

September 11 has  
redefined the  
relationship



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The former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger once said, " No foreign policy - no matter how ingenious, has any chance of success if it is born in the minds of a few and carried in the hearts of none. " Kissinger's remarks regarding the construction of foreign policy bodes great significance to countries at any time, however, its application to one particular set of foreign relations bears interesting outcomes. The relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States have persisted in formal diplomatic terms for slightly more than sixty years.

In that time period, several issues have come to characterize this partnership. Oil, military bases, terrorism, and Osama bin-Laden - are all words that have swirled around in discussions regarding this relationship. Over the course of those sixty years though, many developments have impacted the relationship. In recent history, no event has had as particular or significant an impact as the events of 9/11. Since September 11, 2001, US-Saudi relations have come under greater scrutiny among factions on both sides.

The following paper will attempt to analyze such scrutiny and its beacon for US-Saudi relations post September 11th. In doing so, it will initially assess the historical surroundings of the partnership, context surrounding 9/11, and then the implications for the future of the relationship. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States is one that has been traditionally characterized by oil. Since its foundation by King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in 1932, Saudi Arabia has had a relatively close relationship with the United States over energy matters.

In 1933, it signed the first treaty regarding oil exploration with the Standard Oil Company of California (SOCal), beginning the inklings of a US-Saudi relationship. Despite the discovery of large deposits of oil in 1938, massive production of oil by American firms didn't begin until 1945. American demand for oil dramatically increased in the post-World War II period and America became the largest user of Saudi oil, a position America still holds today (Long, 1985, 13-16).

As the Saudis preferred the presence of American companies over their European counterparts, more and more American firms set up formal agreements with the Saudi government for oil exploration. With the rise in demand and use of Saudi oil in America, strategic concerns regarding the security and stability of Saudi Arabia itself became of paramount concern to US policy. This led to the development of military ties between both countries. One manner in which military ties were forged was through military financial assistance, through programs such as Lend-Lease aid.

Moreover, once the US became engrained in its Cold War mentality of containment, it began to take more direct steps to shore up the stability of US companies with ties to Saudi Arabia and also to increase government-to-government interactions. The concept of 50/50 profit sharing was introduced in 1950 between the Saudi government and the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) (Baghat, 2003, 45). In subsequent years, more companies developed amicable relations with the Saudi government. Relations further developed along military lines after the 1962 Yemeni Civil War.

Following the outbreak of civil war, the United States began " providing arms, training, and other services to the Saudi military (Long, 1985, 42). " Continued transfer of arms and military technologies solidified the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia. The development of Saudi Arabia's National Guard, Air Force, and Navy essentially hinged on US efforts. As power over the pricing of oil changed in the 1970s from the production companies to the oil-producing states in OPEC, Saudi Arabia's political leverage strengthened.

The energy crisis of 1973 reflected the US dependence on Gulf oil. Such a wakeup call translated into policy initiatives embodied in the US Persian Gulf Strategy. Central to this was securing the stability of the Saudi regime, whose stable monarchial hold on the country along with its anti-communist stance made it a beneficial regional ally for the United States (Baghat, 2003, 58-66). Saudi Arabia attracted foreign investment and its economy prospered, providing for the rapid growth of its socialized infrastructure.

Strengthening defense ties and increasing trade between the two countries largely went unnoticed among the publics of both countries until 1991, when the Gulf War broke out. The multinational coalition to drive Saddam Hussein and Iraq out of Kuwait was highly successful, in large part due to the resources and support provided by Saudi Arabia. According to their own governmental numbers, Saudi Arabia provided almost \$55 billion to the war (Gause, 2002, 43). Moreover, the use of American bases in Saudi territory provided for the highly successful air campaign against Hussein.

Nearly half a million US troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War (Gause, 2002, 37). Upon the end of the Persian Gulf War, Saudi Arabia spent enormous amounts of money on US technology to modernize its military. Between 1991 and 1998, arms agreements between the US and Saudi Arabia amounted to almost \$22.8 billion (CRS, 2003, 10). Trade between both countries continued, with Saudi Arabia continuing to be the largest Arab trading partner for the US.

In light of the backdrop of strong energy ties between both countries, significant arms trade, and especially the military relationship, both countries moved into the 21st century on a relatively strong footing. And that's when September 11, 2001 occurred. 9/11 dramatically changed the nature of relations between both countries. As the Middle East Institute pointed out, "Since September 11, 2001, US-Saudi relations have deteriorated, fulfilling a primary goal of Osama bin Laden: to drive a wedge between the two longstanding allies (Stanley, 2004, p. online). Many within the US were angered by what they saw as Saudi involvement in the attacks: 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens; the mastermind of the attacks, Osama bin Laden - was himself a former Saudi citizen. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia reacted with a sense of perplexity at the identity of the hijackers while also fully distancing themselves with both Osama bin Laden and the specific hijackers in question. The fundamental issue between both countries was now terrorism, and it is the one issue that has had the biggest impact on the direction of relations since.

However, before one can begin to understand the direction of relations for both countries, it is necessary to understand the context surrounding 9/11.

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During the 1990s, attacks on US military facilities in Saudi Arabia created concern among US leaders over the safety and security of US military personnel in Saudi Arabia. The first attack occurred on November 13, 1995 in Riyadh at the US headquarters for a US training program for the Saudi National Guard. The second and more lethal attack occurred in 1996 at the Khobar Towers, a housing facility for US soldiers, which killed 19 US Air Force personnel and wounded many others.

The result of this attack was the relocation of the majority of US military personnel to more remote locations in Saudi Arabia. Subsequent criticism by US intelligence officials against their Saudi counterparts for limiting access to suspects created some tension between governments. Ultimately however, the case was resolved in June 2001, right prior to the 9/11 attack (CRS, 2003, 6-7). Despite the occurrence of such attacks within Saudi borders, an important point must be noted: in general, most Saudis felt no direct threat of terrorism, and instead, viewed such attacks as inherently against the US.

Such sentiment was not entirely understood until the aftermath of September 11th. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, public and government scrutiny in America immediately turned to Saudi Arabia. Although America began its military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, great attention was paid to Saudi Arabia. Many within the US began calling for a "divorce" with Saudi Arabia. The primary focus of such attention concentrated on several contentions of Saudi Arabia's supposed involvement to not only 9/11 but also to the greater issue of terrorism.

Aside from the Saudi link to the hijackers and former Saudi citizen Osama bin Laden with his terrorist organization Al Qaeda, the American government became vexed with one issue in particular: terrorist funding. Many US officials were highly critical of the Saudi regime for being either indirectly or directly financing terrorist organizations. Such accusations took the form of three possible types of involvement. The first accusation maintains that the Saudi government has directly provided funding to terrorist organizations as a means of "buying protection" (Hersh, 2001, p. online).

The more common accusation made is that the Saudi government has been less than vigilant in its monitoring of the donations made by Saudi citizens directly towards groups such as Al Qaeda. The third type of involvement has been the argument that the Saudi government's support of specific Islamic institutions and charitable organizations has allowed money to be siphoned off from such groups and transferred to terrorists (Gause, 2002, 46). In a Joint Congressional Report released in 2003, the House and Senate Intelligence Committees assessed the intelligence related to events before and after 9/11.

Among its 900 pages are 28 pages which the Bush Administration has refused to declassify. Reports indicate that this classified section implicates many Saudi officials in the attacks by linking them with channeling hundreds of millions of dollars to charitable organizations with ties to Al Qaeda (CRS, 2003, 4). The Bush Administration's continued refusal to declassify the material, on grounds of national security, has further angered many Saudis who categorically deny any link to 9/11.

The effect has only been to further strain the relationship between both nations. On the civil side, families of more than 600 victims of the September 11 attacks filed a lawsuit in a US District Court seeking approximately \$1 trillion in damages. The lawsuit itself names three members of the Saudi royal family, along with the government of Sudan and Osama bin Laden (CRS, 2003, 3). For the Saudi royal family, such efforts were considered an attempt to extort Saudi money invested in America.

In response, many within the Saudi media called for the withdrawal of such investments, which total almost \$700 billion (CFR, 2002, p. online). Further dampening the relationship was the reaction of the American public toward Saudi nationals. Many Saudi citizens have endured harassment and a feeling of ostracism at the hands of some within the American public. Such harassment and scrutiny often centered on the Wahhabi doctrine of Islam that forms the religious foundation for Saudi society. Combined with hostile media reports, many Saudis have abandoned any desire to travel to America.

As the Stanley Foundation points out, " The consequent decline in personal interaction and relationships may remove a barrier to anti-Saudi sentiment in the US and to anti-US sentiment in Saudi Arabia (Stanley, 2002, p. online). " With members of both the public and government skeptical of each other, the context surrounding 9/11 has created a tenuous climate. As a result, the impact of such scrutiny on part of many within the US government and public has translated into great tension for the US-Saudi relationship.



Having understood the context surrounding September 11 in the United States, it is also vitally important to place the event in context of developments within Saudi Arabia. The Saudi reactions to 9/11 can be viewed from the incident itself as well as the subsequent American reactions. In regards to the event itself, the Saudi regime expressed its condolences and horror at the attacks. Saudi Arabia joined the war against terror. However, despite such actions, there was a sense of distance to the attacks and the greater issue of terrorism.

The Saudi regime was hesitant to acknowledge or accept that 15 of the 19 hijackers were indeed Saudi citizens. To the regime, 9/11 was an unfortunate event, but one that took place outside of Saudi Arabia. As the Economist pointed out, " As far as Saudis were concerned, the Twin Towers were far away (Economist, 2004, p. online). " What helped solidify this feeling initially were the regime's perceptions regarding bin Laden. For the Saudi regime, the link between bin Laden and 9/11 demonstrated an important point in their mind: terrorism was an external matter.

The attacks had been carried outside of Saudi territory, showing that efforts taken by the Saudi regime against bin Laden in the mid-1990s (stripping of his citizenship in 1994 included) were somewhat successful. " Bin Laden's violent campaign against targets outside of Saudi Arabia was, indirectly, proof of the Saudi government's success against him domestically... He [Bin Laden] was not an immediate threat to regime security. The attacks of September 11 did not change the Saudi calculus (Gause, 2002, 39-40). "

In response to the hostile US reactions after 9/11, the Saudi regime took small steps to cut off financial links to specific charitable organizations that might have terrorist links, and also attempted to purge any terrorist activity within its own borders. But it had to tread carefully. Public opinion was growing considerably anti-American and the Saudi regime was walking a fine line. Though for many years, undercurrents of anti-American feeling existed in Saudi Arabia, the US reaction following 9/11 only stirred that sentiment and helped it increase (Cordesman, 2004, 2-3).

This can be accounted for because of several reasons. For one, the anti-Saudi rhetoric in US media generated a similar response against the US within Saudi Arabia. The accusations of terrorist links and mistreatment of Saudis by the US left many Saudis angry at brash judgments of their society and religion. Moreover, many new issues became much more salient to the Saudi public post-9/11. Issues related to the US military presence, US hegemony in the region, and the Saudi domestic sphere all contributed to the sentiment among many within the country.

In particular, this last area related to the domestic sphere has precisely been why the Saudi regime has actually been concerned with public opinion.

Because Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, with no elections and a highly limited political system, the influence of public opinion on the monarchies' decisions was often negligible. However, 9/11 rekindled many issues among the Saudi public, which is beginning to have a direct impact on the regime's actions.

Social and economic changes within the country have created a climate where people are beginning to express their opinions.

Increased education, rapid urbanization, and the enormous population growth are the main factors that have contributed to the House of Al Saud's political responsiveness to public opinion. " Between 1980 and 1997, the number of students in higher education quadrupled (Gause, 2002, 41). " Moreover, almost 83% of Saudi Arabia's population is urban, a situation where more people have access to a variety of sources of information and lifestyles. The effect is the deconstruction of family and tribal loyalties, and in effect, exposure a broader range of ideas.

With this increased urbanization has been the population explosion of the country. Annual growth rates are estimated at around 3-4 percent, placing an enormous strain on the country's welfare system (Gause, 2002, 42). With this increased strain has been compounding economic opportunities for people. Some estimates indicate that almost 30% of the population of 20 million is unemployed - a staggering statistic when one considers that almost 5 million foreign workers live in Saudi Arabia (Pollack, 2003, p. online).

As Gause notes, " These factors all point to an increasingly politicized and potentially restive Saudi population (Gause, 2002, 42). " The increased politicization has placed the microscope within Saudi Arabia squarely on the regime itself. The House of Al-Saud, which is said to have more than 20, 000 members in its family, has been the ruling family since they created the state. Since King Fahd became incapacitated in 1996 because of a stroke, Crown Prince Abdullah has been the de-facto leader. Part of the regime's strength in power has been its long-standing relationship with the religious establishment, or ulama.

For more than 200 years, the House of Al-Saud has had a formal relationship with the doctrine of Islam propounded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, or what came to be known as Wahabbism. The regime's control over the religious establishment derives especially from infrastructural reasons.

Funding for all religious institutions comes directly from the Saudi regime. "

Everyone in the religious sector... is an employee of the Saudi state (Gause, 2002, 44). " Despite such infrastructural ties to the regime, some religious institutions began to splinter, a process within the establishment that began long before 9/11.

It was from this splintering of extremist forces that bin Laden and members of Al Qaeda derived. Post 9/11, splintering among the main religious establishment has increased. On one hand, religious clerics who have long-denounced the legitimacy of the Saudi regime to rule over the country, have come together to denounce extremism in the Islamic world. " This coming together of the Saudi leadership and its former Islamist critics is the most interesting development in Saudi politics Since September 11 (Gause, 2002, 44). On the other hand, some of the more extremist elements within the country that had remained somewhat silent, grew more vocal. 9/11 and especially the US reaction post the attacks, provided an impetus for them to express their anti-American feelings, and in doing so, project such feelings on the Saudi regime. This in effect, has left the Saudi regime with difficult choices regarding its relationship with the US, indicating that 9/11 has had many policy implications for the US-Saudi future.