

ABDALLAH TAHER DABBAGH (1939-2000): IN MEMORIAM

By
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(Riyadh - November 2, 2000) A great many Americans will be saddened to learn of the loss of a dear friend, Abdallah Taher Dabbagh. Members and supporters of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, the National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, numerous other groups, virtually all of the U.S. ambassadors and key embassy staff assigned to Saudi Arabia for the past quarter of a century -- these are but a few of those who knew Abdallah well and will miss him. Abdallah, former longtime Secretary General of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CSCCI) and at his passing a member of Saudi Arabia's Majlis ash-Shura (Consultative Council), died suddenly of a heart attack at his home in Riyadh yesterday. He was just two weeks shy of his 61st birthday.

Only a few hours before his passing, Abdallah, his wife Noleen, and I had talked at length about old times and present events -- the new Palestinian Intifada, the upcoming U.S. presidential elections -- and had planned for just the three of us to have a quiet dinner at their home tonight. But that was not to be. Instead, more than a thousand mourners filled the Al-Rajhi Mosque in Al-Rabwah District this afternoon for Asr prayers and services in memory of Abdallah prior to his burial immediately afterwards.

Almost non-stop for a period spanning most of the past generation, Abdallah was an indefatigable activist in Saudi Arabian public affairs. He was seldom far from the center of the increasingly prominent role being played by the private sector in his country's national development process. He came to this role naturally, as one of the scions within his family's Dabbagh Group of Companies, a highly successful commercial conglomerate. As proof of his business acumen, Abdallah served on the boards of several of the Kingdom's showcase industrial ventures, including the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu, Saudi Cable Company, National Company for Industrial Services, and the Saudi Export Promotion Center.

Before becoming secretary-general of the consortium grouping all eighteen of the Kingdom's chambers of commerce, Abdallah, over a fifteen-year period, had held a succession of positions in the Ministry of Commerce. A common theme to all of them and for which his personality was a perfect match, was the promotion of foreign investment in the Kingdom and the export of Saudi Arabian products, particularly to Great Britain and the United States. He was a stalwart in helping to cement further the already strong ties between the Kingdom's business sector and its counterparts in these two countries as well as in other nations in Asia and Europe.

FROM FATHER TO SON

Abdallah was born in Makkah, the youngest son of a large and distinguished branch of Ashraf (i.e. descendents of the Prophet Mohammad's extended family

and his closest companions). Indicative of the family's size and the closeness between and among its members is the fact that it annually holds a reunion after the month of Ramadhan in Jeddah, to which more than 200 relatives come from all over the world, and for which Abdallah was seldom if ever absent.

Abdallah's father, the late Taher Dabbagh, played a role as unique as any public servant could have played at a crucial turning point in the making of modern Saudi Arabia. At the end of World War I, he served as Minister of Education in what was then the twilight era of the Ottoman Empire, under the Hashemite administration of Sharif Hussein, the Custodian of the Two Holy Places of Makkah and Madinah. Later, he also served as Saudi Arabian King Abdalaziz's ("Ibn Saud's") first Minister of Education.

In addition, King Abdalaziz appointed Taher chairman of Saudi Arabia's first Majlis ash-Shura, a quasi-parliamentary body of notables that deliberated a range of public policy issues in the Hijaz. This was during the 1920s, when the Hijaz, the mountainous and Red Sea coastal region now known as the Kingdom's Western Province, was a separate political entity from what is now the Central Province of the Najd, where Riyadh, the capital is located.

That initial Majlis contained the seed of what would come into being many years later; namely, a national 60-member Majlis ash-Shura. In the eyes of many, it was but only fitting that Abdallah, given his own prominent role in an area of public affairs of growing importance, would be appointed to the new Majlis when it was established in 1994, and that he would be reappointed in 1998, when the Council's membership was expanded to 90 deputies.

The link between father and son in this regard is important to note for another reason. Taher Dabbagh's reputation as being from the Ashraf, and as a leader on his own account, was well established. But his reputation for moral probity and integrity, as well as for personal and physical courage, was legendary. In the early 1920s -- when others feared they might be arrested or killed for doing so, and therefore refused to accompany him -- he went alone to Sharif Hussein, the last of the Hashemite line to rule the Hijaz in what was then, as it had been for the previous five centuries, part of the Ottoman Empire.

Taher Dabbagh's message to Sharif Hussein could not have been sharper and more to the point had it been an arrow through his heart: your and your family's time as commanders and stewards of the faithful is over. You have but one of two choices. Either remain and stand and fight, with the certain knowledge that you will face an ignoble defeat and everlasting humiliation, or abdicate in favor of Abdalaziz bin Abdalrahman Al-Sa'ud and depart in peace with your honor intact.

Sharif Hussein opted to abdicate. He left Arabia and, after a time in Cyprus pondering what his future might be, was appointed by the British, with the sanction of the League of Nations, as King of what shortly became the British Mandate of Trans-Jordan.

Therein began a chapter in Middle Eastern history that, coupled with the saga of the parallel British Mandate for Palestine, has yet to be closed, as the resumption of yet another Palestinian uprising in protest against Israel's illegal occupation of their land has made all too clear. In Sharif

Hussein's place, the Al-Sa'ud, with the help of Taher Dabbagh, who had cleared the way and averted what could easily have been a disaster, were welcomed into Jeddah without resistance, and they have governed there and throughout the rest of the country ever since.

In his later years, Abdallah's father continued to contribute to the Kingdom's welfare, albeit, in retirement, at a step once removed from public life. Until his passing, Taher Dabbagh never ceased to instill in his legions of admirers a love of learning, a passion he passed on to Abdallah and all of his other children.

A friend who for many years headed the public relations department of Saudi Aramco once told me that, when he was a small boy growing up in Makkah, Abdallah's father used to read to him and was a major source of inspiration in his own quest for scholarly knowledge.

The unparalleled scholarly periodical, "Aramco Magazine," and also, "Aramco and Its World," the invaluable reference work on Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Arabia as a whole, are but two byproducts of the range of Taher Dabbagh's influence as an educator and a scholar that extended long after his passing.

Until the end, Abdallah shared many of his father's interests in intellectual pursuits and public affairs. Barely two weeks before his passing, the National Council's board of directors on October 19 elected Abdallah to be the Council's International Affairs Fellow in 2002, upon his scheduled retirement from the Majlis. In addition to being a Fellow at the Council, and simultaneously as a Joseph Volpe Commercial Affairs Fellow with the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, Abdallah hoped to continue his graduate studies in international relations, possibly with a view to pursuing his doctorate.

Like many in public life, Abdallah remained a crypto-student on the side. It was in this capacity that I first met him in the 1970s when he enrolled as a graduate student in the Masters in International Public Policy studies program at the Johns Hopkins School of International Studies (SAIS) in Washington. His efforts to meet what were demanding standards were successful but could not have been easy, for he was simultaneously posted as Commercial Counselor to the Embassy of Saudi Arabia.

Earlier, Abdallah had graduated with a Bachelors Degree from the University of Colorado in Boulder, where he developed an unending passion for and loyalty to the Denver Broncos. As National Council board member Jean AbiNader recalls, Abdallah was the first person in Riyadh to arrange for a cable pipeline from the diplomatic community to his home so that he could watch the Broncos. All who knew him will acknowledge that Abdallah's abiding passion for the Broncos far exceeded the norm.

THE SAUDI ARABIAN-U.S. BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

In terms of furthering the Saudi-U.S. and broader GCC-U.S. commercial relationships there are few who have stayed the course as long as Abdallah. He was involved in the GCC-U.S. Economic and Business Dialogues from their inception in the mid-1980s and remained engaged in these deliberations straight through until he retired from the Council of Saudi Chambers to join

the Majlis ash-Shura as a deputy and member of its Economic and Commercial Affairs Committee.

Abdallah's parliamentary role became merely another forum, albeit one much more directly related to matters of public policy, in which he was able to focus on many of the same issues that he had addressed when he was with the chambers. Earlier, one of Abdallah's most important contributions in search of increased trade, investment and the formation of joint business ventures between our two countries was when he served as Deputy Chairman and then Chairman of the Federations of Arab Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

No less important a chapter in Abdallah's life and legacy is his contribution to the two successful U.S. Administration attempts to sell Saudi Arabia U.S.- manufactured advanced aircraft and air defense systems. The two attempts occurred during the later years of the Carter administration and the early years of the Reagan administration.

As a specialist will recall, these were two of the most hotly contested campaigns in history as to whether or not to enable one of America's Arab allies to strengthen its deterrence and defense capabilities in the face of threats emanating from the Iran-Iraq war that was being waged but minutes away.

In the end, a de facto coalition of Administration officials and U.S. aerospace and defense industry corporate executives, with the help of Saudi Arabian government representatives, of which Abdallah was one of the most important and most active, prevailed.

As a result, the lives of thousands of Saudi Arabians and Americans living in the Kingdom's Eastern Province were spared, as the Iran-Iraq war and the Iranian revolution threatened for a considerable period of time to spread to Saudi Arabia and, but for the deterrence and defense capability that these two defense systems represented, might well have happened.

On these and other occasions, Abdallah personified what has been termed the "special relationship." The phrase is an apt one for describing how many people in America and Arabia feel about the nature and extent of the Saudi Arabian-U.S. relationship, dating, as it does, from the 1930s to the present. Certainly from an American perspective, Abdallah was special to a lot of people. Not least among the reasons was his ability to speak our language so clearly and forcefully, and with great effect in support of his country's interests wherever he happened to be and whatever the occasion. Here is where his wife, Noleen, as his best friend, tutor and most trusted confidante was his greatest asset.

WIT AND WISDOM

In charming American listeners with his wit and wisdom, Abdallah would sometimes slip into his conversations the fact that he was a Broncos fan and that he hoped they were, too. But he was never boorish about this and indulged the passion only if he knew that his listeners were also (American) football fans. Just as often, in any chat about contemporary affairs, it would also become apparent all too quickly that Abdallah knew as much about American domestic politics as any U.S. citizen did, if not more. Literally decades before campaign finance reform became a national cause celebre in the

United States, Abdallah bemoaned what he outspokenly described as the corrupting power of money and lobbies -- especially those that labored in support of foreign interests -- in American governance.

"Money is the mother's milk of politics" is a phrase that Abdallah picked up from a U.S. Senator who befriended him and became his unofficial advisor on Congress and American politics in the 1970s. It became one of his stock-in-trade aphorisms that he often used to describe how he viewed the formation of many U.S. policies. "Dollarocracy" was another zapper that he would use from time to time to get people's attention in order to make them see how the American system of government was viewed by many from abroad.

Bon vivant, sports enthusiast, student of politics and power, public servant with a penchant for commenting productively on whatever government officials were not doing and what they needed to do -- Abdallah was a rare human being with a one-of-a-kind personality whose irrepressible charm won him many friends.

In lighter moments, what many will recall with special fondness was his exceptional sense of humor. Indeed, I don't think I have ever met another person, American or Arab, who loved to laugh, and to make others laugh, as much as Abdallah did. Often when one was not very far into a conversation with him, if the topic was not too serious, he would change the subject, and ask, "Say, have you heard the one about...?" and then would let loose a string of lyrics and one-liners that made you laugh so hard it hurt.

Once I was sitting next to him at an event in Riyadh where formal remarks were being made by a string of after dinner speakers. Almost all of them were either our longtime friends or acquaintances. As one of the windier ones droned on for a bit too long, Abdallah murmured in my ear something to the effect of, "How much longer is this guy going to go on?" When the speaker finished shortly thereafter, Abdallah sprang from his seat and said, "Sir, on behalf of my colleagues, I just wanted to say thank you very much for your eloquent remarks, which, as you can see, I found uplifting. I can't tell you how much all of us are impressed by the viscosity and velocity of your verbosity."

In any conversation with Abdallah about U.S. politics, he had the knack of quickly being able to make his American listeners wonder why it is that there are so few among us apart from those of Arab ancestry and the career Arabists that are able to navigate within Arab and Islamic culture as effectively and comfortably as he could within American society.

Certainly, most people would be hard-pressed to name more than a handful of Americans who are as adept at functioning as successfully in the GCC region or elsewhere in Arabia as successfully as Abdallah was at functioning in the United States. What was truly remarkable was the way that he was able to do so in a way that was unfailingly supportive not just of his own country's interests but of America's as well. In this, he was truly gifted.

Many of Abdallah's and my mutual friends are aware that I was his teacher when he was at SAIS. Some also know that, forever afterwards, he would delight in introducing me to people with the line, "Have you met my mentor, I mean my tormentor?" But when the laughter died down, perhaps few could have also known that both way back then, when he was my student, and for

years afterwards, straight through until the end, was equally true, he was my and many others' teacher too.

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