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Revealed: British Royals Met Tyrannical Middle East Monarchies over 200 Times Since Arab Spring Erupted 10 Years Ago

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Britain's royal family has met members of autocratic Middle Eastern monarchies nearly once a fortnight since the crackdown on 'Arab Spring' protests began 10 years ago this month. Their visits have often coincided with human rights abuses in the Gulf, where pro-democracy activists are punished for criticising the Windsor ties to regimes.

The extent of support given by Britain's royal family to repressive Middle Eastern monarchies in the decade since pro-democracy uprisings rocked the region is revealed this week in a four-part investigation by *Declassified UK*.

Ten years since the 'Arab Spring' protests threatened autocrats from Morocco to Oman, all of the region's eight ruling monarchies remain in power, having spent a decade cracking down on dissent and largely backtracking on promises of reform.

Middle Eastern monarchs have routinely banned political parties, severely repressed dissent and shut down independent newspapers. But while killing, torturing or detaining subjects who call for reform or expose corruption, the UK's royal family was willing to meet the region's monarchies on 217 occasions since 2011, it can be revealed.

The total figure is likely to be higher as the Court Circular, the royal family's official diary, is not comprehensive. Available records show that meetings between the House of Windsor and Bahrain's brutal monarchy were the most frequent, with 44 encounters.

	BAHRAIN: 44 meetings	**Ruled by Al Khalifa family since 1783. Dozens killed and hundreds tortured in 2011 uprising. Leaders of Arab Spring sentenced to life imprisonment. Largest opposition parties banned, free press shut down.**
	SAUDI ARABIA: 40 meetings	**Ruled by House of Saud since 1932. Political parties banned, no free press, opposition activists beheaded, women not allowed to drive until 2018, supported Bahrain crackdown, leads Yemen war.**
	JORDAN: 29 meetings	**Ruled by Hashemite dynasty since 1946, which picks prime minister and the cabinet. Some elected representatives allowed but the law criminalises criticism of the King and government officials while activists are often arrested.**
	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: 28 meetings	**Ruled by dynasties across the seven emirates, dominated by Abu Dhabi. Political parties banned, no free press, opposition activists in prison, sweeping surveillance powers, runs network of torture chambers in Yemen.**
	QATAR: 25 meetings	**Ruled by House of Al Thani since 1847. An absolute monarchy where, after Arab Spring, Emir promised to hold elections for a powerless advisory council in 2013, but first vote delayed until October 2021. Regime provided arms and aid to extremist Islamist groups in Syria and Libya after 2011.**
	KUWAIT: 22 meetings	**Ruled by House of Al Sabah since 1752. The hereditary Emir is the head of state who appoints a prime minister and can dissolve the National Assembly, which is elected but has limited powers, Most key ministries in Cabinet are held by Al Sabah family members.**
	OMAN: 22 meetings	**Ruled by House of Al Said since 1749. Hundreds arrested and several killed in 2011 uprising. Political parties banned, free press shut down, custodial offence to insult the Sultan.**
	MOROCCO: 7 meetings	**Ruled by Alaouite dynasty since 1631. A constitutional monarchy with a multi-party system but where laws restrict criticism of the monarchy and protesters, journalists and human rights groups are repressed. Hundreds arrested and several killed in 2011 uprising.**

Gulf princes in charge of notorious internal security units, such as Saudi Arabia's national guard, had repeated meetings with British royals, with visits sometimes coinciding with those countries' worst abuses of human rights or support to hardline Islamist forces in the wars in Libya and Syria.

Prince Andrew met the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi at his lavish Bateen Palace the same day a court jailed five Emirati activists on charges that included insulting the country's leadership. Among those convicted was an economics professor from Sorbonne university in Paris.

The King of Bahrain's son, Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who is accused of involvement in the torture of activists during the Arab Spring, has met the UK royal family up to seven times since 2011, including at Windsor Castle.

Declassified has also identified at least six occasions when pro-democracy activists or their relatives were punished in retaliation for speaking out against the House of Windsor's support for Gulf regimes.

In Oman, a man was tortured for criticising the Sultan's costly decision to fly 110 horses to Windsor for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Pageant in 2012. The next year, when the man tried to demonstrate against a visit by Prince Charles, he was abducted by Omani security forces.

In Bahrain, a woman and her baby were detained and interrogated after her exiled husband protested against King Hamad's visit to London in 2016. The man had already had his Bahraini citizenship revoked for protesting against the king's presence at the Royal Windsor Horse Show in 2013.

Foreign policy tool

Prince Charles accounted for nearly half of the Windsors' meetings with Arab royalty, followed by Prince Andrew, who recorded 70 encounters – not including the large number of meetings he held with private businessmen from the Gulf dictatorships.

Four of Prince Andrew's meetings were with Sheikh Abdullah, the King of Bahrain's second son, who paid millions of dollars for pop star Michael Jackson to live in Bahrain after the singer's acquittal on child molestation charges.

Although the UK monarchy is supposedly apolitical, its overseas visits are planned by a Royal Visits Committee in the Cabinet Office and chaired by the head of the Foreign Office.

The committee has input from trade officials, senior palace staff and prime ministerial aides, including his national security advisor. Trips aim to boost British interests in the Middle East – largely arms sales or energy deals worth billions of pounds for companies such as BAE Systems.

As far back as 1974, with Britain becoming more dependent on Gulf oil, the Foreign Office noted:

> "There is clearly advantage in encouraging further contacts between members of the Royal Family and the Saudi Royal Family, who occupy most of the positions of power in the country."

Veteran diplomats, as well as military and intelligence officers – many on temporary leave from Whitehall or the armed forces – routinely travel with British royals on trips to the Middle East as part of their entourage.

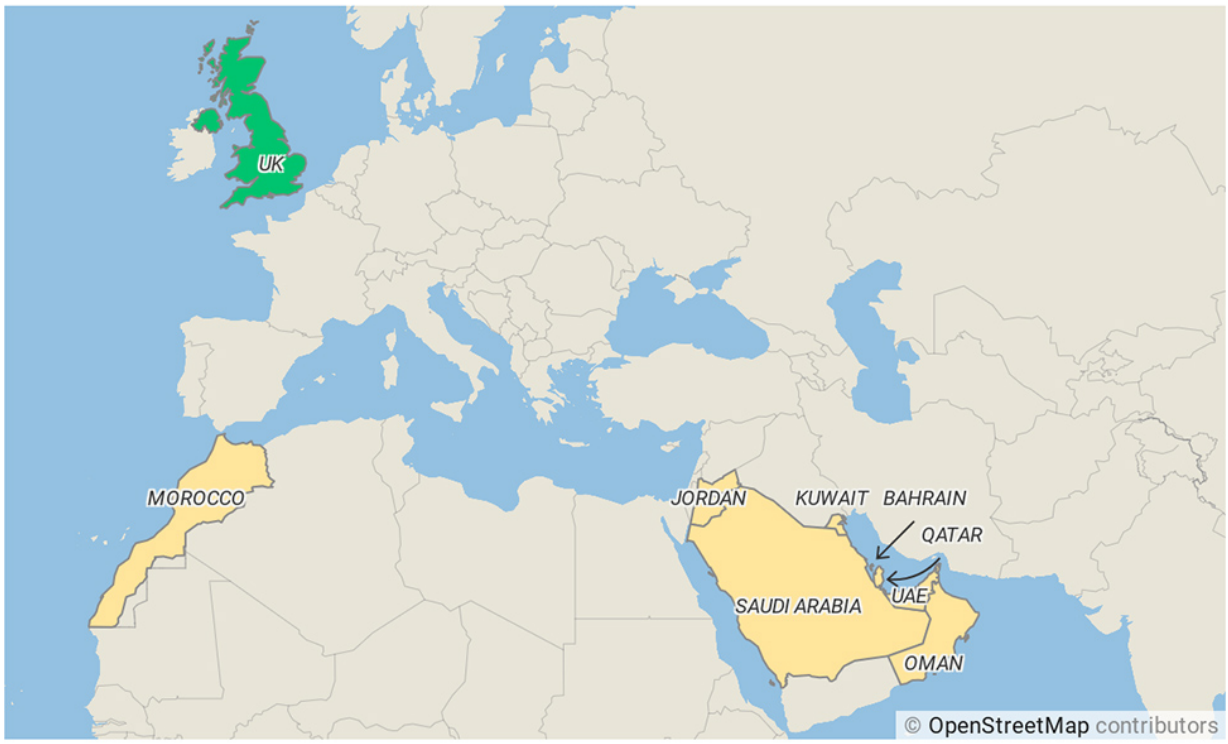
These aides have included: Simon Martin, who later became ambassador to Bahrain; Clive Alderton, later envoy to Morocco; the current Cabinet Secretary Simon Chase, a former GCHQ strategy director; and Jamie Bowden, a GCHQ and army veteran who had served as UK ambassador to Oman and Bahrain during the Arab Spring.

Through these visits, UK royals help promote controversial British policy in the region, often appearing to relish the opportunity to demonstrate their support for autocrats – as shown by Prince Charles' participation in a sword dance in Saudi Arabia at a crucial moment in the negotiation of an arms deal.

Meetings in the UK with Arab royalty often occur back-to-back with trips to Downing Street, or overlap with sessions where government ministers are present at royal palaces.

In 2012, while an Omani protester was being tortured, the Queen held an intimate lunch at Buckingham Palace for the Sultan of Oman, his British adviser Sir Erik Bennett and foreign secretary William Hague.

Map of monarchies in Middle East and North Africa



Map: Phil Miller/Declassified UK • Created with Datawrapper

Far from being a passive player in British foreign policy, the House of Windsor is able to draw on its personal friendships with Middle Eastern monarchs to enhance UK relations, through shared interests such as horse riding and lavish jewellery.

During her reign, the Queen has received millions of pounds worth of jewels from Middle Eastern monarchs including a gold Faberge style egg from Oman, pearls from Qatar and diamonds from the House of Saud.

King Hamad of Bahrain is a regular guest at the annual Royal Windsor Horse Show, where he was photographed laughing with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Andrew, and once reportedly chose to attend the event instead of meeting President Obama.

Queen Elizabeth and the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, 71, have gifted racehorses to each other and regularly appeared together at competitions.

In June 2019 the Queen presented a trophy to Sheikh Mohammed's racing team at Ascot, despite long-standing rumours that he had abducted two of his adult daughters when they tried to leave the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Queen Elizabeth presents a horse racing award to Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed (centre) at Ascot in June 2019 (Photo: Dubai Media Office)

A week after the Ascot award, news broke that Sheikh Mohammed's wife, 46-year-old Jordanian princess Haya, was seeking a divorce and had claimed asylum in Germany.

Haya later won a high court case in London against her husband, who was found to have kidnapped his daughters, prompting the palace to say the Queen would no longer be photographed in public with him.

Last week new video evidence emerged that one of Sheikh Mohammed's daughters, Princess Latifa, is being held against her will in a secure villa in Dubai. The UAE embassy in London claims she "is being cared for at home".

The House of Windsor has met Emirati royals at least 28 times since the Arab Spring, including hosting a state visit.

Costs and secrecy

Official overseas trips are funded by the British public, who have spent £1.4-million on royal family tours of Middle East monarchies since 2011, analysis of palace finances by *Declassified* has found.

The true figure is likely to be far higher, because palace records are incomplete and do not show trips under £10,000.

In one case, Prince Charles spent £210,000 on an overnight trip to Oman, where he mourned the death of Sultan Qaboos, an autocrat who ruled the country for half a century.

A spokesman for Prince Charles told *Declassified*:

> "All decisions relating to travel are made taking into account the time available, costs and the security of the travelling party."

Other meetings in the UK frequently take place at royal palaces maintained with public funds: the family received a £82.4-million "sovereign grant" from the taxpayer last year.

Many of the meetings are shrouded in secrecy because the royal family is not required to release its documents under the Freedom of Information Act.

The royal family's official archive is also off-limits to almost all researchers, but is known to contain sensitive material such as video footage of the Queen giving a Nazi salute.

Where central government departments such as the Foreign Office hold records of royal meetings, they do not have to disclose anything to the public that relates to the Queen, Prince Charles or Prince William.

Diplomatic records relating to less senior royals, such as Princes Andrew and Harry, are subject to a public interest test and may or may not be publicly disclosed.

The National Archives, which contains Foreign Office records from more than 20 years ago, has its own censorship board, whose staff in recent years have included Dr Elizabeth Lomas, then an adviser to Prince Charles and a former head of records management for the royal family.

A 40-year-old file about the Royal Visits Committee, the body which plans overseas trips, is being withheld from the National Archives.

WikiLeaks released some US embassy cables from the years leading up to the 2011 Arab Spring, which confirmed the importance of royal visits as a tool of UK foreign policy. One US report noted that a visit to Riyadh by Prince Charles and his wife Camilla in 2006 "played a role in rebuilding Saudi-U.K. ties" after tensions caused by a corruption investigation into arms deals.

A British diplomat said that during the visit, "members of the two royal families spoke at length about their respective family members and traditions allowing the House of Saud and the House of Windsor [to] build upon their royal commonality".

A US consulate official in Jeddah commented that Prince Charles' visit was "part of this effort… to improve relations with Saudi Arabia. At stake is the renewal of the al-Yamamah project to which British Aerospace's fortunes in the Kingdom are largely tied." The Al-Yamamah project is a multi-billion pound arms deal to supply the Saudi regime with war planes.

A Buckingham Palace spokesperson told *Declassified*:

> "Official engagements with other Heads of State are undertaken on the advice of government. We do not comment on The Queen's private engagements."

A Foreign Office spokesperson told *Declassified*:

> “Official royal visits are undertaken by Members of the Royal Family at the request of the Government to support British interests around the globe. The Royal Visits Committee makes the recommendations on where to visit, these recommendations are approved by HMG [Her Majesty’s Government] and Her Majesty The Queen.
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> “Any private visits, or working visits on behalf of other organisations, are a matter for the Royal Household or the relevant organisation. Travel costs for official visits made at the request of HMG are met by the Sovereign Grant – details of which are published by the Palace.”

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