

Is the Saudi-U.S. Relationship “Broken”?

Written by Anna Viden

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ANNA VIDEN, MAY 9 2014

In order to evaluate the significance of President Obama’s recent visit to Saudi Arabia and to address the more vital question of whether or not the Saudi-U.S. relationship is now “broken” (Barrett Oct. 28, 2013; Kaplan Oct. 28, 2013; Bakr and Strobel Oct 22, 2013; Chulov March 28, 2014), it is necessary to consider the relationship in a longer perspective. This is crucial in order to determine if the present down-face is indeed more serious than previous ones. Furthermore, a *longue durée* perspective will help to establish if the previous *raison d’être* of the longstanding Saudi-U.S. relationship, namely the baseline agreement of oil for security, counter-terrorism cooperation, containment of Iranian regional influence, promotion of regional stability, fostering of commercial and military ties, and instrumentalization by the U.S. of Saudi Arabia’s religious identity are still valid. Rather than a “dying” relationship, is it a natural shift away from the alliance based on diverging interests that we are witnessing?

Strength of Alliance despite Apparent Incompatibilities

The strength and the longevity of the Saudi-U.S. relationship is remarkable, considering the apparent incompatibility of the United States – a Western liberal democracy – with Saudi Arabia – a fundamentalist Middle Eastern monarchy established through military conquest and intermarriage. The relationship, whose foundation was laid on February 15, 1945, with the meeting between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa’ud, onboard the USS Quincy, has endured through thick and thin for more than seventy years. Between 1932, when Saudi Arabia was established, and 1945, U.S. relations with Saudi counterparts were largely outsourced to corporate actors, such as the oil company Aramco (Citino 2002, Vitalis 2007). Fearing that the Saudi king in dire need of finances would sell out the oil concession (possibly to Britain), Aramco officials were instrumental in convincing F.D.R. to extend financial aid to Saudi Arabia in 1943 within the context of lend-lease normally eligible only to democratic nations (Bronson 2006). In February 1945, President Roosevelt was seeking to ensure post-war access to oil and strategic location, while King Abd al-Aziz was eager to find security reassurance. In return for secure access to oil, the United States promised to defend Saudi Arabia against external threats. Over time, this basic transactional relationship evolved into a key commercial, military, and strategic relationship fueled by the Saudi oil wealth and U.S. interests.

Indeed, the Saudi-U.S. relationship has always been a marriage of convenience, in need of constant legitimization before domestic and regional constituencies. For Saudi leaders, this meant justifying the relationship with the United States in terms palatable to a conservative domestic opinion, who in the early days of the alliance perceived all Western influence as a threat to Saudi social fabric and religious traditions; while for U.S. policy-makers, it was necessary to legitimize an alliance with a country whose leadership refused to espouse democracy, respect religious freedom and women’s rights, and which moreover professed anti-Zionist, anti-Israeli, and anti-Western views. A narrative was therefore created by oil executives and U.S. policy-makers which justified the relationship with Saudi Arabia in virtue of the vital importance of the Kingdom’s oil resources to U.S. national interests. The opposition to the Saudi-U.S. relationship notwithstanding, Saudi and U.S. leaders, at least up until now, have been convinced that the benefits outweighed the cost.

The 1973-74 Arab Oil Embargo: The “First 9/11” of the Saudi-U.S. Relationship

That is not to say that the relationship has not been rocky. As suggested by the longtime Saudi commentator Thomas

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Lippman, “there have frequently been policy differences, misunderstandings and angry recriminations, beginning with Saudi anger over U.S. recognition of Israel in 1948” (Lippman Sept. 16, 2013). Realizing the monetary and technological benefits from an alliance with the United States, King Abd al-Aziz chose nevertheless to adopt a pragmatic stance, despite the pressure from his son Faisal and other Arab leaders to withhold the rights to the oil concession that had been granted to Aramco in 1933. This pragmatic stance has prevailed until the present day (Lippman Sept. 16, 2013).

The biggest crisis in the Saudi-U.S. relationship, except for the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, which counted 15 Saudi citizens among the 19 perpetrators, is without a doubt the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973-74. The embargo was imposed on the United States and other Western states for their support of Israel in the 1973 October War. Curiously, the aftermath of the oil embargo turned with the creation of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia Joint Economic Commission in 1974 into a Saudi-U.S. rapprochement with considerable economic and strategic benefits for both parties. The agreement supposed, among other things, the recycling of a significant amount of “petrodollars” into the U.S. economy directly through Saudi investments, and indirectly through commercial and military deals involving American companies and defense contractors. Other prominent areas of contention between the United States and Saudi Arabia are the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, which prompted Saudi Arabia to ostracize Anwar Sadat, and the U.S. Invasion of Iraq, which from a Saudi perspective pushed the regional hegemonic balance starkly in favor of Iran with the establishment of the regime of Nouri al-Maliki (Lippman Sept. 16, 2013).

Diverging Saudi-U.S. Interests in the Context of the Arab Awakenings

A constant thorn in the side of the Saudi leadership since the beginnings of the Saudi-U.S. relationship has been the United States’ warm relationship with Israel, which in the eyes of the Saudis has hardly made Washington an impartial mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Lately, however, it has looked as if Saudi Arabia’s and Israel’s interests have converged in the context of the Arab Awakenings, whereas Saudi Arabia’s and the United States’ interests seem to have diverged. It is on the issues of Egypt and Iran that Saudi Arabia’s and Israel’s interests seem to converge.

From the Saudis’ perspective, the abandonment by the United States of its long-time ally Hosni Mubarak enabled the political rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudis were also upset by the United States’ lack of support for the Egyptian military’s ousting of Mohamed Morsi. (Barrett Oct.28, 2013). To Israel, anything that puts the 1979 peace agreement with Egypt at stake is problematic, whereas to Saudi Arabia the perceived threat to regional stability and the domestic status quo warranted action. As suggested by Anthony H. Cordesman, “from this perspective, it should be... clear why Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE back the military in Egypt with \$12 billion in aid. They are not focused on a pro forma exercise in democracy but on the stability of a state where an extremist regime could quickly become far more of a threat than was the case at the time of Nasser” (Anthony H. Cordesman Nov. 4, 2013).

On the issue of the nuclear deal between the International community and Iran, Saudi Arabia sees the negotiations as power politics played as a zero-sum game, where a perceived victory for Iran is to the disadvantage of the kingdom. From this perspective, the distinction of being perceived as a nuclear power will give Iran hegemonic status in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as a whole. The Saudis also fear that what they see as a “rapprochement” between Washington and Teheran is to their detriment (Henderson Nov. 25, 2013). Security analysts, such as Anthony Cordesman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, seem to suggest that the Saudi fear of a hegemonic threat should be taken seriously. He alludes to “growing asymmetric threats from Iran [not only a nuclear threat] including Iranian efforts to destabilize Shi’ite populations, a growing set of forces tailored to threat targets and shipping in the Gulf, Iranian efforts to become the dominant influence in Iraq, Iranian ties to Hezbollah, and Iranian links to Assad in Syria” (Anthony H. Cordesman Nov. 4, 2013).

Is the U.S. policy in Syria a catalyst for the Saudi “shift” away from the U.S.?

The “shifting away” from the Saudi-U.S. “special” relationship has been signaled by actors on both sides, but most famously by Saudi Arabia’s former intelligence chief and former ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who announced in October 2013 that the kingdom would make “a major shift” in the relations with the United

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States in protest at the United States’ perceived inaction over the war in Syria and the “rapprochement” with Iran (Bakr and Strobel Oct.22, 2013). Prince Bandar’s words were echoed in Washington by another prominent Saudi, the former spy-chief and ambassador to the United States, Prince Turki al-Faisal, who called Obama’s policies in Syria “lamentable” and suggested, in reference to President Obama’s redline speech on Syria (Bakr and Strobel Oct.22, 2013, Kessler Sept. 6, 2013), that the U.S.-Russian deal to eliminate Assad’s chemical weapons was a “ruse” to let Obama avoid military action in Syria (Bakr and Strobel Oct.22, 2013). The refusal by Saudi Arabia to accept a seat on the UN Security Council, which predated these declarations has, been widely interpreted as a criticism of the United Nations’ and the United States’ Syria policy.

American commentators such as Fred Kaplan have called the Saudis’ declarations a “game of high-way chicken”, warning Obama that if he continues down this path, the Saudis will go elsewhere. Kaplan suggests that Obama’s task amounts to

a diplomatic balancing act: to convince the Saudis that the rifts is not as wide as Bandar is suggesting, while at the same time making it clear that the United States’ interests are not as wrapped up with the desires or fate of the royal family as they used to be.

Kaplan suggests that the objective basis of the strategic alliance between Riyadh and Washington – America’s dependence on Saudi oil – is eroding due to United States newfound energy independence (Kaplan Oct.28 2013).

The Meeting: Results

While the recent meeting between President Obama and King Abdullah seemed, in the words of certain commentators, to have “alleviated” the sense that the relationship was in crisis (Gause April 27, 2014) and demonstrated the “strategic alignment” of Saudi Arabia and the United States (al-Harthi April 2, 2014), it nevertheless failed to present solutions to some of the thorniest issues threatening the viability of the Saudi-U.S. relationship, namely Syria and Egypt. As argued by Gregory Gause, the issue of Syria is rendered more complex by the fact that, for Saudi Arabia, Syria presents an opportunity to roll-back Iranian influence from the Eastern Arab world, which is a major foreign policy goal for Riyadh. Where the United States and Saudi Arabia differ is that although Washington is keen to roll-back Iran’s regional influence, it will not let this stand in the way of a nuclear deal with Iran on acceptable terms. Additionally, while Saudi Arabia and the United States agree that Assad needs to leave, they disagree on the means to achieve this and on the basic priorities. For Saudi Arabia, the situation in Syria has domestic opinion dimensions, since the war has evolved into an emotional issue among the Sunni majority (Gause April 27, 2014).

Gause suggests that Saudi Arabia and the United States’ disagreement on Egypt is less threatening to the Saudi-U.S. relationship, since this time the disagreement concerns the issue of democracy: a point of contention in the past without serious consequences. Whereas the U.S. administration saw the Muslim Brotherhood’s engagement in the democratic game as an essential prerequisite to the development of stable democracies in the Arab world, the Saudis felt that the rise to power of an Islamist party questioned their claim as legitimate spokespersons for Sunni Islam at the regional level. In fact, Gause argues that the rise to power of Islamists presents a danger to Saudi foreign policy interests and the domestic stability (Gause April 27, 2014).

How does the White House represent the outcome of President Obama’s visit to Saudi Arabia?

A fact sheet published by the White House on March 28 emphasizes a number of “critical bilateral and regional issues” where the United States and Saudi Arabia are working together, such as “resolving the crisis in Syria, preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, counterterrorism efforts to combat extremism, and supporting negotiations to achieve Middle East peace” (White House, Office of the Press Secretary March 28, 2014).

The fact sheet also lists defense cooperation and cites Saudi Arabia as the largest U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customer, with active and open cases valued at approximately \$97 billion. Concerning bilateral trade and investments, the fact sheet mentions that U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia exceeded \$35 billion in 2013. The fact sheet

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also details energy cooperation, educational programs (approximately 80,000 Saudi students study in the United States), and citizen exchanges (White House, Office of the Press Secretary March 28, 2014).

Conclusion

Despite the misalignment of the United States and Saudi Arabia on certain crucial issues, such as Syria, Egypt, and Iran, the Saudi-U.S. strategic alliance is not “broken” or “moribund”. Most of the main pillars of the relationship, such as counterterrorism cooperation, commercial, military, and strategic ties, are still relevant. The baseline transactional character of the relationship, present in the historical agreement of oil for security, has been slightly modified with the newfound U.S. energy independence. It is too early to tell how this will affect the relationship, since the actual impact on the global energy situation is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the Saudis are frustrated by what they see as the United States’ disengagement from the Middle East in favor of President Obama’s pivot to Asia. While this has not led the Saudis to “shift away” from the Saudi-U.S. alliance, it has prompted them to reach out to other potential partners so as to not “place all their bets on one horse”.

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