the Saudis' rescue by defending the decision not to declassify for fear of compromising intelligence sources and methods while investigations were continuing.

The US administration has an even more ingrained habit of not saying no to another and more evident root cause of terror in the Middle East - the Israeli government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

After a meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas on July 25, Bush criticised the building of an Israeli security fence that extended into the West Bank. Four days later, he stood by as Sharon - a frequent and welcome visitor to the White House - insisted on the construction of the fence with the tepid promise of minimising its impact on the Palestinians.

Between the political survival of two of its closest friends in the region, the Bush administration's delicate balancing manoeuvres can hardly hope to find a foothold in the epicentre of global terrorism.

Until it can say no, and subdue its vested interests in Arab oil and the electoral clout of the Jewish lobby, America can expect to wage its war on terrorism without victory for a long time to come.

Well, I can say this unequivocally: that Bush's relatively gentle response to the Jewish state's unyielding advocacy of the security fence is meant to help out Sharon's politics. All the world must know that not even Bush nor his successors can stop the Zionist lobby in the US in these current conditions. As much as it might want to, Washington will find its ability to aid the Arabs constrained, not least by the diminishing number of Arabists in US bureaucracy and politics.