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# The Role of Iran Policy the Saudi-American Rift

Christopher Parmly

Florida International University, [cparm002@fiu.edu](mailto:cparm002@fiu.edu)

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE ROLE OF IRAN POLICY IN THE SAUDI-AMERICAN RIFT.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

by

Christopher Parmly

2015

To: Dean John Stack  
Green School of International and Public Affairs

This thesis, written by Christopher Parmly, and entitled The Role of Iran Policy in the Saudi-American Rift, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Naisy Sarduy

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Iqbal Akhtar

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Felix Martin, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 13, 2015.

The thesis of Christopher Parmly is approved.

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Dean John Stack  
School of International and Public Affairs

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE ROLE OF IRAN POLICY IN THE SAUDI-AMERICAN RIFT

by

Christopher Parmly

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Felix Martin, Major Professor

This thesis explores what effect Saudi and American policy differences towards Iran have had on their bilateral relations. It is based on the recent thaw in Iran-U.S. relations, and the critical reaction of the Saudi government towards this policy. The question has two components – first, how severe the current Saudi-American rift is, and second, to what extent it can be traced to their differences over Iran. The topic will be addressed through process-tracing methods.

The thesis concludes that there is indeed a rift in Saudi-U.S. relations marked by an increasingly assertive and independent Saudi foreign policy, though its alliance with America will likely endure. It also concludes that while the thaw in relations between Iran and the U.S. on the nuclear issue was not ultimately the major factor, more general differences over Iran are one of the most significant reasons for the Saudi-U.S. rift.

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## CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

### **Premise of Thesis.**

The last five to six years have witnessed a remarkable thaw in relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The earliest signs of this came during the 2008 presidential campaign, when then-candidate Barack Obama first expressed a willingness to speak to Iran without preconditions, possibly offering economic inducements and a promise to stop seeking regime change in Iran, if Iran in turn were willing to make similar concessions on issues of importance to the United States. In the early years of the Obama presidency, not much progress was made along these lines, and American sanctions on Iran actually increased. However, these electoral musings were given a new substance in late 2013, when it was revealed that the American and Iranian governments had been negotiating for months in the hopes of reaching a final resolution to the problem of Iran's nuclear program, satisfying both the American desire to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, and the Iranian desire for an end to the sanctions regime. Despite serious criticism in both nations and from various allies, the negotiation process continued since then, finally culminating on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015 with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran, the United States, and the other major powers with sanctions on Iran (Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China), in which Iran agreed to severe restrictions on and inspections of its nuclear energy program in exchange for a loosening of the sanctions regime.

In Saudi Arabia, however, official policy during the same time period has run in the opposite direction. As a regional rival of Iran, Saudi Arabia has long been concerned

about the possibility of an Iranian nuclear bomb. However, those concerns have often been expressed in very moderate terms; as a Rand Corporation report from 2009 summarized it, Saudi Arabia sought to manage the nuclear threat “through accommodation rather than confrontation,” publicly opposing a possible American military action, and calling for turning the region into a WMD-free zone.<sup>1</sup> This policy has been dramatically altered since then: in 2009, the Saudi foreign minister publicly stated that Iran’s nuclear program required “a more immediate solution than sanctions.”<sup>2</sup> In 2011, senior diplomat Prince Turki Al-Faisal stated that Saudi Arabia “cannot live in a situation where Iran has nuclear weapons and we don’t” and that his country would feel compelled to “pursue policies which could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences,” even suggesting that it would “follow suit,” if Iran were to develop a nuclear bomb.<sup>3</sup> Despite longstanding concerns about Iran’s nuclear program, these new expressions of strength were unprecedented in Saudi discourse. Similar grave concern has been expressed since the revelation of the Iranian-American nuclear negotiations, with King Salman’s decision not to attend a Camp David conference on regional security in May, 2015 seen by some as a deliberate rejection of President Obama’s policy. In short, the Saudi Kingdom has begun, at least rhetorically, to assert itself and express its own foreign policy interests in a way that directly opposes the current goals of the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*, The Rand Corporation, 2010, page 98.

<sup>2</sup> “Arms Deal: Saudi Arabia and U.S. Put 9/11 Behind Them,” *The Guardian*, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/13/arms-deal-saudi-arabia-us>.

<sup>3</sup> “Riyadh Will Build Nuclear Weapons If Iran Gets Them,” *The Guardian*, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/29/saudi-build-nuclear-weapons-iran>.



My thesis subject grew out of an interest in these policy shifts in both countries. The question I am trying to answer is, what effect have America's recent openings towards Iran and specifically its negotiations on the nuclear question had on the Saudi-American security relationship? There are two levels to the question "what effect." The first is how the two countries have drifted apart and how they have remained together since the beginning of the American openings to Iran; it requires a study of whether the differences reflect real changes in the relationship, going farther than public expressions of concern. The second is to what extent the current rift is, in fact, a result of the American opening to Iran, as opposed to other potential factors – for example, a greater need for self-assertion on the part of the Saudis given the perceived American withdrawal from the region.

### **Significance of the Research Project.**

This topic deals with an issue of great importance to the United States at the moment, the effects of its Middle East policy. The region has been one of the most important areas of focus for U.S. foreign policy at least as far back as the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, if not the Gulf War of 1991. Among the countries of the region, Saudi Arabia has been one of the pillars of the U.S. alliance system for even longer than that – a particularly important one given its oil resources; its status as an Arab Sunni state and guardian of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and correspondingly close relations with many other such countries; its proximity to America's main antagonists in the region (Iraq and, now, Iran); and the fact that it is one of the major powers still standing despite the turmoil that has engulfed other regional players like Iraq, Syria, and

Egypt. Iran, on the other hand, has been one of America's main antagonists in the region for thirty six years, and also the only significant one left standing in the wake of the Arab Spring and 2003 war. It is correspondingly important to understand how American actions are affecting its relations with these two countries.

In terms of IR theory, this topic is also of interest for anyone studying the functioning of alliance dynamics. The main fields relevant to this are the studies of alliance formation and dissolution, and of alliance restraint (both covered further in this thesis). Whether the facts reveal a serious breach in the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia, or whether they reveal that the alliance is weathering these difficulties, the situation offers an additional, modern case study in what happens when a longstanding alliance is put under strain. It also offers a case study in inter-alliance politics and the success or failure of allies in restraining each other's behavior, as America is currently trying to do with regards to Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the particular time period being studied (the last five to six years) is still a relatively unexplored area. When researching some of what had already been written on the topic, I found a great deal of research and analysis concerning earlier eras, running into the 2000s and the aftereffects of such things as the Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War. Comparatively little has been written about the era following the 2008 election of President Obama and subsequent outreaches towards Iran, and even less specifically about the triangle of Saudi-Iranian-American relations (most material treats relations between two of the three countries, but rarely all three), and the beginning of the increasingly hostile proclamations by the Saudi government towards the Iranian nuclear

program. This thesis would therefore go some way towards exploring a still-fresh area of research.

It is often asserted, particularly by critics of the Obama administration, that Saudi Arabia has indeed lost faith in its American ally and is increasingly relying only on itself, perhaps to the point of investing in its own nuclear deterrent in defiance of Washington's non-proliferation efforts. It is also asserted, by many of the American and Middle Eastern journalists and think tank writers whose work I have read, that a fear of Iran is very much central to this rift, though not of its nuclear program so much as the growing influence and wealth it would have in the region if the sanctions regime prompted by its nuclear program were lifted. This thesis will examine and try to confirm or deny these assertions. Theoretically speaking, my main focus will be the role of threat perception in international alliances (in this case, what could have led to the changes in perception in both Washington and Riyadh as to the seriousness of the Iranian threat) and alliance restraint (wherein one nation, by allying with another, provides a sense of security that prevents the other from taking rash and violent action – something that many fear the United States is increasingly unable to provide for Saudi Arabia).

### **Research Question and Methodology.**

The research question would be answered through process-tracing methods, following and contrasting two processes – one, the process of drift between the United States and Saudi Arabia since 2008, and two, the process of the gradual opening of negotiations between the United States and Iran during that same time period – in order

to determine how severe the first process has in fact been, and whether or not it is a result of the second.

The question of how severe the process has been will be judged by whether (or how much) the actions of the Saudi government have so far matched its statements. Saudi rhetoric since the late 2000s has clearly expressed displeasure with American policy towards Iran, as well as a willingness to take regional security matters into Saudi Arabia's own hands. This thesis will attempt to measure whether the rhetoric is reflected in the facts, evaluating not only diplomatic ties but also security measures, such as whether the Saudi military budget, arms purchases, or training has increased during this time period; whether Saudi Arabia is diversifying its security ties by seeking other suppliers or partners; whether Saudi Arabia is more prone to taking actions that contradict the wishes of its American ally; whether Saudi Arabia is asserting itself in roles that would previously have been left to the U.S; and whether these assertions (if any) are related to Iran policy (an unusually active role for the Saudis in the fight against ISIS, for instance, would be interesting but far less revealing for the purposes of this thesis than a similar role in the fight against Yemen's Houthis, who unlike ISIS are considered aligned with Iran).

The second question will be addressed by measuring whether the timelines of America's opening to Iran and of the Saudi-American rift allow for the second to have been caused by the first. If the rift follows the election of Barack Obama and the subsequent outreach towards Iran, it could plausibly have been caused by this outreach – if it predates it, another explanation is probably necessary. If the rift becomes notably worse after the public revelation of the nuclear negotiations with Iran in 2013, this would

be another sign that this outreach is seriously affecting relations; if it does not, it may indicate that the rift is not as serious as it appears, or not caused by the Iranian nuclear program. (Even in instances where the timelines line up appropriately, attention will be paid to other possible factors that might explain the growth of a Saudi-American rift at that time).

### **Structure and Chapter Description.**

The thesis will proceed in four major chapters and one concluding chapter. The first will be a historical section, providing a background review of the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In this chapter, attention will be paid to the original formation of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the common interests that led to its creation (an interest in ensuring the flow of oil, and an interest in maintaining political order in the Middle East in the face of both Soviet influence, and the rise of radical populist movements); the role of Iran in American and Saudi foreign policy (with Iran and Saudi Arabia being considered the “twin pillars” protecting the Persian Gulf from hostile penetration); and the deepening of ties between Saudi Arabia and the United States after the Iranian revolution in 1979 left only one “pillar” remaining. Finally, this chapter will also review some of the previous difficult points in Saudi-American relations – the oil embargo of 1973, the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91, the Iraq War of 2003 – and how the alliance overcame (or failed to overcome) these crises. This chapter will therefore provide not only historical background on the Saudi-American relationship, but also points of comparison for the current difficulties in

this relationship, which will be useful in trying to measure the seriousness of the current rift.

The next chapter will examine the question of how serious this rift actually is. It will consider some of the public, rhetorical differences that are often discussed in the press – such as King Salman’s decision not to attend a Camp David summit that was seen by many as a snub of President Obama in reaction to his opening to Iran, or the increasing expressions of alarm from Saudi leaders, both public and private, about the Iranian nuclear program. It will then examine whether Saudi words have been reflected in Saudi actions, in terms of actual policy differences where the two countries have found themselves on opposite sides of an issue, as well as Saudi attempts to assert themselves, not necessarily *against* the United States, but *without* the United States, taking action themselves in areas where they might previously have asked their main ally to intervene or developing their ties with other major powers in unprecedented ways. This will offer insight into whether the Saudi government still sees itself and its ally as being on the same page, and whether it is still willing to trust its security to the American alliance as it often has in the past. This chapter will also address the American point of view on these issues, examining both American actions that have given rise to Saudi fears that they can no longer control their ally, and whether these actions reflect a similar point of view in America, that their Saudi ally can no longer be relied on as it once was (particularly in an age when some of America’s worst national security threats come from Sunni jihadist movements influenced by Saudi ideology). Finally, and just as importantly, this chapter will examine the ways in which the Saudi-U.S. relationship has *not* changed, particularly when it comes to economic and military ties. Weighing these continued areas of

agreement against the areas of disagreement listed earlier will help to answer the question of how serious and durable the current rift is.

The next chapter will discuss the extent to which this rift was caused by the changes in the United States' policy towards Iran. A large part of this will consist of process tracing, comparing the timeline of Saudi statements and actions with the major milestones in the changing Iran-U.S. relationship. Were there signs of a major rift before the election of President Obama, the leader responsible for the opening to Iran? If so, the cause of the rift might not be related to Iran at all. Did the rift lessen at all during President Obama's initial attempts to tighten sanctions on Iran, then increase once the revelations of the nuclear negotiations in 2013 came to light? If so, we could probably conclude that Iran policy is central to the rift. In addition, this chapter will also examine Saudi fears and concerns of Washington in relation to Iran by classifying them into three categories; fears that arise from Iran's nuclear program and America's negotiations concerning it; fears of Iran unrelated to the nuclear program (many observers believe that Saudi Arabia does not fear Iran's nuclear program as much as it fears the increase in status and wealth that Iran would gain from an end to sanctions and isolation); and fears that are completely unrelated to Iran (such as America's Israel policy, or America's response to the Egyptian Revolution). In this way, the chapter will try to determine which of the three has played the largest role in driving the policy differences between the two former allies.

Finally, the last major chapter will examine the findings of the previous three chapters in light of relevant international relations theory, specifically with regards to alliance formation and alliance restraint. The topic of alliance formation will be dealt

with through Stephen Walt's work on balance of threats, theorizing that nations ally primarily to counterbalance the most immediate threats, not raw power. The Saudi-American alliance against Iran has historically been an example of this; with this alliance currently wracked by disagreements over Iran policy, the chapter will examine whether Walt's theories have suggest anything that could explain present disagreements over how to deal with this perceived threat. The topic of alliance restraint will be dealt with through Jeremy Pressman's work, which examines the successes and failures of nations in restraining their allies (particularly less powerful allies) from going to war or otherwise taking actions in the security sphere which they find inadvisable. Since this matches present American attempts to influence a more intransigent Saudi Arabia, this chapter will examine what Pressman's theories can explain with regards to America's successes and failures in alliance restraint.

A concluding section, finally, will summarize the paper's findings and attempt to answer the questions it initially posed.

### **Discussion of Data Sources.**

The data will be mostly qualitative rather than quantitative, and because this era is so recent and still relatively unexplored, this paper will rely heavily on primary sources. Specifically, these sources will include news articles covering recent events (Saudi and Iranian as well as American); publicly available interviews of key players, such as Saudi, Iranian and American government officials; or official speeches and policy statements issued by the relevant governments. More in-depth analysis will come from academic papers issued by think tanks and foundations which closely follow the issue. Actual



books will be used mostly for background, either regarding general international relations theory, or the history of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States and their relations with each other. While there are many books that have been written that touch on the topic of this paper, due to its contemporary nature most of the literature has not yet caught up with recent developments.

Among the primary sources listed above, newspaper articles, interviews and other media reports offer several things of value. Obviously, the first is a record of actual events; high level summits like the May 2015 meeting at Camp David between the leaders of the United States and of the six Gulf Cooperation Council nations, increasing Saudi military interventions in conflicts like Yemen which many see as proxy wars with Iran, the negotiations process between the United States and Iran, the details of which are all recorded by the media. The second is a ready-made source of interviews of senior politicians and other leaders in all three governments, which can provide context and further explanation for the events recorded in the news, as well as the points of view of each government on those events.

The third comes from analysis and consistent study of the topic at hand. Many major newspapers have correspondents who are experts on a particular region, a particular topic, or in a particular field. Examples include David Kirkpatrick at the New York Times or Karen Cunningham at the Washington Post, both Cairo based journalists and prominent Middle East correspondents for their respective newspapers, who have provided consistent coverage of regional issues including the Iranian nuclear program and the controversies surrounding it. Such experts provide a unifying thread running through a series of events (or an unfolding situation like the nuclear negotiations),

providing not only a report of the facts or interviews of major power brokers, but also their own commentary borne of experience in their particular topic.

Media, therefore, provides primary sources in the forms of news articles and interviews, as well as more in-depth research and analysis on the relevant topics. Finally, media also offers some insight into public opinion in all three countries, by offering a sample of the news that each population has access to and bases its opinions on. For all these reasons, media sources will be an indispensable part of the resources used for this paper.

Another important form of primary sources will be official documents released by all three governments. This will include official policy documents issued by the foreign or defense departments of these countries; public speeches made by their senior leaders, diplomats, or security experts; the texts of treaties and agreements between member nations (or, conversely, sanctions regimes or ultimatums); or even leaked documents available through Wikileaks or other sources of information.

These documents are valuable for a number of reasons. Most obviously, they define their governments' official positions when it comes to the Iranian nuclear crisis and related issues. By tracing the evolution of official government documents throughout the past few years, we can see whether, for example, official Saudi policy towards the United States or Iran has shifted in a more intransigent direction or remained more or less consistent. By identifying the issues that recur most often in official documents, we can distinguish which issues are most important to said government.

Equally important, however, is that comparison and contrast between these different documents can help provide a clearer picture of the government's stance. If the

official statements of a government's defense and diplomatic establishments contradict each other, we might conclude that the government is divided on policy. If official government documents are contradicted by private statements leaked to the press, these documents can be taken with some justified skepticism. If a government's actions support its words (if, for example, a government is not only using more assertive and belligerent rhetoric, but this rhetoric is supported by increased arms purchases or military actions), we may take these statements more seriously than if they do not. Thus, government sources will be one of the main primary sources that this paper will rely on for analysis of Saudi, Iranian and American government policies.

Finally, this thesis will rely in part on articles and documents released by various think tanks and institutes specializing in this particular topic – such as the Rand Corporation, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Middle East Institute or the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Like conventional media, these institutes are first of all an excellent place to find primary sources – they keep a close eye on events in the Middle East, and often reproduce news articles or create their own when it comes to ongoing issues or major occurrences.

However, these think tanks' output also goes much more heavily into research and analysis of ongoing issues than conventional media does. Several of them have series dedicated to this particular topic or closely related ones, such as the Rand Corporation's "Iran, Its Neighbors, and U.S. Policy Following a Nuclear Agreement" or the Stimson Center's "Gulf Security" series on national security issues in the region. All of them have published analysis, forecasts, and assessments on the current status of Saudi-U.S. relations, the extent of and causes behind this status, and where Saudi-U.S.

relations are currently headed. In addition, since many of these foundations are government contractors and staffed with experts who were formerly with the U.S. or other governments, they offer the opinions of experts who often have inside perspectives on the issues they are commenting on. Some of the studies issued by these think tanks are, in fact, commissioned by the U.S. government, which means that reading them offers not only the views of experts in the field, but an insight into the sorts of documents that guide U.S. policy decision making. Most of all, these articles tend to be much more up-to-date than the equivalent academic literature, since they are mostly published online and following situations on an ongoing basis. However, these studies also tend to be much more limited in scope and in analysis, very few of them actually reaching the length and rigor of a full dissertation or book; it is my hope that this thesis can cover the same issues in more depth.

Further analysis will also come from the books that have so far been written on this topic. Books will be used in large part to provide background, either in international relations theory or in the history, politics and economics of the Persian Gulf region. Two examples of the former case are *The Origins of Alliances* by Stephen M. Walt and *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics*, by Jeremy Pressman. Walt studies alliance formation and the motives that lead different countries to band together against a particular threat. His book's main claim to fame is its argument that countries ally not in order to balance against the most powerful player in the system but rather against the most immediate threat – and what it is that leads countries to categorize each other as threats (ideology, proximity, political lobbying, etc). This clearly applies to the situation in the Persian Gulf security system, in which the most powerful player (the

United States) and a number of less powerful ones (Saudi Arabia and most of its neighbors) have long banded together against what they considered the threat of Iran. Pressman's book instead analyzes the potential that alliances have to restrain their members from taking violent action against perceived threats – by providing these members with a sense of security, through political pressure, or in other ways. This also applies to the current Saudi-American relationship, in which the U.S. currently finds itself trying to prevent its ally from taking drastic measures (such as the development of a nuclear weapon) in response to the threat it perceives from Iran.

Both books are, therefore, highly relevant for the topic of studying the Saudi-Iranian-American strategic triangle and the recent evolution in the Saudi-American relationship. They offer valuable insights into state behavior which can, if applied to this situation, help to explain the way the two actors are behaving. Also noteworthy, however, is what these books do not cover. Walt's book is more concerned with alliance formation than with dissolution, or the kinds of rocky patches in relationships which the Saudis and Americans are currently undergoing. My thesis, therefore, can add to this field of study by examining not only how threat perception leads to alliances, but also what happens to these alliances when the relevant nations no longer perceive the same threat. Pressman's book does not have this problem; most notably, his case studies cover both successes and failures in alliance restraint, as well as discussing some of the possible reasons for this success and failure. However, the case studies he considers in his book focus on Israeli-American relations and the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than Persian Gulf politics. This thesis can hopefully provide an additional case study, examining how

Pressman's observations hold up in a less well studied part of the Middle East – one which currently hosts the most tenuous interstate rivalry in the region.

As noted above, other books to be used for background will focus on the politics, economics and history of the Persian Gulf rather than general international relations theory. In this category of books, the most relevant ones are *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, by F. Gregory Gause, published in 2010, and *Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf*, by Mahboubeh Sadeghinia (published in 2011). The former is a book specifically describing the emergence of the modern regional security system in the Persian Gulf, as it resulted from three major wars – the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and onwards. The latter takes a more detailed view of the same topic; it is both broader than Gause's work, showing how this regional security system fits into the broader context of world politics, great power relations, and fields other than security (economics in particular), and narrower, dwelling specifically on what the system means when viewed through the eyes of one of the players (Iraq, Iran, or the Gulf Cooperation Council members of which Saudi Arabia is the de facto leader).

These books are, therefore, extremely useful as guides to the region and to the security environment that this thesis will focus on, providing historical and environmental context for the current Saudi-Iranian-American strategic triangle. Neither of them, however, addresses the behavior of this triangle itself. They either focus only on the politics of regional players, or the way the region itself fits into the broader world context. The United States, Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, have come to form their own particular strategic system, narrower than either global politics or even the general

regional security system, and transcending the politics of any one region. So far, the literature dedicated to this triangle remains limited; by examining the way policy towards one member of the triangle affects relations between the other two, this thesis will help to shed light on a currently understudied security system.

To turn to a narrower part of the literature, there are also several books which focus specifically on bilateral relations between two of the three countries under discussion: the best examples of these are Trita Parsi's *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, Rachel Bronson's *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership With Saudi Arabia*, and the Rand Corporation's *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*. Parsi's book concentrates on the Obama administration's attempts at outreach towards Iran since his assuming power in 2009 – focusing not only on Iran's nuclear program but on other issues such as the sanctions regime, Iran's human rights records, and the domestic political obstacles in the way of an opening towards Iran. Bronson's book focuses on the history of Saudi-U.S. relations, exploring the role of such issues as oil, religion, the Cold War, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the various events that have wracked the region since the beginning of the relationship, and ending by discussing how the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath affected the relationship between the two countries. The Rand Corporation book (a compilation of essays written by various Rand experts), finally, concentrates on relations between Riyadh and Tehran; among the issues addressed, it describes the role of sectarianism and ideology, proxy conflicts in Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Lebanon and Palestine, and, finally, the implications of these relations for United States foreign policy.

All three books offer excellent summaries of bilateral relations between two of the three members of the Saudi-Iranian-American triangle (the Bronson book being the weakest one in the sense that, while it is a very thorough and comprehensive summary of Saudi-U.S. relations, it also dates from 2006 and thus is somewhat behind the times). However, they limit themselves to bilateral issues; like Gause and Sadeghinia's books, they do not address the relations among all three members of the triangle. This is especially problematic because it is difficult to understand the relations between any two members of the triangle without including the third. Iranian-American relations take place in a context in which the U.S. has been the protector and ally of Iran's principal rival in the region since before the Iranian Revolution (and has counted on the Saudis as its main regional ally against Iran). Saudi-American relations take place in the context of this alliance and Saudi Arabia's historic dependence on foreign powers to help deter regional adversaries – which, in recent times, has essentially meant Iran. Saudi-Iranian relations have historically taken place in a context where the Saudis could count on the assistance of an American superpower which shared their goal of containing Iran, a situation that is radically altered if the superpower no longer shares these goals (or is no longer perceived to). Studying the trilateral relations between all three countries, as this paper will, seems therefore to be the logical next step after books like the above which focused on bilateral relations.



## **CHAPTER TWO – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Introduction.**

The main emphasis of this thesis is on the present day, and how Saudi-U.S. relations have changed over the last decade. However, it would be impossible to explore this topic without the context of history, and how the partnership between the two nations evolved to its present point. This chapter is concerned with providing that context. In it, I will review the origins and foundations of the Saudi state and of the Saudi-American relationship since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. I will then review the role that Iran played in this relationship, the deepening of Saudi-U.S. ties after the rise to power of the current Iranian regime, and some of the previous crises which the Saudi-U.S. alliance has weathered.

Throughout this chapter, my primary concern will be to identify the common interests upon which Saudi Arabia and the United States have built their alliance over the past seventy years or so, and, conversely, any major points of contention that have existed over the course of that alliance. This will provide context for the present rift between the two nations, offering examples of where it ranks in comparison with previous disagreements, and whether it endangers the fundamentals of the relationship. It will also provide context for how both nations' policies towards Iran, the main (or at least most visible) point of contention between them today, arrived at their current point.

### **Saudi Arabia – Foundation and Ideology.**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as a modern nation-state, was created in 1932 with King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud as its ruler. The birth of the nation took place in the context of

the strife following the First World War, the Arab Revolt encouraged by the British during that war, and the collapse of Ottoman authority in the region. The current Saudi political-religious system had already existed in some form or other for decades, however, with one of its foundations dating back to the eighteenth century: the alliance between the Al Saud family and the conservative Sunni Islamic movement commonly known in the West as “Wahhabism,” after the name of its founder, Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahhab. (This is often a contested name, viewed as offensive by many of its practitioners because it implies that they follow Wahhab rather than God and the Prophet Mohamed. It will nevertheless be used here as the most practical definition for the particular movement begun by this preacher, as opposed to terms like “Salafi” which are more acceptable but less specific to the Saudi context).

Wahhab’s message emerged in an Arabia whose religious landscape was very different from the Saudi kingdom of today. In addition to several branches of Sunni Islam, “many Arabs professed Shiism in the eastern and north-eastern regions of the peninsula,” as well as Yemen; “Jews lived in some regions of Yemen and Najran;” and all varieties of Islam “coexisted peacefully with the cult of saints that was widespread throughout the peninsula and even with the survivals of idol worship.”<sup>4</sup> In short, the peninsula was home to a variety of different religious practices, not all of them Islamic, and some of them unorthodox according to stricter interpretations of Islam.

By contrast, Muhammad Wahhab and his followers promoted a religious worldview based on a strict interpretation of monotheism, and believed that “the Islamic world had deviated from these principles [...]; people indulged in *bida* [innovation],

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<sup>4</sup> Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, Saqi Books, London, 1998, page 70.

considered the worst sin.” According to the Wahhabi movement, “the only sources of Islam were the Quran and the Sunna [records, practices and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed];” some additional imams and religious scholars up until the fourteenth century were also considered valid sources of knowledge, but otherwise, they “rejected the theory and practice of virtually all subsequent generations.”<sup>5</sup> In sum, the movement represented an attempt to return to a basic, purer form of Islam, and considered many of the diverse religious practices in the Arabian Peninsula to be innovations not sanctioned by religion – practices which they intended to stamp out.

For the purposes of this thesis, the most important part of Wahhabism was the role it played in the politics of the peninsula. While he commanded a strong following, Muhammad Wahhab’s was not exclusively a popular movement; he “strove constantly to win the support of the Najdi [central Arabian] nobility for his teachings,” and Wahhabism “did not become a powerful movement before their support was enlisted.” After seeking the friendship of several local political leaders, Wahhab finally settled in Diriya under the protection of the local emir, Muhammad Ibn Saud, who was then seeking ways to expand his influence in the region. Wahhab’s “need for military support and the ambitious emir’s interest in religious backing led them to unite their efforts;” from then on, Wahhab’s life was “inseparable from the destinies of the emirate of al-Diriya and the future state of the Saudis.”<sup>6</sup> His movement would go on to support the rise of a first Al Saud state in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and later on, the rise of the modern Saudi kingdom.

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<sup>5</sup> Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, page 74.

<sup>6</sup> Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, pages 80 and 82.

The rise of the “Wahhabi” movement and its alliance with the Al Saud family in the eighteenth century, then, was one of the foundations of the society that would eventually become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. From the Wahhabi point of view, the Saudis provided a ready-made political and military entity willing to adopt and carry their message to the rest of the Arabian peninsula. From the Saud point of view, the Wahhabis’ religious message provided them with the sort of legitimacy that they would not have had as a strictly political entity.

This sort of arrangement was not without precedent in the region. One of the more definitive justifications for it came from Islamic scholar Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth century, who wrote extensively about the proper relationship between religion and state. Taymiyya “was particularly insistent that religion cannot be practiced without state power.” The duties that God had commanded for his human follower, such as “Holy War, justice, pilgrimage, communal prayer... assisting the oppressed, Legal Penalties and so on – cannot be fulfilled except through the power and authority of a ruler.” However, this arrangement cut both ways: “The purpose of all Public Functions is the material and spiritual welfare of human beings. [...] No government can achieve this without adhering to Islamic norms.” Therefore, while religion needed the state as a practical matter, the state also needed religious guidance if it were to perform the tasks that made it legitimate – something Taymiyya viewed as essential enough that he even recommended the clergy abandon its isolation from politics. While “for a long time, he had few followers and little influence, [...] in the eighteenth century, [Taymiyya] was

adopted by the Wahhabi movement,” as a result of which the Saudi political system today is heavily influenced by this social contract.<sup>7</sup>

To this day, the Kingdom’s rulers remain acutely aware of this arrangement, in which their legitimacy is based in large part on their allegiance to Islamic principles – and to an especially conservative, puritanical, and exclusivist vision of Islam, which has historically had little regard for minorities like the Shi’a. This is, if anything, even more true given that the borders of the modern kingdom have made the Saudis the custodians of the two holiest sites in their religion (Mecca and Medina). In analyzing the Kingdom’s behavior, this is an important factor to keep in mind.

### **The Saudi-U.S. Relationship: Origins, Foundations, and Early Years.**

Formal relations between the governments of the United States and Saudi Arabia were first established in 1940, less than a decade after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was officially proclaimed by King Abdelaziz Ibn Saud. For the private sector, American involvement in the region had begun some time earlier, in the form of companies drawn to the region by the opportunities for oil exploration; Standard Oil of California was granted a concession to explore the eastern regions of the new kingdom, and finally discovered oil in 1938, increasing U.S. government interest in the region and partly explaining the establishment of diplomatic ties soon thereafter. The relationship was soon made stronger in the context of the Second World War. Though it remained officially neutral throughout the entire conflict, King Ibn Saud’s government rebuffed several advances by the Axis who had requested its support, first to assist a coup against

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<sup>7</sup> Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, second edition, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, pages 158-162.

the pro-British government of neighboring Iraq, then to lead its own rebellion against the British presence in the region. Conversely, the King allowed Allied aircraft safe passage through his airspace, as well as guaranteeing safe passage through the Persian Gulf to ships meant to resupply the Soviet Union. By the end of the war, Saudi Arabia had been made eligible for lend-lease assistance by the United States government, making it an Allied nation in all but name.<sup>8</sup>

The moment most often cited as the beginning of the close relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, however, was the meeting between King Ibn Saud and President Franklin Roosevelt on board the U.S.S. *Quincy* near the Suez Canal in February 1945. Topics that were discussed at the summit included access to oil (for which there was a growing demand in the West), the future of Palestine (which Roosevelt promised would not be decided without fully consulting both Jews and Arabs), prospects for the development of Saudi Arabia (with the King rejecting American assistance for the time being), and the nature of the future relationship between the two countries (Ibn Saud's concern being ensuring his country's continued independence in the face of the Western powers).<sup>9</sup> While Roosevelt died later the same year, the relationship between the two governments continued to develop under his successor, Truman. It had a security component from very early on: in 1945, a military cooperation agreement was signed that created an American air base at Dhahran, to be turned over to the Saudis three years from the end of the war. In 1946, with the increase in Soviet-American tensions around the

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<sup>8</sup> Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership With Saudi Arabia*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pages 36 and 37.

<sup>9</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, pages 39 and 40.

globe, this lease was extended to 1962 in a second agreement. In addition to the Dhahran base, the new agreement also provided an American survey of Saudi Arabia to collect strategic data, and recommendations for a comprehensive plan to build a modern Saudi military. Finally, it established a U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM) to help train this eventual new military.<sup>10</sup> Over the same period of time, the Saudis developed an equally close relationship with the American oil industry. What had started out as a concession granted to Standard Oil expanded in 1944 to include three other American corporations (Exxon, Mobil, and Texaco), which formed a partnership with S.O. to create the Arabian American Oil Company, better known as Aramco, to further explore and develop the resources discovered in the Kingdom during the previous decade.

There were difficulties in the Saudi-American friendship from the beginning. When it came to security issues, the prospect of an American military presence in the Kingdom raised fears that it would open up Saudi Arabia to foreign subversion and colonization – an especially great concern given the recent examples of the French and British empires, which had claimed to support Arab independence movements in World War One, only to claim large parts of Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf for themselves. Therefore, the creation of the American base at Dhahran was a controversial and much-debated decision – and, in fact, the lease on the base was eventually canceled in 1962.

When it came to broader regional issues, the United States and Saudi Arabia did not always pursue the same policies, particularly when it came to Israel. America's recognition of the State of Israel was strongly criticized in Saudi Arabia, where the King viewed this recognition as a betrayal of President Roosevelt's promise on the U.S.S.

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<sup>10</sup> David Long and Sebastian Maisel, *The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia*, University Press of Florida, 2010, page 149.

*Quincy* to listen to both Arab and Jewish viewpoints<sup>11</sup> – and found himself limited in the amount of support he could offer to United States policies.<sup>12</sup> The rise of Arab Nationalism was also a matter of some concern for the U.S, particularly after the death of King Abdelaziz Ibn Saud and the ascension of his son Saud, who for a brief period in the 1950s, “flirted with Nasserism, apparently enamored with the charismatic vision of Egypt’s president”<sup>13</sup> – who would soon establish himself as more aligned with the East than the West.

Finally, the question of oil exploitation was also a cause for concern; while eager for the money that oil sales would bring in, the Saudis were as wary of foreign companies on their soil as they were of foreign military units, seeing either one as a potential source of subversion and colonization. Given the rising tide of Arab nationalism throughout the region, it became even more important for the Saudi monarchy’s legitimacy to avoid the impression of caving in to foreign interests. Thus, King Abdelaziz threatened to nationalize Aramco a few years after its creation, only to finally agree to divide the profits of oil sales on a 50-50 basis between Aramco and the Saudi government.<sup>14</sup> The question of control over the Aramco oil fields would be a recurring one in future years, with the Saudis continuing to press for more control of the company (and ultimately acquiring a controlling interest in it) – as would conflicts over oil sales more generally.

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<sup>11</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, page 42.

<sup>12</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, page 47.

<sup>13</sup> Long and Maisel, *The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia*, page 150.

<sup>14</sup> Nathan Citino, *From Arab Nationalism To OPEC: Eisenhower, King Saud, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations*, Indiana University Press, 2002, page 39.



Despite all these differences, the Saudi-American relationship endured. None of these issues was significant enough to cause a true breach in relations between the two countries – in particular, the oil concessions in Saudi Arabia were never revoked, and the two nations maintained a security relationship in some form or other that continued to grow stronger over the years. By the 1950s, Saudi Arabia was the United States' most valued ally in the Arab world. What were the main motives of the two actors in pursuing this relationship?

From the American point of view, geopolitical considerations after the end of World War Two were among the most important issues at hand. With the defeat of the Axis powers, the Soviet Union became the main point of concern for American foreign policymakers; the Cold War ushered in the doctrine of containment, based on preventing Soviet influence from spreading any further than it already had. This was a great concern in the Persian Gulf, given the region's proximity to the Soviet Union; in fact, during World War Two, the northern half of Iran was already occupied by Soviet troops (an intervention justified by concerns that the Iranian government was leaning too close to the Axis), with only the British troops occupying southern Iran standing between them and the Persian Gulf. This brings us to the other main concern of the United States – at the same time that Soviet influence was increasing, British influence was on the decline. While Great Britain had, in the past, been the world power with the greatest influence in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, the toll taken by two world wars meant that it would no longer be capable of containing Soviet power in that region. For several reasons – the still-powerful influence of isolationist and anti-colonial movements in the American Congress, and a rising tide of Arab Nationalism in the region, both of which

the White House was wary of provoking – it was also unlikely that the United States could take over Britain’s role as a colonial power in the region. Supporting and empowering friendly governments in the region, as was being done in Western Europe, would therefore be the preferred method of deterring Soviet interests, and Saudi Arabia would be one of the best situated of these governments.<sup>15</sup>

While containing outside threats was an important factor in the Saudi-American relationship, it soon became equally important to counter threats that were native to the region. Arab Nationalist sentiment began to express itself through the seizure of power by radical, secular, republican regimes, particularly that of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, a charismatic leader whose appeal went well beyond his nation’s borders. While Nasser and governments like his officially proclaimed their neutrality in the Cold War, the American government of President Eisenhower believed Nasser to be fundamentally anti-Western and, consciously or not, serving Soviet interests.<sup>16</sup> As a result, aid was increased to conservative monarchies like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and (at the time) Iraq, in the context of what became known as the Eisenhower Doctrine. This proclamation by the American president highlighted the importance of guaranteeing the continued independence of his Middle Eastern allies, offering economic and military assistance to those nations that requested it and, if necessary, authorizing the use of military force to protect these nations’ independence from “any nation controlled by international communism.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, page 43 to 46.

<sup>16</sup> Salim Yaqab, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, University of North Carolina Press, 2003, page 2.

<sup>17</sup> Dwight Eisenhower, “Special Message to Congress on the Situation in the Middle East,” January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1957, preserved online at *The American Presidency Project*, accessed September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11007>.

While Eisenhower's speech to Congress only singled out the Soviet Union as a potential aggressor, his statements about the importance of protecting his allies from "any nation" aligned with it were ambiguous enough that they could be read to also include cooperation against enemies like Nasser's Egypt, or any other radical government that might threaten the U.S. alliance system.

The last motive was, of course, oil. In the early years of the twentieth century, the United States was mostly self-sufficient in this regard, and even supplied much of the oil for the Western European market. By the 1940s, however, the energy needs of the West were growing so quickly that these traditional energy sources could no longer meet them. Because of this, the discovery of the Persian Gulf's resources was a godsend: the amount of oil in the region would be enough to meet the West's energy needs for decades to come, and the region's proximity to Western Europe at a time when its main priorities were reconstruction and recovery made it especially attractive. The development of these resources and their positioning on the open market was, therefore, of pressing importance to the West, as was ensuring that they did not fall under Soviet or other hostile hands.<sup>18 19</sup>

Those three factors applied equally well when viewed from the Saudi perspective. The Saudi kingdom had no desire to fall under a Soviet sphere of influence (for ideological as well as strategic reasons, given Saudi Arabia's opposition to the communist worldview). Containing and stopping revolutionary Arab Nationalist movements like those that had brought Nasser to power was possibly even more important, given the danger that such movements might one day try to overthrow the

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<sup>18</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, page 45.

<sup>19</sup> Citino, *From Arab Nationalism To OPEC*, page 43.

Saudi government from within. Finally, the development of oil resources meant a steady influx of Western money that would enrich Saudi Arabia and dramatically increase its position in world politics. Those three shared interests – preventing foreign domination of the region, opposing populist revolution and subversion within the region, and ensuring the continued flow of oil – would continue to form the basis of the Saudi-American relationship until the present day, even as the identity of these foreign and domestic threats changed and the nature of the oil trade evolved.

### **Iran-U.S. Relationship, and Consequences for Saudi Arabia.**

This was not the only alliance that the United States would form in the region during the same time period. In the Persian Gulf, it was equally interested in opening relations with Iran. Though an independent nation, Iran had been a British (and to some extent, Russian) sphere of influence at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. While the British had maintained a presence in the region for longer than that, the discovery of oil in Iran in 1909 significantly raised the nation's profile, and Great Britain's interest in it. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain had a near-monopoly on Iranian oil, exploited by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (hereafter AIOC). While the AIOC's concession had been agreed to by the Iranian government, and negotiated with it several times, it had become a matter of serious controversy as Iranian public opinion turned against the company, which was seen as a symbol of quasi-colonial foreign occupation. It was also criticized as an unfair and exploitative economic enterprise, with the lion's share of the profits from oil sales going to the AIOC and only a small percentage going to Iran – the most offered by the Company, in 1949, was 16%. (The contrast with Saudi

Arabia's arrangement for a 50/50 split with Aramco, signed only a year later, was not lost on the Iranians and further fueled criticism of the AIOC).<sup>20</sup>

The United States' arrival as a major force in Iranian politics took place in the context of this dispute. By the early 1950s, relations between Great Britain and Iran had almost entirely broken down, with Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh nationalizing the AIOC and the entire oil industry of Iran. In response, the British sought American approval and support for a coup d'état to overthrow Mossadegh. The history of the coup is most comprehensively documented in Stephen Kinzer's *All The Shah's Men*, published in 2008. According to Kinzer, the watershed moment as far as the United States was concerned was the passing of the American presidency from Harry Truman to Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. Truman had been sympathetic to the Iranian leadership, and unwilling to associate his country with old-fashioned British colonialism in the eyes of Middle Easterners. Eisenhower and his cabinet, however, were more willing to listen to the British point of view, particularly when the British painted Mossadegh as a dangerous left-wing radical, and Iran as being in imminent danger of a communist takeover.<sup>21</sup> This culminated in 1953 with the British and American intelligence agencies cooperating with several elements of the Iranian government to overthrow Mossadegh, and hand the real power in the country back to the Shah (king) of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who had largely confined himself to a symbolic role since assuming the throne in 1941. In addition to transforming a representative republic into an absolute monarchy, the coup

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<sup>20</sup> William Spencer, *The United States And Iran*, Twenty-First Century Books, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *All The Shah's Men: An American Coup And The Roots Of Middle East Terror*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, Hoboken, New Jersey, 2003, pages 1 – 16.

also had lasting implications for Iran's relations with the great powers. The United States, without which the coup would not have taken place, had effectively replaced Great Britain as the foreign power with the largest stake in Iran. This was reflected in the changes to Iran's oil market; while the AIOC survived as a player in Iranian economics, its monopoly was broken, and five American oil companies, along with several European ones, were allowed to enter the country.

For the next quarter-century, Saudi Arabia and Iran would remain America's two principal allies in the Persian Gulf region. The two countries were considered the "twin pillars" of Persian Gulf security. However, Iran was the foremost "pillar" of the two.<sup>22</sup> There were several reasons for this; Iran was a more developed and industrialized country, already had a stronger military, and had a much greater population. It was also the nation standing directly between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf oil fields, and therefore a more obvious choice as the primary rampart against possible Soviet aggression. Finally, it controlled fully half of the Persian Gulf coastline, making it the most important country to control should the need to protect the oil shipments from the region ever arise.

As a result, over the course of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, Iran became one of the closest allies and weapons clients of the United States, not only in the region, but in the world. The culmination of this policy came during the Nixon administration, a time when the United States was reeling from the effects of a losing war in Vietnam and the related anti-war sentiment at home. Now that the U.S. government would find it harder to justify deploying troops overseas to fight communism, it became all the more

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<sup>22</sup> R. K. Ramazani, "Security in the Persian Gulf," *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, Spring 1979, accessed on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/1979-03-01/security-persian-gulf>.

important to shore up regional allies in order to ensure that they could take on the work that the American military might have performed before. Iran was at the top of that list of allies. The key phrase remembered by General Williamson, then head of the U.S. military mission in Tehran, was that Iran was to be granted “all available sophisticated weaponry short of the atomic bomb.”<sup>23</sup> More specifically, Iran was to advance its armed forces “as rapidly as possible;” Iran would be allowed to buy recently invented laser-guided munitions, as well as advanced fighter craft that were still in the design stages (eventually including the F-14, which no other foreign nation ever acquired). To aid in the modernization of the Iranian military, the U.S. agreed to increase the number of military technicians assigned to Iran, matching the number of Soviet technicians in Egypt (then the Soviet Bloc’s most important ally in the Middle East). Finally, the U.S. would also assist Iran’s undercover work supporting Kurdish militias in neighboring Iraq, now another Soviet ally.<sup>24</sup>

The growth of Iran as the region’s main military power, U.S. ally, and U.S. weapons client had important repercussions for Saudi Arabia. First among these, they reduced the need for the Saudis to develop their own military capabilities. This was important not only because Saudi Arabia was still a less modern and developed country as a whole, but also because of the royal family’s concerns about developing too powerful an army, whose leaders might eventually use their forces to seize power for themselves. (This was not an unreasonable fear given the number of countries in the

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Oil Kings: How The U.S, Iran and Saudi Arabia Changed The Balance Of Power In The Middle East*, Simon & Schuster, 2011, page 66.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper, *The Oil Kings*, pages 66, 67, 68 and 69.

region that had undergone military coups – Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya – and continues to be a concern to this day).<sup>25</sup> Thus, military modernization proceeded, but at a slower pace than it had in Iran. Similarly, the fact that Iran was actively working to counterbalance “radical” Arab Nationalist governments like Iraq’s meant that there was less pressure on Saudi Arabia to do the same, or at least to take the lead in this fight. In short, Iran’s status as the main “pillar” of defense in the Middle East provided a security blanket for Saudi Arabia, and made it less imperative for it to assert itself as a military power in the region.

Instead, Saudi Arabia concentrated more on developing economic rather than military power. Saudi oil production continued to grow in the several decades after World War Two, expanding exploration on its own soil and offshore to eventually reveal the world’s largest oil reserves. The Saudi government, however, was concerned with ensuring that the country should benefit as much as possible from the profits of these oil sales. Equally important, it was concerned that it not lose control of these oil resources or allow the Western companies developing them to acquire the kind of undue influence that they had over Iran (as illustrated by the Mossadegh confrontation). As a result, Saudi Arabia and other countries in its position began to explore ideas for cooperation between them to prevent a united front against the world’s largest (and Western-based) oil companies. This ultimately culminated in the Baghdad conference of 1960, convoked by the Saudi and Venezuelan governments and also including the Iranian, Iraqi and Kuwaiti governments, all five of whom convened to create the Organization of Petroleum

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<sup>25</sup> Long and Maisel, *The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia*, page 150.



Exporting Countries (OPEC).<sup>26</sup> This marked the beginning of Saudi Arabia's use of oil as a diplomatic tool through which to assert its international presence.

The full importance of this did not become clear until the 1970s, when this oil diplomacy began to be deployed much more harshly to further Saudi interests. The first (and best remembered) instance of this was the crisis of 1973, in which the Arab members of OPEC declared an oil embargo in response to U.S. support for Israel in its war with Egypt and Syria. The details of that crisis will be explored later in this chapter, when we discuss previous major disagreements between the United States and Saudi Arabia. However, another important but less often remembered example of this was the standoff between the U.S. and Iran over oil prices that occurred a few years later, in which the Saudis eventually played a decisive role.

The background event leading up to this crisis was the 1973 oil embargo, and the rise in oil prices in which the Iranians, despite their official status as an ally of the United States, had participated. While the embargo ended early in 1974, oil prices continued to increase steadily thereafter, by common consensus among OPEC governments. This increased the revenues of OPEC countries considerably, and was considered long overdue by governments that had resented the cheap prices of the 1950s and 1960s for denying them the full benefits of their oil riches. For Western economies, however, whose growth since the end of World War Two had been facilitated by these cheap prices, the effect was disastrous. It also had national security implications – because it revealed the dependence of Western nations on oil resources from outside their borders, because of its armies' need for oil, and because popular anger at the economic crisis

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<sup>26</sup> Long and Maisel, *The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia*, pages 80 and 81.

fueled electoral gains for Communist parties in several West European nations (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal). For all these reasons, the United States was desperate to find a nation that would be willing to export oil at a cheaper rate than that offered by OPEC. The Shah's Iran would normally have been the obvious choice, due to its especially close ties with the United States. However, the Shah remained adamant that oil prices would continue to rise, noting that the West, after all, had increased the price of its own exports to Iran (including oil-based products) a number of times in the past and that it was only natural for the OPEC nations to do the same thing.

Instead, it was the Saudi government of King Khalid Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud that finally announced that it would not abide by OPEC's planned price increase for 1977, and that it would at the same time be increasing its oil exports. By flooding the market with (comparatively) cheap oil, the Saudis provided much needed relief for Western economies that had been suffering for the last five years. At the same time, they caused considerable harm to other OPEC members and particularly to Iran, which stood to lose much of its revenue in a Saudi-dominated market.<sup>27</sup>

This event marked Saudi Arabia's first success in asserting itself, not as part of a larger bloc as in 1973, but as an individual player in the politics of the region, choosing its own path in the midst of an argument between its Western allies and its OPEC partners, and in so doing effectively resolving the argument. It was also the point at which Saudi Arabia took advantage of difficulties in the Iran-U.S. relationship to begin taking over what had formerly been Iran's role as America's most valuable ally in the region. When the 1979 revolution caused the collapse of the Shah's regime – an event

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<sup>27</sup> Cooper, *The Oil Kings*, chapters 10, 11, and 12.

that was partly precipitated by the fall in oil revenues following Saudi action – this relationship would become even closer.

Iran, in sum, has played a pivotal role in Saudi foreign policy and Saudi-U.S. relations from the start. Because of its position in the region and its strong military support by the United States, the Shah's Iran provided a security blanket for the Saudis, sparing them and the smaller Persian Gulf monarchies from having to invest too deeply in their own military and allowing them to focus more on the development of their oil resources, and their use as an economic tool for leverage in the international arena. At the same time, when the Iranian-U.S. relationship began to experience growing pains, the Saudis seized the opportunity to improve their own relations with the United States, and take over the role previously performed by Iran.

#### **The Deepening of the Saudi-U.S. Relationship: 1979 and Aftermath.**

The Iranian Revolution drastically altered the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, resulting in a much more immediate threat for the Saudi Kingdom than it had ever perceived before. Its northern borders were now lined by *two* major nations hostile to it, Iraq and Iran. Each of these was more modern, more economically developed, more heavily populated, and much more heavily armed than Saudi Arabia. Each was also governed by a regime antithetical to Saudi values – secular Arab Nationalist Ba'athism in Iraq (the kind of Arab “radicalism” that the Saudis and Americans had both been concerned with rolling back since the 1940s), and a revolutionary religious ideology in Iran which challenged Saudi Arabia's claim to the leadership of the Islamic world (and,

in addition, emerged from a rival sect, Shi'a rather than Sunni, that many in the Kingdom saw as essentially heretical in the first place).

To make matters worse, Iran occupied the entire northern coastline of the Persian Gulf, potentially making it a very serious threat to the oil shipping routes that the Saudis depended on for their exports – and the fall of the Shah's regime had left no obvious successor to its role as the main regional power guaranteeing security in the Persian Gulf. Worse still was the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 (driven by Saddam Hussein's belief that the revolution had weakened Iran and made it an easy prey), which turned the entire Persian Gulf into a war zone and created an even more imminent threat to these oil routes. Finally, while not directly related to the Persian Gulf, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 also was not ignored in Riyadh, as it represented a hostile move into the Muslim world and in the direction of the Persian Gulf by the superpower most hostile to Saudi Arabia. By the beginning of the 1980s, the regional security system the Saudis had grown comfortable with during the previous quarter-century had collapsed, and only hostile regimes – Arab Nationalist, Islamic fundamentalist, or Marxist – were moving into the vacuum.

Without the Shah of Iran to rely on as a regional policeman, and no other obvious candidate in the region to take his place, the Saudis began to seriously increase their security ties with the United States, which was as concerned as they were with the turmoil in the region and becoming more willing to involve itself directly. The first sign of this was what would be called the "Carter Doctrine" of 1980, in which President Carter declared that "an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region

will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States,” and would be “repelled by the use of any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>28</sup>

While other presidents including Eisenhower and Nixon had made similar statements about the importance of the Persian Gulf region, Carter’s declaration was both more emphatic (notably promising the use of “any means necessary,” a strong commitment in the age of nuclear armament), and more open-ended, not referencing international communism but “any outside force” (an admission that there were now more threats to be faced in the region than those of the Cold War). More importantly, this doctrine was soon backed up with actual military units. While the United States had historically maintained little presence in the Persian Gulf, Carter created a Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) capable of intervening quickly in the Persian Gulf in the event of a crisis – though Saudi Arabia and most of America’s Persian Gulf allies, still wary of American presence, refused to lend the use of their own military bases to this project.<sup>29</sup> Carter’s more hawkish successor, Reagan, would build upon and expand Carter’s initiatives. In the “Reagan corollary” to the Carter doctrine expressed early in 1981, the new president committed the U.S. to the defense specifically of Saudi Arabia – not only for its territorial integrity in the face of outside threats, but also for its domestic stability.<sup>30</sup> In 1983, he expanded Carter’s RDJTF by turning it into the U.S. Central

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<sup>28</sup> James Earl Carter, “The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1980, preserved online at *The American Presidency Project*, accessed September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=33079>.

<sup>29</sup> F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations Of The Persian Gulf*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, page 57.

<sup>30</sup> William Safire, “The Reagan Corollary,” *The New York Times*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1981, accessed September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/04/opinion/essay-the-reagan-corollary.html>.

Command (CENTCOM), a new unified combatant command whose area of responsibility would be the Middle East, North Africa and Southwest Asia. Finally, in 1987, he committed U.S. naval forces to the region to protect oil tankers sailing from American-friendly states through the Persian Gulf against any threat from either Iraqi or Iranian forces. While initially committed only for a defensive role, the Navy found itself intervening more proactively in several cases, notably attacking an Iranian ship that was laying mines in the Gulf, and destroying two Iranian offshore oil platforms in retaliation for Iranian attacks on tankers. Two things should be noted about this deployment. First, the U.S. deployed at the request of the Kuwaiti government, and the Saudi government made no request for protection – but U.S. forces still made it a policy to defend its ships as well. Second, the U.S. deployment did not come in reaction to any development in the Iran-Iraq War, but rather to preempt the possibility of increased Soviet influence in the region, as the Kuwaitis had requested help from both superpowers.<sup>31 32</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, therefore, the Saudis tolerated an increasing American presence in the Persian Gulf but continued to keep their distance – or, more precisely, to be seen as keeping their distance – from it. This was especially important in view of the fate of the Shah, which demonstrated the dangers of being viewed as an American puppet – something the new Iranian government was now accusing the Saudis and other Western monarchies of being. Behind closed doors, however, the relationship was changing. The decade witnessed a massive covert operation in which the United States and Saudi Arabia were both key players – the arming of Afghan guerrillas to fight against

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<sup>31</sup> “U.S. Central Command History,” United States Central Command website, accessed September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.centcom.mil/en/about-centcom-en/history-en>.

<sup>32</sup> Gause, *The International Relations Of The Persian Gulf*, pages 79 and 80.

the invading Soviet army. Known as Operation Cyclone, it took the form of both financial and arms support delivered to neighboring Pakistan, which then passed on the assistance to the Afghans. The aid given to the rebels grew substantially over the course of the decade; the Saudis agreed to match dollar for dollar the assistance given by the United States, effectively doubling the aid to anti-Soviet elements. Due to their close partnership with the United States in this endeavor, they (and the Pakistani government, then a close ideological ally) were also able to direct the aid towards the rebel factions that they were closest to – primarily conservative, Sunni, Pashtun elements that shared the worldview of the Saudi and Pakistani governments.<sup>33 34</sup>

Thus, while the United States and Saudi Arabia maintained a respectful distance for appearances' sake, they were in fact cooperating much more closely to guarantee the security of the region than their public statements would have acknowledged. More than that, the Saudis showed themselves to be an extremely valuable partner for the American superpower, providing significant financial support and other resources (including volunteers) to a cause that struck a major blow against the Soviets. They also demonstrated an ability to influence American policy for narrower goals, tilting the balance of power within the Afghan resistance towards the factions they saw as closest to their interests. While it was not in a position to fully take over the role that the Shah's Iran had previously played in the American-led alliance system, Saudi Arabia had

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<sup>33</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2010, pages 128-132.

<sup>34</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001*, Penguin Books, 2004.

nonetheless stepped into the vacuum left by its collapse, and become America's main partner in regional security.

As significant as the deepening of Saudi-U.S. relations during the 1980s was, the following decade would bring even more dramatic changes. This time, the precipitating event was Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 – an action which some feared might be a prelude to an invasion of Saudi Arabia, and at the very least would leave Iraq in a position of strength vis-à-vis his southern neighbors. At first, Saudi Arabia hoped to resolve the crisis without American assistance, attempting to convene a summit to find an “Arab solution.”<sup>35</sup> When it was unable to do so, and Saddam proved unwilling to withdraw from Kuwait, the Saudi government accepted an American military presence on its soil (as well as, eventually, forces from other allied nations). At first, the purpose of this presence was to protect Saudi Arabia from any future aggressive action from Iraq, and offer a show of force that might encourage Saddam to withdraw on his own. When this also failed to occur, the American-led force went on the offensive, removing the Iraqi army and restoring Kuwait's independence.<sup>36</sup>

The decision to accept an American troop presence, much less one with a combat mission directed at another Arab state, was a major milestone in the Saudi-U.S. relationship. It was a step that the Saudis had resolutely tried to avoid since the beginnings of the American alliance in the 1950s, and even the collapse of the Iran-led regional security system a decade earlier. That it was allowed to occur at all was a testament to how threatened the Saudi government felt by the 1990 invasion. Equally

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<sup>35</sup> Gause, *The International Relations Of The Persian Gulf*, page 104.

<sup>36</sup> Gause, *The International Relations Of The Persian Gulf*, pages 104 to 114.



impressive, the American troops did not leave the country at the end of the war, despite having largely destroyed Iraq's military capabilities. They remained stationed on Saudi soil for another decade, serving as a deterrent against Iraq and Iran and enforcing sanctions (and conducting airstrikes) against Iraq. For better or for worse, an American military presence in Saudi Arabia had become part of the strategic landscape.

The next major shift in Saudi-U.S. relations would occur in 2001, with the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. With those attacks, America placed a new priority on fighting the al-Qaeda organization responsible for the attacks, and more generally the Sunni jihadist movements associated with it, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan. The ensuing conflict was dubbed the global war on terrorism, and involved the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

The conflict led to increased cooperation between the Saudi and American governments when it came to fighting al-Qaeda and other jihadist movements. The jihadist wave had already been sweeping the Middle East for years, leading to a civil war in Algeria and terrorist attacks in other nations, as these movements called for the removal of governments they saw as corrupt, apostate, and pro-Western. Despite its emphasis on a conservative form of Islam, and the fact that it had supported the rise of such movements (such as the Taliban in Afghanistan), Saudi Arabia was considered one of these governments, particularly by al-Qaeda's leader, Osama Bin Laden. It and the United States therefore had a common enemy and a shared interest in bringing it down.

However, it should also be noted that the two countries did not cooperate in all respects. Most notably, the Saudis refused to participate in the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, in stark contrast to the earlier Gulf War in which they had essentially served as

America's forward base of operations. In addition, this war was followed quickly by the removal of almost all U.S. troops from Saudi soil. While this did not mean an American withdrawal from the Persian Gulf region as a whole, the era in which Saudi Arabia was willing to accept a massive Western military presence on its soil had ended.

In short, the 1980s, 1990s, and early 21<sup>st</sup> century were marked by an increasingly dangerous security environment for Saudi Arabia, with the Iranian Islamic republic, Saddam Hussein's government, and Sunni jihadist movements like al-Qaeda all arising as threats to the kingdom. The Saudi response to this was to increase its military and security cooperation with the United States, at first behind closed doors, and later more overtly. This increased cooperation did not come without costs or difficulties.

### **Previous Major Crises in Saudi-U.S. Relations.**

Before moving on to the present day, this thesis will present a brief overview of three previous major crises in Saudi-U.S. relations and their eventual resolution (or lack thereof) – the 1973 oil crisis, the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The 1973 oil embargo, as mentioned above, was imposed by the Arab members of OPEC, but with Saudi King Faysal leading the movement. It consisted of two parts, a total embargo on the United States and a reduction in oil production to ensure that the U.S. would not be able to buy oil secondhand from other sources. It lasted until March 1974, at which point the Saudis and other Arab states relented and allowed the flow of oil to resume its course.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Guy Caruso and Frank Verrastro, "The Arab Oil Embargo – 40 Years Later," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://csis.org/publication/arab-oil-embargo-40-years-later>.

The cause of the embargo was the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and the support for Israel provided by the United States in the conflict. In that sense, the embargo can be seen as the logical result of one of the earliest issues in Saudi-U.S. relations – President Roosevelt’s 1945 promise to consult both Arabs and Jews on the fate of British Palestine, and the failure (in Saudi eyes) of all succeeding American administrations to take that promise into account. Previously, the Saudis had always objected to American favoritism towards Israel, but usually limited their protests to diplomatic gestures. A secondary factor in the lead-up to the embargo was the fact that around 1970, the global oil glut (surplus of oil supply compared to demand) finally gave way to a shortage; this increased the vulnerability of oil-importing countries and put the Saudis and their allies in a stronger bargaining position.<sup>38</sup> In other words, while this was a longstanding grievance, the Saudis finally felt that they had an opportunity to act on it – and, as a secondary goal, to assert their influence on the global oil market.

Ultimately, the embargo failed in its stated purpose. Saudi Arabia ended the embargo without having forced the United States to meaningfully review its policies towards Israel, particularly in the fields of military and intelligence assistance that had been so valuable during the 1973 war. Despite some speculation at the time that the United States might use military force to secure its oil supply, no such coercive measures were taken; the U.S. essentially waited out the embargo until Saudi Arabia gave up. Nor was the embargo followed by any significant drifting apart in the Saudi-American alliance. As Rachel Bronson notes in her book *Thicker Than Oil*, the Saudi-American

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<sup>38</sup> Long and Maisel, *The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia*, pages 83 and 84.

relationship “seemed to recover with unprecedented speed,” with each of the two nations apparently acknowledging that “it was far too dangerous and costly to oppose the other” in the international context of the Cold War, in which the Saudis remained more concerned with the threat posed by the Soviet Bloc and its allies than with their objections to Israel’s policies in the region.<sup>39</sup>

As we saw earlier, the Saudis would soon become invaluable to the American economy by flooding the market with cheap oil in defiance of OPEC guidelines and the Shah of Iran’s policies. This would help to explain the speed with which the United States forgave the Saudis for the embargo. It may also demonstrate a realization by the Saudis that there was more to be gained by having America in their debt than there was by threatening it; a realization confirmed by the increasing cooperation between the two countries that we have seen took place throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Lastly, it should be noted that when the Saudi oil reserves underwent what could be called a soft nationalization (with the Saudi government increasing its share of Aramco to 60% in 1974, and 100% by 1980),<sup>40</sup> the United States did not object, in contrast to their reaction to Mossadegh’s nationalization of Iranian oil resources a generation earlier. In short, despite a major clash on Israel policy, the United States and Saudi Arabia came to recognize that neither would gain from a prolonged clash with the other and that they had too many common interests (both economic and strategic) to justify continuing the feud, settling into a cooperative pattern instead.

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<sup>39</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, pages 120, 121, 122 and 123.

<sup>40</sup> Long and Maisel, *The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia*, page 83.

The second major crisis to be discussed is the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91. Unlike the previous one, the crisis in this case primarily concerned relations between the two societies, rather than between their two governments. Once the shortcomings of their own diplomacy towards Saddam Hussein had become clear, the Saudis were willing to accept an American troop presence on their soil. Similarly, the Americans were willing to abide by the guidelines set by the Saudis (and the rest of the international community), which was only to liberate Kuwait, not occupy Iraq or bring down Saddam Hussein, whose regime the Saudis wanted to preserve as a buffer between themselves and the Iranians. The conduct of the war itself was not, therefore, a major point of disagreement.

The problem was rather how to prevent or mitigate the social disruption that could be caused by the presence of large numbers of American troops on Saudi soil. Some of these issues became instantly famous, particularly those pertaining to women's rights; a 1990 protest by Saudi women driving cars in defiance of the nation's conservative laws was blamed on the presence of the (gender-integrated) U.S. military. The Americans and Saudis attempted to minimize this disruption by limiting and setting guidelines around U.S. troops' interactions with the population (American servicewomen were, for instance, expected to observe the Saudi dress code when off-base). More serious, though less often discussed in the West at the time, was the blow to the public legitimacy that came from the Saudi government, caretaker of the two holiest sites in Islam (Mecca and Medina), publicly allowing the deployment of a massive non-Muslim army on its soil. The American troop presence in Saudi Arabia was one of the most often repeated grievances by Osama Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda group during their rise throughout the 1990s. Even among less radical Muslims, the presence of the American army did not sit well,

particularly when it remained in the country for years after the liberation of Kuwait and the defeat of Saddam Hussein.

The question of how the Saudi and American governments dealt with the negative consequences of the Persian Gulf War might best be answered “they did not.” Rather, they accepted that there would be such consequences and chose to go forward with their plan nonetheless. The Saudis, in particular, considered a longer process of consulting and seeking the approval of various tribal and religious leaders before publicly accepting the American offer of assistance in order to mitigate the blow. However, “with Iraqi troops at his doorstep, the king did not have the luxury of time to build the consensus” that some in his government were calling for.<sup>41</sup> Instead, he chose to accept American aid as quickly as possible, and only then turned to the clergy and sought retroactive validation for his decision (which he eventually received, in the form of a fatwa allowing foreign forces to defend the kingdom – though it should be noted that this fatwa would be used by more radical elements to discredit the Saudi religious establishment, as it supposedly proved that they, too, had become American stooges). The conclusion to be drawn from the Gulf War, therefore, was that the Saudi government perceived Saddam Hussein’s army as a real enough threat (even though he had stopped at the Saudi border and made no threats against the Kingdom) to abandon their forty-year old policy of rejecting an American troop presence on their soil, and risk the backlash that this entailed in order to guarantee the survival of the state. The two following decades would, however, be shaped in large part by the consequences of this decision.

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<sup>41</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, page 195.

The third crisis to be discussed is the 9/11 terrorist attack, along with subsequent actions by the United States, including the war on terrorism, invasion of Afghanistan, and invasion of Iran. As discussed above, the attacks highlighted the growing threat of Sunni jihadist movements throughout the Middle East, and turned them into a priority for the national security establishments of both Washington and Riyadh. The battle against these movements would also lead to closer cooperation between them, which continues to exist to this day.

However, the war on terrorism also placed the Saudis in an awkward position because these same Sunni movements were so closely intertwined with their own history. The observation most often made in the West in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks was that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers responsible for the attack were Saudi nationals. While not necessarily significant in and of itself, this effectively illustrated an uncomfortable fact – that Sunni fundamentalist movements like al-Qaeda were of the same type that the Saudis themselves had often supported throughout the region. As we saw above, the Saudis had used their influence during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to ensure that financial aid to the Afghan rebels went towards conservative, Sunni, Pashtun factions – some of whom, like warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the West was now fighting in Afghanistan. During the 1990s, the Saudis had provided support for the Taliban in their rise to power and had been one of only three nations in the world to recognize them as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Osama Bin Laden himself, during the 1980s, had been closely aligned with Saudi intelligence kingpin Turki Al-Feisel.<sup>42</sup> In the past, such

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<sup>42</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, page 212.

movements had been useful against Saudi Arabia's more clear-cut ideological enemies – Communists, Arab Nationalists, or more recently, Shi'a Muslims.

While the Saudis recognized that these proxies were spinning out of control, it was equally important to them that the fight against them not unbalance the region to a point that would benefit their other enemies. It was not at all clear that the United States understood these concerns, a problem that was made graphically clear by its inexplicable decision to invade Iraq, overthrowing a regime with no ties to al-Qaeda or Sunni jihadism and which the Saudis had considered the main buffer between themselves and their regional adversary, Iran. Thus, while the 9/11 attacks highlighted a common enemy between the two nations and prompted increased cooperation against it, some of America's policies in fighting that enemy left the Saudi government questioning whether the United States could still be trusted to have its interests at heart. Finally, the fact that the United States had historically turned a blind eye to Saudi support for Sunni jihadist movements or even supported them (as in the case of Afghanistan), and was only now beginning to blame the Saudis for such policies, fueled resentment for the United States in both the Saudi public and government, just as the identity of the hijackers fueled resentment for Saudi Arabia in the U.S.<sup>43</sup>

These issues were expressed at the beginning of 2003 when the Saudi government publicly opposed the invasion of Iraq, though it did lend the U.S. some logistical support for the operation; and at the end of the year when most U.S. troops withdrew from Saudi Arabia at the Kingdom's request. How the two governments weathered this crisis, therefore, can be seen as a step back to the status quo of the 1980s. The Saudis and

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<sup>43</sup> Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, pages 235, 236 and 237.



Americans would cooperate against common threats, and would even work together to some extent on issues on which they disagreed in public, but a major American military presence was no longer tolerable, in light of both public opinion and the Saudi government's disapproval for some of the uses to which America was putting that military. The relationship survived this crisis, as well, but it was no longer as close as it had been.

In all three cases, the storm was weathered because the two countries, whatever their differences, still had too many interests in common for a serious breach in relations. In the case of the oil crisis of the 1970s, both nations shared common geostrategic interests, and a common interest in undermining Iran and OPEC's oil prices – for the U.S, in keeping a supply of cheap oil flowing, for Saudi Arabia, in the increased revenue they received from flooding the global oil market. For the 1990-91 Gulf War, it was stopping the threat posed by Saddam Hussein to Saudi independence and the free flow of oil. For the war on terror and 2003 Iraq War, it was defeating the Sunni jihadist movements that had targeted both nations. It is noteworthy, however, that the problems caused by the latter two crises were never really resolved, and have continued to hang over Saudi-U.S. relations until today.

### **Conclusion.**

From the above, we can now summarize the main factors that have defined the Saudi-U.S. relationship over the years. The partnership between the two nations has historically been founded on three common concerns – protecting the region from penetration by foreign powers hostile to Saudi and American interests (at first Soviet,

later Iraqi and Iranian); protecting conservative, pro-Western regimes like the Saudis and their allies in the other Gulf nations from domestic subversion by radical populist movements (Nasserist, Islamist, sectarian, or other); and ensuring the continuing flow of oil from the Persian Gulf region, a trade on which both the Saudi and Western economies depend heavily. While the exact nature of the threats and the Saudis and Americans' reactions to them changed over the years, those three themes remained constant from the beginnings of the relationship between the two powers in the late 1940s to the mid-2000s.

Along with those common interests, there have also been points of concern, particularly on the Saudi side of the relationship, which similarly endured since the late 1940s. Foremost amongst these is the Saudi government's emphasis on preserving its sovereignty and independence, and its concern about the danger of granting any Western agency too much influence over their own nation, a danger illustrated by the fate of regional rulers like Iran's Mossadegh who were seen as defying the West. Equally important is the Saudi government's emphasis on preserving its cultural identity, and being seen by its people to preserve its cultural identity – a particularly important point for a government whose legitimacy is founded on conservative Islamic principles, and its status as custodian of the holiest sites in Islam. Thus, the Saudi decision to work with the West on items of mutual interest has always been tempered by its attempts not to associate itself too closely with it, either in fact or in the public eye. The various ups and downs of the Saudi-American relationship described above can be seen in large part as the result of Saudi attempts to balance between those two impulses.

Due to its size, power, and impact on the Persian Gulf region, Iran has always been a major factor in the Saudi-American relationship, though its exact place in this

relationship has varied considerably over the years. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was the region's main buffer against outside threats, sheltering the Saudis not only from Soviet and other hostile interests, but also from the need to take too active a role in the defense of the region. In the mid-1970s, it became a troublesome economic partner for the oil-dependent American economy, thus allowing the Saudis to take over its role as America's closest partner among oil exporting nations. In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, it became hostile to both Saudi and American interests, forcing the Saudis to take an increasingly assertive role in the security of the region, and to work together more and more closely with the United States. This brings us to the topic of contemporary Saudi-U.S. relations over Iran, which will be explored in the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER THREE – THE EXTENT OF THE SAUDI-AMERICAN RIFT

### **Introduction.**

In the past chapter, we discussed the history of the Saudi-American relationship leading up to the current situation. This chapter will primarily focus on the difficulties between the two nations spanning the last eight years – economic, diplomatic, and strategic. The first section will focus on the rhetorical, public disagreements that have taken place between the Saudi and American governments. The second will focus on instances in which these disagreements have been translated into policy differences, with the two nations not only verbally criticizing each other but actively pursuing opposing policies. The third will focus on the Saudi attempts to assert themselves in the region, diplomatically and militarily, in roles that were previously more often filled by the United States. The fourth will focus on the American point of view on the evolving relationship. Finally, the fifth will focus on the ways in which the relationship has *not* changed in spite of all these disagreements.

The purpose of this chapter is to measure the severity of the current rift between the United States and Saudi Arabia – and, particularly, how deeply these disagreements affect their most basic common interests (free flow of oil, defense of the region from outside threats, defense of the existing order against domestic subversion). This will help to determine whether the current disagreements between Washington and Riyadh can be overcome, or whether they represent changes in the most crucial aspects of their relationship.

### **Saudi-American Disagreements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – Rhetoric.**

When it comes to Iran policy, it should be noted that the present situation, in which the United States plays the role of the “dove” when compared with Saudi Arabia’s more hawkish stance, is a fairly recent development. Historically, the reverse has more often been the case, particularly, as we saw in the previous chapter, given how slow the Saudis were in asserting themselves in the power politics of the Persian Gulf. Even after the events of the 1980s and 1990s forced the Saudis to pay more attention to the security environment and heightened tensions with Iran, this tendency did not disappear, and in some ways was present even in the years of the global war on terrorism.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran during most of the 2000s is explored in some depth in the study *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*, published by the Rand Corporation in 2011. The study does acknowledge a rivalry between the two nations, which includes but is not limited to Saudi concerns over Iran’s nuclear program (other issues include ideological rivalry, the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, and relations with divided nations such as Lebanon or Iraq which have become the battlegrounds in proxy wars between the two). However, it also describes many ways in which Saudi-Iranian relations remained cordial – including, perhaps surprisingly, the nuclear issue itself. Relations over the nuclear issue, in RAND’s estimation, were “more muted than might be expected;” rather than adopting an aggressive posture, Saudi Arabia was more close to “the European line of treating the Iranian issue within the context of a WMD-free Middle East, which would include Israel,” a position that implied “Riyadh’s non-support for a U.S. strike, which Saudi Arabia perceives would engender both domestic public opposition and erode the Al-

Saud's legitimacy on the Arab stage."<sup>44</sup> When it came to the broader issue of sectarian differences, relations between the two nations for most of the 2000s was, similarly, more nuanced than might have been expected – “official pronouncements are surprisingly calibrated and carefully worded on these issues,” with then-King Abdullah considering Sunni-Shi'a splits “a matter of concern, not a matter of danger.” Towards the end of the Bush administration, the King was “publicly distancing the Kingdom from U.S. policy, offering lukewarm support for the U.S. sponsored GCC+2 (Egypt and Jordan) coalition against Iran, and simultaneously pursuing a more unilateral diplomacy in the Levant and the Gulf.”<sup>45</sup>

American policy towards Iran during those same years was, by contrast, openly hostile. This was strongly expressed in President Bush's State of the Union address of January 2002 (the first such address since the 9/11 attacks), in which Iran was singled out as a hostile nation which “aggressively pursued [weapons of mass destruction] and exports terror,” which posed “a grave and growing danger,” and which the President warned might be tempted to pass on weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups, threaten its neighbors, or blackmail the United States.<sup>46</sup> More revealing, however, was that in 2003, soon after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the American State Department received “a proposal from Iran for a broad dialogue with the United States [...] including full cooperation on nuclear programs, acceptance of Israel and the termination of Iranian

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<sup>44</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*, page 98.

<sup>45</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*, 2010, pages 6 and 7.

<sup>46</sup> “Transcript of President Bush's First State of the Union Address,” *Cable News Network*, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002, accessed October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/>.

support for Palestinian militant groups.”<sup>47</sup> The Bush administration chose to ignore this offer of negotiation, refused to respond, and even reprimanded the Swiss government for having transmitted the Iranian proposal. Unlike in Iraq, no military action was ever taken against Iran, but U.S. rhetoric towards Iran during this era remained hostile, often hinting that no outcome other than regime change was acceptable.

By the end of the decade, however, the American discourse began to change. The first hints of this were in the 2008 presidential election, in which then-Senator Obama “took the unusual step of making engagement with U.S. adversaries a central part of his foreign policy platform,” and declaring that it was “critical” that the U.S. “talk to the Syrians and the Iranians.”<sup>48</sup> While this would have been a difficult position to embrace during the first few years of the war on terror, the increasing unpopularity of the Iraq War and the more hawkish Bush administration had opened up a political space that made it possible for a candidate like Obama to propose less militant policies – something that was confirmed when, during the same election cycle, five former U.S. Secretaries of State called on the United States to open a dialogue with Iran.<sup>49</sup>

A real rapprochement between the two countries was still years in the future, and in some ways, President Obama continued his predecessors’ more hawkish policies – particularly when it came to the sanctions imposed on Iran for its pursuit of nuclear enrichment, which would eventually increase during his first term. However, traces of

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<sup>47</sup> Glenn Kessler, “In 2003, U.S. Spurned Iran’s Offer of Dialogue,” *The Washington Post*, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006, accessed October 3rd, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/17/AR2006061700727.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll Of The Dice: Obama’s Diplomacy With Iran*, Yale University Press, 2012, page 8.

<sup>49</sup> Parsi, *A Single Roll Of The Dice*, page 7.

the moderation shown on the campaign trail continued into his presidency. In an address made on the Iranian New Year, he recorded a greeting to the Iranian public assuring it that his government was “committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us,” seeking “engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect.”<sup>50</sup> He rejected early requests from the Israeli government to impose new sanctions and to impose new deadlines on the Iranian government.<sup>51</sup> Finally, his administration gave hints that it might be willing to abandon the objective of a zero-uranium-enrichment resolution to the Iranian nuclear program, which his predecessor had insisted on.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time that the United States was adopting a more conciliatory public stance towards Iran, however, Saudi Arabia was moving in the opposite direction. In a meeting with new Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Feisel stated that “a more immediate solution” than sanctions would be required to restrain the Iranian nuclear threat, in contrast to his country’s earlier, more cautious stance.<sup>53</sup> Two years later, Prince Turki Al Feisal, a senior Saudi diplomat and former intelligence chief, warned senior Western leaders that should Iran acquire a nuclear weapon, this would “compel Saudi Arabia [...] to pursue policies which could lead to untold and possibly dramatic circumstances.” While this statement remained ambiguous, a senior official in Riyadh close to Prince Turki clarified them the following day, stating

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<sup>50</sup> Parsi, *A Single Roll Of The Dice*, page 62.

<sup>51</sup> Parsi, *A Single Roll Of The Dice*, pages 69-78.

<sup>52</sup> Parsi, *A Single Roll Of The Dice*, page 12.

<sup>53</sup> “Arms Deal: Saudi Arabia and U.S. Put 9/11 Behind Them,” *The Guardian*.



that “we cannot live in a situation where Iran has a nuclear weapon and we don’t [...] If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, [...] we will have to follow suit.”<sup>54</sup>

In general, Saudi Arabia’s public policy towards the Iranian program has remained the same over the years: that Iran may seek nuclear power for civilian purposes, which Prince Turki himself conceded was “the right of all peaceful nations,” but should not attempt to turn this enrichment program into a weapons program. However, increasing statements such as those above indicate that by the end of the last decade, Saudi Arabia began to perceive the Iranian nuclear program as a more urgent threat and openly discuss the possibility of drastic measures to remove it. The rhetoric from Riyadh began to sound closer to that of the United States during the Bush administration (which had promised that it would “do what is necessary to ensure our nation’s safety”<sup>55</sup> in the face of threats like the Iranian nuclear program), at the same time that the United States itself was moving away from such rhetoric and towards the sort of more cautious statements characteristic of earlier Saudi policy.

As energetic as Saudi Arabia’s public pronouncements were becoming, statements made behind closed doors were, if anything, even more dramatic. According to American diplomatic cables made public by WikiLeaks in 2010, the Saudi government had repeatedly recommended that the United States take military action in order to destroy the Iranian nuclear program, with then-King Abdullah urging the American

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<sup>54</sup> “Riyadh Will Build Nuclear Weapons If Iran Gets Them,” *The Guardian*.

<sup>55</sup> “Transcript of President Bush’s First State of the Union Address,” *Cable News Network*.

government to “cut off the head of the snake” – an opinion shared by several other Arab governments, including Jordan, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>56</sup>

This revelation further confirmed that despite the Saudi government’s public statements hoping for a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, in private, it was now earnestly seeking more radical solutions. It was also noteworthy for several more reasons. First of all, it was an explicit demand for a military resolution in a way that even Princes Saud and Turki’s recommendations noted above were not, a call for direct action of the kind that the Saudis had historically avoided making in their dealings with Iran. Second, this demand was made by the King of Saudi Arabia himself. While the previous statements could be attributed to lower ranking ministers, the source of this one leaves no doubt that the ultimate authority in the nation was deeply concerned enough by the Iranian program to be calling for military action. Third, the statement was made in a meeting by the King with General David Petraeus of the U.S. Army in April 2008, months before Barack Obama’s electoral victory. This indicates that the Kingdom’s difficulties with its American ally on this issue go back further than the arrival of a president willing to consider détente with Iran. This does not mean the two events are unrelated, since Obama had already made his foreign policy preferences clear on the campaign trail, but it does suggest that the difficulties between the two nations run deep enough that they will not be resolved simply by a change in leadership.

The late 2000s were, in short, a period of transition during which the public policy statements of both nations underwent major changes. In previous years, and particularly

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<sup>56</sup> “Saudi Arabia Urges U.S. Attack On Iran To Stop Nuclear Programme,” *The Guardian*, November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cables-saudis-iran>.

under the Bush administration, American foreign policy had been assertive and intransigent, accusing Iran of nefarious intentions in its foreign policy in general and its nuclear program in particular, refusing to respond to offers for direct and bilateral negotiations, and hinting that it might be moved to take military action to resolve its issues with Iran (hints that were given credence by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003). Saudi foreign policy had been more nuanced and more moderate, lending only cautious support to its American ally's anti-Iranian efforts, showing willingness to cooperate with Iran on items of mutual interest, and usually avoiding the kind of direct statements that could be taken as provocative by the Iranians. By the end of the decade, the two nations had essentially switched places; the United States, under a new president, was now engaging in public outreach towards Iran, suggesting that it would be willing to negotiate a resolution to the nuclear crisis (though other items and a more general "grand bargain" such as Iran had requested earlier were still not on the table). Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, was less convinced than ever that such a resolution to the nuclear crisis was possible, increasingly calling on its American ally – at first behind closed doors, then publicly – to end any threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program by any means necessary, and warning that if this did not happen, it might be compelled to begin its own nuclear arms program, breaking with decades of Saudi policy in defiance of U.S. nonproliferation efforts.

### **Saudi-American Disagreements in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Policy.**

As we saw in the previous chapter, rhetorical differences between the Saudi and American governments are nothing new. More important is whether these public

disagreements have translated into real differences of opinion at the policy level. Several examples of these have emerged in the last ten years – usually not directly related to the Iranian nuclear program, but related to Iran policy to some extent. The following section will explore these policy differences.

One of the most obvious issues on which we can judge the evolution of Saudi-U.S. relations is the involvement of both nations in Iraq. Each is significantly invested in the future of that country, Saudi Arabia because of their common border and its former status as a buffer against Iran, the United States thanks to the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation. As we saw in the previous chapter, the American invasion was already a major point of contention between Washington and Riyadh – which, despite American hopes, ultimately opposed the war and did not join in the American-led coalition. The decade following the invasion exposed the differences in their priorities even more extensively, as both attempted to cope in their own way with the vacuum left by the collapse of Saddam Hussein.

While Saddam's government was nominally secular, he and most of his ruling circle came from a Sunni background, in contrast to the Shi'a majority of his fellow citizens for whom the highest levels of government were largely inaccessible. Because of this, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states had never been eager to see his regime destroyed or his country degraded as a military force. Despite his history of aggression, Saddam served as a useful rampart not only against Iran but against Iraq's Shi'a majority, which the Saudis feared would offer the Iranians a foothold on their border, and in any case distrusted on ideological grounds. The United States' decision to remove his government and install some form of democracy was therefore, from the Saudi point of

view, one of the worst possible outcomes. Representative government would, inevitably, mean rule by the Shi'a. Saudi fears were quickly justified by the new politicians that tried to take over the country. America's original favorite candidate, Ahmed Chalabi, was an Iraqi Shi'a exile who later fell out of favor with the United States after being accused of passing sensitive information to Iran.<sup>57</sup> Those who eventually did reach the status of Prime Minister – Ayad Allawi, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Nouri al-Maliki and Haider al-Abadi – were, in every case, Shi'a, the last three of them from the Islamic Dawa Party, which had once supported the Iranian Revolution and whose leadership had spent much of Saddam's reign in exile in Iran.<sup>58</sup> Finally, Shi'a movements asserted themselves much more prominently in Iraqi civil society, from the calls for elections by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (one of the country's foremost Shi'a clerics) to the emergence of more radical and populist movements like that of cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Not all of these movements had the support of the United States, but at the end of the day, Washington largely seemed to accept the de facto takeover of the country by Shi'a politicians. The Saudis did not. This was expressed rhetorically through accusations that the Iraqi government was riddled with Iranian agents, or the refusal to reopen full diplomatic relations until six years after the invasion. But the disagreement went deeper than this; in 2007, the United States accused the Saudi government of financing Sunni groups opposed to then-Prime Minister Maliki, possibly including

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<sup>57</sup> David Johnston and James Risen, "The Reach Of War: The Offense; Chalabi Reportedly Told Iran That U.S. Had Code," *The New York Times*, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/02/world/the-reach-of-war-the-offense-chalabi-reportedly-told-iran-that-us-had-code.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Ali Latif, "The Dawa Party's Eventful Past and Tentative Future in Iraq," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=20930>.

insurgent groups – the U.S. government estimated that half of the foreign combatants moving to Iraq to support anti-government militias were coming through Saudi Arabia, and that the Saudis were not doing enough to stem this flow. The Saudis did not confirm the accusation, but had publicly hinted at the time that they “might” provide financial backing to Iraqi Sunni militants in the event of an American troop withdrawal, and made an effort to enlist fellow Gulf nations in the effort to support Sunni factions. While American and Saudi government officials both downplayed their differences in public (with the U.S. continuing to place most of the blame for unrest in Iraq on Syrian and Iranian interference), the two nations had clearly come to support different sides, the U.S. hoping that the Shi’a controlled government could ultimately stabilize the country while the Saudis refused to trust it and considered it a tool of Iran.<sup>59</sup>

This would not be the last disagreement between Washington and Riyadh as to the level of Iranian influence over a Middle Eastern nation. In Iraq itself, the disagreement has gone on until the present day, and these countries’ reactions to the conflict between the Baghdad government and the Sunni movement now calling itself the Islamic State (hereinafter “ISIS.”) On the one hand, the Saudi government has publicly joined the campaign against ISIS, as have the United States and various other regional players, both Sunni and Shi’a. On the other hand, the Saudi government has also warned that the offensive against ISIS could empower Shi’a players in the region, and called for the United States to place “boots on the ground” in order to prevent Iran from “taking

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<sup>59</sup> Helene Cooper, “Saudis’ Role in Iraq Frustrates U.S. Officials,” *The New York Times*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/27/world/middleeast/27saudi.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/27/world/middleeast/27saudi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

over Iraq.”<sup>60</sup> Even now that both nations share a common enemy and objective in Iraq, the Saudis continue to be worried about Iranian infiltration and are concerned that the United States does not take the threat seriously enough.

Similar difficulties between the two countries have emerged over the civil war in Syria, the other nation that has seen much of its territory fall under ISIS control. Ruled by another secular dictator, Bashar al-Assad, Syria until recently was a mirror image of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq – a nation whose rulers came from a Shi’a background, but whose population was mostly Sunni. As a result, popular uprisings against the Syrian government quickly took on a sectarian nature, eventually devolving into a civil war that is often seen as the latest front in a general, regional conflict between Sunni and Shi’a.

The United States and Saudi Arabia’s policies towards Syria have undergone roughly the same arc. Both of them initially focused on their opposition to the Assad regime, a longstanding enemy of theirs that was considered Iran’s most reliable ally in the Middle East. Both of them, with the rise of ISIS in 2014, were forced to reassess their policies and take this new enemy into account. And both of them would, ideally, prefer an eventual solution in which Syria is not dominated by either Assad or ISIS, though neither is in a position to become one of the major combatants – Saudi Arabia because of its own limited military capacities, the United States because of war fatigue and Congressional opposition in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan engagements of the last decade. Instead, the bulk of their contributions to the war have come in the form of support for Syrian militias.

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Spenser, “Iran is ‘taking over Iraq’ and Obama must put boots on the ground against Isil, warns Saudi Arabia,” *The Telegraph*, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/11453242/Iran-is-taking-over-Iraq-and-Obama-must-put-boots-on-the-ground-against-Isil-warns-Saudi-Arabia.html>.

And yet, despite these general areas of agreement, the two countries continue to disagree on how, and to what extent, to arm these militias. Most especially, the Saudi government has criticized the United States for failing to give sufficient arms to “moderate rebel groups” in Syria and for having failed to support them earlier, which they believe “not only encouraged Assad, but allowed militants to emerge as the strongest element in the opposition.”<sup>61</sup> The United States, on the other hand, “fears that any heavy weapons or training for the rebels might leak to militants who would then turn on the West, repeating the U.S. experience in 1980s Afghanistan.” This has led to not only frustrated relations between the two allies, but a lack of any coherent strategy when it comes to the Syrian civil war, which partly explains why both the Assad and ISIS factions remain deeply entrenched, while a “moderate,” Saudi- and U.S.- friendly third party capable of defeating both still has not emerged. The main cause of this disagreement seems to be one of threat perception; the Saudis are either less worried about the potential for blowback from arming Sunni jihadists than the Americans, or view it as a more acceptable risk – and, in any case, seem to consider the removal of Assad a higher priority. Put simply, the Saudis are more concerned about their Shi’a enemies than the Americans are, while the Americans are more concerned about their Sunni enemies than the Saudis are.

Finally, the wave of protests, riots and revolutions in the region since the end of 2010, colloquially known as the “Arab Spring,” have also exposed fault lines in the Saudi-American relationship. The first of these concerned the fate of President Mubarak

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<sup>61</sup> Yara Bayoumy and Angus McDowall, “Persistent Saudi-U.S. differences hurt Syria strategy,” *Reuters News Agency*, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/05/us-syria-crisis-saudi-usa-idUSBREA4407L20140505>.



in Egypt in the face of growing crowds demanding his removal from power. In public, the United States government did not commit strongly to either side, but did repeatedly state that urgent reforms were needed in the Egyptian system. This statement was interpreted by the Saudis, who had been outspoken in their support for Mubarak, as a withdrawal of support, and the Kingdom's foreign minister declared his government "astonished at what we see as interference in the internal affairs of Egypt by some countries."<sup>62</sup> The U.S. government's lack of support was especially shocking given Mubarak's status as a longstanding ally, whose survival the Saudis expected the United States to be more invested in.

Later the same year, a similar crisis in Bahrain gave rise to more friction between Washington and Riyadh. This was another case of a government friendly to Saudi Arabia and the United States threatened by large scale public protests – though in this case, a situation made worse by Bahrain's status as a GCC member, and by the fact that, as in Iraq, the conflict threatened to replace the Khalifas, Bahrain's Sunni ruling family, with a government chosen by a Shi'a majority. The Saudis acted quickly, sending troops into Bahrain to suppress the uprising and ensure the survival of the Khalifa government. The United States, as in Egypt, adopted a more ambiguous position: President Obama "obliquely criticized the Saudi action without explicitly condemning the kingdom."<sup>63</sup> Earlier on, Washington had hoped to enlist Saudi support in persuading the Bahraini

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<sup>62</sup> Angus McDowall, "Mubarak's Departure Deals Blow To Saudis," *Wall Street Journal*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703786804576138321598498188>.

<sup>63</sup> David Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. – Saudi Tensions Intensify With Mideast Turmoil," *The New York Times*, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15saudi.html?action=click&contentCollection=Middle%20East&module=RelatedCoverage&region=Marginalia&pgtype=article>.

government to enact reforms and to show restraint in the eyes of the public, a hope that was dashed by the Saudi intervention. Predictably given the demographics of Bahrain's protesters, several Saudi officials also claimed that they believed Iran was involved in the uprising, an opinion the U.S. government did not share.

In short, the United States' general response to the Arab Spring was to attempt to work with it, not necessarily abandoning their allies among Arab regimes, but at least encouraging them to enact reforms in order to placate rather than confront the protesters. The Saudis did not approve of this policy, and soon began to act directly in contradiction of American preferences. Rather than encouraging reform, they treated the protests as an immediate threat to be rolled back by any means necessary, encouraging the government to use violence to suppress protests in Egypt and personally taking action to that effect in Bahrain. Disagreements have continued to this day; at a recent summit at Camp David in May 2015, President Obama offered security guarantees to visiting GCC leaders against external threats, but not domestic ones, considering that such threats were for the Arab countries to solve themselves.<sup>64</sup> This message is understandably disquieting for the Saudis, since it can be taken to mean that, should their own regime ever be threatened, they could not rely on their American ally to protect them from their own people. It also represents a major change in a Saudi-U.S. alliance which, originally, was just as much directed against domestic unrest in the region as it was against penetration by hostile foreign powers.

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<sup>64</sup> Zachary Laub, interview with Vali Nasr, "Widening Arab-U.S. Gulf Over Iran," Council on Foreign Relations, May 22, 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/widening-us-arab-gulf-over-iran/p36571>.

### **The Saudi Role in the Middle Eastern Region – A Newfound Assertiveness.**

Having discussed some examples of recent cases where Saudi and American policies opposed each other, we now turn to a broader topic: instances in which the Saudis have attempted to assert themselves in the region without involving the United States. This is a different, but potentially equally important indicator of Saudi-U.S. relations. Given the historically close economic, military, and diplomatic ties between the two and the extent to which they have come to rely on each other, Saudi attempts to reduce their reliance on the United States may be just as significant as actual opposition to its foreign policy.

Economically speaking, the Saudi government has been seeking to diversify its foreign ties and avoid depending entirely on its American ally for some time. One of the earliest examples of this came soon in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when Saudi Arabia put an end to its subsidies of oil transportation to the North American market. Former American ambassador to Saudi Arabia Charles Freeman summarized the event in an interview with *Newsweek* by saying that the Saudis have “downgraded us,” a decision that he attributed to the Iraq invasion, as “we were a very acceptable and desirable security partner so long as we had no imperial agenda of our own in the region.”<sup>65</sup> Soon thereafter, the Kingdom’s chief foreign customer became China.

This economic diversification by the Saudi government has continued since then. The import of American cars to Saudi Arabia has been diminishing in favor of cheaper, more fuel-efficient Chinese cars. Overall trade has been trending downwards – totaling

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<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Broder, “Inside the Saudi-U.S. Rift,” *Newsweek*, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/saudia-arabia-us-obama-king-abdullah-king-salman-riyadh-middle-east-302360>.

\$25 billion in 2012, but only \$19 billion in 2013.<sup>66</sup> Chinese-Saudi ties, by contrast, have been booming, growing from \$1.28 billion in 1990 to \$73 billion in 2013. Saudi Arabia is now China's largest oil supplier, and China has become Saudi Arabia's largest supplier of goods and services – as well as the second largest Asian destination (after Japan) for Saudi exports. Finally, Chinese contractors have become increasingly involved in Saudi Arabia's construction, communication, oil and gas sectors.<sup>67</sup> In part, this simply reflects the growth of the Chinese market and its opening up to the world, but it is still noteworthy that Saudi ties have grown so strong with a nation that is often cited as America's main emerging strategic rival. Nor is China the only other major power to have benefited from increased economic ties to Saudi Arabia. Russia, as a major oil producer in its own right, has historically been more of a rival than a partner for Saudi Arabia. However, relations have been improving there as well; in June 2015, new agreements were passed between the two countries regarding issues such as energy production and the civilian use of nuclear power – with the Saudi government stating that it may pay the Russians to operate as many as sixteen nuclear reactors within its territory.<sup>68</sup> This would, if enacted, help to diversify the Saudi economy (whose energy still comes mostly from oil and gas) and place it greatly in Russia's debt. Finally, the Saudi government has also been courting investments from European Union member

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<sup>66</sup> Broder, "Inside the Saudi-U.S. Rift."

<sup>67</sup> Naser Al-Tamimi, "The Ties That Bind Saudi-Chinese Relations," *Al Arabiya*, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/world/2014/03/14/The-ties-that-bind-Saudi-Chinese-relations.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Emma Ashford, "The New Saudi-Russian Axis," *The National Interest*, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/the-new-saudi-russian-axis-should-america-worry-13172>.

states, which has grown in fields ranging from consumer goods to more ambitious projects such as the development of solar power.<sup>69</sup>

The Saudis are, in short, significantly expanding their trade relationships with other great powers, particularly in fields (such as nuclear energy, a sensitive topic given the fear of arms proliferation in the Middle East) where they might once have been expected to turn to America instead. This does not necessarily indicate a deliberate attempt to distance itself from the United States – the prospects of increased profits and a higher diplomatic profile, alone, are enough to justify this policy. However, the practical result will be to make Saudi Arabia less economically dependent on the United States, a situation that cannot be lost on Saudi policymakers even if that is not their primary objective.

This becomes even truer when we focus specifically on the international arms trade and Saudi Arabia's place in it. In the past, the Saudis have had a particularly close relationship with the United States when it came to military imports, particularly since the 1991 Gulf War encouraged them to invest more in their own military. Among the purchases made were M1 Abrams battle tanks, M2 Bradley fighting vehicles, F-15 air superiority fighters, F-15E ground attack aircraft, and Patriot surface to air missiles, all top-of-the-line weapons systems whose sale the United States government often restricts to its closest allies only.<sup>70</sup> The relationship was advantageous to both sides, as Saudi

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<sup>69</sup> "Prince Turki seeks European investments in Saudi Arabia," *Saudi Gazette*, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20110912108707>.

<sup>70</sup> "Saudi Arabia – Profile," *Federation of American Scientists*, March 2002, accessed October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, [http://fas.org/asmp/profiles/saudi\\_arabia.htm](http://fas.org/asmp/profiles/saudi_arabia.htm).

Arabia's oil wealth enabled it to buy these weapons systems without the need for any U.S. government assistance. This and Saudi Arabia's proximity to major American enemies Iraq and Iran allowed it to become one of America's largest weapons clients, with the U.S. government overcoming even the objections of such powerful interests as the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC, or Israeli lobby).

This relationship has not ended, particularly since the Saudis show no sign of slowing their arms buildup, recently becoming the world's number one arms importer.<sup>71</sup> However, "the Saudis in recent years have broadened their acquisitions to include more European- and Russian-made weaponry."<sup>72</sup> According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's records, these weapons include "45 combat aircraft from the UK, [...] 4 tanker aircraft from Spain and over 600 armored vehicles from Canada." In addition to these weapons already purchased, Saudi Arabia has "a long list of outstanding orders for arms, including 27 more combat aircraft from the UK, [...] and a large number of armored vehicles from Canada."<sup>73</sup> These are roughly the same categories of weapons that the United States had previously sold the Kingdom in the post-Gulf War era. Finally, the Saudis announced in 2015 that they were considering major arms purchases from Russia, and were particularly interested in the S-300 long-range surface-to-air-missile, and the Iskander-E tactical ballistic missile system. How serious the Saudis are

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<sup>71</sup> Niall McCarthy, "Saudi Arabia Has Become The World's Biggest Arms Importer," *Forbes*, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2015/03/10/saudi-arabia-has-become-the-worlds-biggest-arms-importer-infographic/>.

<sup>72</sup> Adam Entous, "Saudi Arms Deal Advances," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704621204575488361149625050>.

<sup>73</sup> Pieter Wezeman and Siemon Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2014," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1503.pdf>.

about this is unclear – the sale was “presented as a done deal in Moscow,” while “assessed as unlikely in the West.”<sup>74</sup> However, it should be noted that the Russians have already arranged major arms deals with nations that had previously been seen more as American weapons clients but were now seeking to reduce their dependence – such as Egypt and Bahrain.

Despite this, the United States remains the largest weapons supplier to the Saudi military – the *Al Monitor* article cited above notes that the Saudis continue to buy 40% of their weapons from American firms, while SIPRI notes that in the 2010-2014 period, the Saudis purchased 38 combat helicopters from the United States and had placed orders for 154 combat aircraft. Conversely, major arms deals with Russia have not even been confirmed yet, while purchases from Europe have caused serious controversy at home.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, the Saudi interest in finding other weapons clients cannot be ignored in Washington, particularly given the examples of Egypt and Bahrain. If nothing else, the Saudi government’s interest in diversifying its sources of arms can be seen as a reminder to Washington that it cannot take its allies in the region for granted. This message seems to have been received; much of the Camp David summit of May 2015 between the U.S. and GCC governments revolved around the Obama administration’s attempts to reassure its allies that it remained committed to their security, promising increased military and

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<sup>74</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov, “New Russian Arms Deals Could Shake Up Mideast Market,” *Al Monitor* reprinted in *U.S. News and World Report*, August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/08/26/new-russian-arms-deals-could-shake-up-mideast-market>.

<sup>75</sup> “Weapons Exports: EU Nations Sell The Most Arms To Saudi Arabia,” *Der Spiegel*, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/eu-makes-controversial-weapons-sales-to-saudi-arabia-a-822288.html>.

security cooperation and hinting that it might help the Gulf nations develop their own missile defense systems.<sup>76 77</sup>

The Saudi Kingdom has not only worked hard to develop its military capabilities in recent years; it has also put them to use in regional conflicts. We have already seen how the Saudi military intervened in Bahrain to secure the ruling family's position and suppress popular unrest. More recently, it has also been deployed to Yemen, taking sides in the country's ongoing civil war. Like Bahrain, Yemen is a country bordering Saudi Arabia, which was governed by a Sunni Muslim president; as in Bahrain, this president came under challenge from a mostly Shi'a popular movement (the Houthis) which the Saudi government accused of being backed by Iran. In the Yemeni case, however, the rebels successfully overthrew their government and installed a new one, but Saudi Arabia and its neighbors refused to recognize it as legitimate and offered their support to deposed President Hadi in his attempts to retake control of the nation.<sup>78</sup> In March 2015, this support turned to direct military action, as the Saudis committed 100 fighter jets, 150,000 soldiers, and several naval units to an offensive against the Houthi government. The Saudi ambassador to the United States explained that the operation was meant to remove "any threats to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by ballistic missiles, heavy weapons

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<sup>76</sup> Guy Taylor, "Obama Weighs Offering Saudi Arabia Weapons Provided Only To Israel," *The Washington Times*, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/5/obama-weighs-offering-saudi-arabia-weapons-provide/?page=all>.

<sup>77</sup> Julie Hirschfield Davis and David Sanger, "Obama Pledges More Military Aid To Reassure Persian Gulf Allies on Iran Deal," *The New York Times*, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/world/middleeast/obama-saudi-arabia-iran-persian-gulf-security.html>.

<sup>78</sup> "Gulf Arab Ministers Condemn Houthi 'Coup' In Yemen," *Reuters News Agency*, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, accessed October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/01/21/uk-yemen-security-gcc-idUKKBN0KU1YX20150121>.



and planes seized by the Houthi militia,” as well as “protect the legitimate government of Yemen and the Yemeni people from the hostile Houthi movement which is allied with Iran and Hezbollah.” Though the original operation was since completed, Saudi and allied forces have remained in Yemen since then and the conflict with Yemeni forces continued.<sup>79 80</sup>

The Saudi intervention in both Bahrain and Yemen was notable because in both cases, Saudi forces constituted the bulk of the military forces committed to the operation. Saudi Arabia had involved itself in military conflicts before, but usually left most of the fighting to others – Egypt, Syria and Jordan in the cases of the previous Arab-Israeli wars, the United States and other Western nations in the case of the Persian Gulf War. This time, the Saudi military was the primary actor in the operation. In the case of Bahrain, as we have seen, the military action was taken in defiance of the United States, which would have preferred that the Saudis encourage the Bahraini government towards moderation. In the case of Yemen, the U.S. approved of the operation, voiced public support for it, and may have provided some logistical and intelligence support, but no more. The Saudi government, in short, has asserted its ability to take military action that would previously have been left to its allies – with or without the approval of the United States, a major shift in their relationship.

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<sup>79</sup> “Saudi ‘Decisive Storm’ Waged To Save Yemen,” *Al Arabiya News*, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/26/GCC-states-to-repel-Houthi-aggression-in-Yemen-statement-.html>.

<sup>80</sup> “Saudi Ambassador To US: Operation Renewal of Hope Focuses on Political Process, Addresses Any Aggressive Move By Houthi Militias,” website of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, accessed October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/news/MinistryNews/Pages/ArticleID2015423124623514.aspx>.

Finally, the last area in which the Saudis have been asserting their independence is the diplomatic sphere, increasingly seeking the role of a regional leader. The intervention in Yemen provided a good example of this, as a number of states in the region – including Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Pakistan, and every member of the GCC other than Oman – followed Saudi Arabia’s lead in supporting the restoration of the former Yemeni government.<sup>81</sup> Another example is the announcement by the GCC at its 2013 annual summit that it would be forming a unified military command structure to face security threats in the region (referencing both Iran and Syria in its announcement). This would increase military ties in an alliance in which Saudi Arabia, as the largest, wealthiest and best armed of the six members, is generally considered the de facto first among equals. Also noteworthy is that the same annual summit included a public confrontation between the Saudi and Omani governments, with the Omanis objecting to the concept of a union between all six nations, which had previously been suggested by the Saudi government.<sup>82</sup> While a full political union is very unlikely, it is nevertheless revealing that the Saudi government would propose it – it indicates that the Saudis are very actively pushing for even greater unity in an alliance that it currently dominates.

Finally, a similar announcement was made in March 2015 – the same month that the offensive against Yemen began – at the Arab League’s conference in Egypt, where the nations involved agreed “on the principle to create a joint military force.”<sup>83</sup> The

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<sup>81</sup> “Saudi ‘Decisive Storm’ Waged To Save Yemen,” *Al Arabiya News*.

<sup>82</sup> “GCC To Form Unified Military Command,” *Al Arabiya News*, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/12/11/Gulf-states-focus-on-Iran-Syria-at-summit.html>.

<sup>83</sup> “Arab League agrees to create joint military force,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32106939>.

announcement was made by Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, not the Saudi government, and no formal structure has been created yet. However, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, given the broad support it has received from Arab League member states including Egypt, could be seen as the de facto first application of this military alliance. This, along with the fact that Saudi Arabia remains one of the foremost military powers in the Arab world, suggests that the Saudi government would very likely play a leading role this hypothetical future military force.

In short, Saudi Arabia's government has been taking a much more active and independent role over the last decade vis-à-vis its American counterpart – to some extent economically, and particularly militarily and diplomatically, taking direct military action and forming and leading regional coalitions as necessary to support it. It should be emphasized that this more active role is not necessarily directed against its American ally, which has indeed disagreed with some Saudi initiatives, but also approved of others. Nor does it mean that the two countries do not maintain a close relationship – Saudi Arabia may be engaging more closely with other major powers in the economic, diplomatic, and even military spheres, but the United States still remains a close partner in all three. However, the fact remains that the Saudi government has begun to take into its own hands matters which in the past, would have been left to their allies (American or other), or at least left a much larger role for these allies – be it military action, the diplomatic leadership of the region, or engagement with other great powers. In other words, the Saudis are currently asserting their independence and seeking to play a more important role in the politics of the region.

### **The Saudi-American Rift – The American Perspective.**

So far, this chapter has concerned itself mostly with Saudi reactions to the United States – concern over its perceived lack of reaction to the Iranian nuclear peril, concern over its policies towards Iraq, Syria, and the Arab Spring protesters that may not be in Saudi Arabia's best interests, attempts to assert itself without calling on its American ally in roles that might previously have been America's. In this section, I will temporarily move to a different topic – how does the perceived rift look from the American point of view? Does the United States perceive similar problems with its Saudi ally that could lead it to distance itself, or to accept the increased Saudi assertiveness of the last half-decade?

The most obvious cause for concern from the American point of view is one that was raised in the last chapter – the 9/11 attacks, and the subsequent emphasis that the United States has put on combating Sunni jihadist movements such as al-Qaeda and, more recently, ISIS. Like many aspects of the Saudi-U.S. relationship, the disagreement here is not necessarily over broad policy, so much as it is over priorities. Both the Saudi and American governments are considered targets by these jihadist movements and, accordingly, both consider them a national security threat. But this does not mean they place the same urgency on fighting these threats – as we saw in the case of the Syrian civil war, where Saudi Arabia places the highest priority on battling Assad (and, by association, Iran, and their Shi'a allies throughout the region). The United States has been more concerned with the possibility that fighting Assad could empower ISIS and create even more dangerous conditions in the region. This would at least partly explain Washington's reluctance to fully align with the Saudis in regional conflicts. The fact that

Saudi Arabia has a track record of encouraging such jihadist movements (most famously in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion), and that much of their financing is believed to come from wealthy donors in the Persian Gulf,<sup>84</sup> is an additional concern. The U.S. State Department admits that “it has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority.”<sup>85</sup> In the same way that the Saudis are frustrated with the United States for not sharing their priorities in opposing Iran as energetically as possible, there is frustration with the Saudi government on the American side for not sharing their priorities in stamping out Sunni jihadism.

Still, this difference in priorities should not be exaggerated. The two nations have cooperated in counterterrorism efforts that target such jihadists, and Saudi assistance in this program has been a great help to the United States. Saudi religious institutes may preach a vision of Islam close to that of many jihadis, and Saudi Arabia’s efforts in stamping out the overall movement may fall short of Washington’s wishes. However, as pointed out in a recent Foreign Policy article, “when it comes to tactical counterterrorism – uncovering conspiracies and disrupting them – Saudi Arabia has become an invaluable partner, one of the very best Washington has.” Ties between American and Saudi agencies increased after the 2003 bombings in Riyadh, and even more so beginning in 2009 with the growth of jihadist terrorism in Yemen, which the Saudis consider their

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Windrem, “Who’s Funding ISIS? Wealthy Gulf ‘Angel Investors,’ Officials Say,” *NBC News*, September 21, 2014, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/whos-funding-isis-wealthy-gulf-angel-investors-officials-say-n208006>.

<sup>85</sup> “US Embassy Cables: Hillary Clinton Says Saudi Arabia ‘A Critical Source Of Terrorist Funding,’” *The Guardian*, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/242073>.

“backyard.” Beyond their success in disrupting plots, the Saudis have also made some progress in targeting terrorist financiers – if not as much as the Americans would like – and also “in the area of rehabilitating extremists,” where its efforts have been “recognized internationally.”<sup>86</sup> For all the difficulties between the two nations on the subject of Sunni radicalism, Saudi cooperation remains too valuable for the United States to throw away. To the extent that Washington is moving away from Riyadh, these differences alone are not enough to explain the rift.

What may be equally important is an issue with which the Saudis have little to do directly: war fatigue resulting from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts that raged for most of the 2000s. While public support for both wars was initially very high, America’s years-long commitments eventually evolved into a long counterinsurgency effort with unclear goals and uncertain outcomes. The American public began to tell the pollsters that the invasion of Iraq had been a mistake in 2005, and this has remained the majority opinion since then. Opposition to the Afghanistan intervention never passed the 50% mark, but has also increased steadily over the years.<sup>87</sup> This war fatigue was part of the reason for President Obama’s election, and has been reflected in his foreign policy. Speaking of the Defense Department budget in 2010, Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that the United States would “look long and hard at another military operation that would cost us \$100 billion a year,” and that while it would take action against any

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<sup>86</sup> Daniel Benjamin, “The King and ISIS,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/the-king-and-isis-saudi-arabia-egypt-iraq/>.

<sup>87</sup> Andrew Dugan, “Fewer in U.S. View Iraq, Afghanistan Wars As Mistakes,” *Gallup*, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183575/fewer-view-iraq-afghanistan-wars-mistakes.aspx>.

imminent threat, the cost of war would be a factor “in situations where there are real choices.”<sup>88</sup> When President Obama considered military action against the Assad regime in Syria in retaliation for its use of chemical weapons, public and congressional opposition were strong enough that he ultimately declined to intervene, instead placing the issue before a divided Congress (a choice the Saudis disagreed with vehemently).<sup>89</sup> Finally, on the issue of a nuclear Iran, American public opinion has not favored direct action: in a CBS poll conducted in March 2015, three in four Americans viewed the Iranian nuclear program as a threat to the United States; but only 29% believed that this threat required military action, while 45% believed that the threat could be contained.<sup>90</sup>

The United States’ move away from the Saudi position on Iran and other Shi’a threats, therefore, may not be a sign of distrust towards Saudi Arabia, or a reaction to its policies in the region. They reflect the reality of American public opinion, as well as a war machine exhausted by two major regional conflicts – plus an economic recession, which Secretary Gates pointed out in the aforementioned interview meant the United States would be even more wary of investing large resources into a regional conflict. Had the Saudis called on the United States to “cut off the head of the snake” five years sooner, when the American economy and military were stronger and the public mood

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<sup>88</sup> Alex Spillius, “US Cannot Afford Another Afghanistan or Iraq, Warns Defence Secretary,” *The Telegraph*, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/7701718/US-cannot-afford-another-Afghanistan-or-Iraq-warns-Defence-Secretary.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Baker and Jonathan Wiesman, “Obama Seeks Approval By Congress For Strike In Syria,” *The New York Times*, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

<sup>90</sup> Sarah Dutton, Jennifer DePinto, Anthony Salvanto, and Fred Backus, “Poll: Foreign Challenges and the President,” *CBS News*, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-poll-foreign-challenges-and-the-president/>.

more confrontational in the wake of 9/11, it is possible that their ally would have agreed. At any rate, the President would likely have faced less public and congressional opposition than he did in 2013 when contemplating action against Assad. However, this is no longer the case. While America still viewed the Iranian program as a threat, its war fatigue and economic weakness had made it more attractive to seek a negotiated solution rather than the military one the Saudis would have preferred.

Finally, it is important to note what Saudi Arabia's newfound assertiveness in the region means from the American point of view. I noted at the end of the last chapter that the expanded Saudi role in regional politics did not necessarily mean opposition to the United States. Going beyond this, from the Obama administration's point of view, this assertiveness may in fact be a good thing. The Obama foreign policy has been described, sometimes critically, as "leading from behind." The phrase is particularly associated with the U.S. policy towards the Libyan civil war in 2011, in which "the U.S. role was not dominant, but it was crucial," consisting largely of acting in a supporting role complementing the capabilities of other actors – Libyan anti-Qaddafi rebels on the ground, and aerial strikes by the British and particularly the French, whose president "was the driving force behind [the operation to support the Libyan rebels] and its largest contributor." The number of American lives and amount of American resources lost was minimal. "At a moment of fiscal obsession, Qadhafi was deposed on the cheap: the most recent figures, from earlier this summer, showed just \$1.1 billion in American outlays on



the mission, a virtual rounding error at the Pentagon and the equivalent of a few days of involvement in Afghanistan.”<sup>91</sup>

If other actors, like the Saudis, are willing to fulfill the role in the Persian Gulf region that the French and British did in Libya, and take on the military operations that would previously have fallen to the U.S, Washington, given its present difficulties, may well view this as a blessing rather than a challenge to its authority. And the American role in Yemen so far is, in fact, very similar to what it was in Libya – as announced by the White House, “President Obama has authorized the provision of logistical and intelligence support to the GCC-led military intervention.”<sup>92</sup> Once again, the U.S. has allowed another power to take the lead, while complementing its actions by providing “support” resources. Finally, this strategy in the Persian Gulf would not be unprecedented. It mirrors the policy of the Nixon administration towards the Shah’s Iran in the early 1970s, when another period of economic troubles, a war-weary military, and strong anti-war sentiment, led the United States to invest in a regional ally to lead the fight against communism rather than take the lead itself.

From the American point of view, in sum, the partial disengagement from the Saudi alliance has less to do with genuine policy disagreements (though they do exist) and more to do with its own unwillingness to remain as deeply militarily engaged in the Middle East. A more energetic and confrontational Saudi foreign policy, therefore, does not necessarily contradict American interests. Its practical effect is to transfer at least

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<sup>91</sup> Ben Smith, “A Victory For ‘Leading From Behind,’” *Politico*, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/story/2011/08/a-victory-for-leading-from-behind-061849>.

<sup>92</sup> Micah Zenko, “Make No Mistake – The United States Is At War In Yemen,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/30/make-no-mistake-the-united-states-is-at-war-in-yemen-saudi-arabia-iran/>.

some of the burden for regional security from American to Saudi shoulders, allowing the U.S. to recover from its experiences of the previous decade. The fact that Saudi policy will occasionally go against American preferences may simply be considered an acceptable price to pay.

### **The Saudi-American Relationship – What Has Not Changed.**

We have now examined the different ways in which the United States and Saudi Arabia have drifted apart – rhetorical differences, particularly over the Iranian nuclear program, policy differences towards Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Arab Spring, differences in priorities when evaluating regional threats, the increasing assertiveness of the Saudis and the (comparative) disengagement of the United States. It is also important, however, to review the ways in which the Saudi-U.S. relationship has not changed.

On strategy and security, while priorities and preferred policies may be different, the fundamental outlook mostly remains the same. When it comes to Sunni jihadism, the Saudi government may rank the threat lower on its priorities list than enemies like Iran, Syria or their Shi'a allies, but it and the United States both view these movements as national security threats, as evidenced by the close ties between their counterterrorism agencies. When it comes to the Iranian nuclear program, the U.S. may prefer that the issue be resolved through negotiation rather than confrontation, while Saudi Arabia may have preferred that the U.S. use military force. However, both consider the possibility of a nuclear Iran to be a threat to their security, and have committed themselves to ensuring that this threat never materializes – something that can be seen not only in the recently signed nuclear agreement, but in the Obama administration's first term, during which it

pushed for the enactment of tighter sanctions by the UN Security Council on Iran,<sup>93</sup> and rejected an earlier settlement to the nuclear crisis proposed by Turkey and Brazil.<sup>94</sup>

When it comes to the regional security system, the United States remains committed to ensuring the defense of Saudi Arabia. This commitment has been repeatedly expressed by President Obama, who at the outcome of the May 2015 summit at Camp David, promised that the United States was prepared to “work jointly with the GCC states to deter and confront an external threat to any GCC state’s territorial integrity,” by means “including the potential use of military force” if necessary.<sup>95</sup> It has also been expressed through the continued arms sales of the United States to Saudi Arabia. In the first five years of the Obama administration, an estimated \$64 billion dollars worth of fighter aircraft, attack helicopters, radar planes, refueling aircraft, air-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, artillery, small arms and ammunition, cluster bombs, and missile defense systems were sold to GCC member states, three quarters of these sales going to Saudi Arabia.<sup>96</sup> At the Camp David summit of 2015, the United States further promised to “ensure that arms transfers are fast-tracked to GCC member states contributing to regional security,” as well as helping to advise and offer technical

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<sup>93</sup> “United Nations Security Council Resolution,” United Nations website, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1929%282010%29](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1929%282010%29).

<sup>94</sup> James Reinf, “US Rejects Iran Nuclear Deal Brokered By Turkey And Brazil And Sets Up New Sanctions,” *The National*, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/us-rejects-iran-nuclear-deal-brokered-by-turkey-and-brazil-and-sets-up-new-sanctions>.

<sup>95</sup> “U.S. – Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement,” *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>.

<sup>96</sup> William Hartung, “It’s Not Diplomacy, It’s An Arms Fair,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/14/obama-arms-fair-camp-david-weapons-sales-gcc/>.

assistance to these states in developing ballistic missile defense forces and early warning systems, and further increasing military exercises and training activities.<sup>97</sup> While Saudi Arabia may be diversifying its sources of arms purchases, its relationship with the United States remains very strong. Finally, the U.S. Navy remains committed to ensuring the free flow of trade from the Persian Gulf: in May 2015, the Navy was once again assigned to protect cargo ships sailing through the region from any possible Iranian threat.<sup>98</sup>

The same is true of more general economic activities. We have discussed Saudi Arabia's attempts to diversify its economic partnerships and its drift away from the United States – a drift for which in some ways the United States has followed suit, with its push for energy independence in the last decade and the more recent shale revolution. However, while economic ties may be weaker than they used to be, they are still significant. By 2014 estimates, the United States was still Saudi Arabia's third export partner (behind China and Japan) and second import partner (behind China).<sup>99</sup> In September 2015, the two countries planned to increase economic ties with the Saudis unveiling “a giant raft of investment and partnership potential opportunities in sectors including oil and gas, civil infrastructure, and banking,” and major American retailers,

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<sup>97</sup> “Annex to U.S. – Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement,” *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>.

<sup>98</sup> “U.S. Navy Bolsters Presence In The Gulf,” *Agence France Presse*, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/mideast-africa/2015/05/03/us-navy-bolsters-presence-gulf-iran-seizure/26835345/>.

<sup>99</sup> “The World Factbook – Saudi Arabia,” Central Intelligence Agency website, last updated September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>.

banks, finance firms and other potential investors “expected to be invited to set up shop.”<sup>100</sup> The two nations remain important trading partners.

Perhaps most importantly, while the United States and Saudi Arabia may no longer be as close as they once were, neither has yet succeeded in finding partners with whom they could replace each other. In diversifying its economic ties and sources of arms purchases, Saudi Arabia has moved closer to several major powers, but neither of them has stepped into the kind of security partnership that the United States has had with the Saudis in the past. China, for example, is sometimes named as a possible successor to the United States in this role; but on regional security issues of interest to the GCC, it “de facto aligns with the United States, [...] defusing tensions with Iran” and vetoing Security Council resolutions for intervention against Assad.<sup>101</sup> In a hypothetical security partnership with China, therefore, the Saudis would face the same difficulties that they currently do with the United States. This also applies to Russia, which has historically been a strong patron of Syria and, more recently, Iran, and currently has no incentive to abandon these countries for a Saudi security partnership.

The same is true for the United States, which has no realistic alternatives to Saudi Arabia as a regional power to partner with in order to guarantee a friendly security system in the Persian Gulf. Iraq, after the Gulf War, the 1990s sanctions regime, the 2003 invasion and the current civil war, is in no condition to play a decisive role outside

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<sup>100</sup> Shonaz Meko, “Saudi, U.S. to deepen ties with giant new investment, partnership plan,” *Al Arabiya News*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2015/09/05/Saudi-unveils-giant-U-S-partnership-and-investment-plans-.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Imad Mansour, “The GCC States and the Viability of a Strategic Military Partnership with China,” *The Middle East Institute*, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/gcc-states-and-viability-strategic-military-partnership-china>.

of its borders. Iran, despite the recent thaw in relations, is still viewed primarily as an adversary (it is important to remember that the 2015 agreement concerns only the Iranian nuclear program and the Western sanctions imposed on it, leaving many unresolved issues unaddressed). None of the remaining Gulf states – Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman – are as powerful as Saudi Arabia, and all of them are aligned with it in any case. Neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia have a plausible alternative to their current arrangements, nor does one seem likely to emerge in the immediate future. This explains why, despite the increasing differences between the two nations, the fundamentals of their alliance have remained in place.

### **Conclusion.**

Since the invasion of Iraq, the Saudi-American relationship has undergone significant changes. Public disagreements between the two countries have been making headlines since 2009, with the Saudi government openly expressing its wishes for a more militant American policy towards Iran, and the United States failing to oblige it. These disagreements have been amplified by several regional crises in which the two nations have pursued opposing policy objectives. In Iraq, the United States has, since soon after the 2003 invasion, supported the Shi'a dominated government, while Saudi Arabia undermined it by supporting Sunni opposition groups. In Syria, the Saudi government has made opposition to the Assad regime its first priority, while the United States has been unwilling to involve itself too deeply with the anti-Assad rebellion. In the face of the Arab Spring protests, the United States has encouraged allied governments to address the protests through political reform, while the Saudis encouraged these governments to

crack down. The Saudis have also taken a more assertive stance in the region, militarily by intervening directly in conflicts in Bahrain and Yemen, diplomatically by encouraging further regional unity through organizations in which it is a major player, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League, and economically by distancing themselves from the United States and seeking closer partnerships with other major powers.

Washington's response to these issues, however, has been muted: it has responded to Saudi frustration with repeated promises of its commitment to their security, and followed up on these promises with increased arms sales to help guarantee the Saudis' security and support for Saudi military operations in Yemen. Not only does it seem that the United States is not offended by the increasing assertiveness of its Saudi ally, its responses actually seem as though they are intended to bolster it, accepting Saudi Arabia's leadership role in the region and supporting it. This becomes less surprising when one considers that the war weariness of the American nation and its ongoing economic troubles make it more difficult for it to play the sort of assertive role in the Persian Gulf region that it did in the 1990s and 2000s. The most convenient solution, from the American point of view, may simply be to allow the Saudis to fill the resulting power vacuum.

In the previous chapter, three common concerns were identified upon which the historic Saudi-American alliance had been founded – ensuring the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, protecting American allies in the region from penetration by hostile foreign powers, and protecting conservative, pro-Western monarchies from domestic subversion. With this chapter, we can now judge how severely the Saudi-American “rift” has affected each of these three topics. When it comes to ensuring the free flow of oil,

the two allies are in agreement: despite America's moves towards energy independence and the rise of Saudi exports to American rivals like China, the U.S. Navy has maintained its presence in the Persian Gulf, a presence the Saudi government has not objected to. On the issue of containing foreign powers (which, today, means Iran), the relationship has become more troubled – the two nations agree on the general objective of containing Iran, but disagree on methods and priorities (negotiation versus confrontation in the case of the Iranian nuclear program, whether Iran and its allies or Sunni jihadist movements are the greater threat). The issue of containing domestic subversion is perhaps the one that has been most affected by the current rift. America's response to the Arab Spring included accepting the removal of a longstanding ally in Egypt and asking other allied governments to listen to the protesters and reform their political systems – rather than aligning fully with these governments and against the protesters as the Saudis would have wished. Combined with the previous administration's rhetoric about democracy promotion, and its empowerment of Shi'a populists in Iraq (albeit involuntarily), this has created a climate in which the Saudi government is no longer certain that it can trust the United States to be a strong ally against subversive movements, as they once were against Nasserist and earlier Islamist movements. The fact that this applied to both America's current, Democratic administration and its previous, Republican one is important. If it were only one new president who had displayed this attitude towards democracy promotion and instability in the region, the Saudis could have hoped that it was a temporary aberration that would pass with the next presidential inauguration. The fact that it has instead taken root in both parties makes a return to the status quo seem much less likely. This would encourage the Saudis to form their own long-term plans to



combat populist threats in the region, without counting on the support of the United States.

The Saudi-American alliance remains despite all of these differences, driven not only by these issues on which the two nations still agree, but also by a lack of alternatives. Despite their disagreements, the United States is still the best patron available for Saudi Arabia among the great powers, and Saudi Arabia the only realistic ally available for the United States in preserving a friendly security order in the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, the alliance is now transformed, with the biggest change being Saudi Arabia's determination to play a leading role in the region and reduce its reliance on its American ally. The ultimate result of this may not be a break in relations between the two, so much as a return to the pre-1979 status quo, in which America maintains a smaller military presence in the Gulf, and its local allies play a greater role in maintaining order in the region. This time, the most important of these allies, playing the role that the Shah's Iran did before 1979, will be Saudi Arabia.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – IRAN AND THE SAUDI-AMERICAN RIFT**

### **Introduction.**

In the past chapter, we discussed the extent of the Saudi-American rift: in this one, we will discuss the extent to which the Saudi-American rift can be traced to Iran policy. The first section will examine the process of improving relations between the United States and Iran since 2008, and compare it with the increasing difficulties of the Saudi-American relationship (listed above), in order to determine whether the latter can be plausibly traced to the former, and what other explanations for it might exist. In the next three sections, the problems that have emerged between Saudi Arabia and the United States will be separated into three categories – those that can be traced to disagreements over the nuclear crisis and the thaw in Iran-U.S. relations, those that concern Iran but not the nuclear crisis and negotiations, and those that are entirely separate from Iran.

Iran's nuclear program, the U.S. attempt to dismantle it through sanctions and diplomacy, and Saudi Arabia's increasingly loud opposition to this policy are the most commonly discussed source of disagreement between the two countries. The purpose of this chapter is to attempt to weigh the nuclear crisis and negotiations against other issues to determine whether this is, in fact, the primary cause of the Saudi-American rift.

### **Saudi-American and Iranian-American Relations, Side By Side.**

This section will examine the timeline of improved relations between Iran and the United States, and contrast it with reactions from Saudi Arabia. In order to do this, it will dwell on the major milestones in the evolution of the Iran-U.S. relationship, describe the

official Saudi reaction, as well as whether any of the major events in Saudi-U.S. relations – for the most part, listed in the earlier chapters – followed soon after these milestones and could plausibly have been a reaction to them.

The first major milestone is the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. As was noted in the previous chapter, Obama intentionally distanced himself from his predecessor’s foreign policy, calling for engagement and negotiation with American enemies – including Syria and Iran – of the kind that the Bush administration rejected when the Iranians made the offer of a “grand bargain” in 2003. On the topic of Iran specifically, Obama announced in an interview in 2007 that he “would offer economic inducements and a possible promise not to seek ‘regime change’ if Iran stopped meddling in Iraq and cooperated on terrorism and nuclear issues.”<sup>102</sup> This signaled from early on that the president was hoping to end a pattern of hostility between the two nations going back to the 1979 revolution, a prospect that would understandably have concerned the Saudis given their shared enmity with Iran and reliance on the United States on security issues.

Saudi Arabia did not feature as prominently in the Obama campaign. The candidate toured several countries in the region in July 2008, including fellow GCC member Kuwait, but Saudi Arabia was not one of them. Nor did the Saudis react with any particular hostility to his candidacy or his eventual election. It was during this time period, however, that Saudi rhetoric against Iran became increasingly belligerent and began to be accompanied by calls for action from the United States: King Abdullah’s

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<sup>102</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Jeff Zeleny, “Obama Envisions New Iran Approach,” *The New York Times*, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007, accessed on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/02/us/politics/02obama.html? r=0>.

infamous call for the United States to “cut off the head of the snake” was made in April 2008, when Obama was already the likely nominee for the Democratic Party. After Obama’s election, the Saudis not only continued to make such requests but began to make them overtly; Saudi Foreign Minister Saud’s call for “a more immediate solution” than sanctions was made in 2009, and Prince Turki’s warning that his country might be compelled to pursue its own nuclear weapons program in 2011. Given the timing, it is possible that the rise to power of a new president seeking improved relations with Iran is what caused the present level of Saudi anxiety about the Iranian nuclear program and the reliability of their American ally.

The rise of Obama is not, however, the only such event that could explain this. As we have seen, Saudi anxieties about the United States and Iran predate the 2008 presidential campaign, even if they were not as strongly expressed: they go back to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the resulting opening of that country to Iranian influence. The timing of the American troop withdrawal from Iraq, in particular, coincides with the increasing Saudi rhetoric just as much as the Obama campaign and early presidency. The process began in 2007, when the commander in chief of U.S. forces in Iraq recommended the withdrawal of 20,000 troops by the middle of the following year; it was formalized in November 2008, with the signing of the Status of Forces Agreement setting the timetable for full withdrawal; it was completed by December 2011, with the withdrawal of the last U.S. troops (not counting a small force attached to the U.S. embassy).<sup>103</sup> From the Saudi point of view, this represented the

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<sup>103</sup> David Cutler, “Timeline: Invasion, Surge, Withdrawal; U.S. Forces in Iraq,” *Reuters News Agency*, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011, accessed October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/18/us-iraq-usa-pullout-idUSTRE7BH08E20111218>.

removal of the only strong allied force keeping order in Iraq, leaving the country in the hands of a Shi'a government that they viewed as too closely aligned with Iran, and completing the destruction of Iraq as a buffer zone between the Kingdom and Iran. Even without an American rapprochement with Tehran, this alone would have been good reason to justify the Saudis' increasing alarm.

Another possible explanation is the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency of Iran in 2005. While Saudi Arabia was not the most frequent target for his rhetoric, Ahmadinejad became quickly known for his confrontational and nationalist style and in particular his intransigence concerning Iran's right to resume uranium conversion and pursue a nuclear program.<sup>104</sup> The President is not the most powerful figure in the Iranian political system and, in particular, not the person ultimately in charge of the military and security agencies (that role falls to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei). However, the idea that his government represented a shift in a more aggressive direction for the Iranian government could also explain why the Saudi government decided to match its belligerent tone.

In short, the rise of an American president willing to negotiate with Tehran is not the only explanation for the appearance of a more confrontational Saudi tone towards Iran – though it may be one of several causes for it.

The next major milestone was a step backwards – the period roughly covering President Obama's first term in office from 2009 through 2013 – during which relations between Iran and America actually deteriorated. The previous chapter noted that the Obama administration increased sanctions on Iran soon after coming into office. The two

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<sup>104</sup> "Profile: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010, accessed August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-10866448>.

most important events in this process were America's rejection, in May 2010, of a deal proposed by Turkey and Brazil that might have resolved the Iranian nuclear standoff; and the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1929 the following month, which targeted a number of new individuals and organizations tied to the Iranian nuclear program. One more event must be noted that was not related to the nuclear crisis: the Iranian presidential election of June 2009, during which President Ahmadinejad won a second term in office and defeated a candidate widely seen as a moderate. The election was strongly contested within Iran: Ahmadinejad was accused of fraud, setting off a wave of protests that was repressed by Iranian security forces. These events "upended" President Obama's initial attempts to reach out to Iran; while he "initially opted for a muted response" to the elections, "the Iranian regime's violent crackdown of opposition supporters complicated his administration's attempt to balance outreach with its defense of human rights." By the following year, Iran's "continued repression of opposition supporters," combined with "newly surfaced reports outlining Iran's enrichment related activities, resulted in Obama's hardening stance towards the country."<sup>105</sup>

It might be expected for this increasingly harsh stance on Iran to have been greeted with relief in Saudi Arabia, reassuring it that its American ally was not in fact becoming too close to Iran – especially since it was so closely related to the Iranian nuclear program. This was not the case. Saudi pronouncements against the Iranian nuclear program, demands that the U.S. response go beyond sanctions, and hints that Saudi Arabia might develop its own nuclear program, continued throughout this period – most of the calls for military action mentioned in the previous section took place during

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<sup>105</sup> "The Candidates on U.S.-Iran Policy," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012, accessed October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/candidates-us-iran-policy/p26798>.

Obama's first term. The new American policy was not enough to satisfy the Saudi government: at most, it may have raised Saudi hopes that the Americans, having returned to a more confrontational policy towards Iran, could still be persuaded to resort to a military solution. Instead, the breach between the two countries remained. The Americans had been willing to temporarily abandon their plans for diplomatic outreach in light of events in Iran, but the Saudis were not willing to abandon their new policy of confrontation towards Iran, or their demands for a military solution.

The next major milestone in the relationship came roughly one year into President Obama's second term. On November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Iran and the P5+1 powers (United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China) announced that they had reached an interim agreement, under which key parts of the Iranian nuclear program would be frozen in exchange for temporary sanctions relief.<sup>106</sup> The agreement was the first step in a process towards an eventual, more permanent resolution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, that would go on for another year and a half.

The Saudi official reaction to the announcement was to "cautiously welcome" it, acknowledging that the agreement "could" lead to a comprehensive solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, "provided there is goodwill." This comprehensive solution, the official statement went on to say, should involve "the removal of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear, from the Middle East," though it acknowledged that all

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<sup>106</sup> Anne Gearan and Joby Warrick, "World powers reach nuclear deal with Iran to freeze its nuclear program," *The Washington Post*, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-in-geneva-raising-hopes-for-historic-nuclear-deal-with-iran/2013/11/23/53e7bfe6-5430-11e3-9fe0-fd2ca728e67c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-in-geneva-raising-hopes-for-historic-nuclear-deal-with-iran/2013/11/23/53e7bfe6-5430-11e3-9fe0-fd2ca728e67c_story.html).

nations had a right to a nuclear energy program for civilian use.<sup>107</sup> Outside of the public statements, certain officials reacted less positively to the revelation. One of the more noteworthy public reactions to the deal came from Nawaf Obaid, an adviser to the Saudi ambassador to Great Britain, who stated that “we were lied to, things were hidden from us,” and that Saudi Arabia would, in response, be adopting “a new defense doctrine” based around containment of Iran.<sup>108</sup> The first statement refers to the fact that the negotiations with Iran began in March 2013, and were hidden from the public – and from allies like Saudi Arabia – until the signing of the interim agreement. The second statement, however, is of particular interest, because Saudi foreign policy has in fact undergone major alterations since that time period. The GCC summit at which a new, unified military command structure was announced – in which Saudi Arabia would be the de facto senior partner – came in December 2013, less than a month after the announcement of the interim nuclear agreement. A little over a year later, in March 2015, the Arab League similarly announced that it would be creating a joint military force – and at the same time, an exact such military force, led by the Saudis, was conducting a military intervention in Yemen against a Shi’a movement viewed as being aligned against Iran. The newly assertive Saudi policy, discussed in the previous chapter and consisting of Saudi Arabia rallying and leading regional coalitions against Iran and its perceived allies, seems very similar to that announced by Obaid.

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<sup>107</sup> “Saudi Arabia Cautiously Welcomes Iran Nuclear Deal,” *Voice Of America*, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/saudi-arabia-cautiously-welcomes-irans-nuclear-deal/1797132.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Damien McElroy, David Blair and Peter Foster, “Iran Nuclear Deal Changes Middle East Alliances As Saudi Arabia Rebels Against Washington,” *The Telegraph*, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10474143/Iran-nuclear-deal-changes-Middle-East-alliances-as-Saudi-Arabia-rebels-against-US.html>.



The question, again, is whether this newly assertive policy can be tracked to the announcement of deal between the United States (and the other major world powers) and Iran, and the thaw in relations it represented. This is what Obaid's public statement seemed to claim. However, the timeline does not fit perfectly. Saudi Arabia had already begun to assert its military strength in the region before the interim deal was announced, and even before the negotiations began – the intervention in Bahrain that put down a mostly-Shi'a protest took place in 2011. Nor are the nuclear negotiations with Iran the only thing that explains the newfound assertiveness of the Saudi government. Obaid himself, in an op-ed piece published by *Al-Monitor* a month before the interim agreement, had stated that his government was coming to realize that “it is time for the major Arab powers to prepare a response for maintaining order in the Arab world and to counter Iran's expanding infiltrative policies.”<sup>109</sup> The reason Obaid gave for this shift was not the Iranian nuclear program, which was not mentioned once in his op-ed, but rather the ongoing civil war in Syria, which he saw as a major battlefield between Saudi and Iranian allies, and the failure of the West – specifically France, Britain, and the United States – to intervene, proving that they “no longer have the political and economic stomach to unilaterally engage their militaries in the region.” As with the rise of President Obama and the idea of diplomatic engagement with Iran, the interim agreement with Iran may have been one of the things that caused a change in Saudi behavior, but there were probably other factors as well. At any rate, it is not the only explanation that fits the facts.

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<sup>109</sup> Nawaf Obaid, “Saudi Arabia Shifts To More Activist Foreign Policy Doctrine,” *Al Monitor*, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/contents/articles/originals/2013/10/saudi-shifts-foreign-policy-doctrine.html#>.

Finally, we come to the most recent milestone in the Iran-U.S. relationship – the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran, the P5+1 powers, and the European Union, on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015. This was the culmination of the negotiation process that followed the interim agreement of 2013. The agreement lifted a number of the sanctions that had been imposed on Iran. In exchange, it gave the international community much greater access to the Iranian nuclear program, including not only a comprehensive inspections regime, but the transformation of one nuclear facility into a research institute housing both Iranian and foreign scientists, and the reconstruction of another according to blueprints approved by the international community. It also included a provision for the return of sanctions should Iran be found in violation of the agreement. However, it did allow Iran to continue some uranium enrichment – one of the major issues the United States had refused to grant in previous negotiations.<sup>110 111</sup>

The Saudi official reaction, as quoted by the Kingdom’s embassy in Washington, was that “the Kingdom has always been in favor of an agreement [...] that would prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon,” and “must include a specific, strict and sustainable inspection regime of all Iranian sites, including military sites, as well as a mechanism to swiftly re-impose effective sanctions in the event that Iran violates the agreement.”<sup>112</sup> It must be noted that this statement describes “an agreement” which the

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<sup>110</sup> William Broad and Sergio Pecanha, “The Iran Nuclear Deal – A Simply Guide,” *The New York Times*, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/31/world/middleeast/simple-guide-nuclear-talks-iran-us.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Eyder Peralta, “6 Things You Should Know About The Iran Nuclear Deal,” *National Public Radio*, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/07/14/422920192/6-things-you-should-know-about-the-iran-nuclear-deal>.

<sup>112</sup> “Saudi Statement on Iran Nuclear Deal,” The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014, accessed October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-releases/press07141501.aspx>.

Saudis would consider acceptable, but does not specify whether or not the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action meets these criteria in their eyes. The statement also expressed Saudi Arabia's approval of the fact that sanctions imposed on Iran for its support of international terrorism and violations of international arms treaties would continue (only those sanctions related to the nuclear issue will be removed), and promised "harsh and determined responses from the countries in the region" should Iran try to use the benefits gained from the lessening of sanctions to "incite turmoil" in the region rather than for domestic matters such as improving the lives of their citizens.

In the following months, Saudi policy became less ambiguous. After a meeting between King Salman and President Obama in September 2015, the Saudi foreign minister announced that the King was "satisfied" by the assurances Obama had given him, and believed "this agreement will contribute to stability and security in the region by preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon."<sup>113</sup> This opinion was not shared by the entire royal family. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former ambassador to Washington and head of Saudi intelligence, wrote a public column two days after the agreement claiming that it would "wreak havoc" on the region, and accusing President Obama of knowingly signing a bad deal.<sup>114</sup> While he was not speaking for his government, Bandar's long and respected service means his opinions should not be dismissed, and likely represent the views of some within the Saudi government.

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<sup>113</sup> Peter Baker, "Obama and Saudi King Sidestep Dispute Over Iran Nuclear Deal," *The New York Times*, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/world/middleeast/obama-and-saudi-king-sidestep-dispute-over-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Adam Taylor, "Saudi Prince Bandar: The U.S. Nuclear Pact With North Korea Failed. This Will Be Worse," *The Washington Post*, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/07/16/saudi-prince-bandar-says-iran-nuke-deal-worse-than-failed-north-korea-deal/>.

This latest milestone in the Iran-U.S. relationship is still too recent for a meaningful analysis of how Saudi policy has evolved in its aftermath. However, the official reaction to the agreement is still worth examining in light of previous Saudi reactions to the Iran-U.S. relationship. The original response – that Saudi Arabia supported a deal, as long as it was strict and effective enough and contained punitive measures should Iran be caught cheating – is what the Saudis have said all along. But equally interesting was the expression of approval for the sanctions on Iran that would continue – those imposed because of Iran’s support for terrorism – and the message to Iran of how it should use its resources (for internal improvement, not to handle external threats). As we saw with the previous milestones, increasing Saudi hostility towards Iran can be explained by other events, and the way Iran has benefited from them – the end of the U.S. presence in Iraq, the continued survival of President Assad in Syria – just as well as by the Iran nuclear deal. Combined with the increasing Saudi expressions of support for the nuclear agreement, this poses the question of whether Saudi Arabia’s main concern with Iran is its nuclear weapons program (the item with which America has been most concerned, and around which the American-Iranian thaw in relations has occurred) – or other aspects of its policy. This is the subject of the rest of this chapter.

### **Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the U.S. – The Nuclear Crisis and Negotiation.**

In both this section and the last chapter, we have focused on rifts in the Saudi-American alliance over the course of the last decade. For the rest of this chapter, we will categorize the differences between the two nations into one of three groups; the first is those differences rooted in Saudi fears of the Iranian nuclear program specifically.

The Iranian nuclear program is certainly a concern for the Saudi government. For obvious reasons, it would be a strategic disaster to Saudi Arabia for its main regional rival to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, which many fear is what its nuclear program was meant to produce. The ability to threaten any state with nuclear reprisals would render the Iranian regime essentially untouchable; threatening war, regime change, or air strikes (none of which the United States or its allies have carried out against the Islamic Republic, but which have always remained “on the table” as a last resort) would no longer be an option for the Western-GCC alliance. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, as an immediate neighbor of Iran, would be well within range of any Iranian nuclear weapons system, and therefore its most immediate target in any hypothetical future war.

In such a scenario, the imbalance in power between Saudi Arabia and Iran would be enormous. To counteract a nuclear Iran, Saudi Arabia would be forced to choose between several options, all of them deeply unattractive. It could rely on its ally the United States to deter Iran with its own nuclear arsenal. But this would force the Saudis to once again place their defense in the hands of an ally that they do not fully trust. The last time this happened, during and after the 1990-91 Gulf War, the presence of and dependence on U.S. forces fueled the objections of radical religious movements, ultimately including al-Qaeda, and the Saudi throne was left vulnerable to accusations that it had become an American puppet. This would likely be an even greater problem today, given the difficulties the Saudi-American relationship is undergoing, and the revolutionary wave that has been sweeping the Arab world since 2010. Alternatively, Saudi Arabia could pursue its own nuclear weapons program in the hopes of achieving parity with Iran and negating its advantage as quickly as possible. This would risk

alienating Saudi Arabia's Western allies, particularly the United States, which have made it a priority to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially in the Middle East. Despite the current difficulties in their relationship, the Saudis would be unlikely to want to provoke the United States so directly – especially since, as noted above, they have no realistic alternative as a partner among the great powers (or at least none that are more reliable than the U.S. has been, particularly on the Iran issue). Finally, it could do neither of these things, and acquiesce to Iran's new leading role in the region – a concession of defeat in the “cold war” that the two nations have been waging, which would probably be the least attractive option of all.

A nuclear-armed Iran would be an unacceptable threat to Saudi Arabia. Two questions follow from this: first, whether a nuclear-armed Iran is a realistic expectation. Iran itself has repeatedly denied that its nuclear program is intended for anything other than peaceful, civilian, energy-related purposes: the Supreme Leader has gone so far as to issue a fatwa, “based on Islamic teachings, forbidding the production of nuclear weapons.”<sup>115</sup> However, the Saudis remain unconvinced, as we saw from the various statements in which the Saudi king or other highly placed leaders requested that the United States apply military force against Iranian nuclear installations. The second is whether the current nuclear arrangement would really prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon if it wanted to do so. Public statements from the King of Saudi Arabia seem to indicate that he believes so, at least for now. However, Saudi researcher Mansour Al-Mazourki points out that “since the deal will only take effect for a relatively

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<sup>115</sup> “Sermons by Ayatollah Khamenei in the Eid Al-Fitr congregational prayers,” the Office of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=contentShow&id=13450>.

short period of time, 15 years, and will not destroy Iran's technical capabilities to build a nuclear programme," Iran will still be left with the ability to produce its own nuclear weapon in the near future.<sup>116</sup> This is a view that aligns with Prince Bandar's assessment that the nuclear program will "wreak havoc" upon the region. In other words, Saudi Arabia may still feel compelled to raise the issue again in the future.

As important as the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon are the problems raised by the Iran nuclear deal itself, and how the negotiation process may have impacted the politics of the region. Both the interim agreement of 2013 and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 were signed by Iran and the P5+1 powers, and the talks leading up to them were conducted between these same countries (and, in the latter case, the European Union). Conspicuously absent from the entire process were the Gulf Cooperation Council nations. The one exception was Oman, which acted as middleman and broker in the initial process before the negotiations became public. The other five states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, were not even aware of the negotiations until they were revealed to the world in November 2013.

This was not lost on Riyadh: after the revelation of the interim agreement, former intelligence chief Prince Turki Al-Faisal noted and criticized the P5+1 powers for failing to include the GCC in the process. Regional media reacted even more vehemently, as "a Saudi newspaper editor assailed the Western powers for 'behind the back dealings,' while a Kuwaiti commenter noted wryly 'we are not at the table but on it,'" and "an op-ed in

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<sup>116</sup> "Why Saudi Arabia and Israel Oppose Iran Nuclear Deal," *Al Jazeera*, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/saudi-arabia-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal-150401061906177.html>.

the Emirati press went as far as to accuse the United States ‘of giving away in the Gulf and the Levant that which it does not own to those who do not have the right to it.’”<sup>117</sup>

While these do not represent the voices of the regional governments, they are not far removed from the sentiments that were expressed by Saudi princes like Bandar Bin Sultan or Saudi diplomats like Nawaf Obaid. Given Saudi Arabia’s hostility towards Iran and its already strained relations with the United States, it is understandable that the P5+1 powers chose not to include it in the negotiations, or even reveal them until they was already well along. However, as a result of this, Riyadh has now seen its suspicions about the United States vindicated: its American ally was willing to go behind its back to pursue a policy it knew Saudi Arabia would not approve of, on a topic that has been of extreme importance to Saudi Arabia in the last seven years, with a nation that Saudi Arabia considers its foremost regional rival. The confirmation of the Saudis’ fears, that they cannot trust their American ally to present a united front against Iran on a matter as important as its nuclear program, may ultimately do as much damage to their relationship as any material gains Iran derives from the agreement.

Finally, the Iranian nuclear program is not the only thing at stake in the 2015 Plan of Action: in exchange for the increased inspections and restrictions, Iran is to be rewarded with the lifting of a number of international sanctions that had previously inflicted serious damage on its economy. This is expected to revitalize trade with Iran and increase the revenues available to the Iranian government. Riyadh’s fear is that “Iran will use an estimated \$100 billion in funds unfrozen by sanctions to boost its armed

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<sup>117</sup> Dalia Daasa Kaye and Jeffrey Martin, “The Days After A Deal With Iran,” The Rand Corporation, 2014, page 12, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE122/RAND\\_PE122.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE122/RAND_PE122.pdf).



proxies throughout the Arab world” – at a time when the Saudis are already fighting against, or supporting the fight against, such proxies in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere.<sup>118</sup> This explains the initial Saudi response to the announcement of the nuclear deal, admonishing Iran to use its wealth for domestic improvements and not the subversion of foreign nations.

Saudi Arabia may or may not have been deeply concerned with the threat of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. But in either case, it was satisfied with the situation created by the international community’s response: “the international sanctions regime that restrained its ambitions and capacity for power projection” became “a pillar of foreign policy” for the Saudi government over the course of the 2000s. Viewed in this light, “a nuclear deal would not rehabilitate, but rather free a dangerous regional rival to harass and threaten the kingdom.”<sup>119</sup> Lastly, a successful resolution to the nuclear crisis would also mean a diplomatic rehabilitation of Iran, freeing it to improve relations with a number of foreign nations that would previously have kept their distance for fear of offending the West. The end of sanctions would mean more money for Iran to invest in its economic infrastructure and more opportunities for trade, making it a more effective competitor with Saudi Arabia in fields other than military strength, such as the international oil market. The implications of ending the nuclear crisis, in short, are just as great a concern for the Saudis as the nuclear crisis itself was.

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<sup>118</sup> Warren Strobel and Matt Spetalnick, “Iran should use nuclear deal to help economy, not for regional ‘adventures:’ Saudi minister,” *Reuters News Agency*, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/17/us-iran-nuclear-saudi-idUSKCN0PQ22S20150717>.

<sup>119</sup> Jeremy Shapiro, “Iran and the U.S.-Saudi Bargain,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/26/iran-and-the-u-s-saudi-bargain/>.

The recent negotiations over Iran's nuclear crisis were, in sum, certainly a major concern for the Saudis, but not only out of a fear of the Iranian nuclear program. Equally important was what the negotiations revealed about how much the United States could be trusted, and especially what the end of the crisis would mean for Iran's power in the region. Paradoxically, the worst possible outcome from that point of view would be for Iran *not* to develop a nuclear weapon, and instead to follow the newly signed treaty to the letter. That strategy would go farthest in ending its diplomatic isolation, reassuring the world that Iran no longer deserves to be treated as a pariah state, and maximizing its diplomatic capital, its economic resources, and, by extension, the power of the Iranian government (however it chooses to exercise it). The reason the nuclear negotiations have been such a heated topic in the Saudi-American relationship is that, while the United States may have seen Iran's nuclear program as the main reason to be concerned with it, to the Saudis, Iran is the greatest threat on the agenda with or without a nuclear weapon.

#### **Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the U.S. – Other Major Issues.**

As perceived from Saudi Arabia, the Iranian threat is to an important degree ideological. In the media, this is usually explained simply through sectarian differences between the two nations, with Saudi Arabia standing for the Sunni branch of Islam and Iran for the Shi'a. "Ideologies that emphasize the distinctions between Arabs and Persians, the East and the West, and ruling classes and the 'street' are also thought to inform Saudi and Iranian threat perception," according to the Rand Corporation's last in-

depth study of relations between the two countries.<sup>120</sup> But religion and ideology, the report adds, function “both as calculated instruments of state policy and as a set of deeply held beliefs by certain key constituencies that decision-makers must factor into their political calculus.” This section will examine the threat Iran poses to the Kingdom both ideologically and strategically, and its implications for Saudi-U.S. relations.

As far as the Saudi Kingdom is concerned, one the most important “key constituencies” to keep in mind is their country’s Wahhabi religious establishment. As noted at the beginning of the first chapter, the cornerstone of the Saudi social contract for close to three hundred years has been the alliance between the Al-Saud royal family and the religious movement founded by Muhammad Ibn Abd Al Wahhab, with the royal family providing political clout for the religious movement, and the religious movement providing legitimacy for the royal family. The Wahhabi movement has historically been conservative and exclusivist, frequently considering other Muslims who do not follow its doctrines to be apostate – a criticism that applies particularly to the Shi’a branch of Islam. This provides one incentive for the Saudi government to be intransigent towards Shi’a movements in the region in general, and the largest Shi’a power, Iran, in particular. And in the aftermath of the Gulf War, and the rise of al-Qaeda and other religious movements who accuse the Saudis of having forsaken their religious responsibilities and become Western puppets, the Saudi government has even more incentive than usual to keep the religious establishment satisfied.

However, there are strategic justifications for Saudi Arabia’s fear of Shi’a militancy as well. While the overall Shi’a percentage of the Muslim world is fairly small

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<sup>120</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*, page 11.

(only 12 to 15 percent of the total population), a number of Shi'a populations exist in regions close to Saudi Arabia. Iran is the most significant of these, both because the vast majority of Iranians are Shi'a and because the regime firmly embraces that branch of the religion. Outside of Iran, the Shi'a form a majority of the population in Iraq (65-70 percent) and Bahrain (65-75 percent), both nations that border Saudi Arabia. Lebanon is the only other nation in the Arab world that may have a Shi'a majority (demographics are uncertain, but estimated at 45 to 55 percent, with the rest of the population containing a large non-Muslim element). However, other large Shi'a populations close to Saudi borders can be found in Yemen (35 to 40 percent of the population), and Kuwait (20 to 25 percent of the population). Finally, Saudi Arabia also has its own Shi'a minority – 10 to 15 percent of the population, mostly concentrated on its eastern coastline with the Persian Gulf.<sup>121 122</sup>

Saudi Arabia tends to treat political movements representing these communities and challenging a Saudi-favorable status quo as agents of Iran. There is some justification for this reading. In Iraq, the creation of a more representative political order resulted in the end of Saudi Arabia's largest bulwark against Iran, and its replacement with a government that is, at the very least, more connected with and friendly towards Tehran. In Lebanon, the most powerful Shi'a political faction, Hezbollah, has been a close ally of the Iranian government since the 1980s. And whether or not the Saudis are right to suspect deep Iranian involvement in the Yemeni civil war, Iranian rhetoric at

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<sup>121</sup> "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," Pew Research Center, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/#sunni-and-shia-populations>.

<sup>122</sup> Raihan Ismail, "The Shi'a Question in Saudi Arabia," Middle East Institute, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/shi%E2%80%98question-saudi-arabia>.

least has been largely sympathetic to the Houthi Shi'a rebels, and hostile to the Saudi military intervention in that country.<sup>123</sup> The Saudi fear, then, is that ethno-sectarian nationalism among Shi'a communities in the region will be stirred up by the Iranian government in order to weaken the Saudis and their allies, and they are firmly committed to fighting this trend wherever they find it. The interventions in Bahrain and Yemen can be seen as an attempt to prevent the same thing that happened in Iraq from occurring there. The Sunni/Shi'a divide, from this point of view, is not about Shi'ism as an ideology but as an identity. Having a common identity with Iran, the groups that embrace that branch of Islam are considered those through which Iran is most likely to pressure the Saudis and their allies.

The Sunni/Shi'a divide is not the only ideological separation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Also important is the divide between the conservative, "moderate" (in terms of foreign policy), and pro-Western monarchy in Riyadh, and the revolutionary republic now in power in Tehran. Osama Bin Laden and other Sunni radicals are not the first movements to have questioned the Saudi royal family's legitimacy on Islamic grounds. A generation earlier, the Iranian Revolution had already "placed intense pressure on the al-Saud" by "providing a model of government that accorded primacy to the clerical class and cast a spotlight on the perceived impiety of the Saudi royal family."<sup>124</sup> This is particularly true because Iran is well aware that its Shi'a status puts it in the minority in the region (as is its ethnic identity Persian nation in a region where

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<sup>123</sup> Sam Wilkin, "Iran Wages Media Onslaught Against Saudis Over Yemen," *Reuters News Agency*, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/02/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN0PC0RK20150702>.

<sup>124</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*, page 14.

most nations are Arab). In order to compensate for this, it has worked hard to present itself not primarily as a Shi'a but an Islamic actor, or, even more generically, as a revolutionary actor embracing causes that many disenfranchised populations in the region can relate to. "As noted by an official in the Lebanese Hizballah's research wing, 'At the heart of Iran's foreign policy are two key issues: the Palestinian cause and confronting Washington's hegemonic schemes in the region. There is nothing particularly Shia about the two issues. Indeed, both have been presented as causes for the majority of Sunni Arabs.'"<sup>125</sup> This populist, confrontational stance towards the United States and Israel was already in place during the 1980s under Ayatollah Khomeini, and experienced a rebirth during the 2000s; "since the invasion of Iraq and in particular since the election of Ahmadinejad, Iran has pursued what can best be described as a nonsectarian, 'Arab Street' strategy"<sup>126</sup> designed to appeal to the public of most other countries in the region (whatever the stance of their government).

This strategy is a threat to Saudi Arabia because the foreign powers Iran is challenging, particularly the United States, are the same ones that the Saudis have established strong relations with in both the defense and economic spheres. Therefore, any success Iran has in weakening them will weaken Saudi Arabia as well. Beyond this, it also threatens the legitimacy of the Saudi government and its claim to leadership among the nations that share its demographics (Arab, Sunni). It should be noted that Iran's "Arab Street" strategy has not necessarily been successful in winning support outside of the Shi'a populations in the Middle East. In the current confrontation between

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<sup>125</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall Of Saddam*, page 22.

<sup>126</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall of Saddam*, page 21.

Sunni and Shi'a factions, few Sunni groups, even those like ISIS who oppose the Saudi government, have chosen to align with Tehran. Despite this, "the seizure of pan-Arab issues by Iran has [...] inspired alarm, but also a degree of jealousy in Riyadh."<sup>127</sup> Iran's attempts to become a regional leader with broad, cross-sectarian appeal may not succeed, but the Saudi government takes the threat seriously all the same.

Finally, there are ways in which Saudi Arabia and Iran "would appear structurally inclined toward rivalry in the Gulf."<sup>128</sup> In an interview with *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, Professor Mohsen Milani, the author of *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution*, argues that "Iran and Saudi Arabia are neither natural allies nor natural enemies but natural rivals who have long competed as major oil producers and self-proclaimed defenders of Shia and Sunni Islam, respectively."<sup>129</sup> Milani notes that in the years before the Iranian Revolution, this rivalry was "managed and controlled by the United States, with whom they were both strategic allies." To a certain extent this was the case, though it was also true that it suited Saudi Arabia to maintain good relations with Iran as a buffer against the Soviet Union. But as we saw when reviewing Saudi-U.S. history, conflicts between the two nations existed even then, particularly in the energy market. During the Iranian-American disagreements over the price of oil in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia was happy to take advantage of the rift by flooding the market with cheap oil, increasing its value to the United States while undermining Iran, with ultimately ruinous results for the Shah's

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<sup>127</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall of Saddam*, page 23.

<sup>128</sup> Wehery et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since The Fall of Saddam*, page 75.

<sup>129</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Explaining the Iran-Saudi Rivalry," *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011, reprinted on the *Cable News Network* website, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/12/explaining-the-iran-saudi-rivalry/>.

government. As the two most powerful nations in the Persian Gulf, some measure of rivalry will probably always exist between Saudi Arabia and Iran, no matter what governments control them and what ideologies these governments proclaim.

In sum, Saudi Arabia's fear of Iran goes beyond Iran's nuclear program, or its recent thawing in relations with the United States. It has an ideological component, rooted in the fear of being viewed as too soft on Shi'ism by an intransigent religious establishment, and the fear of Iran successfully imposing itself as the spokesman for popular causes in the region among Sunni and Shi'a alike. It has a tribal identity component, rooted in Saudi concerns about the Shi'a communities surrounding them (and, in their eastern province, on their own territory) and the fear of Iran using its common identity with these communities to ally with and empower political elements hostile to Saudi interests. It has an economic component, rooted in the two countries' status as major oil producers and rivals within OPEC. And it has a strategic component, rooted in the simple fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran are the two most powerful nations in the Persian Gulf, each with ambitions of regional leadership. Often in recent years, in Iraq, in Bahrain, in Syria, in Yemen, this rivalry has led to violence, with the Saudis either intervening directly against Shi'a movements that it sees as agents of Iran, or supporting local factions opposed to these movements.

How do these differences with Iran affect Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States? To begin with, the nuclear negotiations affect each aspect of this, as we saw in the previous section. The lifting of sanctions will provide an economic and diplomatic boost to Saudi Arabia's main competitor, while the increasing American unwillingness to follow Saudi Arabia's lead deprives it of the certainty that it can rely on



a superpower partner that gives it an edge over Iran. However, even without these negotiations, a rift between the two countries would still be visible. As we saw in Iraq, in Bahrain, and most recently in Syria, the Saudis and Americans have repeatedly found themselves at odds in Middle Eastern crises. These differences are largely about priorities. Saudi Arabia's is containing any increase in power by Iran or its Shi'a allies, while America places a higher value on stopping Sunni jihadist movements, some of which the Saudis may see as useful bulwarks against Iran. It is also less likely to take drastic action in the context of a weakened economy, war-fatigued public, and current political deadlock in Washington. Finally, the United States is more inclined to respond to public protests by encouraging reforms among their allies, while the Saudis see them as a danger to be confronted by force.

Had the Iranian nuclear program somehow not existed as an issue, the two countries would still have experienced a rift over these crises, which are deeply linked to Iran (at least in Riyadh's eyes, due to the Shi'a factor). Assuming that the recent treaty definitively resolves the Iranian nuclear crisis, in Saudi Arabia's eyes as well as America's, the two countries will still differ over such issues. This leads us to the last section of this chapter – recent Saudi-American differences on issues unrelated to Iran.

### **Saudi Arabia and the U.S. – Other Major Issues.**

Historically, one of the most consistent issues in America's relations with Saudi Arabia (in fact, with the entire Arab world) has been its support of Israel. It was the earliest bump in the road in the Saudi-U.S. relationship, when the United States chose to recognize the state of Israel after having told the Saudi King that no action would be

taken without consulting both Jewish and Arab populations. Later on, it became the cause of one of the greatest breaches in relations between the two countries, when Saudi Arabia participated in an oil embargo against the United States in 1973 to protest its support for Israel. Despite multiple Saudi objections over the years, the United States remains Israel's closest ally and continues to supply it with arms, use its diplomatic clout to protect its interests at the United Nations, and turn a blind eye to what is believed to be a significant undeclared nuclear arsenal. The Saudis, for their part, still have not recognized Israel as a sovereign nation, and continue to object to its occupation of the Palestinian territories, as well as America's failure, as they see it, to pressure their ally into a resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. As recently as 2007, the issue remained important enough that Foreign Minister Saud Al-Feisal, on a visit to Washington, actually ranked it "first" among the Kingdom's concerns, which should be dealt with "before we look at Iran," "whether Iran is developing weapons of mass destruction, or whether it is interfering in Iraq, or not."<sup>130</sup>

Despite this, the Israel issue has faded into the background in the last few years as Iran and its Shi'a allies loomed larger in Saudi security policy. The American negotiations with Iran, to which both countries were opposed and in which neither was consulted, have done much to reduce hostility between them. Common concerns over Iran are now so important to both that, "since the beginning of 2014, representatives from Israel and Saudi Arabia have had five secret meetings to discuss a common foe, Iran,"

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<sup>130</sup> "Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Feisal's Interview With U.S. Reporters," November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007, transcript obtained through the website of the Saudi embassy to the United States, accessed October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/archive/2007/transcript/Page0.aspx>

despite the fact that the two nations continue to avoid diplomatic relations.<sup>131</sup> For the moment, therefore, Israel is unlikely to be a major issue in Saudi-American relations. In the long run, however, it is likely to return, particularly given the pressures on Saudi Arabia discussed in the previous section – from its ultraconservative religious establishment, which is no more fond of Israel than it is of Iran, and from Iran through its attempts to use anti-Israeli sentiment to increase its popularity and legitimacy in the Arab and Sunni worlds.

A much more serious source of disagreement for the moment is the two nations' reactions to the Arab Spring movements that have swept the Middle East since 2010. As we saw above, a great deal of this is related to their policies towards Iran – protests, riots, and rebellions against the governing order have taken on a sectarian form in a number of cases where the population belonged to one branch of Islam and their rulers to another, which turned these rebellions into Sunni/Shi'a conflicts and, by extension, Saudi-Iranian proxy wars. However, the Arab Spring encompasses more than these conflicts, and Saudi Arabia and the United States have found themselves at odds even in situations that had no sectarian element or relationship to Iran. This was most obvious in Egypt (a majority-Sunni nation ruled by Sunni leaders, and where the revolution had little to no sectarian aspect), where the United States eventually acquiesced to the removal of President Mubarak, one of their oldest allies in the region, while the Saudis supported his government and encouraged harsher measures to put down the riots and restore order. When the government installed by the Egyptian Revolution was overthrown in a coup

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<sup>131</sup> Eli Lake, "Israelis and Saudis Reveal Secret Talks To Thwart Iran," *Bloomberg View*, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-06-04/israelis-and-saudis-reveal-secret-talks-to-thwart-iran>.

d'état in 2013, "the Saudis were the first foreign government to back the takeover publicly;" they were also reported to have "promised [new Egyptian president] al-Sisi that they would replace any military or economic aid cut off by Washington (as they did in Pakistan in 1998, when that country tested nuclear weapons and Washington cut aid)." <sup>132</sup>

The underlying problem with the overthrow of Mubarak in particular and the Arab Spring in general is that it has caused the Saudi government to question whether it can trust the United States to be on its side should it ever find itself in a similar situation. "Historically, in times of trouble, Saudi kings have depended on American presidents to guarantee their external security. But at this moment of crisis, [then-King] Abdullah views President Obama as a threat to his internal security. He fears that in the event of a widespread revolt, Obama will demand that he leave office, just as he did to Mubarak, that other longtime friend of the United States." <sup>133</sup> This fear may or may not be justified. Unlike Egypt, Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer "and the only one with the excess production capacity to moderate rises in the price of oil," or, conversely, cause another oil crisis on the same scale as 1973 should it feel the need. "This would argue for granting an 'exception' to Saudi Arabia from the Obama administration's trumpeting of universal rights. Indeed, the soft criticism of Bahrain's Saudi-dictated suppression of its people suggests that this has already become U.S. policy."

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<sup>132</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Cheers The Coup In Egypt," *The Daily Beast*, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013, accessed October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/07/07/saudi-arabia-cheers-the-coup-in-egypt.html>.

<sup>133</sup> Martin S. Indyk, "Amid the Arab Spring, Obama's Dilemma Over Saudi Arabia," The Brookings Institute, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, accessed October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/04/07-middle-east-indyk>.

However, while the Saudi government can hope that the United States has made it and its oil-exporting Gulf allies an exception to its support for human rights in the region, it cannot simply assume that to be the case. This is doubly true because a democracy promotion agenda that runs counter to the Saudi desire for stability is not something unique to the Obama administration: President Bush pursued a similar policy in Iraq. Having seen the same agenda promoted by presidents from two opposing parties – all the more meaningful in Washington’s current, hyper-polarized state – suggests that it has become deeply rooted in the American government, not a passing fad that the Saudi government can hope to outlast.

Of the two outstanding issues between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, then, one of them, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has temporarily receded into the background – though in the long run, it is unlikely to remain there. But the other, the Arab Spring, is an existential issue to the Saudi government – it indicates the point at which the United States can no longer be relied upon as a source of support. For a relationship which, originally, was founded in part on a common interest in opposing domestic subversion throughout the Middle East, this constitutes a major turning point. And while most of the Arab Spring conflicts on which Riyadh and Washington have clashed have been tied to Iran in some way, the example of Egypt suggests this would still be true even if Iran were not a factor.

### **Conclusion.**

The Saudi-American relationship has deteriorated roughly over the same period of time that the Iranian-American relationship improved – a period of time going from 2008

at the height of the American presidential campaign, until the present day, with the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in July 2015 concluding the negotiations on Iran's nuclear issue that have been ongoing since 2013. Because of this, and because Saudi statements have pointedly denounced the United States for responding inadequately to the Iranian nuclear program, it is tempting to conclude that this is the cause of the rift in Saudi-American relations. Upon closer analysis, however, the situation is not so clear cut. The rise of the Obama administration, its promises of dialogue with Iran, and its eventually successful negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue are not the only event in the timeline that could have persuaded the Saudis that their alliance with America needed revision. Some of the issues between the two countries go back as far as 2003, and a number of others occurred in the 2008-2015 period that could explain the relationship's deterioration just as well.

These issues can be fit into three categories. First, the thaw in relations between the United States and Iran centered specifically around the nuclear negotiations. Saudi Arabia's problem with its U.S. ally, in this case, is not only fear of an Iranian nuclear weapon, but fear of the increased power that Iran will wield if the sanctions imposed on it as a result of its nuclear program are lifted. Second, issues related to Iran but not related to the nuclear crisis or its recent resolution – such as the current polarization of the Middle East into Sunni and Shi'a factions, the ideological challenges posed by the Iranian revolution, and the simple reality of two major powers in close proximity vying for control and influence over the region. To the Saudis, these issues are also of critical importance, in contrast to the United States whose interest in Iran has been primarily about restraining its nuclear program. Yet the United States has mostly refused to defer

to Saudi preferences on these issues as well, creating a rift that will almost certainly remain in place even if Iran's nuclear program ceases to be an issue. Third, there are differences between the United States and Saudi Arabia entirely unrelated to Iran; the main one is the response to the Arab Spring uprisings. These overlap in large part with Sunni-Shi'a conflicts (Bahrain, Yemen, Syria), but the Saudi-American difference of opinion has persisted even in places like Egypt, where the Arab Spring had few sectarian connotations or connections to Iran. The United States' willingness to side with protesters demanding the fall of a government over a leader who had been a key ally for almost forty years, even without any involvement by Iran or other strategic rivals, was in itself enough to cause Riyadh to rethink its relationship to the U.S.

The remaining question is whether one of these can be said to be the primary cause of the Saudi-American rift. Given the amount of attention it has received in the media, we might have expected the Iranian nuclear program to be this primary cause. As we have seen, however, the nuclear program is, at the very least, not the only issue that could have given rise to the rift occurring from 2008 to 2015: other issues include the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the withdrawal of troops from Iraq between 2008 and 2011, the U.S.'s response to the Arab Spring, and the U.S.'s response to the civil wars and revolutions with a strong sectarian component in countries surrounding Saudi Arabia (Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, Iraq) in which Iran is either involved on the Shi'a side or suspected by Riyadh of being so involved. The common theme in all these issues is a misalignment between Saudi and American objectives and priorities in the region, which the Saudis perceive as having benefited Iran.

Iran's nuclear program is certainly part of the equation, but largely in the way it fits into a broader context of Saudi-Iranian regional competition. The Saudi government seems almost as concerned about the diplomatic rehabilitation of Iran and the end of sanctions as it is about the nuclear threat posed by Iran itself. These things would improve Iran's position in the region and, the Saudis fear, allow it to pursue the policies it wants in these other areas – political competition through proxy wars, economic competition through the oil trade, ideological competition as Iran ceases to be a pariah state under sanctions and rebuilds its ties to the outside world. But even without Iran's improved position, all of these things would still be of great concern to the Saudi government – and, because of America's relatively weakened position due to the economic recession and two wars in the previous decade, it would likely not have been able to support Riyadh in reining in the Iranians and their allies.

Perhaps more importantly, America would likely not have been *willing* to support Riyadh in some of these regional conflicts, at least to the extent that the Saudis would have liked. The Iranian nuclear crisis has been, to the United States, the key issue in relations with Iran. Washington is not indifferent to the spread of Iranian influence through the Middle East, but it does not feel the same immediate pressures (through ideology, geography, economics) that the Saudis do, or the same priorities. On the other hand, the United States has become much more sensitive to the threat posed by Sunni jihadist movements, places a higher priority on combating them than the Saudis do, and therefore is more wary of taking sides in Sunni-Shi'a conflicts, lest it find itself supporting movements with radical anti-American agendas. Finally, under both Bush and Obama administrations, Washington has begun to take seriously the idea of



democracy promotion and reform throughout the Middle East. This puts them at odds with the Saudis, who prefer to maintain the status quo and have found America's democracy promotion contrary to their interests (in Iraq and more recently in the nations affected by the Arab Spring) and favorable to Iran's. The Americans, on the other hand, find the Saudi emphasis on preserving existing friendly regimes rather than reforming them to be unrealistic and, ultimately, likely only to defer rather than prevent revolution.

For all these reasons, a significant rift in Saudi-U.S. policy would have occurred over roughly this time period with or without the Iranian nuclear issue: the latter is simply the most visible point of disagreement between them. Most of these points of disagreement are, however, inextricably linked to Iran, which has played a role in many of the crises that the Saudis are concerned about and remains their main regional rival.

## CHAPTER FIVE – THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### **Introduction.**

In the previous three chapters, we reviewed the history of the Saudi-Iranian-American relationship, the degree of seriousness of the Saudi-American rift, and the extent to which this rift could be traced to Iran. Now that the topic has been sufficiently fleshed out, this chapter will involve existing international relations theory. The two books that will be used for this are Jeremy Pressman's *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics*, and Stephen Walt's *The Origins of Alliances*. The former focuses on the success or failure of one nation to hold back its allies from pursuing military policies (generally offensive) counter to its interests. The second focuses on the reasons behind alliance formation, particularly when these alliances are directed against a particular nation or group of nations. In both cases, I will apply the authors' lessons to the evolution of the Saudi-Iranian-American relationship, examine where and how well the relationship fits into their expectations, and what explanations for it can be drawn from their theories.

### **Alliance Restraint.**

Jeremy Pressman's book *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* studied a particularly form of alliance behavior, in which the bond between the two countries served to prevent one of them from going to war or otherwise taking drastic measures in the pursuit of its national interest. Sometimes, the entire purpose of the alliance was to prevent one of the its members from taking military action, and

sometimes the restraint factor only came into play later when the two allies had differing interests; sometimes, the attempt to restrain an ally was successful, sometimes not. Pressman studies the topic of alliance restraint primarily through the two examples of the Anglo-American alliance and the Israeli-American alliance, in the early Cold War in the first case and from the 1950s until the present in the second case. From these examples, he attempts to draw conclusions about the origin, the nature, and the success rate of alliance restraint.

For our purposes, Pressman's work is of obvious interest. The Saudi-American relationship, as we have seen, has recently become a situation in which one party in the alliance (the United States) has adopted a more moderate line towards those Saudi Arabia considers its enemies (whether Iran, its Shi'a allies, or Arab Spring protesters) and tried to convince the Saudis to follow in their footsteps, while the Saudis have instead adopted a more hard line position towards these enemies. In this section, I will apply Pressman's conclusions to the Saudi-American alliance. In so doing, I will examine whether they provide any explanation for the success or failure of American policymakers in shaping and restraining Saudi behavior, particularly as it relates to Iran.

Pressman defines alliance restraint as "an actual or anticipated diplomatic effort by one ally to influence a second ally not to proceed with a proposed military policy or not to continue an existing military policy." The focus, he stresses, "is military policy, not the entire range of an ally's policies. Military policies include military interventions, war, arms sales, nuclear proliferation, and the formation of alliances."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics*, Cornell University, page 6.

The most clear-cut case of alliance restraint in the recent past of Saudi-U.S. relations is the 2003 Iraq War, which Saudi Arabia opposed and (along with a number of other American allies) attempted to persuade the U.S. to abandon, ultimately without success. The subject is treated in the final chapter of Pressman's book. More recently, however, what we have seen is the reverse: the United States has been the power attempting to restrain its allies, and Saudi Arabia the "restraine" (to use Pressman's term). The previous three chapters have shown us numerous, specific examples of this. In Iraq, just as Washington had once hoped to win Saudi Arabia's approval for the invasion, it also hoped to secure its support for its post-Saddam leadership, only to see the Saudis offer support to Sunni factions opposed to the central government instead. In Bahrain, it had hoped to gain Saudi support in persuading the ruling family to enact political reforms in the face of Arab Spring opposition; instead, the Saudis put down the opposition through military force. In the Syrian civil war, the United States has attempted to limit arms supplies to "moderate" anti-Assad factions and not jihadist groups; the Saudis have provided material support to such factions – such as Jaish al-Fatah – in spite of American objections.<sup>135</sup> Finally, even in cases like Yemen in which the United States supported the Saudi effort, it has attempted to persuade the Saudis to take a more moderate line, for example by trying to "persuade Saudi Arabia's government to limit the scope of its airstrikes on cities and towns in Yemen," without

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<sup>135</sup> Kim Sengupta, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria," *The Independent*, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html>.

success.<sup>136</sup> All of these behaviors added up to a more generally assertive and militarized foreign policy, frequently towards actors that were seen as being associated with Iran, and frequently without regard for U.S. policy preferences. To use Pressman's terms, they include "military interventions" (Bahrain, Yemen), "arms sales" (Syria, possibly Iraq) and "the formation of alliances" (though often with non-state actors, as in Yemen and Iraq). The United States, overall, did not succeed in "restraining" the Saudis from embracing these new policies.

Why were these attempts unsuccessful? Pressman's book offers at least two conclusions about the factors that explain the failure to restrain an ally, even when the "restraineed" is the less powerful of the two. One is that, "the success or failure of alliance restraint attempts depends on the willingness of the most powerful ally to mobilize its power resources. If the powerful ally mobilizes, it can compel weaker allies to be restrained. [...] Merely being the more powerful ally is not sufficient to prevail in an alliance restraint dispute."<sup>137</sup>

How does this explanation apply to the Saudi-American disputes of the last few years? At first glance, our example may seem to contradict Pressman's observations. The United States *has* mobilized resources in the hopes of influencing Saudi policy. The primary means for this has been military assistance, in the form of increased arms sales to the GCC states (most of them going to Saudi Arabia), complemented with more streamlined and expedited sales processes, and increased technical and training

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<sup>136</sup> Brian Bennet and W. J. Hennigan, "U.S. trying to restrain Saudi Arabia on deadly Yemen airstrikes," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-yemen-fighting-20150420-story.html>.

<sup>137</sup> Pressman, *Warring Friends*, page 15.

assistance. This process has been ongoing since the beginning of the Obama administration, and was reconfirmed most recently at the Camp David summit of 2015 where more arms sales and military cooperation was promised. These arms deals, combined with diplomatic efforts at summits like Camp David, are a way for the U.S. to demonstrate its continued commitment to its Gulf allies in general at a time when many seem to be questioning the value of the U.S. alliance. In particular, they “give Saudi Arabia and the UAE a qualitative edge in air power relative to Iran,”<sup>138</sup> and offer these countries the means “to defend against potential missiles strikes, maritime threats, and cyberattacks from Iran.”<sup>139</sup> None of this, however, has prevented Saudi Arabia from adopting a more aggressive position towards Iran and its allies, in fields that would previously have been left to the American ally, and with or without its approval.

The first thing that must be noted is the *nature* of the American resource mobilization effort. While it constituted a major economic and diplomatic effort from the American point of view, nothing about it put significant pressure on the Saudis to abandon their increasingly assertive foreign policy. Washington offered to sell arms to and increase support for the Saudi military, but it did not threaten to withhold arms or support in order to impose a more restrained foreign policy. In fact, the new arms sales and increased cooperation were not even conditional on any changes in behavior for the Saudis or their GCC allies. Pressman’s conclusion was “if the powerful ally mobilizes, it

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<sup>138</sup> Jean-Loup Samaan, “US Arms Sales All About Iran,” *Al Monitor*, May 2013, accessed October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/us-arm-sales-iran.html#>.

<sup>139</sup> Julie Hirschfield Davis and David E. Sanger, “Obama Pledges More Military Aid To Reassure Persian Gulf Allies on Iran Deal,” *The New York Times*, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/world/middleeast/obama-saudi-arabia-iran-persian-gulf-security.html? r=0>.

can compel weaker allies to be restrained.” So far, the United States has not tried to “compel” the Saudis to do anything. Put simply, the American resource mobilization effort does not seem to have included threats, bribes, or trade-offs, but only gifts. The conclusion here seems to be not “the greater power mobilized its resources and failed to achieve the intended effect,” but rather “if the greater power does not *demand* behavior modification, it will not get it.”

Also important to note is which aspects of the Saudi-U.S. relationship were most impacted by this resource mobilization. The American arms sales and increased military cooperation are mostly directed towards the immediate protection of the GCC nations from enemy attacks, most particularly from Iranian attack. They were also being made in the context of the U.S. negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, which were in their final stages during the May 2015 summit at Camp David, and which the U.S. was anxious to ensure would not jeopardize their alliance. Viewed in this light, one can argue that the American resource mobilization effort *did* work. Saudi acquiescence to the Iran nuclear deal has, for the moment, been won; and the Saudi-American alliance, however strained, has for the moment been preserved.

There are many other aspects of the Saudi-American relationship, however, that this resource mobilization did not address. These include the Arab Spring uprisings (where Washington’s policy was not to reassure the Saudis, but rather to encourage them and their allies to make concessions), the Syrian civil war (where far from cooperating in arms sales, Washington has attempted to restrict them) and the political situation in Iraq (where Washington has largely supported the central government, while Riyadh opposed

it). Not coincidentally, those were the areas in which we saw the greatest degree of Saudi assertiveness and opposition to Washington's policies.

The "resource mobilization" described by Pressman did, therefore, occur in the context of the Saudi-U.S. relationship. It was simply a very restrained form of resource mobilization – first because it was not tied to any rigid demands for change, and second, because it targeted only a certain, restricted range of Saudi activities (and within these limits, it was moderately successful). Because of this, the American resource mobilization effort was not enough to prevent the increasing rift in Saudi and American foreign policy objectives. As for why the American resource mobilization effort was so limited, Pressman's next finding offers some possible explanations there as well. "There are several conditions that make power mobilization more or less likely in the case of alliance restraint: deception, leadership unity, national security priorities, and policy alternatives."<sup>140</sup> Of the four, the last three are especially applicable in this case.

"Unified leadership promotes successful mobilization; divided leaders make it less likely. Mobilizing one's power resources is costly, so disagreement about whether to do so may stymie the effort. [...] Unity is not necessarily a cause of power mobilization but is at least correlated with it."<sup>141</sup> From this point of view, the current level of polarization in Washington is certainly a likely explanation for Washington's very limited mobilization of resources. This is especially true since the level of polarization has already affected foreign policy. President Obama's decision to support the Western intervention in Libya in 2011 was met with some political opposition for having failed to

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<sup>140</sup> Pressman, *Warring Friends*, page 15.

<sup>141</sup> Pressman, *Warring Friends*, page 16.



seek congressional approval. In 2013, President Obama sought to curtail similar criticism by seeking authorization for a similar operation against President Assad following the latter's use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war<sup>142</sup> – an authorization that never came. Finally, the Iran nuclear deal itself has provoked much controversy in Washington, with the House of Representatives voting 245 to 186 in favor of a non-binding resolution stating that the Iran nuclear deal did not comply with American law, and the Senate very nearly approving a vote disapproving of the deal (58 in favor of the vote and 42 against, two short of the 60 needed to allow the issue to come to a final vote, but still showing a majority of senators opposed to the deal).<sup>143</sup> In this climate, therefore, the unity of leadership needed in Washington to promote the kind of push against an increasingly independent, anti-Iranian, and anti-Shi'a foreign policy may very well have been lacking. In particular, the votes against the Iran nuclear deal, though largely symbolic and ultimately failing to derail the process, indicate that many politicians in Washington would probably agree with the Saudis that a more hawkish foreign policy against Iran and its allies is needed.

The next issue brought up by Pressman was national security priorities. “Restraint attempts are part of a larger national security framework that indicates the importance of each issue: the allies’ *hierarchy of national security objectives* directly shapes their stance on the restraint attempts. [...] If, for example, the restrainer feels its ally’s contested

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<sup>142</sup> Peter Baker and Jonathan Wiesman, “Obama Seeks Approval by Congress for Strike in Syria,” *The Washington Post*, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, accessed October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

<sup>143</sup> Ted Barret, Manu Raju, Deirdre Walsh, Tom LoBianco, “Senate Democrats Protect Obama On Iran Vote,” *Cable News Network*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/10/politics/iran-nuclear-deal-vote-congress/>.

military policy will undermine the larger security objective, the restrainer will mobilize its resources to stop it. If, in contrast, the contested military policy is inconvenient and even dangerous but will not adversely affect the restrainer's highest national security priorities, it will be more likely to rely on rhetoric rather than material sanctions or inducements."<sup>144</sup>

This seems to summarize the Saudi-American differences of the moment well. As noted several times in the past chapters, the United States' policy towards Iran has been focused first and foremost on the nuclear program; other considerations, while still important, have been secondary. Much of Saudi Arabia's disappointment with its American ally comes from this, as from the Saudi point of view, all issues related to Iran are important. We should also remember that the Middle Eastern region in general is not the United States' only priority, particularly with the "pivot to Asia" announced by the Obama administration. According to this model, then, America's resource mobilization occurred and was directed only at those Iranian activities that it deemed a priority; other issues like the Arab Spring or the Syrian civil war were not considered grave enough to put serious pressure on Riyadh.

While Pressman measures only military policies, it should be noted that non-military priorities will necessarily have an impact on military ones as well. In this case, given America's comparatively weakened state due to the economic recession and the toll taken by the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, it may be that domestic issues like strengthening the U.S. economy are viewed by the Obama administration as more important than foreign policy issues overall. As a result, foreign policy issues that are not a very high

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<sup>144</sup> Pressman, *Warring Friends*, page 16.

priority – as is the Iranian nuclear program – may simply be judged as not worth the expense of political capital to fight over, even though they might be if the American political context were different.

Finally, we come to policy alternatives. “Restrainers may see a way to focus their resources on creating an alternate pathway to the same outcome desired by the restrainee. [...] Sometimes this means substituting one military policy for another.”<sup>145</sup> This also describes the success and failure of America’s attempts at restraining Saudi Arabia. On the topic of the nuclear issue, America substituted one military policy (improved military capabilities and increased defense cooperation) for more drastic ones (for example, Saudi Arabia working to produce its own nuclear weapon); for the moment, the Saudis have accepted the substitution. On other topics, since America offered no alternative policy that took the Saudis’ desires seriously into account, they proceeded with their own military policies as planned. On this, the U.S. may simply have believed there were no acceptable foreign policy alternatives – for example, that there was no way to satisfy the Saudi objective of overthrowing Assad’s regime without dangerously empowering ISIS, making the cure worse than the disease.

In sum, Pressman’s book offers us a framework for understanding the emergence of the Saudi-American rift. According to Pressman, the rift is the sort of occurrence that the U.S, as the more powerful partner in the relationship, could have prevented by mobilizing its resources to pressure the Saudi government into changing its behavior. However, while the U.S. did mobilize its resources, it did so in as non-coercive a way as possible, and applied them only to a limited area of Saudi-U.S. interest – the Iranian

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<sup>145</sup> Pressman, *Warring Friends*, page 16.

nuclear program, and the threat of direct military action by Iran in the Persian Gulf. Within that area, the U.S. was moderately successful, ultimately winning Saudi support for its approach to Iran after the nuclear negotiations were concluded. Outside of it, the rift continued. Possible explanations for this limited mobilization of resources include the divided and polarized atmosphere in Washington; a comparatively lower priority placed on Iran-related issues other than the nuclear program; and, perhaps, a failure to imagine realistic alternatives to Saudi policy preferences that could still have met the Saudis' approval.

### **Alliance Formation.**

Stephen Walt's *The Origins of Alliances*, the other main theoretical work discussed in this chapter, is primarily concerned with alliance formation. Key to Walt's book are the concepts of "balancing" versus "bandwagoning," which concern different ways in which the rise of one powerful state may cause the other states in the international system to react. People who believe that most alliances are based on "balancing" behavior argue that "states join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat"<sup>146</sup> – both to ensure their survival in the face of the more powerful enemy, and because forming an alliance with weaker states gives a nation comparatively more influence than forming an alliance with a state that is clearly the more powerful. Conversely, people who believe that most alliances are based on "bandwagoning" believe that "states are attracted to strength. The more powerful the state and the more clearly this power is demonstrated, the more likely others

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<sup>146</sup> Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1990, page 18.

are to ally with it. By contrast, a decline in a state's relative position will lead its allies to opt for neutrality at best or to defect to the other side at worst."<sup>147</sup> The two main motivations for a state to do this are appeasement – allying with a stronger power in order to avoid the consequences of becoming an enemy or a target – and a desire to share in the stronger power's "spoils of victory." In this debate, Walt sides with the former over the latter – "balancing is far more common than bandwagoning" – but does not entirely agree on what it is that causes states to balance. "In contrast to traditional balance of power theorists, [...] I suggest that states ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone. Although the distribution of power is an extremely important factor, the level of threat is also affected by geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions. Thus I propose balance of threat theory as a better alternative than balance of power theory."<sup>148</sup>

According to Walt, this theory explained, for example, why West European nations chose to align with the United States – the more powerful superpower – rather than the Soviet Union, which although less powerful, was both closer and perceived to have more hostile intentions. It also seems to describe the Saudi-Iranian-American triangle very well. Of the two countries, the United States is unquestionably much more powerful than Iran, but Saudi Arabia has chosen to align with the United States against Iran since the 1979 revolution. Given Khomeini's hostility to governments like the Saudis and Iran's support for revolutionary movements as discussed in the last three chapters, this confirms that the Saudis chose to balance against "threat" rather than raw

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<sup>147</sup> Walt, page 20.

<sup>148</sup> Walt, page 15.

“power.” More generally, this theory also fits the observations made in chapter two – that the Saudi-American relationship was based on a common interest in preserving the free flow of oil, protecting the region from penetration by hostile powers, and protecting U.S.-allied regimes from popular uprisings that might seek to overthrow them. In other words, the Saudis chose to ally with a status quo power, with no more interest than them in upsetting Saudi Arabia’s status in the region or the Saudis’ internal political system, against revisionist powers like the Soviet Union, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq, and revisionist movements like the communists, Nasserists, and revolutionary islamists, which did threaten the established order both in the region and inside Saudi Arabia.

However, this also offers some suggestions to explain the current rift between the two nations. While the United States has historically posed no threat to the Saudi system and has joined it in opposing dangers to its throne or to its allies, in the era of the Arab Spring, this is no longer the case – at least, not as unequivocally as it was in the past. Using Walt’s framework, this would constitute a change in the way Riyadh perceives the strategic balance. By failing to support their allies in the region against protest movements and even siding with them in some instances, the United States has made itself a threat to Saudi interests. While it may still be seen as a lesser threat when compared to Iran, it is nevertheless enough of one to damage the alliance and lead Riyadh to rely more on itself and less on Washington.

The Saudi-American relationship also suggests something more that is relevant to Walt’s observation. *The Origins of Alliances* argues that nations will form alliances in the face of a common threat; but what happens when the alliances no longer perceive the same threat? As we saw earlier, the American threat perception when it comes to Iran

differs from Saudi Arabia's in at least two ways. The U.S. sees the Iranian threat primarily in terms of Iran's nuclear ambitions, while Saudi Arabia considers Iran a much more comprehensive threat, equally problematic with or without a nuclear weapons program. And unlike Saudi Arabia, the U.S. also believes that the Iranian threat is one that can be defused through negotiations. This difference in threat perception has not led to a dissolution in the alliance, but it has led to a change in its nature, with the Saudis accepting American help in those areas where the two of them still share the same concerns (the defense of the Gulf from any possible future attacks from Iran), while no longer relying on it in the areas where they do not (Syria, Bahrain).

On the topic of balancing versus bandwagoning, Walt makes two observations which are relevant to this case and may further explain the Saudi-American rift. When considering "strong" versus "weak" states, Walt observes that "weak states are also likely to be especially sensitive to proximate power. Where great powers have both global interests and global capabilities, weak states will be concerned primarily with events in their immediate vicinity."<sup>149</sup> This would seem to explain the current misalignment between Washington and Riyadh's priorities. The United States, a "great power," ranks its national security priorities on a global scale: they currently include great power competition with Russia and China, tensions with North Korea, a conflict in Afghanistan, and broad, transnational terrorist threats from various jihadist organizations, to name only these. Tensions with Iran are only one of the issues America is confronting, and not necessarily the most important one. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, is a regional power, and Iran, in addition to being an adversary, is currently the only other power in the region of

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<sup>149</sup> Walt, page 29-30.

roughly equal capabilities. Therefore, Iran is the greatest and most immediate threat to Saudi Arabia in a way that it is not to the United States.

This also explains the difference in prioritization noted in the previous chapter, where the threats posed by Iran's nuclear program and by the possibility of direct action against the Persian Gulf states were the only ones that Washington seemed to take almost as seriously as Riyadh, and much more seriously than the threat of Iranian intervention in Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. An Iranian nuclear weapon, and Iranian military domination of the Persian Gulf (and the oil routes that flow through it) are by far the greatest threats that it can pose to a global superpower. The other threats are more regional in nature – which explains why they can be considered a less urgent concern for Washington, but cannot be by Riyadh.

Walt then notes that “states will also be tempted to bandwagon when allies are simply unavailable. This statement is not simply tautological, because states may balance by mobilizing their own resources instead of relying on allied support. They are more likely to do so, however, when they are confident that allied assistance will be available. [...] If they see no possibility of outside assistance, however, they may be forced to accommodate the most imminent threat.” This does *not* seem to be confirmed by the Saudi-American relationship. The increasing difficulties between Saudi Arabia and the United States have not made Saudi Arabia more accommodating towards Iran; on the contrary, they have made it more hostile and encouraged it to “mobilize its own resources instead of relying on allied support.” There are two ways to interpret this. One is that Walt is simply wrong, or, at least, that the Saudi-American alliance is an exception to a general rule. The other is that while Saudi Arabia understands that it cannot rely on the



American alliance to the extent that it did in the past, it has not fully given up on it; Riyadh is not at the point where it “sees no possibility of outside assistance.” This interpretation is supported by the significant efforts in diplomacy and in military aid that the Obama administration has offered to the Saudis, by Saudi Arabia’s acceptance of these efforts, and by its public statements that it accepts the American assurances concerning the Iranian nuclear program. The Saudi mobilization, then, would not be a reaction to their lack of confidence in their American ally, but rather a reaction to their frustration with certain American policies, combined with a confidence that the alliance with the United States will still be there should a direct conflict with Iran occur.

Outside of Walt’s observations on balancing, bandwagoning, and threat perception, two more things are relevant to this case study. First, with regards to the role of ideology, “the evidence shows that ideology is less powerful than balancing as a motive for alignment. [...] The record also shows that certain ideologies are extremely divisive. In other words, states sharing these ideologies are more likely to compete than to form durable alliances.”<sup>150</sup> Walt, writing primarily in the context of the Cold War, refers specifically to Marxism and Arab Nationalism throughout the book as particularly “divisive” ideologies. However, if we take religion to be an ideology, Saudi-Iranian enmity could be said to be an example of this. As we saw in the previous chapter, the conflict is not merely between two branches of Islam, and Iran has repeatedly attempted to challenge Saudi Arabia’s leadership within the Muslim world, even and perhaps especially within the Sunni world. Unifying, transnational ideologies like Marxism – or,

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<sup>150</sup> Walt, page 5.

if we accept the analogy, religion – paradoxically invite rather than suppress inter-state strife by leading to such competition between the governments who share them.

By contrast, “these problems do not affect either liberal states or monarchies. [...] For a liberal society, legitimacy rests not on relations with other states but on popular elections and the voice of the people. For monarchies, the right to rule is based on the traditional or divine right of kings. Because the principles of monarchical or liberal rule grant legitimate authority over one’s own domain but imply no such authority over the domain of others, alliances between monarchies or between liberal states are not torn by ideological conflicts.”<sup>151</sup> Walt was describing alliances between states that shared the same ideology, but they apply to the Saudi-American relationship as well. As a monarchical and a liberal state, their legitimacy limited to their own domain, and as nations that do not share a religious (or, indeed, any) worldview, the two nations have had no ideological reasons to quarrel for most of their relationship. However, this may be changing if we take American support for the Arab Spring and the earlier invasion of Iraq to be applications of their own liberal norms to Middle Eastern nations – and one day, Riyadh fears, to Saudi Arabia. One of the underlying principles of the relationship, the lack of competition over ideological reasons, is now eroding.

Lastly, Walt concludes that “neither foreign aid nor political penetration is by itself a powerful cause of alignment. Even more important, neither is an effective way to gain leverage except under very unusual conditions.”<sup>152</sup> This matters because as we saw when discussing resource mobilization, America’s primary method for attempting to

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<sup>151</sup> Walt, page 36-37.

<sup>152</sup> Walt, page 5.

influence Saudi behavior since the beginning of the rift has been in a form of foreign aid – the increase in arms sales and technical assistance for the Kingdom’s defense and that of its GCC allies against Iranian attack. If Walt is correct, this will not ultimately improve the American bargaining position with regards to Saudi Arabia – which corresponds to my own observation that those policies were essentially “gifts,” carrying little or no obligation by the Saudis for having accepted them. Thus, while the arms sales and military assistance may have been well received in Riyadh, we should be wary of assuming any long term continuation of Saudi friendship with the United States based on them.

In sum, Walt’s book both offers some explanation for the historic basis of the Saudi-American alliance and Saudi-Iranian enmity, as well as the present rift. His “balance of threats” theory explains why Saudi Arabia would have chosen to align against Iran and with the United States – the former, while much weaker, was perceived as the more immediate threat, and the latter as no threat at all. Two reasons Iran was perceived as a threat were its proximity to Saudi Arabia, which made the two rivals for the status of primary regional power, and the ideological rivalry between two nations whose legitimacy is founded partly on Islam. By contrast, the United States, a more distant country with no particular grounds for ideological rivalry and no interest in challenging the Saudi social structure, was perceived as less of a threat. With regards to the present rift, these factors may be changing – the United States’ apparently sympathetic relations with Arab Spring protesters may have turned the United States into a perceived threat (albeit still a minor one compared to Iran) to Saudi interests, and ended

the previous understanding of the U.S. as a status quo power that posed no challenge to the Saudi ideology or way of life.

### **Conclusion.**

Having reviewed Pressman and Walt's works and how they apply to the Saudi-Iranian-American strategic triangle, we can now explain the evolution of the strategic triangle since 1979 as follows;

With regards to the origins of the Saudi-American alliance against Iran, Walt's work, though focusing mostly on alliance formation and dissolution during the Cold War, offers an explanation that fits the facts well. Saudi Arabia, like West European nations during the Cold War, chose to balance not against raw power but against perceived threats, allying with the more powerful but more distant nation with an interest in preserving the status quo (the United States) against the less powerful but more geographically close nation which was perceived as posing the greater threat based on its challenge to the existing order and to the legitimacy of their governments (the Soviet Union for Western Europe, Iran for Saudi Arabia). Since the United States perceived Iran in the same light as the Saudis did, the alliance was natural.

Two things have changed in recent times that may help to explain the current rift. The first is a change in Saudi Arabia's threat perception – having now endorsed regime change in the region several times against governments that Riyadh did not want to see overthrown, the United States has made itself a potential threat as well, and the Saudis must take this into account when balancing between Washington and Tehran. The second is a divergence in threat perception between the two countries; Saudi Arabia

perceives Iran as requiring equally zealous opposition on every front, while the United States perceives it as a country that can be reasoned with, and has prioritized containment on a few particular fronts (the nuclear issue and the safety of the Persian Gulf) over others.

Walt and Pressman both offer explanations for the latter decision. Pressman points out that all nations will rank their objectives by priority, while Walt points out that as global superpowers, like the United States, have global interests, their priorities will be less tied to a certain geographic area than those of a regional power like Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the United States has chosen to prioritize containment of Iran on the two issues that could pose the greatest threat to it as a superpower – the danger of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, and the danger of Iran establishing military domination over the oil-rich Persian Gulf. In the current climate of economic crisis and political deadlock confronting Washington, less pressing issues such as Iranian inroads into other countries in the region, while still of concern, are accorded a lower priority, since they do not threaten U.S. hegemony as directly.

The same phenomenon also explains why the United States has been unable or unwilling to prevent the Saudi-American rift. According to Pressman, a nation in the U.S.'s position should be able to influence a weaker ally's foreign policy choices if it sufficiently mobilizes its national resources towards that end. However, Washington's mobilization has been limited to these two issues – the nuclear negotiations and the security of the Persian Gulf – and as a consequence, has won Saudi acquiescence on these issues for the moment, but not on the other ones (Iraq, Syria, Yemen) on which they

differ, and on which the Saudis have begun to pursue an increasingly interventionist foreign policy whether or not it aligns with the interests of their American ally.

Finally, this mobilization did not take the form of coercion, or even deal-making – it was made up primarily of a large increase in weapons sales and military assistance. It was hoped that these would convince the Saudis of the seriousness of the American commitment to their security, and so convince them to acquiesce to American policies in the region. But other than the price of the weapons provided, the Saudis incurred no cost, and had to make no major strategic adjustments to suit Washington. According to Walt, this form of “free” assistance does nothing to guarantee an ally’s loyalty, as it does not provide the great power with any leverage. Combined with the changes in the way Riyadh perceives its American ally, this is something U.S. policymakers and IR scholars should both keep in mind when trying to perceive the future. Washington has, for the moment, won Saudi acquiescence for its decision to negotiate away the Iranian nuclear program and the two nations continue to cooperate in ensuring the defense of the Gulf Cooperation Council states from any future Iranian attacks. However, this understanding remains fragile, and may not survive if the rift between the two countries on Iran-related issues continues to grow.

## CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSIONS

### **Summary.**

In the first main chapter of this thesis, we examined the history of the Saudi-American relationship from its inception in the 1940s until roughly the mid-2000s. This allowed us to identify the main factors that have defined the relationship and remained consistent. Three common interests motivated the United States and Saudi Arabia to form and maintain an alliance throughout this period. The first was a common interest in developing the oil resources of the Arabian Peninsula and guaranteeing their free flow, which ensured both the growth of Western economies which were becoming increasingly oil-dependent, and an influx of money through which the Saudis and their neighbors developed and modernized their societies. The second was a common interest in protecting Saudi Arabia and other friendly nations in the Persian Gulf from any encroachment by foreign powers hostile to them and the West – a role originally held by the Soviet Union, but later by regional powers Iraq and Iran. The third was a common interest in preserving the Western-friendly regimes in the region from popular movements that might seek to overthrow them and replace them with more radical governments – originally Nasserists and communists, later islamists of both Sunni and Shi'a denomination.

Just as common interests remained consistent, however, so too did bilateral tensions, particularly the Saudi concern with protecting itself from Western encroachment, both on its sovereignty as a nation-state, and on its cultural identity as a

traditionalist, Sunni, Muslim society. And there have at times been serious breaches in relations between the two countries – some, like the Saudi oil embargo of the 1970s, ultimately overcome and reversed, others, like the social backlash caused by the presence of U.S. forces after the Gulf War, and the disagreements over the invasion of Iraq, which continue to affect the relationship to this day. This is important to note: while the Saudi-American alliance has endured for seventy years, the Saudis have always had reservations that occasionally boiled over into real disputes.

Finally, it is also important to note that Iran has been a constant factor in the Saudi-American relationship, though not always in the same capacity. In the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, it was a valued ally, relied upon by Americans and Saudis alike to be the buffer between the Soviet bloc and the other, weaker Persian Gulf states. In the mid to late 1970s, it was a troublesome ally for the United States, threatening its reliance on cheap oil, and an opportunity for Saudi Arabia, which moved closer to the United States by undercutting Iranian oil policy. From 1979 onwards, it was a hostile regime, prompting a closer Saudi-American relationship particularly in military affairs as both sought to contain it. The role of Iran has changed and may be changing again, but there was never a time when it did not significantly impact Saudi-American relations and more generally their policies towards the Persian Gulf region.

In the following chapter, we examined the depth of the present rift in Saudi-American relations, from roughly 2007-2008 onwards when serious and public differences in how to deal with the Iranian nuclear program began to emerge (the Saudis moving in a more hawkish direction while the United States expressed a willingness to resolve the issue diplomatically). In addition to the Iranian nuclear program, this rift has



included disagreements on how to interact with the central government and other factions vying for control of post-Saddam Iraq; how to deal with the Arab Spring revolutions that began in 2010-2011 in North Africa and spread to Saudi neighbors like Bahrain and Yemen; how best to influence the outcome of the Syrian civil war; and what role Saudi Arabia and the United States should each play in every one of these crises. The rift has had an economic component, as the Saudis increasingly work to diversify their economic partnerships, and perhaps more significantly to diversify their weapons suppliers. It has a diplomatic component, as Saudi Arabia increasingly takes a leadership position among regional organizations like the GCC and the Arab League and uses it to promote policies Washington does not necessarily approve of. And it has a military component, as Saudi Arabia has begun to break its longstanding supporting role in regional wars and take the lead in military operations in Bahrain and Yemen.

The United States' reaction to these developments has been fairly muted. It has objected to some of Saudi Arabia's activities in the region, but none of these activities have led it to take punitive actions. On the contrary, America's priority seems to have been reassuring the Saudis of its commitment to their security, both through repeated diplomatic initiatives and increases in arms sales and military cooperation on Gulf security. Notably, these American efforts to win back Saudi approval have concentrated only on specific areas – policy towards the Iranian nuclear program, and the defense of the Persian Gulf. Saudi acquiescence on these issues appears, for the moment, to have been won, but elsewhere, the rift continues to exist.

In the next chapter, we applied process-tracing to the Saudi-American rift, comparing major statements and actions by the Saudi government to developments in the

Iranian-American relationship that had recently preceded it. The theory that the newfound American willingness to negotiate with Iran and the subsequent talks over the Iranian nuclear program caused the rift is tempting, but not convincing, in that it is never the only explanation that fits the facts. Saudi calls for military action against Iran around the turn of the decade can be explained equally well by other factors, such as Iran's newfound belligerence under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the American decision to withdraw from Iraq and leave (from Riyadh's point of view) an Iranian-friendly government immediately on the Saudi border. The newfound Saudi assertiveness in regional security and diplomacy began before the Iran nuclear negotiations did, and can be explained just as well (probably better) as a reaction to the increasing chaos in the region caused by the Arab Spring uprisings and subsequent conflicts, as anything that occurred in bilateral relations between Iran and the U.S. And the brief period, during Obama's first term, in which the United States returned to a more inflexible position towards Iran, increasing sanctions and rejecting proposed deals, did nothing to reduce Saudi Arabia's assertiveness in the region or its anxiety about Iran.

We then listed Saudi Arabia's issues with the United States into three categories: issues concerning the Iranian nuclear program, the Iranian nuclear negotiations, and the new thaw in relations initiated by the Obama administration; other issues concerning Iran; and other issues in the region, not concerning Iran. In the first case, Saudi Arabia's concern is not strictly the Iranian nuclear program, but anything that might allow Iran to increase its standing in the region – the end of sanctions, for example, which would allow Iran to rebuild its economy and expand its diplomatic ties, are a problem for Saudi Arabia even if Iran chooses never to develop a nuclear bomb, because all of these options result

in a more powerful Iran. In the second case, Saudi Arabia's main concern is the increasing polarization of the region into Sunni and Shi'a camps through conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, the Shi'a factions assumed by Riyadh to be either Iranian allies or actual extensions of Iranian policy. Here, Riyadh's frustration with the United States comes from its failure to intervene energetically in these conflicts, and its seeming willingness to allow large parts of the region to fall under Iranian control. In the third case, Riyadh's chief concern is the Arab Spring, and specifically that the United States no longer shares its willingness to combat popular uprisings and may one day be willing to abandon the Saudi government as it did Mubarak.

In the previous chapter, finally, we examined what two international relations theorists' work on alliance dynamics could teach us about the Saudi-American relationship. Walt's theory that countries form alliances to balance not against raw power but against the most immediate threat explains the original dynamic of Saudi Arabia and the United States balancing against Iran very well. But it may also explain Saudi Arabia distancing itself from and relying less on its American ally. Many of the latter's policies in the region, from opening up the Iraqi government to Shi'a/Iranian influence to supporting some Arab Spring uprisings against Saudi allies, have upset Saudi Arabia's interests to the point that it may have recalculated whether *America* poses a threat. Pressman's theories on alliance restraint and the requirements for its success explains the United States' limited success in stopping the Saudi-American rift: it has chosen to mobilize its resources to influence Saudi policy only on a pair of issues, the Iran nuclear program and the defense of the Persian Gulf, and then only by offering incentives, not threats or quid pro quos. As to why the United States chose not to apply its resources to a

wider range of issues, Pressman and Walt both suggest that the two of them simply have different priorities – particularly because for Saudi Arabia, as a regional power, all issues that threaten to empower its main rival are important, while for the United States, in an age of political polarization, a war weary public, and an economic recession, the need to prioritize foreign policy issues to focus only on the most important ones has become greater.

### **The Saudi-American Rift.**

Has the Saudi-American relationship significantly changed in the past seven years? The answer to this question is certainly “yes.” Many of the examples discussed in the previous four chapters could be cited, but what they all amount to is this: Saudi Arabia is asserting itself as a regional power, and more specifically as a military power, to an extent that has never been seen before. It is doing so whether or not its actions meet with the support of its most powerful ally, the United States, and has in fact defied Washington’s stated policy preferences several times. While disagreements between the two nations are nothing new, Riyadh’s continued application of military force in the face of one regional threat after another, its attempt to continue modernizing and expanding its military capacities, and perhaps above all its attempts to associate other nations in the region with its newly assertive status through institutional mechanisms like the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council all suggest that this new policy is here to stay. Its rhetoric towards Washington, meanwhile, suggests that a lack of trust in the United States, or at least in its ability to do what must be done to preserve its allies in the region, has a great deal to do with this assertive policy.

There are several qualifiers to this, however. First is the lack of alternatives faced by both nations in the choice of their allies. Even under the most optimistic circumstances for Saudi Arabia, if it should be able to remake local politics profoundly enough to tie its GCC allies, Jordan, Egypt, and possibly other nations into a regional security system under its leadership, this alliance will still not have the security resources of a great power, and so will likely still need an ally among the world leaders. The most obvious of these remains the United States; its main competitors, Russia and China, both have ties to Iran and Syria and therefore would be even less reliable as partners against it. The United States, similarly, will continue to need a strong ally in the Persian Gulf region, which remains vital for both economic and security reasons. Saudi Arabia is the only viable option, every other potential regional power being either hostile (Iran), in no condition to take up this burden (Iraq, Egypt), or both (Syria). Lacking viable alternatives, Riyadh and Washington are likely to maintain their alliance, even in a deteriorated state, rather than break it.

Second, it is unclear whether the United States even considers Saudi Arabia's assertiveness to be a major concern. The political divisions in Washington and the new prioritization of domestic (economic) issues caused by the 2008 financial crisis, which per Pressman's observations made the U.S. less able to influence Saudi behavior, also made it less able to influence events in the Middle East in general. And as noted in the historical background section, the last time the United States was in a comparable situation, it dealt with it by empowering local allies, like the Shah of Iran, to take on a greater role in the American-led security system. The U.S. government may have simply decided to follow the same policy again, allowing Saudi Arabia to take on the role of its

major regional ally in the Persian Gulf region. This interpretation is supported by the increasing American arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which in addition to their diplomatic value in convincing the Saudis of America's continued commitment, have also enabled and facilitated its adoption of a more militarized foreign policy. To be sure, the Saudis will occasionally use these weapons in ways the United States would not prefer – but a certain amount of divergence is inevitable in any alliance, and given its present state, the United States was in no position to impose its preferred solutions on Bahrain or Syria in any case. Letting Saudi Arabia fill the vacuum left by the United States after the Bush administration's wars may simply be the best option for the moment.

Third, we should note that the trends manifested in the current rift are not entirely new. An increasingly assertive foreign policy role is in some ways the story of Saudi Arabia in the last seventy years – we saw the country take on a greater role in various stages, from its part in creating organizations like OPEC or the GCC, to instigating and then suppressing the oil embargos against the West in the 1970s, to taking on an increasing security role in cooperation with the United States in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan in the 1980s. The addition of an interventionist military role in the present day can be seen as simply the latest step in this process. Similarly, some increased distance between the United States and Saudi Arabia was probably inevitable after the cultural backlash from the Gulf War and the disagreements over the Iraq War: the Saudis have, after all, always been ambivalent about being too close to the United States and the West.

Finally, as noted several times throughout this study, the differences between Washington and Riyadh are often in their priorities and perceptions rather than

fundamental, irreconcilable differences. The United States and Saudi Arabia may not agree on how best to deal with Iran's nuclear program, but both of them agree that Iran must be prevented from using it to produce weapons. The United States and Saudi Arabia may disagree about the degree to which Iran has spread its influence to other nations in the region, but both of them agree that such influence should be fought. The United States may rank jihadist movements like al-Qaeda or ISIS as a higher priority than does Saudi Arabia, but both of them agree that these movements are national security threats that must be stopped. In many of these cases, the relevant agencies of the two nations have continued to cooperate against the perceived threat despite the differences between their leaders.

The one exception to this is the American response to the Arab Spring uprisings. The other two pillars of the Saudi-U.S. relationship – the importance of the oil trade, and of defending the region against foreign penetration – remain in place, if slightly damaged. However, the American rhetoric of democracy promotion and human rights in the Middle East (consistent through two very different presidential administrations), their tolerance of the Shi'a rise to power in Iraq, their unwillingness to support longstanding allies like Mubarak in Egypt and the Khalifas in Bahrain, all add up to a fundamental contradiction of the relationship's third pillar, the defense of friendly governments against revolution. The Saudis are unlikely to forget this, and the memory of the Arab Spring will continue to shape relations for some time. It need not mean an end to the Saudi-American alliance, but the Saudis have a new understanding of how far that alliance goes and to what point they can trust in their American ally's support – and have renewed efforts to

ensure that any future threats like the Arab Spring can be met without needing to call in said ally.

### **The Role of Iran.**

How much have the Iranian nuclear negotiations contributed to this rift? From the evidence above, the answer seems to be “very little.” The Saudis may have considered the Iranian nuclear program to be a serious national security threat – however, as we have seen, *all* potential Iranian advances in the region are taken in Riyadh as a serious security threat. The Saudis may have thought that candidate Obama’s offer of negotiations with Iran, and President Obama’s actual negotiations with Iran, were a disappointing and weak response to an Iranian threat – however, this was not the first time that an American action was seen in this light (the first in recent memory most likely being the Iraq War that threw that country’s gates open to Iranian penetration) and would not be the last. More telling, however, is Saudi Arabia’s eventual decision to publicly accept the American guarantees regarding the Iran nuclear agreement and the fact that it would keep nuclear weapons out of Iran’s hands. This acquiescence to the Iranian-American thaw in this one instance – while continuing to energetically oppose Iran on every other front, and work with the U.S. to strengthen the Persian Gulf’s defenses – suggests strongly that Iran’s nuclear program was never the key factor in Saudi considerations.

Have differences in Iran policy in general contributed to the rift? The answer to this is “yes” – in the sense that, given the strategic situation of the Persian Gulf, with Saudi Arabia and Iran the only major regional powers left standing, anything that changes



the balance of power is “about Iran” whether intended to be or not. From the Saudi point of view, the U.S. decision to invade Iraq and remove one of the Kingdom’s main security buffers empowered Iran. The U.S. decision to tolerate the rise of a political class in Baghdad dominated by the Shi’a majority empowered Iran. The U.S. decision to withdraw troops from Iraq less than a decade after the invasion, and thus remove one of the main anti-Iranian forces left in the country, empowered Iran. The U.S. decision not to unequivocally support the Khalifa government of Bahrain in the face of protesters, and instead to encourage reforms which risked similarly empowering a Shi’a population, would have empowered Iran if Saudi Arabia had not stepped in. U.S. indecision in Syria and unwillingness to use all necessary force to remove the Assad regime, Iran’s only state ally in the region, empowers Iran. Even issues completely unrelated to the Sunni-Shi’a conflict, like the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, can be seen as empowering Iran to the extent that they deprive Saudi Arabia of a valuable regional ally.

Empowering Iran was almost certainly not the goal of the United States in any of these instances, and in some of them, it may not even have been aware that the Saudis would view its actions in that light. But the Saudis have – and from their point of view, the American refusal to take their concerns into consideration means the United States can no longer be depended on to protect Saudi interests, and that steps must be taken to do the things the United States will not. Some form of rift would likely have occurred even if the Iran/Shi’a issue could somehow be taken out of the picture – as noted, the Arab Spring and the divergence that emerged from it would be an issue even without an Iranian dimension, and previous issues like the backlash to the Gulf War would also have

helped drive the two nations apart. The rift that did occur, however, could not fail to be colored by the Saudi-Iranian competition that currently dominates the region.

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