



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

September 25, 2007

Saudi Arabia and the United States: Reluctant Bedfellows in a Strategic Embrace

Joshua Teitelbaum

For several years, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has been especially difficult. During the first Gulf War (1990-1991), relations had reached an all-time high, marked by intensive cooperation to liberate Kuwait and protect the Saudi kingdom from Saddam Husayn. Yet little remains today of those halcyon days of photo-ops with Generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Khalid bin Sultan. Seventeen years ago, the countries strode confidently forward to confront a common enemy. Today, they retain common adversaries, but different ones: radical jihadi terrorism and a rival state bidding for regional hegemony – the Shi`ite Islamic Republic of Iran. The geopolitical changes unleashed by America's overthrow of Saddam Husayn's regime in Iraq have resulted in a significant measure of mistrust creeping into the Saudi-American relationship. As a result, a mutual lack of confidence intrudes on what should otherwise be an air-tight alliance.

Over the past 40 years, marked by the decline of British power and its replacement by the US in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia has consistently turned to the United States to assure its security. A close military and political relationship developed, as the Saudis became firm US allies in the Cold War. The US trained Saudi troops and built military facilities for Saudi use, ostensibly, but which could be easily used for American operations, as they were, in fact, in the 1991 Gulf War. The two countries did not share much in the way of values, but they did share much in the way of common interests, from combating communism to keeping oil flowing.

The recent downward spiral began with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. From Washington's perspective, the involvement of so many Saudi citizens in the attacks combined with initial Saudi government denials and the ideological and financial support for terrorism emanating from the kingdom to seriously sour the relationship. "If I could somehow snap my fingers and cut off the funding from one country, it would be Saudi Arabia,"

Stuart Levey, the Undersecretary of the Treasury in charge of tracking terror financing told ABC News on the sixth anniversary of the attacks.

In Washington, there was hope that the Saudis would play a more constructive role in Iraq, but instead the long US occupation has encumbered the relationship. While initially supportive of Saddam's removal, the end result of the US occupation has been the strengthening of the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'ites and of Iran itself, Saudi Arabia's traditional rival across the Gulf. The Saudi government either looked the other way or gave tacit approval to Saudis jihadis who flocked to Iraq, choosing to kill two birds with one stone: the "martyring" of home-grown Wahhabi extremists while supporting Sunni co-religionists against Shi'ite domination.

The US considers the Saudi role to be counterproductive. US officials have said that the Saudis are funding the Sunni tribal opposition and seeking to enlist other Gulf countries in the effort, since they consider the current regime of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to be in the pocket of Iran. The US Ambassador to the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad, stated that "Saudi Arabia and a number of other countries are not doing all they can to help us in Iraq. At times, some of them are not only not helping...they are doing things that [are] undermining the effort to make progress." Adding fuel to the fire, Crown Prince Abdallah referred to the US presence in Iraq as an "illegal foreign occupation" at the Arab summit hosted by Riyadh in March. (The US had been given a preview of Abdallah's ire a week earlier when the Saudi king refused to attend a White House dinner in his honor planned for April.)

It is to Iran that one must look for an explanation of Saudi behavior. The success of Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Gaza, the deepening of the Syrian-Iranian relationship (creating an unprecedented level of tension between Riyadh and Damascus), and the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran have significantly altered the balance of power between these two regional rivals. Although both the US and Saudi Arabia want to block the expansion of Iranian power, the US appears indecisive and is not exhibiting the kind of leadership necessary to assuage Saudi fears.

In a kind of Catch-22 situation, the US wishes to engage the Saudis as a leading force in a US-allied coalition of Middle Eastern "moderates" to confront Iran, but the Saudis appear reluctant to follow an America that might leave the Shi'ites in power in Iraq and fail to act decisively when the Iranian situation reaches a critical point. In Riyadh's eyes, the US is no longer a confident and reliable superpower willing and able to pursue its vital interests in the region.

It appears likely that in the near future (at least until a new President enters the White House), Riyadh will be moving its relationship with Washington on a new trajectory that emphasizes its independence from a weakened United States. For instance, President Bush's July 16 call for an "international meeting" this fall on Arab-Israeli elicited mixed signals from Saudi Arabia. A visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates in early August resulted in a statement by Saudi Foreign Minister Sa'ud Al Faysal that the Saudis "would look very closely and very hard at attending" the

meeting –a response that was interpreted, perhaps charitably, by a senior State Department official as “an interesting and forward-leaning answer.” But in mid-September, Sa‘ud lowered expectations of Saudi attendance when he stated that “the kingdom’s participation is doubtful” if substantive issues were not to be addressed.

Yet despite tactical differences over Iran and the Arab-Israeli issue, all indications are that long-term interests dictate that strategic relations remain intimate. Both sides realize this, and indeed are stepping back from the brink. In late July, US officials announced that Washington would propose an arms sale – reportedly valued at \$20b. – to Saudi Arabia. Commitment to protecting Saudi oil fields was indicated by a report in late August that the US defense company Lockheed Martin would provide training for a special force tasked with protecting those fields. Such deals further lock the two countries into a long-term defense relationship.

While the degree of US-Saudi intimacy will fluctuate, the US needs Saudi Arabia for its oil and contribution to regional stability, and the Saudi royal family needs the US to keep it in power and Iran at bay. This is what keeps these very different countries, reluctant bedfellows they may be, locked in a strategic embrace.

TEL AVIV NOTES *is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation*