

**STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVES
BEHIND THE U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP FROM 1961-2016**

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ABSTRACT

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After Jamal Khashoggi's murder, many Americans questioned why the United States, a proud democracy, continued to work alongside the repressive Saudi monarchy. This thesis addresses this question and explains how this partnership evolved between 1961 and 2016. Throughout this work, I explore the principal interests that drove and maintained the U.S.-Saudi relationship over time. Although the United States claimed to champion human rights in its foreign policy decision-making, I argue that mutual oil and security interests, rather than liberal reform, directed the two countries' relations.

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INTRODUCTION

“It is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as [an] eternal ally or [a] perpetual enemy...We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”

Lord Palmerston¹

In October 2018, Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered in the Saudi consulate located in Istanbul. A Saudi Arabian journalist, Khashoggi spent decades covering major stories within the Kingdom, such as the rise of Osama bin Laden. However, in 2017, Khashoggi fell out of favor with the Saudi monarchy, which caused him to flee the Kingdom. During his self-imposed exile in the United States, he wrote several anti-Saudi columns, including ones that criticized the actions of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler. Khashoggi published a column exclaiming his prior fear of arrest inside the Kingdom due to his dissenting opinions.

Although Khashoggi escaped arrest before his exile, he did not remain free for long. In late 2018, Khashoggi traveled to Istanbul to obtain a Saudi document verifying that he was divorced; he planned to use this document to marry his Turkish fiancée, Hatice Cengiz. Although he claimed the journey would be safe, he gave Cengiz two cell phones and asked her to call an adviser to Turkish President Erdogan if he did not safely return. His fiancée waited for more than ten hours outside the consulate. The next morning, she returned, but there was still no sign of

¹ “Treaty of Adrianople—Charges Against Viscount Palmerston,” Digitized Edition of Commons and Lords Hansard, the Official Report of debates in Parliament, HC Deb 01 March 1848 vol 97 cc66-123, accessed 03 May 2021, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1848/mar/01/treaty-of-adrianople-charges-against>.

Khashoggi. Her hope quickly dwindled. She would soon learn that her fiancé would never return and that the whereabouts of his body would remain unknown.

The details of Khashoggi's murder shocked the international community, and many believed that Crown Prince Mohammed was responsible for his death. A UN investigation discovered sufficient evidence to justify an investigation in Prince Mohammed's role in the murder, and many human rights activists and lawmakers demanded strong and swift action against the monarchy.² Nevertheless, responses varied. Germany, Finland, and Denmark canceled arms deals with Saudi Arabia, while the United States, Canada, France, and the U.K. imposed sanctions against the Saudis allegedly connected to the killing (excluding the Saudi crown prince).³

The Saudis were initially ambivalent regarding Khashoggi's disappearance. Indeed, during the immediate aftermath of Khashoggi's murder, the Saudis denied any knowledge of his disappearance. However, a few weeks later, Saudi officials admitted that the journalist died while resisting arrest, and they later declared that he died of a chokehold. After investigating his death, the government claimed that the head of a negotiations team ordered the killing after the deputy intelligence chief demanded that he return Khashoggi to Saudi soil by means of persuasion or, if he struggled, by force. The investigators also released information on Khashoggi's death: he was forcibly restrained, injected with a sedative (which caused a lethal overdose), and then his body was dismembered for discrete disposal.⁴ Moreover, Crown Prince Mohammed failed to understand why the international community was outraged. Eight days after

² Patricia Zengerle, "U.S. lawmakers demand accountability for killing of Saudi journalist," Reuters, 10 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-khashoggi-congress/u-s-lawmakers-demand-accountability-for-killing-of-saudi-journalist-idUSKCN1P5026>.

³ "Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death," BBC News, 24 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>.

⁴ "Jamal Khashoggi," <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>.

Khashoggi's murder, Prince Mohammed called Jared Kushner, then a senior advisor to President Trump. Prince Mohammed expressed confusion and exasperation regarding the reaction, and he did not understand why the journalist's death was making headlines.⁵

Although the Crown Prince was shocked at the international outrage, he was likely pleased with President Trump's response. During a statement in November 2018, Trump declared:

“Our intelligence agencies continue to assess all information, but it could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event - maybe he did and maybe he didn't! That being said, we may never know all of the facts surrounding the murder of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi. In any case, our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They have been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran. The United States intends to remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia to ensure the interests of our country, Israel, and all other partners in the region. It is our paramount goal to fully eliminate the threat of terrorism throughout the world!...As President of the United States I intend to ensure that, in a very dangerous world, America is pursuing its national interests and vigorously contesting countries that wish to do us harm. Very simply it is called America First!”⁶

Thus, according to Trump, U.S. intelligence was unable to determine the Crown Prince's responsibility and national interests such as antiterrorism, oil, and countering Iran superseded any serious responses to Khashoggi's murder. Trump's America First response and his failure to

⁵ Alexandra Ma, “The Saudi crown prince reportedly couldn't understand why everyone is outraged at Khashoggi's murder,” Business Insider, 22 October 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.in/the-saudi-crown-prince-reportedly-couldnt-understand-why-everyone-is-outraged-at-khashoggis-murder/articleshow/66316483.cms>.

⁶ Anthony Zurcher, “Trump Saudi statement: What the president's words reveal,” BBC News, 20 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/46283695>.

hold Prince Mohammed accountable enraged several human rights activists and politicians. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi exclaimed, “If we decide commercial interests override the statements we make and the actions we take, then we must admit we have lost all moral authority.”⁷

The reactions of Nancy Pelosi, President Trump, and Crown Prince Mohammed pose a series of intriguing questions. What role, if any, did the United States play as an international “moral authority” in its relationship with Saudi Arabia? When did antiterrorism and countering Iran emerge as key American interests? How did American interests, like oil, vary across time? Why did the public outrage regarding Khashoggi’s murder surprise Prince Mohammed? Was the U.S. giving clear and consistent signals on the need for liberal reform in the Kingdom during Mohammed’s lifetime? Or were U.S. messages more conflicted, confusing, and changing?

In this thesis, I argue that since 1961, the United States’ foreign policy priorities and messaging to the Kingdom were not primarily focused on liberal reform. Rather, they were focused on national security and, after the oil shocks of the 1970s, energy security. Although the United States attempted to change course (consider President Carter’s focus on human rights and President George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda), the United States has not played an influential role in changing the fundamentally illiberal nature of the Kingdom. To illustrate the power of these security and oil interests, I will discuss critical moments of tension in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and I will demonstrate how one or both interests preserved this partnership.

To explore the interests of human rights, security, and oil in the US-Saudi relationship, I will narrate the major foreign policy changes since 1961. I show that liberal reform was

⁷ Zengerle, “U.S. lawmakers demand accountability for killing of Saudi journalist,” <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-khashoggi-congress/u-s-lawmakers-demand-accountability-for-killing-of-saudi-journalist-idUSKCN1P5026>.

consistently overshadowed by security and oil interests, and despite significant tensions, security and oil interests kept this relationship intact. First, I argue that the Kingdom's vast oil supply and influence on world prices contributed to the strategic decision to not push for human rights reforms. The 1973 oil embargo proved the efficacy of the Saudi oil weapon, and it demonstrated the necessity of compromising with the House of Saud's demands. The oil interest's dominance continued until the late 2000s, when U.S. energy production increased and dependence on foreign oil declined. Therefore, although American direct dependence on Saudi oil has decreased, oil interests were a key driver in U.S.-Saudi relations.

Alongside oil, security interests shaped this alliance, and Saudi Arabia's strategic importance in the region caused the United States to avoid imposing democratic reforms on the Kingdom. Initially, mutual security interests were defined by containing the spread of communism. According to Gary Sick, an American academic and analyst of Middle East affairs, the relationship's importance increased after the Iranian Revolution left the United States "strategically naked in the Persian Gulf," with no one to turn to except for the Saudis.⁸ After 1979, the United States and Saudi Arabia worked together to curb Iran's influence in the region, and, over twenty years later, the two countries partnered in the fight against terrorism.

To understand why the United States downplayed liberal reform as a principal interest in its foreign policy with Saudi Arabia, I will also analyze the role of the human rights interest across time. My most surprising finding is that the greatest Saudi democratic reform achieved by a U.S. president happened during the Cold War, despite a bipolar context. I assert that shared security interests allowed for this unique success to occur. Moreover, I argue that although the United States largely attempted to export liberalism after the end of the Cold War, it did not

⁸ Gary Sick, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to Dual Containment," in *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 239.

pursue democratic reform in Saudi Arabia due to its key security and oil interests. Consequently, American diplomacy after Kennedy produced no significant progress on liberal reform.

Finally, I will conclude my paper by considering the future of U.S.-Saudi relations regarding liberal reform. I will review an argument of Madawi al-Rasheed, a Saudi Arabian professor of social anthropology, to provide a recommendation for preserving this relationship while encouraging human rights reforms. However, I conclude that reform is improbable, as security interests will likely continue to control the relationship.

CHAPTER 1: The North Yemen Civil War & the Six-Day War

When President Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961, the country enjoyed relative energy independence and did not yet rely on foreign production for domestic energy consumption. Net imports of petroleum amounted to less than one-fifth of total U.S. consumption. The United States imported 73 thousand barrels of petroleum per day from Saudi Arabia, which accounted for less than one percent of total U.S. consumption.⁹

Rather than oil, the global expansion of communism shaped U.S. foreign policy during this period. Throughout the 1960s, the U.S.-Saudi relationship focused on mutual security interests, namely the containment of communism. Although total U.S. energy production began to lag behind consumption, the U.S. government was not yet concerned about energy independence, and, subsequently, leaders emphasized American security interests more often than oil interests. Moreover, the beginning of Kennedy's presidency was characterized by the American presidency's largest human rights victory in Saudi Arabia: the abolition of slavery. However, this achievement was largely driven by security concerns, rather than America's purported dedication to the global expansion of human rights.

The Nationalist Coup in Yemen

In 1962, Abdullah as-Sallal and his revolutionary republicans toppled the newly crowned Imam Muhammad al-Badr. As-Sallal declared himself president under the newly created Yemen Arab Republic. This coup produced the North Yemen Civil War, which was fought between the

⁹ "Annual Energy Review," U.S. Energy Information Administration, 27 September 2012, <https://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/annual/showtext.php?t=ptb0507>.

republicans and al-Badr's royalist backers.¹⁰ Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Britain supplied the royalists with military aid, while Egypt and the Soviet Union aided the republicans.¹¹ This surge of regional instability, coupled with communist interference, shaped President Kennedy's foreign policy agenda.

Set against a backdrop of global instability from communist aggression, President Kennedy believed that his predecessor executed a deeply flawed foreign policy strategy. President Eisenhower, in Kennedy's opinion, possessed a narrow-minded perspective on the developing world's rising sense of nationalism and its role in the Cold War.¹² After entering office, Kennedy sought to befriend the emerging states in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, appeal to their anti-colonial efforts, and prevent them from succumbing to Soviet influence.

In the Middle East, Kennedy's administration reached out to Egypt, hoping that Nasser would agree to help the United States oppose communism. This approach outraged Saudi Arabia. Nasser's rise to power during the 1952 Egyptian revolution, his widespread popularity, and his claim to pan-Arab unity under his leadership threatened the legitimacy of the Saudi government.¹³ However, this outrage did not dissuade Kennedy. An ongoing power struggle between Crown Prince Faisal and King Saud concerned the President and contributed to his doubts on the stability of Middle Eastern monarchies. As a result, Kennedy's administration continued to pursue a dialogue with Nasser.

¹⁰ Asher Aviad Orkaby, "The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962-1968," Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2014, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:12269828>.

¹¹ Stanley Sandler, *Ground Warfare: The International Encyclopedia*. Vol.1 (2002): p.977.

¹² "A Short History of the Department of State: Kennedy's Foreign Policy," Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, accessed 03 May 2021, <https://history.state.gov/departmentshistory/short-history/jfk-foreignpolicy>.

¹³ Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 93.

In 1962, Kennedy's "delicate courtship" of Nasser reached a crossroads when the nationalist coup overthrew Yemen's monarchy. Egypt, with military assistance from the Soviet Union, aided the nationalists while Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and Israel backed the Royalists. Although Kennedy pressed on in his attempts to forge a partnership with Nasser, the Soviet Union continued to assist Egypt, and the United States eventually supported the Saudis, although largely remaining on the sidelines.¹⁴

During this conflict, King Faisal ascended to the Saudi throne in 1964. The new king addressed the crisis in Yemen by continuing to support a coalition of states that backed the Royalists and by developing an Islamic alternative to Nasser's Arab nationalism. Faisal traveled to nine Muslim countries in 1965, and shortly thereafter, Iran, Jordan, Tunisia, Sudan, Turkey, Pakistan, and Morocco joined Faisal's Islamic bloc. By providing a religious counterpoint to Nasser's secular nationalism, Faisal hoped to protect the legitimacy of Al Saud's rule and discourage dissent.¹⁵

The North Yemen Civil War and King Faisal's ascension to power brought the United States and Saudi Arabia closer together. Egypt's tenacious partnership with the Soviets throughout the North Yemen Civil War disappointed Kennedy, and King Faisal appeared as a potential partner. According to Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, while Kennedy was "unimpressed" with King Saud, he viewed King Faisal as a "much more impressive figure," who could potentially help counter communist aggression.¹⁶

In late 1962, President Kennedy and King Faisal met for the first time, and during this meeting, Kennedy pursued both national security and human rights interests. The two leaders

¹⁴ Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States Since FDR* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 36.

¹⁵ Bronson, 93.

¹⁶ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 39.

discussed the Yemeni republicans' outcries for the overthrow of all Gulf monarchies and the survival of the House of Saud. Kennedy cautioned Faisal that if the Kingdom did not reform, internal instability reminiscent of Yemen would threaten the monarchy's rule. By protecting the Saudis, Kennedy hoped to encourage regional stability and contain communism. Kennedy also broached unexplored territory: human rights reform in the Kingdom. The President pressured King Faisal to institute reforms in Saudi Arabia. For example, Kennedy implored the King to allow Jews to enter his territory. In Riedel's opinion, Kennedy's forthright support for reform "represented a highly unusual direct American intrusion into Saudi internal affairs, reflecting the president's deep concern about the sustainability of the monarchy."¹⁷

Fortunately for Kennedy, his bluntness did not sever relations with Saudi Arabia. Quite the opposite happened: Faisal agreed with him. As a result of this meeting, King Faisal implemented a ten-point reform program that abolished slavery, modernized the administration, reformed religious and judicial institutions, upgraded labor and social laws, provided free medical care and education, built efficient infrastructure, and established consultative and local councils.¹⁸ Riedel argues that Kennedy's success was due to the King's acknowledgement that revolutionary sentiments were spreading across the region and reforms were necessary for survival. Therefore, the communist threat and Saudi security concerns likely drove the King's decision to institute reform. Riedel claims that this meeting was a "unique example of an American president convincing a Saudi leader to make major internal reforms in the Kingdom, with no president before or since having done so." Consequently, Kennedy was successful in

¹⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 40.

¹⁸ "Faisal ibn Abd al-Aziz al- Saud," Oxford Reference, accessed 03 May 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100443491>.

advancing human rights reform because he linked reform with stability, thereby convincing the Saudis that political reform was the best way to stop the spread of nationalism and dissent.

Kennedy's connection between reform and the monarchy's safety produced the most significant human rights reform in the Kingdom caused by the American presidency. Figure 1.1 was created by the V-Dem Institute's online graphing tool, which synthesizes a variety of data to measure levels of democracy across time. Figure 1.1 demonstrates that shortly after their meeting, the rates of exclusion based on gender, social group, urban-rural location, socio-economic group, and political group decreased, thus indicating a shift towards a higher level of democracy. The most significant changes occurred in the rates of exclusion by socio-economic group and urban-rural location, which decreased substantially due to Faisal's ten-point reform program.

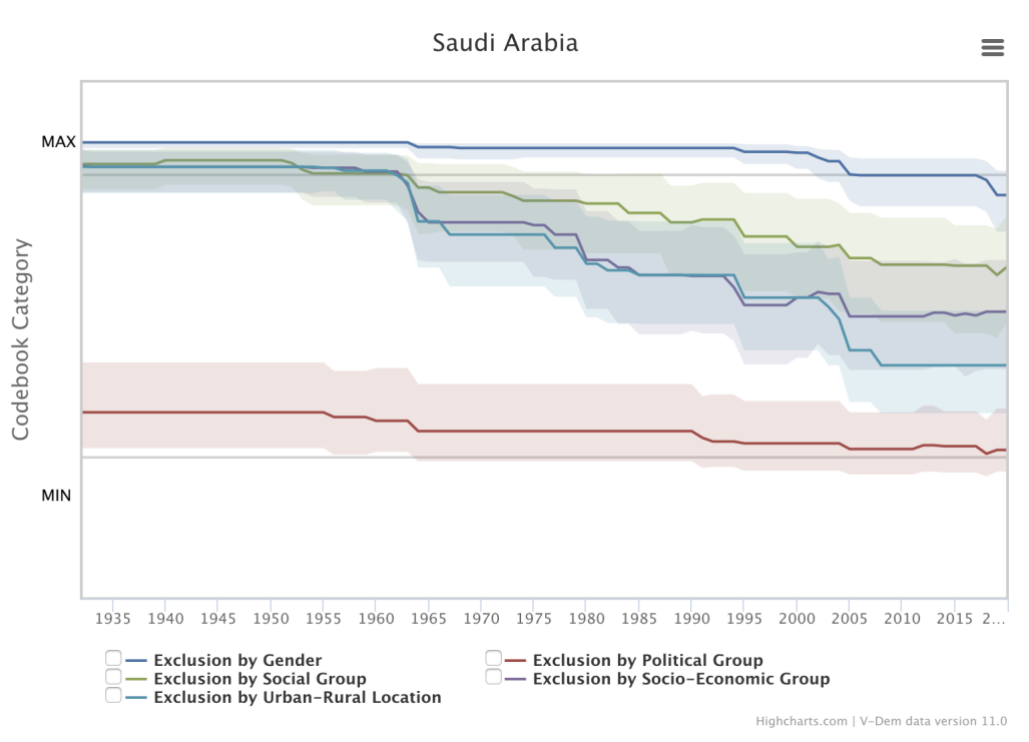


Figure 1.1

Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>

During this meeting, Kennedy also pledged American support for Saudi Arabia. While encouraging the King to institute reforms, he assured him that “the United States would consider its pledge of general support for the Kingdom to apply to threats activated from without and from within.” Indeed, after continuous Egyptian air attacks on Saudi towns, the U.S. sent fighter jets to Saudi Arabia during Operation Hard Surface. The Saudis benefited greatly from American protection, receiving eight F100D jet fighters, six KB-50 air-to-air refueling tankers, and over 500 U.S. military personnel.¹⁹ This commitment to Saudi survival symbolized a notable expansion in the security relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia.²⁰

Throughout the Yemen conflict, Nasser remained at the center of King Faisal’s security agenda. Egypt’s air attacks and internal dissent concerned Faisal. The king repeatedly grounded the Royal Saudi Air Force because its pilots routinely defected with their jets to Egypt. There were also widespread rumors of coup plots. These events posed an existential threat to King Faisal, who was still consolidating power after the overthrow of his brother, King Saud.²¹

Although Kennedy’s sights were initially focused on Nasser, Soviet involvement in the Yemeni Civil War caused Kennedy to pivot toward Saudi Arabia as they shared similar concerns regarding the U.S.S.R. Consequently, rather than oil and human rights, communism and security brought the two countries closer together, and as a result, they forged a security partnership that would overcome significant tensions and strengthen in the coming decades.

¹⁹ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 43.

²⁰ Joseph A. Kechichian, *Faysal: Saudi Arabia’s King for All Seasons* (University of Florida Press, 2008), p. 80.

²¹ Bruce Riedel, “How the 1967 War dramatically re-oriented Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy,” Brookings, 30 May 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/05/30/how-the-1967-war-dramatically-re-oriented-saudi-arabias-foreign-policy/>.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War

The U.S.-Saudi strategic relationship, however, was threatened in 1967 during the Arab-Israeli War, as both countries developed differing security interests. Within six days, Israel swiftly crushed the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian militaries, and seized significant swaths of land: the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The results of this war produced a myriad of important consequences, and for this thesis, I will draw attention to two outcomes that transformed U.S.-Saudi relations: the shift in Saudi Arabia's focus from Egypt to Israel and the rise of the U.S.-Israeli strategic alliance. I argue that despite the disagreement on the issue of Israel-Palestine, security concerns regarding communism continued to drive the U.S.-Saudi partnership.

Before 1967, the House of Saud viewed Nasser and his promulgation of Pan-Arabism as the foremost security threat. However, the Egyptian army's defeat signified the failure of Pan-Arabism. Nasser's decline and Israel's victory shifted Saudi concerns to Israel. Dr. Adeed Dawisha, a distinguished professor of political science at Miami University, asserts, "The humiliating defeat of [Nasser] and his brand of revolutionary nationalism at the hand of the Israelis in June 1967 was, in a sense, the catalyst for freeing the Saudis from Egypt's psychological and ideological blockade. And, paradoxically, it was also the events of June 1967 which thrust Saudi Arabia into the Arab-Israeli quagmire."²² Indeed, after the Six-Day War, Faisal and Nasser reconciled at the Arab summit in Khartoum. This resolution marked the end of the countries' battle for dominance in the region; as a result, Egypt retreated from Yemen and the Saudis concluded their assistance to the royalists. The North Yemen Civil War resulted in the

²² Adeed Dawisha, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Ups and Downs of Pragmatic Moderation," *International Journal* 38, no. 4 (1983): 675, accessed 19 April 2021, doi:10.2307/40202206.

formation of a republican government, which incorporated members from the royalist faction (except for those from the royal family).

After the 1967 war, the Arab world viewed Israel's aggression as unjust, and King Faisal was focused on regaining Arab control of East Jerusalem. Faisal's top priority was now championing the Palestinian cause, which he executed via fundraising and diplomacy. Faisal instructed his brother, Prince Salman, to lead a committee dedicated to raising funds to back Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation. This committee's creation marked the first time that Saudi Arabia used private financing to support an Islamic cause. Saudi Arabia also became a prominent supporter of Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization. This pivot strained U.S.-Saudi relations. Faisal was frustrated by the United States' reaction to the Six-Day War.²³ On the war's second day, the King supported an oil embargo against the United States and the United Kingdom. While the Arab oil weapon decimated Britain's economy and led to their exit from the Gulf, it proved ineffective in punishing the United States because domestic oil production rendered the country largely self-sufficient.²⁴ Moreover, to Faisal's chagrin, President Johnson vocally opposed any permanent change in the Israeli-occupied territories' legal and political status. Johnson also argued that Arab territory should only be returned as part of a broader peace agreement that recognized Israel's right to exist.²⁵ As a result, Saudi relations with the Johnson administration deteriorated, and this tension persisted into the Nixon era.²⁶

Israeli success in the Six-Day War engendered a strategic alliance with the United States. Before the war, this relationship did not exist. According to Michael B. Oren, former Israeli

²³ Riedel, "How the 1967 War dramatically re-oriented Saudi Arabia's foreign policy."

²⁴ Riedel, "How the 1967 War dramatically re-oriented Saudi Arabia's foreign policy."

²⁵ "The Six Day War: U.S. State Department Summary of the War," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed 21 April 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/u-s-state-department-summary-of-the-six-day-war>.

²⁶ Riedel, "How the 1967 War dramatically re-oriented Saudi Arabia's foreign policy."

ambassador to Washington, “Only after the ceasefire—on the seventh day, as it were—did American policymakers realize that Israel was a military powerhouse that had just defeated several Soviet-backed armies and should therefore be allied with the United States. Subsequent decades gave rise to one of the deepest and multifaceted defense relationships that the U.S. had maintained with any foreign nation in the post-World War II period.”²⁷ One year after Israel’s victory, President Johnson approved the sale of Phantom aircraft to Israel, which established the precedent for U.S. support for Israel’s protection from neighboring Arab states.²⁸ As this thesis will demonstrate, American support for Israel proved to be a nagging issue that, at times, strained U.S.-Saudi relations.

Conclusion

Security concerns, rather than oil, dominated U.S.-Saudi relations during the 1960s. After entering office, President Kennedy initially hoped to befriend Nasser and use his influence over the region to counter communist aggression. Nasser, however, was disinterested in a partnership with America, and he accepted Soviet help during the North Yemen Civil War. As a result of Nasser’s alignment with the U.S.S.R, the United States and Saudi Arabia grew closer. Kennedy pledged American support for the House of Saud’s survival, and after he linked liberal policies to the monarchy’s safety, King Faisal instituted reforms, such as the abolishment of slavery. Kennedy’s success in encouraging the abolition of slavery remains the American presidency’s largest human rights victory in Saudi Arabia.

²⁷ Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2003), xiv.

²⁸ Jeremy Sharp, “CRS Report for Congress: U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel,” updated 25 April 2007, 2, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20070425_RL33222_ee97f8a100b2abd96b43a0f4d0cc6848e74efb26.pdf.

Kennedy's human rights achievement stands in opposition to a popular international theory. According to international relations scholar John J. Mearsheimer, states are more likely to spread their ideals in a unipolar context, "which is defined as the presence of only one great power in the system, thus rendering great power security competition impossible." However, contrary to Mearsheimer's argument, the greatest democratic reform achieved by a U.S. president in the Kingdom happened during the Cold War (a bipolar context). President Kennedy spurred tremendous change in the Kingdom after he convinced King Saud to institute a ten-point reform program in the name of Saudi security, which featured the establishment of the basic law, the abolition of slavery, and the creation of a judicial council.

However, Kennedy's partnership with King Faisal was quickly threatened. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War altered power relationships in the Middle East and caused the United States to strengthen its ties to Israel. In contrast, King Faisal, who was no longer threatened by Egypt, picked up the mantle of defending Palestine. Simultaneously, Israel's swift and decisive victory caused the United States to rethink its Middle East strategy, and as a result, the U.S. government pursued a strong defense relationship with Israel. Since then, American and Saudi diverging beliefs on the Israel-Palestine issue caused a significant strain in relations that varied in intensity across time.

CHAPTER 2: The Oil Shock

The 1970s featured two pivotal events in the U.S.-Saudi relationship: the 1973 oil embargo and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Throughout this decade, the United States began rapidly importing more crude oil. Total U.S. energy production could no longer meet the demands of consumers, and America was no longer invulnerable to oil supply disruptions. The domestic crisis that ensued gave rise to the American focus on energy independence, a goal that would dominate the political debate for decades. Thus, the U.S.-Saudi relationship was defined largely by oil during most of this decade.

The Rise of American Twin Pillar Strategy

After entering office in 1969, President Nixon sought to redefine American security interests due to the Vietnam War and the public's aversion to further involvement in foreign conflicts. The Nixon Doctrine responded to these pressures by urging American allies to bear greater responsibility for defense against global communist aggression. In the Gulf, the Nixon administration depended on Iran and Saudi Arabia for security cooperation—a strategy henceforth known as the “Twin Pillar” policy.²⁹

However, the United States did not depend on Iran and Saudi Arabia equally. From the US's perspective, Iran was the more consequential ally due to its size, military, and shared borders with the U.S.S.R. and the Persian Gulf. Iran's leader, Mohammad Reza Shah, was also willing to work openly alongside the United States on security matters.³⁰ For example, throughout the early seventies, the Nixon administration worked with the Iranians to counter the

²⁹ Sick, 238.

³⁰ Sick, 238

Soviet-Iraqi threat.³¹ The Shah also agreed to counter any oil price hikes introduced by OPEC, and in return, the United States supported the Iranian government with advisors and sophisticated, albeit non-nuclear, military technology. As a result, many Iranians viewed the Shah as an American puppet, which provided fertile grounds for future anti-government protests.³²

The 1973 Oil Crisis

Even with the Nixon Administration's retooling of its relationships in the region, it could not predict the future, and that future arrived on October 6, 1973 when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel to reclaim territories lost during the 1967 War. The Israeli army faced massive casualties and equipment loss, particularly on the Egyptian front. By the fourth day of fighting, Israel lost 49 airplanes (including 14 Phantoms) and 500 tanks. The initial lack of success raised doubts concerning Israel's likelihood of survival, and it appeared that Israel would not become a decisive military power in the region.

Nixon might have ignored the war had it only involved Middle Eastern powers, but in early October of 1973, the Soviets inserted themselves into the conflict and delivered a massive airlift and sealift of supplies.³³ This action concerned President Nixon; he told his foreign policy team, "We can't allow a Soviet-supported operation to succeed against an American-supported operation. If it does, our credibility everywhere is severely shaken."³⁴ To prevent the Soviets

³¹ Bryan R. Gibson, "The Secret Origins of the U.S.-Kurdish Relationship Explains Today's Disaster," *Foreign Policy*, 14 October 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/14/us-kurdish-relationship-history-syria-turkey-betrayal-kissinger/>.

³² Sick, 238-239.

³³ John W. Finney, "Soviet Could Spur Move to Aid Israel," *New York Times*, 11 October 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/10/11/archives/soviet-could-spur-move-to-aid-israel-us-officials-believe-moscow-is.html>.

³⁴ Memcon, October 17, 1973, WSAG Meeting: Middle East, 10/17/73 (1 of 2), Box H-092, WSAG Meetings, RNL.

from “upsetting the military balance in the Middle East,”³⁵ Nixon ordered the launch of Operation Nickel Grass on October 9th. This operation included an extensive American airlift to provide necessary military equipment to the Israelis. For example, by the end of the war, Israel received 8,755 tons of material from the U.S.³⁶

Operation Nickel Grass had immediate and extensive effects on America’s relationships with all Muslim powers in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia. Arab states were outraged by the massive U.S. airlift, and on October 17th, Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil producers declared “a five percent cut in oil production and exports to punish the United States for the airlift, [and they promised] that every thirty days that went by without a change in American policy would produce another five percent cut. The Saudis cut production ten percent immediately.”³⁷

This embargo did not surprise the United States, although its consequences shaped decades of future domestic and foreign policy. According to a *New York Times* article published on October 16th, three days before the embargo’s announcement, Washington officials were aware that the airlift might evoke outraged responses in Arab countries toward American interests, including oil.³⁸ Indeed, months earlier, King Faisal publicly linked American policy on Israel to the Arab oil weapon. Faisal declared that “Saudi Arabia would use its oil as a political

³⁵ Bernard Gwertzman, "Transports Land: Extra American Help Reported To Include Additional F-4's Provides No Details Aware Of Possible Response U.S. Announces It Is Resupplying Israel Arms To Offset Soviet Airlift To Arabs Seeks To Avoid Clash Israeli Ship Loads U.S. Arms," *New York Times*, 16 October 1973, <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/historical-newspapers/transports-land/docview/119617497/se-2?accountid=7118>.

³⁶ Adam Wambold, “Operation Nickle Grass: Turning Point of the Yom Kippur War,” Richard Nixon Foundation, 08 October 2014, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2014/10/operation-nickel-grass-turning-point-yom-kippur-war/>.

³⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 51.

³⁸ Bernard Gwertzman, "Transports Land: Extra American Help Reported.”

weapon if the United States continued to support Israel's policy of aggression against the Arab world."³⁹

The embargo's production cuts created a massive nationwide gas shortage, and the domestic situation was exacerbated by hefty price controls and federal regulations.⁴⁰ Long gas lines plagued Americans desperate to fill up their tanks. Gas stations served regular customers by appointment only or shut down, and some towns shut off electricity and even banned Christmas lights.⁴¹ Panic was common among the American public, and many engaged in oil panic buying. A service station leader remarked, "A year ago, a service-station attendant would say: 'Shall I fill her up?' The driver would say, 'No, give \$2 worth.' Now, the customer says: 'Fill her up.' The attendant says, 'No, \$2 worth."⁴² Consequently, this crisis rooted the importance of energy independence in the American psyche.

However, while citizens paid the price of the embargo, the United States continued its diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. Both sides understood each other's importance, and Saudi Arabia, not wanting to risk this special relationship, secretly provided the U.S. military with oil during the embargo.⁴³ Throughout the crisis, U.S. and Saudi leaders engaged in consistent communication. Nixon, embroiled in political conflict due to Watergate, pleaded with Saudi Arabia to end the embargo to save his presidency. To curry favor, Nixon attempted to persuade King Faisal that he was the only American leader willing to resist pro-Israeli influence

³⁹ Kechchian, 138.

⁴⁰ Victor McFarland, *Oil Powers: A History of the U.S.-Saudi Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 137.

⁴¹ Kamelia Angelova and Rob Wile, "America Out of Gas: Unreal Images from the 1973 Oil Crisis," *Business Insider*, 03 October 2013, <https://www.businessinsider.com/1973-oil-crisis-photos-2013-10#this-station-in-potlatch-washington-was-turned-into-a-religious-meeting-hall-1>.

⁴² Peter Khiss. "Dealers See 'Panic Buying' in Long Lines for Gasoline: Dealers Attribute Long Lines at Gas Stations to 'Panic Buying'," *New York Times*, 04 January 1974, <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/historical-newspapers/dealers-see-panic-buying-long-lines-gasoline/docview/120184368/se-2?accountid=7118>.

⁴³ McFarland, 150.

in Congress. Nixon argued that if he was impeached, the Arabs would lose their opportunity to make a suitable peace agreement. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger worked to meet Saudi demands. He traveled between Middle Eastern countries on short flights, a strategy deemed “shuttle diplomacy,” as he attempted to solve the crisis. His diplomatic efforts were largely successful, although they were unable to meet all Arab demands, such as complete Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Although Syria and Libya wanted the embargo to proceed, the Arab oil leaders voted to end the embargo in March of 1974.⁴⁴

While American oil consumers suffered, the Saudi monarchy benefitted. The embargo allowed OPEC to almost quadruple the price of oil to \$11.65 by the year’s end.⁴⁵ Due to the embargo, Saudi Arabia’s economy was booming, and although the Kingdom profited at the expense of American oil consumers, this price increase encouraged the U.S.-Saudi alliance. Historian Victor McFarland argues that the Saudis’ new wealth created a more reciprocal economic relationship with the United States as Saudi investment began flowing into American companies, and vice versa. McFarland claims, “Now that the kingdom was much wealthier, it had more to offer the United States as an investor, an export market, and a source of funds for anti-communist causes around the world.”⁴⁶ This wealth led to the development of the U.S.-Saudi Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation--an effort that sent three hundred U.S. consultants to the kingdom to advise Saudi bureaucrats and oversee economic development; the annual budget of these development projects was up to \$200 million.⁴⁷

Although the 1973 oil shock strained U.S.-Saudi relations, the alliance persisted. Saudi Arabia secretly provided the U.S. military with oil during the embargo, and the kingdom’s new

⁴⁴ McFarland, 149.

⁴⁵ McFarland, 137.

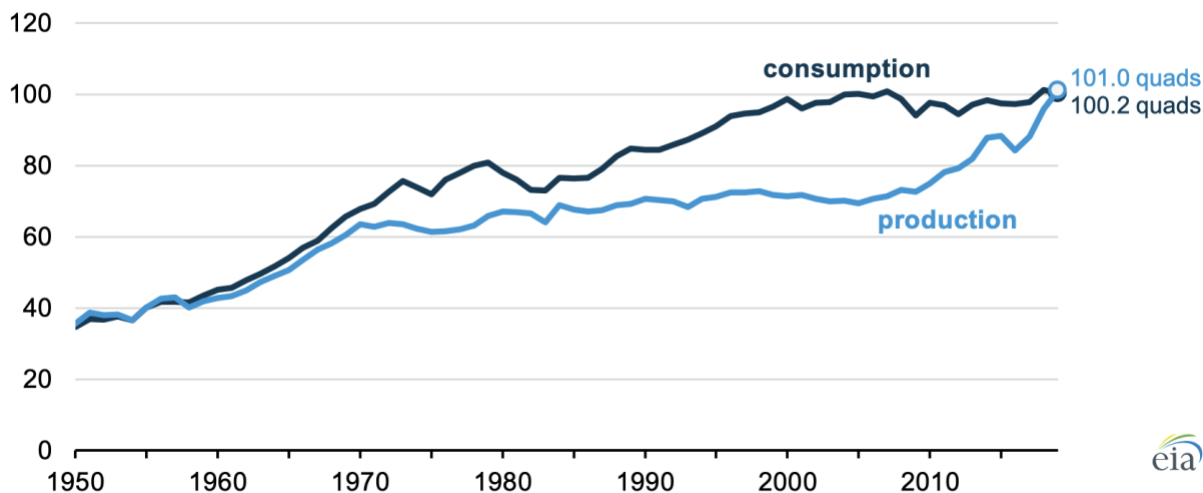
⁴⁶ McFarland, 139.

⁴⁷ McFarland, 161.

wealth provided opportunities to the United States for investment, exports, and anticommunist funding. During this period, U.S. total energy production began to lag behind its consumption (figure 2.1), and its imports of foreign oil dramatically increased (figure 2.2). Saudi leadership claimed that they supported lower oil prices during OPEC meetings, and this repeated assertion convinced American leaders that the kingdom was a dependable ally in moderating extremism within OPEC.⁴⁸ By 1975, the United States viewed Saudi Arabia as a critical swing producer that could increase or decrease oil production at whim.⁴⁹ Although Iran remained the focus of twin pillar diplomacy due to its strategic capabilities, Saudi Arabia increased in importance as an ally by convincing the U.S. government that it was an important and reliable partner in keeping oil prices low.⁵⁰ Although the embargo ended and the crisis abated, the United States was no longer invulnerable to the oil weapon, and the debate on energy independence ignited.

U.S. total energy production and consumption (1950-2019)

quadrillion British thermal units (quads)



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Monthly Energy Review*

Figure 2.1

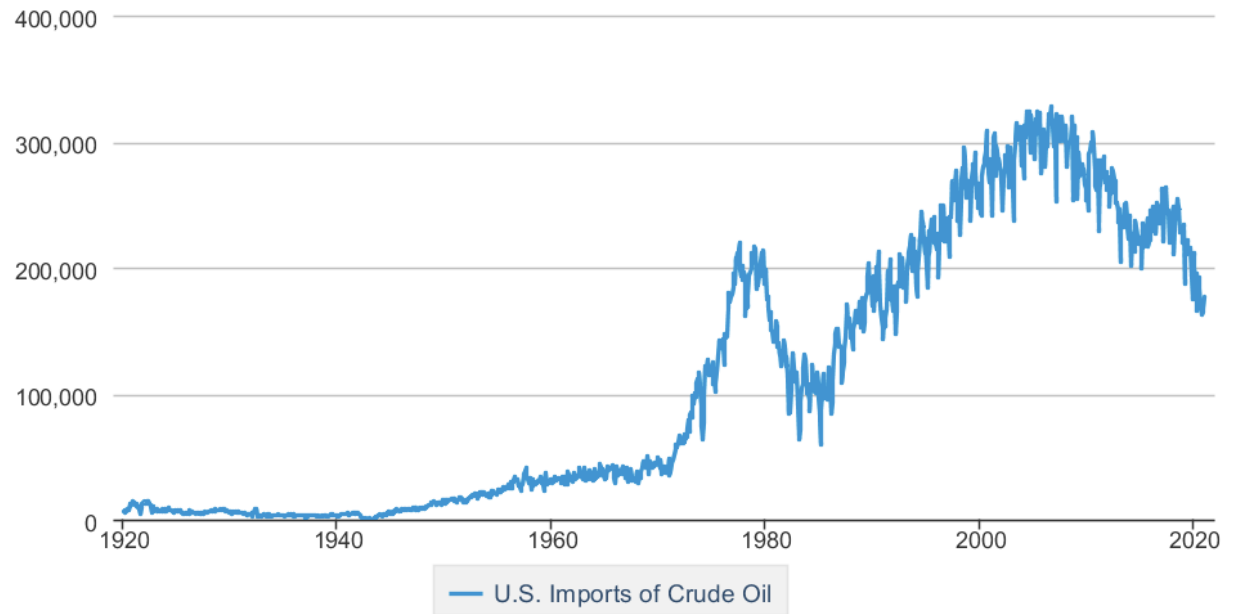
⁴⁸ McFarland, 139-140.

⁴⁹ McFarland, 183.

⁵⁰ McFarland, 140.

U.S. Imports of Crude Oil

Thousand Barrels



 Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

Figure 2.2

CHAPTER 3: The Iranian Revolution

One year after President Carter was inaugurated, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi fled Iran after a year of widespread protests. According to the Associated Press, on that day “[j]ubilant Iranians danced in the streets of Tehran Tuesday, chanting ‘The Shah is gone’ as word spread swiftly through the capital that the monarch had left the country.”⁵¹ The Shah’s transgressions included: aggressive modernization, rampant corruption, suppression of political dissent, imprisonment and torture of political enemies, a harsh crackdown on the communist Tudeh Party, and allyship with the United States and the United Kingdom. Iranians were also frustrated by economic inequalities, the 1953 Iranian coup d’état, and Western imperialism. As a result, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in February of 1979 and founded the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁵² This event threatened the Saudi monarchy, upended the existing U.S. security strategy, and transformed the surrounding region. Moreover, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan threatened American oil interests and Saudi security. While Carter claimed he would discontinue the practice of disregarding American allies’ human rights abuses,⁵³ security and oil interests, rather than human rights, dominated the U.S.-Saudi relationship after 1979.

Exporting the Revolution

Not only did Iran revolutionize its own state, but it also attempted to export its revolution into nearby states, which terrified monarchies like Saudi Arabia. A CIA intelligence assessment

⁵¹ “AP Was There: Shah Leaves Iran as 1979 Revolution Looms,” Associated Press, 16 January 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/343d87fdb960424e9ec0f4a90dc64fcb>.

⁵² Afary, J. "Iranian Revolution," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 20 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution>.

⁵³ “Carter’s Foreign Policy,” U.S. Department of State, accessed 03 May 2021, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/carter>.

documented Iran's attempts to export the revolution. The Iranian leadership was "[committed] to the liberation of oppressed peoples throughout the Muslim world." According to the CIA, Khomeini stated:

"I hope that [Iran] will become a model for all the meek and Muslim nations in the world and that this century will become the century for smashing great idols...O zealous Muslims in various countries of the world, wake from your sleep of neglect and liberate Islam and the Islamic countries from the clutches of the colonialists and those subservient to them."⁵⁴

Khomeini's message targeted the minority Shia population in Saudi Arabia, and his words posed a direct threat to the Saudi monarchy. Iranian radio also broadcasted similar pro-Shia messages into Saudi Arabia and promoted anti-government ideas and conflicts, thereby directly threatening Al Saud's core interest: survival.⁵⁵

The combination of Iranian attempts to export the revolution and the location of the Kingdom's Shia population was concerning. The Eastern Province housed both the Shi'a and oil fields. Although the Shi'a amounted to only two percent of the total population, they accounted for one-quarter of the Eastern Province's population. Compared to Sunnis, Saudi Shi'as occupied "inferior economic and social positions," owned less land, were not as involved in business, and were "willing to perform the hard manual labor so distasteful to most Saudis" (including work on the oil fields—Shias constituted around one quarter to one-third of the Saudi Arab oil workforce).⁵⁶ The Shias experienced harsh oppressive policies by the Saudi government,⁵⁷ were

⁵⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Strategic Research, National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia, "Iran: Exporting the Revolution," (Virginia, 1980), 1, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81B00401R000500100001-8.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Bronson, 146.

⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, "Iran: The Shia Revolution and Iran's Neighbors," General CIA Records (Virginia, 1979), 1, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81B00401R000500100031-5.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Bronson, 146-147.

not considered loyal citizens, and were disappointed by the monarchy's unfulfilled promises regarding modernization.⁵⁸ The numerous reasons for discontent raised the likelihood of unrest and a revolution similar to Iran's; as a result, the Saudi government followed this security threat closely.⁵⁹

The Saudi monarchy believed that if the revolution traveled across the Persian Gulf and the Shi'a revolted, oil field security would be jeopardized, and Al Saud rule would be endangered. After all, during the two years preceding the Revolution, Iranian empowerment of the Shia caused labor unrest and damage to oil infrastructure.⁶⁰ A recently declassified State Department document revealed the early rise of this concern. In a message from the American Embassy in Jeddah to the Secretary of State, the author reports, "During [the] course of my [conversation] with [*sic*] Prince Saud on January 1, 1979, he said Saudi Arabia was very concerned about events in Iran. SAG fears that if Shah goes, all the symbols of unity in the country will disappear. [The] army will disintegrate and [the] country will collapse into tribalism. This would produce chaotic [conditions] which will not be good for the area."⁶¹ The meaning of "the country" is unclear. "The country" could refer to either Iran or Saudi Arabia. Although the Iranian Revolution certainly proved fatal to the Shah's rule, it also threatened Saudi rule by emboldening the Saudi Shia minority and encouraging a collapse into tribalism.

This State Department message was a harbinger of events to come. Pro-Iranian Revolution leaflets circulated among Saudi Shia, and in November of 1979, the Shia revolted. Outraged at government oppression and inspired by nearby revolutions, the Shia defied the

⁵⁸ Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on The Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, And The Shia Uprising Of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 214, doi:10.1017/S0020743806412320.

⁵⁹ <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81B00401R000500100031-5.pdf>

⁶⁰ Bronson 146-147

⁶¹ "Saudi View of Iran (C - Entire Contents) F-2009-09811," U.S. Department of State, Freedom of Information Act, <https://foia.state.gov/Search/Results.aspx?searchText=Saudi%20Arabia&beginDate=19781231&endDate=19791231&publishedBeginDate=&publishedEndDate=&caseNumber=>.

monarchy's order and publicly celebrated 'Ashura (the Shia holy day that honors the martyrdom of Imam Hussein).⁶² This event was met by a harsh government crackdown, which resulted in seven days of gruesome violence between thousands of outraged Shias and government security forces.⁶³ Dr. Joseph Kostiner emphasizes the role of community in this revolt; he argues that although the Saudi Shia were motivated by Khomeini's revolution, the seven-day protest "was prompted not so much by Iranian manipulation as by a sense of communal solidarity and real grievances, and was genuinely populist in character."⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the Saudi government quelled protests and regained control. The Shia uprising, coupled with the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, highlighted the importance of minority views, and it caused Al Saud to become increasingly conservative and adopt more rigid religious policies.⁶⁵

The Iranian Revolution also caused Al Saud to doubt the United States' dedication to its allies. The example of a popular revolution overthrowing a strong regime that had superpower support was extremely disturbing to the Saudi monarchy.⁶⁶ As a symbolic show of support, the United States sent unarmed F-15 fighters to Saudi Arabia for only five days.⁶⁷ However, a *New York Times* article reported that the Saudis were [irritated] by this action. Although the United States was attempting to satisfy Saudi security concerns, American leaders misunderstood Saudi wishes due to cultural differences.⁶⁸ Consequently, the Saudi monarchy signed an internal

⁶² F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47.

⁶³ Jones, 213.

⁶⁴ Joseph Kostiner, "Shia Unrest in the Gulf," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987), 177.

⁶⁵ Jones, 229.

⁶⁶ Gause 47

⁶⁷ Charles Moher, "F-15 Fly-In to Saudi Arabia Met Host of Problems," *New York Times*, 05 March 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/03/05/archives/f15-flyin-to-saudi-arabia-met-host-of-problems-estimated-at-16.html/>

⁶⁸ Flora Lewis, "U.S.-Saudi Relations: A Surprising Communications Gap: News Analysis Communications Gap Goes Deeper Change in Saudi Policy is Denied Impact of Iranian Events on Saudis Basic Cultural Differences," *New York Times*, 27 February 1979, <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest->

security agreement with Iraq (which, at the time, appeared as a potential protector against Iran). Saudi Arabia also strengthened ties with Syria, and a common fear and hatred of Egypt united the three countries.⁶⁹

The Second Oil Shock

1979 also marked the second global oil shock in five years. Strikes related to the Iranian Revolution caused total crude oil production to decline and oil prices to rapidly increase. For example, the cost of oil per barrel experienced over a 150% increase from mid-1979 to mid-1980. Lines at American gas stations grew. Purchasers of crude oil panicked: they feared that the crisis would grow and that religious fundamentalism and nationalism would diffuse to other regional oil-producing states.⁷⁰

However, the shortage only amounted to four to five percent of world demand. Why did this loss cause such an astronomical increase in price? Daniel Yergin, a leading authority on energy and world affairs, argues that panic triggered this increase, which was fueled by five factors. First, global oil demand was rising. Second, contractual arrangements within the oil industry were disrupted as a result of the revolution. This disruption caused mobs of new buyers to enter the marketplace, “scrambling to secure the same number of barrels that they had lost.”

Third, the consumer governments were dissimilar in policy. The international energy-security system was still in development, and any governmental action to solve domestic oil crises would be interpreted as major international policy. This lack of clarity added further stress

com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/historical-newspapers/u-s-saudi-relations-surprising-communications-gap/docview/120931103/se-2?accountid=7118.

⁶⁹ Gause, 50.

⁷⁰ Samantha Gross, “What Iran's 1979 Revolution Meant for US and Global Oil Markets,” Brookings, 05 March 2019, www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/05/what-irans-1979-revolution-meant-for-us-and-global-oil-markets/.

and tension to the marketplace. Fourth, the chaos provided oil exporters with the opportunity to gain additional revenues by increasing prices and manipulating supplies. Finally, a volatile combination of emotions, such as uncertainty, anxiety, confusion, fear, and pessimism, led to irrational decision-making that exacerbated the crisis.⁷¹

The Carter administration, too, was driven by growing fears of a future of global energy scarcity.⁷² In an address to the nation, now commonly known as the “Malaise Speech,” President Carter lamented:

“In little more than two decades we've gone from a position of energy independence to one in which almost half the oil we use comes from foreign countries, at prices that are going through the roof. Our excessive dependence on OPEC has already taken a tremendous toll on our economy and our people...This intolerable dependence on foreign oil threatens our economic independence and the very security of our Nation.”⁷³

These words indicate the extent of the U.S. transition from energy independence to dependence, and this shift produced enormous changes in American foreign policy toward the Middle East. Although Carter attempted to reform domestic energy policy, his efforts failed and American dependence on foreign oil continued. His administration resorted to engaging in endless negotiations with Saudi Arabia, begging them to keep oil prices down as each OPEC price increase yielded greater rates of inflation and unemployment.⁷⁴

The Saudis continued their role as a key swing producer. Although the Kingdom initially increased production to offset Iranian losses and continued to urge price moderation, Saudi

⁷¹ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 667-8.

⁷² McFarland, 193

⁷³ Jimmy Carter, Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals, "The Malaise Speech," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/249458>.

⁷⁴ McFarland, 193

leaders reduced production after the Shah's exile. This amounted to a reduction of 1 thousand barrels of oil per day, and shortly thereafter, the OPEC official price system collapsed.⁷⁵

Potential reasons for cutting production include limits in capabilities, increases in Iranian production, and Saudi resentment towards the United States for the failure to save the Shah.

Yergin responds, "Whatever the reason, the blunt fact was that only Saudi Arabia had the kind of spare capacity that the United States once had, the sort that could, if brought into production, quell the panic."⁷⁶

The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Even though the Iranian revolution created new dilemmas for the U.S.-Saudi relationship regarding energy, events occurring later that year would cement a closer tie in the security realm: the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. On December 24, 1979, a massive number of Soviet troops were airlifted into Kabul to overthrow the Marxist government and replace it with one controlled by the Soviet government.

This attack surprised President Carter and was an immediate concern for American oil interests in the region. Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security advisor, warned that Moscow's ambitions might grow due to Iranian and Pakistani instability. The Carter administration feared that the Soviets might make a military push into the Arabian and Oman Gulfs, thereby threatening American oil interests. "As he wrote in his diary, the president and his team decided to regard the Soviet invasion as 'a radical departure from the reticence which the Soviets had

⁷⁵ Gause, 52.

⁷⁶ Yergin, 672.

shown for the last ten years since they overthrew the government of Czechoslovakia' and 'to make this action by the Soviets as politically costly as possible.'⁷⁷

The Saudis were also deeply alarmed by the Soviet's actions, and although tension remained due to Camp David and Iran, this shared threat and overlapping security interests brought the two powers closer together. Carter imposed economic sanctions on Russia and authorized a covert CIA operation to provide Pakistan's mujahedin with lethal weapons to fight the Soviets. The Saudis, also alarmed by the Soviet threat, provided funds to arm and train Afghan rebels on Pakistani soil. Then, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence would help the rebels carry out attacks inside Afghanistan against the Soviet forces. By uniting the United States and Saudi Arabia against a common enemy, the Soviet Union inadvertently strengthened American influence in the Gulf, and although tensions remained on the topic of Israel and oil prices, this event proved the ability of the United States and Saudi Arabia to work together to achieve shared security interests.

American Strategy Upended

The Iranian Revolution, the second oil crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan marked the end of twin pillar diplomacy and demanded that the United States develop a new Gulf strategy. After all, Khomeini's rise to power was predicated, in part, on Iranian resentment toward the Shah's pro-Western behavior. Consider a famous painting by Hasan Isma'ilzadah, which depicts the story of the Iranian Revolution (figure 3.1). The Shah is seen hurrying past a noose, with a red devil and a black dog (another symbol of evil) on either side. The Shah's wickedness is further amplified by the cash and coins tumbling out of his American and British

⁷⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 75.

stamped luggage. Khomeini, in contrast, floats ethereally above with a Quran in his hand, thus demonstrating his superiority as a ruler who rises above anti-Islamic behavior and will not capitulate to Western influence. This anti-Western sentiment is also portrayed in an Iranian poster that depicts Khomeini breaking through an American flag, thereby freeing the Iranian people from Western imperialism (figure 3.2). According to Gary Sick, an American academic and analyst of Middle East affairs, this intense hatred of America and the subsequent fall of the Shah left the United States “strategically naked in the Persian Gulf, with no safety net.”⁷⁸

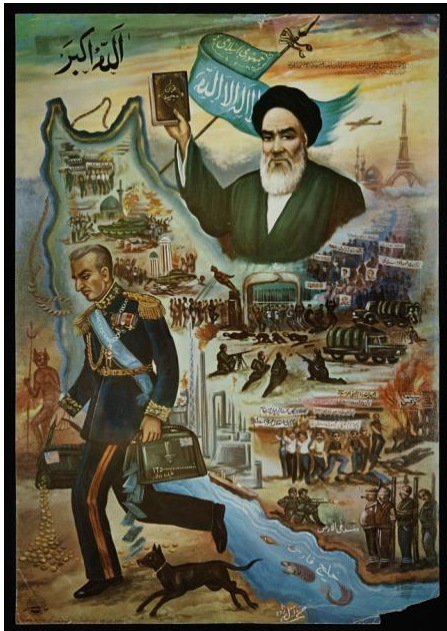


Figure 3.1: The Shah's Exile and Khomeini's Return

1979
Hasan Isma'ilzadah, Iranian, b. 1922

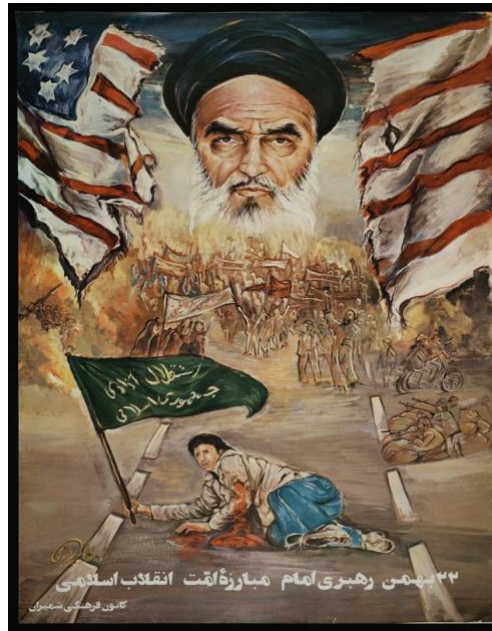


Figure 3.2: Wounded Protestor under Khomeini Breaking Through US Flag

c. 1980

America was not entirely “naked” in the Middle East (the partnership with Israel remained strong). Nevertheless, with Iran now hostile and Iraq allied with the Soviets, Saudi Arabia was effectively the only option left to the Americans seeking a partner in the region.

⁷⁸ Sick, 239.

However, there were significant limitations on relying on Saudi Arabia. Saudi-American relations were tense due to the Arab-Israeli debate and oil. Saudi Arabia, furthermore, had a smaller population than Iran, had fewer military capabilities, and was hesitant to intervene forcefully in regional politics. Consequently, U.S. strategists believed the monarchy would not assume the Shah's role as the regional policeman.

President Carter responded with the Carter Doctrine. In his State of the Union address in 1980, Carter announced that the United States would use military force to protect its interests in the Persian Gulf. This proclamation departed from the United States' previous role of giving only indirect or sporadic military support. To achieve this plan, the military created the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), which featured several existing armed service units and was the predecessor to the Central Command. A new joint command structure would coordinate these units, while the United States developed its airlift and sealift capabilities to rapidly deploy those units when necessary. The RDJTF would later be taken over by the United States Central Command (CENTCOM).

Saudi Arabia was hesitant to accept the Carter Doctrine. The Shah's fall from power demonstrated the danger of appearing allied with the West. The House of Saud also did not want to provoke Iran or Iraq, which rejected the new strategy, and the Saudis feared the reactions of other Arab states that disapproved of the American-brokered peace between Egypt and Israel. This sentiment was widespread, and Oman was the only Gulf power to formalize a military facilities agreement with the U.S.⁷⁹

If the Saudis were concerned about appearing too close to Americans, those concerns lessened considerably in 1980 when Saudi's neighbor Iraq invaded Iran. Although the monarchy

⁷⁹ Gause, 57.

remained reluctant to appear too friendly to the West, the neighboring war (arguably made possible by the Iranian Revolution) concerned the Saudis, and they requested a display of American support. The U.S. government was eager to strengthen its relationship with its only viable Gulf partner. American Airborne Warning and Control Systems were immediately dispatched to the kingdom. President Reagan extended the show of commitment by offering to sell the Saudis AWACs. The Pro-Israel lobby was outraged by this announcement and fought hard to prevent the sale from happening. Nevertheless, Reagan succeeded, and the sale was pushed through Congress in late 1981. Riyadh, however, continued to refuse formal American military presence on its soil.⁸⁰

Conclusion

1979 was a pivotal year for U.S.-Saudi relations. The Iranian Revolution ended America's most important partnership in the Persian Gulf, and it threatened the House of Saud's rule by encouraging Shia dissent. The United States' inability to save the Shah concerned the Saudi monarchy, and their trust in the U.S. declined. Moreover, the revolution produced the second global oil crisis in ten years, which cemented the importance of U.S. access to Arab oil. Despite tensions caused by Israel-Palestine and the Shah's exile, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia worked together to fund, arm, and train the Afghan insurgents after the Soviet invasion. As a result of this calamitous year, Carter pledged the use of military force to defend American interests in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia withheld support for the Carter Doctrine; however, during the Iran-Iraq War, they turned to the United States for military help. Despite fierce protests, the U.S. government supplied and sold AWACs to the Saudis. Although Carter attempted to bring human

⁸⁰ Gause, 69.

rights to the forefront of his foreign policy agenda, security and oil interests dominated the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and no significant human rights progress was made in the kingdom during this time.

CHAPTER 4: The 1991 Gulf War

Security and oil interests defined the U.S.-Saudi relationship during the pivotal 1991 Gulf War, and Carter's unprecedented commitment to defending American interests in the Gulf was realized after 120,000 Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. Although President Bush legitimized the war in terms of good versus evil, the United States ignored the Kingdom's many documented human rights abuses. The discrepancy between Bush's moral appeals and his inaction on Saudi Arabia's human rights violations demonstrates that oil and security, rather than human rights, shaped the U.S.-Saudi relationship during this period. However, as I will demonstrate, progress was nonetheless achieved in the Kingdom. I argue that the 1991 Gulf War yielded greater international attention to Saudi Arabia, which placed new pressure on the monarchy to institute liberal reforms.

Saddam Hussein

The rise of Saddam Hussein in 1979 transformed U.S.-Saudi relations, and his name would quickly become synonymous with American intervention in the Middle East. The President of Iraq from 1979 to 2003, Saddam precipitated the Iraqi Ba'ath Party's rise to power, whose ideology consisted of Arab socialism and nationalism. A repressive dictator, he was famous for squashing Shia and Kurdish independence movements and for murdering an estimated 250,000 Iraqis.⁸¹

Saddam's aggression also extended to his foreign policy. Shortly after becoming president, Saddam ordered the invasion of Iran to gain dominance in the Persian Gulf and to

⁸¹ "War in Iraq: Not a Humanitarian Intervention," *Human Rights Watch*, 25 January 2004, retrieved 12 April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2004/01/25/war-iraq-not-humanitarian-intervention>.

prevent Khomeini from exporting the Shia revolution. Although Saddam promised a swift and decisive victory, the war dragged on for eight years and ended in an impasse in 1988.

Nevertheless, the war emboldened Saddam, although Iraq ended the war in a tremendous amount of debt to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, owing approximately \$37 billion.⁸² Nevertheless, Saddam's "enormous ambitions had not been reduced by the war. If anything, the Iraqi dictator emerged from eight years of conflict even more determined than he was in 1980...to become the dominant player in the Middle East."⁸³ These ambitions caused Saddam to demand that Iraq's debts be forgiven as a token of gratitude for defending the region from Iranian expansionism. Kuwait, however, declined his requests.⁸⁴

Enraged by Kuwait's lack of help, Saddam retaliated against the country in July 1990. He accused the country of breaching OPEC's production quotas, waging economic warfare against Iraq, and conspiring with the United States.⁸⁵ Kuwait, in Saddam's point of view, was depressing oil prices by over-producing crude oil, thereby cheating Iraq out of essential oil revenues. Saddam also claimed that oil-rich Kuwait was taking oil from an Iraqi oil field that lied adjacent to the Iraq-Kuwait border.⁸⁶ As a result of increasing tensions with Kuwait, Iraq's economic problems, and Saddam's blind ambition, over a hundred thousand Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990.

⁸² "The Gulf War, 1991," the Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, accessed 03 May 2021, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.

⁸³ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 100.

⁸⁴ "The Gulf War, 1991," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>

⁸⁵ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 101.

⁸⁶ "The Gulf War, 1991," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>

The American Response

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait startled President Bush, who had presumed that Saddam's threats were only political and intended to achieve concessions. Riedel, who was the CIA's Deputy Chief Persian Gulf Task Force during the invasion, explains Bush's lack of foresight, "Saddam was always a difficult person to read. He was impulsive, prone to bad decisions, and exercised poor-judgment...It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict the moves of a leader who repeatedly makes such monumental mistakes."⁸⁷ Bush's failure to anticipate Saddam's actions was exacerbated by CENTCOM's lack of preparedness. CENTCOM, which took control over the Carter Doctrine's Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in 1983, was still in its infancy and had not yet finished its plans for dealing with an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Furthermore, CENTCOM's abilities to intervene were limited by an inadequate number of personnel and an insufficient military apparatus.⁸⁸

President Bush soon realized that Saddam's actions threatened U.S. oil, and therefore, security interests in the region. A CIA report emphasized the Iraqi army's proximity to the Saudi border and stressed that "if Saddam stays where he is, he'll own twenty percent of the world's oil reserves. And a few miles away he can seize another twenty percent. He'll have easy access to the sea from Kuwait's ports. Jordan and Yemen will probably tilt toward him. Israel will be threatened. Saddam will be the preeminent figure in the Persian Gulf."⁸⁹ The report stressed that if Saddam's ambition went unchecked, Iraq would control the world's second and third largest oil reserves while maintaining the fourth largest army. This report demonstrated that American

⁸⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 102

⁸⁸ A. R. Hybel, *George H. W. Bush and the Gulf War*. In: *US Foreign Policy Decision-Making from Kennedy to Obama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 96, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137397690_4.

⁸⁹ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 102-103.

access to oil was in danger, and as a result, the U.S. government responded swiftly to defend Saudi Arabia and its regional oil interests.⁹⁰

In response to such frightening predictions, Bush acted quickly to preserve American security and oil interests in the Gulf. The U.S. government spearheaded efforts to coordinate an international coalition against Iraq. This coalition acted through the UN Security Council to pass a variety of resolutions that imposed economic sanctions against Iraq, declared the annexation of Kuwait invalid, and demanded Iraq's immediate withdrawal from Kuwait.⁹¹ Simultaneously, the United States advocated for an unprecedented and enormous American military deployment to the Kingdom.⁹²

The Iraqi threat to American oil and security interests motivated negotiations regarding a joint U.S.-Saudi response. Prince Bandar, the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, served as a critical intermediary between the two countries due to his incomparable access to both President Bush and King Fahd. The American account of these negotiations suggests that the Kingdom was initially divided on how to respond until Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney visited Fahd. The Saudi account, on the other hand, argues that Fahd instantly understood the consequences of Saddam's invasion and supported retaliation. Regardless of these differences, Bandar successfully negotiated between the two countries, and King Fahd approved the deployment of U.S. troops. Operation Desert Shield began on August 6th.⁹³

By September, Saudi Arabia was safe, and the focus shifted to liberating Kuwait. Saddam's refusal to surrender convinced Bush and Fahd that force was the only viable option. In early November, Bush announced that the size of the American expeditionary army in the

⁹⁰ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 103.

⁹¹ "The Gulf War, 1991," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.

⁹² Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 103.

⁹³ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 105.

Kingdom would more than double.⁹⁴ He also urged the United Nations to allow the use of force. His appeals succeeded, and UN Resolution 678 authorized the use of force to compel Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, albeit allowing Saddam a forty-five-day grace period to withdraw. Under the leadership of the United States, an international coalition of thirty-five nations combined forces to liberate Kuwait.⁹⁵

Saddam continued his refusal to withdraw, and after the grace period ended, the coalition attacked Iraq by air. Led by the United States, international forces bombed strategic locations, such as “the Iraqi command and control facilities, Saddam’s palaces, the Ba’th Party headquarters, power stations, intelligence and security facilities, hydroelectric stations, oil refineries, military-industrial complexes, and Iraq’s missile facilities.” Within a day, the coalition forces maintained control over the skies. Saddam countered with missile attacks against Israel and coalition bases in the Kingdom. In response, the coalition launched a land campaign that resulted in the swift liberation of Kuwait. The UN Security Council outlined the conditions for a cease-fire in Resolution 686, and Iraq was compelled to agree to its conditions, such as sanctions, payment of reparations for war damages, and the return of property stolen from Kuwait. Security Council Resolution 687 was also passed, which created the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) to investigate Iraq’s suspected chemical and biological weapons capacity.⁹⁶

The Gulf War produced far-reaching effects on the U.S.-Saudi relationship. First, the large presence of American troops on Saudi soil thwarted any plans Saddam may have possessed for invading the Kingdom. Bush noted in his memoir, “In retrospect if Saddam had wanted to make a go for Saudi Arabia, he probably made a mistake in that he did not do it in this brief

⁹⁴ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 107.

⁹⁵ “The Gulf War, 1991,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.

⁹⁶ “The Gulf War, 1991,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.

window (early August); if he had he would have had a free run.”⁹⁷ Second, the American’s strong defense of Saudi Arabia strengthened the relationship between Bush and Fahd. Riedel argues that during this period, the U.S.-Saudi relationship was at its best and hit its strongest point.⁹⁸ This closeness, combined with the growth of public awareness regarding this relationship, produced shifts in American attitudes toward the Kingdom. Figure 4.1 demonstrates the results of a Hart-Teeter Research Companies’ survey, which was sponsored by NBC News and The Wall Street Journal. The survey was conducted between March 15, 1991 and March 19, 1991, and it gathered responses from a nationally representative sample of registered voters. Figure x reveals the results from the following question: “Since the war with Iraq started, have you gained respect for Saudi Arabia, lost respect, or is your opinion unchanged?” The survey found that almost half of all respondents stated that they gained respect for Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the Gulf War.⁹⁹

Compared to the overwhelmingly positive American response, the Saudi reaction was largely negative. From the Saudi public’s point of view, it was astonishing to discover that their country, which spent billions on weapons each year, depended on the United States to deal with Iraq. Dissidents in the religious community claimed that the real enemy was the United States. Safar al Hawali, the dean of the Islamic College at Umm al Qura University, composed a public letter to Saudi’s most senior cleric and deemed the United States “an evil greater than Saddam.” However, the religious protests did not stop after Kuwait’s liberation. The religious protestors called for a greater Islamic society and condemned Fahd’s pro-American policies (one of which

⁹⁷ George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 335.

⁹⁸ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 130.

⁹⁹ Wall Street Journal/NBC News, NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll: Omnibus, March, 1991, Hart-Teeter Research Companies, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1991), Dataset, DOI: <https://doi.roper.center/?doi=10.25940/ROPER-31094721>

was Osama bin Laden).¹⁰⁰ As a result of these protests and the discovery of Saudi's dependence on American military assistance, the Kingdom renewed previous efforts to spread Wahhabism throughout the world.¹⁰¹

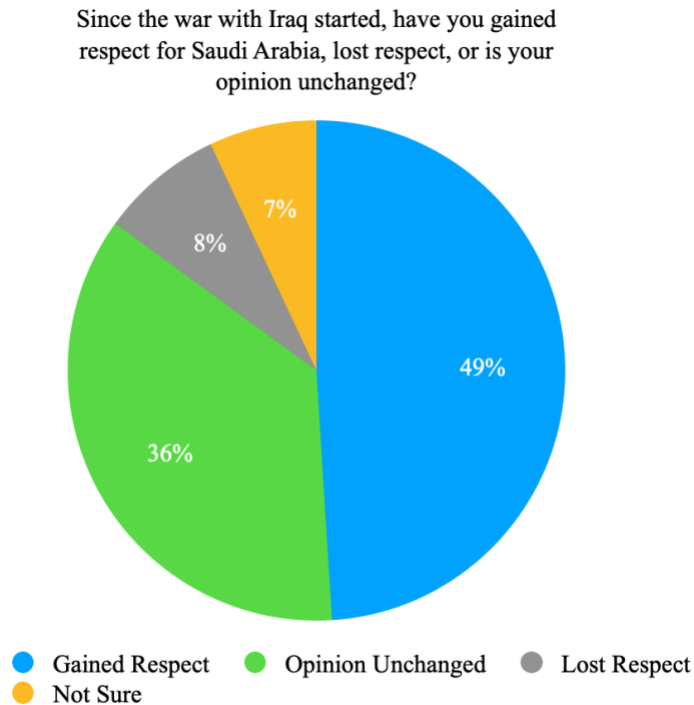


Figure 4.1

Graph created based on Roper poll.

The Gulf War & Human Rights

Although many Saudis were outraged by American military presence and deemed the U.S. evil, the human rights framework provided the basis for the Gulf War's public support in America, and President Bush argued in favor of intervention to uphold American values. However, this standard only applied to Iraq, and Bush publicly ignored Saudi Arabia's many human rights violations. This inconsistency suggests that although Bush's rhetoric contained

¹⁰⁰ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 106.

¹⁰¹ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 111.

strong human rights appeals, American intervention in the Gulf War was motivated by security and oil interests. The United States viewed Saudi Arabia as an important ally in achieving these interests, and, subsequently, the U.S. government did not pressure the House of Saud to make reforms.

Shortly after the Iraqi invasion, President Bush attempted to call the public to action by emphasizing Iraq's threat to American strategic and economic interests. The public was not convinced and remained unwilling to go to war for oil. Bush changed his tactics and began presenting the war as an attack against Saddam Hussein's inhumane actions. During remarks at a Republican campaign rally, Bush exclaimed:

“On August 2nd, Iraq invaded Kuwait. They literally...raped, pillaged, and plundered this once-peaceful land...They've tried to silence Kuwaiti dissent and courage with firing squads, much as Hitler did when he invaded Poland. They have committed outrageous acts of barbarism. In one hospital, they pulled 22 premature babies from their incubators, sent the machines back to Baghdad, and all those little ones died...This morning, this very morning, over 300 Americans, innocent civilians, are held against their will in Iraq. Saddam Hussein calls them guests. They are held in direct contravention of international law, many of them reportedly staked out as human shields near possible military targets. Brutality that -- I don't believe Adolf Hitler ever participated in anything of that nature.”¹⁰²

This characterization provoked widespread support for American intervention, even though Bush had failed to mention that Iraq was previously a U.S. ally. Moreover, Bush's eventual refusal to

¹⁰² George Bush, Remarks at a Republican Campaign Rally in Mashpee, Massachusetts, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/265422>.

overthrow the dictator appeared inconsistent with his portrayal of Saddam. According to John Kane, a professor in the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University, “It was as though the allies in World War II had turned around and gone home once Hitler had been pushed back inside Germany.”¹⁰³

Despite framing the Gulf War in terms of good-and-evil, the United States overlooked Saudi human rights violations and urged no reforms. Therefore, Bush’s expressions of American exceptionalism and the compatibility of power and virtue proved false. A 1990 report on human rights in Saudi Arabia revealed the existence of “credible reports of [frequent instances of] torture and mistreatment of detainees, particularly political detainees,” and mentioned that four Americans were flogged with a cane for disobeying Islamic law. The report expanded upon the multiple human rights violations, asserting that speech was constricted, arbitrary arrests were common, freedom of religion was nonexistent, political protests were prohibited, domestic servants suffered sexual and physical abuse, and women, religious minorities, and migrant workers from Africa and Asia experienced discrimination.¹⁰⁴

A window of opportunity to encourage reform appeared in late 1990. Although the U.S. military presence disturbed many Saudis and elicited religious protests, some hoped that it would bring reform. For example, many Saudi women believed that the presence of American military and Kuwaiti female drivers, who were entering the kingdom as refugees, would spur change. Women were further inspired by Fahd’s actions at the onset of the crisis; fearful of Saddam’s aggression, the King allowed women to volunteer for nursing and first aid. Consequently, on

¹⁰³ John Kane, “American Values or Human Rights? U.S. Foreign Policy and the Fractured Myth of Virtuous Power,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Dec. 2003, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Dec., 2003), page 790, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552537>.

¹⁰⁴ “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices For 1990,” United States Government Publishing Office, February 1991, pages 1615-1628, <https://archive.org/details/countryreportson1990unit>.

November 6, 1990, a group of fifty Saudi women protested the driving ban by motoring into the capitol.¹⁰⁵ The women drove in an envoy of fifteen cars for thirty minutes before they were apprehended by the police. “The drivers,” as they were known, faced harsh consequences for their actions. The women and their husbands were banned from foreign travel for a year, and the women who were employed by the government were fired. Furthermore, they were denounced publicly as immoral women intent on corrupting Saudi society. Aisha al Mana, a businesswoman who participated in the protest, reflected, “I think it was worth it, because we raised the issue of the women in Saudi Arabia and the consciousness about it.”¹⁰⁶

Although knowledge of this protest was widespread, the United States remained focused on Iraq and protecting its security and oil interests, rather than demanding human rights reform. Indeed, a State Department communication that reported significant events in the Gulf did not mention the driving protest.¹⁰⁷ Throughout 1991, Bush praised Saudi Arabia for its role in the Gulf War and omitted its many documented rights violations. Therefore, the United States entered the conflict to preserve its oil and security interests, and no serious efforts were made to encourage human rights improvements.

Explaining Saudi Arabia’s Progress

Despite American inaction on Saudi human rights, the V-Dem graph (figure displays progress after 1990. Raed A. Alhargan, an author from King Saud University, argues that the United Nations, the European Union, and international non-governmental organizations caused

¹⁰⁵ Donna Fenn Heintzen, “AP Was There: Saudi Women Protest Driving Ban in 1990,” AP News, 27 September 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/42eb44e0ab5c42249c07a1c5c8cd5fb4>.

¹⁰⁶ Caryle Murphy, “Saudi Women Reunite to Remember Driving Protest,” NPR, 16 December 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97541372>.

¹⁰⁷ “Gulf Update 11/15/1990 F-2007-03992,” U.S. Department of State, Freedom of Information Act, accessed 03 May 2021, <https://foia.state.gov/Search/Results.aspx?caseNumber=F-2007-03992>.

the Kingdom's human rights reform between 1990 and 2011. During the 90s, Saudi Arabia moved from invoking state sovereignty to accepting four core human rights instruments. This progress was triggered by international attention to Saudi Arabia, and it resulted in the legal adoption of the four treaties: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). According to Alhargan, "Saudi Arabia ratified these conventions in an attempt to avoid international shaming, to rebuff outside critics, and to signal to the international human rights network that Islamic law as applied in Saudi Arabia (and its local legal regulations) is not in contradiction with the ratified conventions."¹⁰⁸ This pressure produced several reforms. For example, the Kingdom increased women's access to education, developed employment opportunities for women, appointed women to key positions, reformed the judicial system, opened a Centre for National Dialogue, allowed Human Rights Watch to visit multiple times, and permitted the creation of Saudi human rights organizations.¹⁰⁹

However, although these reforms constituted significant progress, Saudi Arabia remains a highly oppressive society. Human Rights Watch reported that in 2020, Saudi authorities continued its longstanding practice of suppressing dissidents, human rights activists, and independent clerics. Influential women's rights activists, such as Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdulaziz, and Nassima al-Sadah, remained in jail while on trial

¹⁰⁸ Raed A. Alhargan, "The impact of the UN human rights system and human rights INGOs on the Saudi Government with special reference to the spiral model," *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 16:4, 2014, 607, DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2011.626772.

¹⁰⁹ Alhargan, "The impact of the UN human rights system and human rights INGOs on the Saudi Government with special reference to the spiral model," 617, DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2011.626772.

for their advocacy work. Despite the significant women’s rights progress in the kingdom (such as gaining the right to drive in 2017), the situation remains bleak. A male guardian’s approval is necessary for Saudi women to get married, leave prison, or obtain certain healthcare, and women continue to experience discrimination relating to marriage, family, divorce, and child custody issues.¹¹⁰

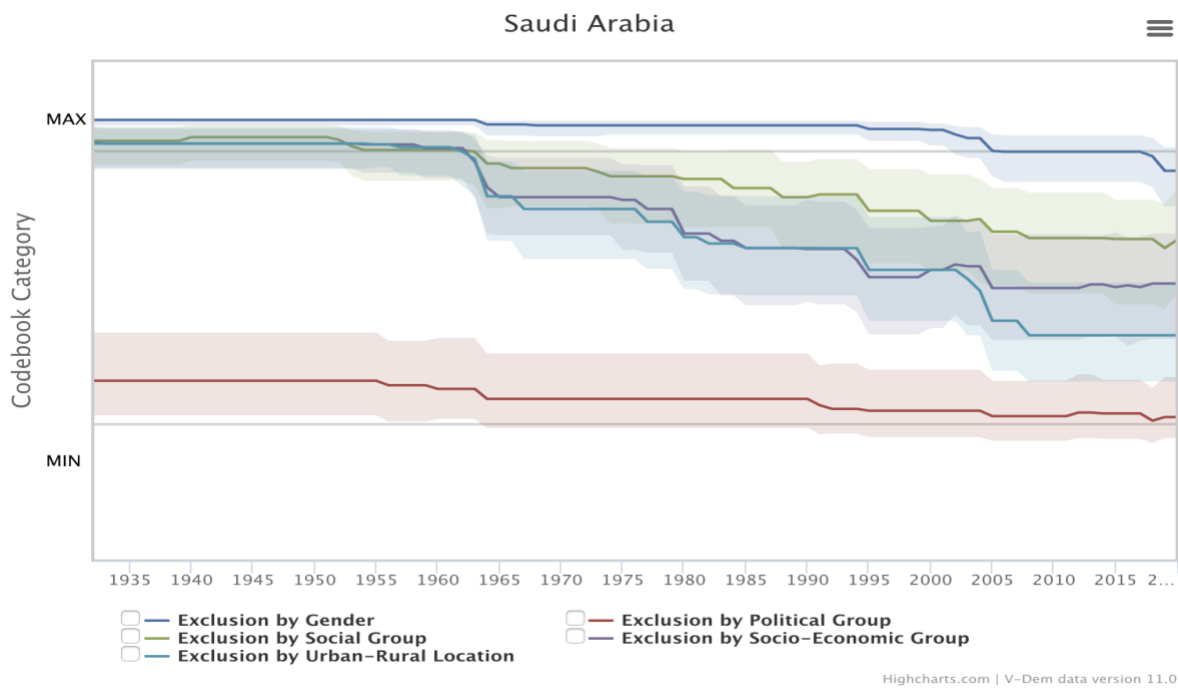


Figure 4.2

Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>

Conclusion

The Gulf War signified the peak of U.S.-Saudi relations and triggered widespread American support for the relationship. Although Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait surprised President Bush, the United States responded quickly to defend Saudi Arabia and its oil interests. Despite

¹¹⁰ “Saudi Arabia: Events of 2020,” Human Rights Watch, accessed 03 May 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/saudi-arabia#>.

Bush's heavy use of human rights rhetoric to justify the war, he did not acknowledge the several documented human rights abuses in the Kingdom. Thus, security and oil interests drove U.S. policy during this period. Nevertheless, the V-Dem graph demonstrates decreased levels of exclusion. Alhargan attributes this success to pressure from the UN, EU, and INGOs. However, this progress is diminished within the context of current human rights violations, as documented by Human Rights Watch.

CHAPTER 5: The 2000s: 9/11, American Promotion of Democracy, & the Rise of Energy Independence

In this section, I argue that security interests related to terrorism defined the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and these shared interests enabled both countries to overcome significant differences regarding President Bush's Freedom Agenda and the Iraq War. It is important to note that although Bush advocated for the spread of democracy across the Middle East following 9/11, he did not pressure the Saudis to enact liberal reform. I argue that Bush did not pursue reform in the Kingdom because the U.S. government did not want to risk losing the Kingdom as a counterterrorism ally. Finally, in contrast to the importance of oil in prior decades, I argue that this period saw the peak and decline of American dependence on foreign oil, thereby rendering the oil interest less influential in U.S.-Saudi relations.

9/11: Never Forget

The United States was permanently changed after the traumatic attacks on 9/11. Since then, Americans experienced changes to air travel and safety, saw the rise of anti-Muslim assaults, and witnessed the rise of the USA Patriot Act, which increased domestic and border security and expanded surveillance efforts for the sake of national security. Despite the immense domestic changes, F. Gregory Gause III, director of the Bush School's Department of International Affairs, argues, "When it comes to Saudi-American relations, the more things change, the more they stay the same."¹¹¹ In this section, I argue that although security and oil concerns remained the dominant drivers during this period, a new security concern arose: global

¹¹¹ Gause, 148.

terrorism. This new threat caused President Bush to publicly encourage the spread of democracy to alleviate terrorism, thereby prioritizing liberal hegemony in the Middle East. This proclamation, known as the Bush Doctrine, and the subsequent invasion of Iraq strained U.S.-Saudi relations. Nevertheless, after al Qaeda bombed three compounds in Riyadh, the House of Saud partnered with the U.S. in the global war on terror, and the historic partnership endured.

The events of 9/11 outraged Americans, and for many, Saudi Arabia proved a convenient scapegoat. After all, Osama bin Laden was born in Riyadh and hailed from a high-ranking Saudi family. For years, the Saudis upheld jihad as a central tenet of Islam and exported fundamentalist Islam to placate internal opposition. Consider the consequences of Saudi financial support for the mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Gause claims, “When the jihad in Afghanistan ended with Soviet withdrawal, the Saudi government chose not to confront the ideological trend it had helped to create. It dealt sharply with Salafi activists, such as bin Laden, who directly challenged the Al Saud’s right to rule. It did not, however, do anything to reign in the jihadist ideas and networks created in the 1980s.”¹¹²

Therefore, American frustration with the Saudi government’s role in 9/11 was not unfounded. After all, the Saudi’s maintained domestic infrastructure and global networks that funded al Qaeda and other jihadist groups.¹¹³ The House of Saud spent around \$10 billion to promote Wahhabism, their puritanical version of Islam. This money went to the Muslim World League, the International Islamic Relief Organization, the al-Haramain Foundation, the Medical Emergency Relief Charity, and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, some of which were

¹¹² Gause, 145

¹¹³ Stephen Tankel, “Saudi Arabia: Arsonist and Firefighter,” *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 173.

connected to terrorist networks and promoted extremist ideologies.¹¹⁴ However, while the Saudi government produced the breeding grounds necessary for extremism, the 9/11 Commission “found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior officials within the Saudi government funded al Qaeda.”¹¹⁵

In response to the horror and confusion surrounding the attacks, President Bush reacted swiftly by addressing the nation, forming a war cabinet, and allowing Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to raise the military readiness level to DEFCON Three.¹¹⁶ The Saudis, in contrast, were slow to respond. Although Bandar conveyed the Kingdom’s horror at the attack¹¹⁷ and Crown Prince Abdullah endorsed the invasion of Afghanistan and allowed the U.S. access to Saudi basing and airspace,¹¹⁸ conspiracy theories and doubts abounded. For the first two years following 9/11, there was limited counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries.

From Hesitation to Engagement: The Saudis Join the Fight Against Terrorism

Although the Saudi government undoubtedly created the perfect breeding grounds for terrorism, the House of Saud was initially divided on how to respond. Several senior princes accused the Zionists of hijacking the planes and framing the Arabs. The head of the Interior Ministry, Prince Nayef, publicly supported the idea of a Jewish conspiracy.¹¹⁹ Islamweb, a website dedicated to promoting Islamic beliefs and cultural content on the Internet, claimed, “Around 4,000 Israelis working in the World Trade Centre [sic] had been issued a secret

¹¹⁴ Daniel Byman, “The U.S.-Saudi Arabia Counterterrorism Relationship,” Brookings, 24 May 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>.

¹¹⁵ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Inside the United States, “Staff Statement No. 15: Overview of the Enemy,” 23 March 2004, 10.

¹¹⁶ Gary Gregg, “George W. Bush: Foreign Affairs,” UVA Miller Center, accessed 04 April 2021, <https://millercenter.org/president/gwbush/foreign-affairs>.

¹¹⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 135.

¹¹⁸ Tankel, 176.

¹¹⁹ Tankel, 173-174.

directive before the incident not to report for duty on September 11 which they complied with. This is evident from the fact that not a single Israeli or American Jew working in the WTC was reported killed or missing.”¹²⁰ Crown Prince Abdullah, who initially believed this conspiracy theory, changed his opinion after U.S. officials presented evidence of Saudi involvement. The Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al Faisal, pressed for a joint U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism task force soon after the attacks.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the Saudi government doubted al Qaeda’s threat to their rule.

Although the United States immediately recognized al Qaeda as an existential threat by the United States, Saudi Arabia remained unconvinced. According to Stephen Tankel, an Assistant Professor in the School of International Service at American University, Saudi officials believed they were immune from terrorist attacks and concluded that its terrorist-enabling infrastructure was “a net positive because [it] provided legitimacy at home and influence abroad.”¹²² The American public recognized this lack of cooperation. A survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates in December 2001 asked participants the following question: “[P]lease tell me whether or not you think [Saudi Arabia] has done enough to support the United States and oppose terrorism...Have they done enough, or have they failed to do enough to support the United States and oppose terrorism since September 11th?” The survey found that 63% of respondents believed that the Saudi government “have failed to do enough,” while only 17% answered that the Saudis “have done enough.”¹²³

¹²⁰ “Unraveling Anti-Semitic 9/11 Conspiracy Theories,” Gorowitz Institute, Anti-Defamation League, 2003, <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/anti-semitic-9-11-conspiracy-theories.pdf>.

¹²¹ Tankel, 173.

¹²² Tankel, 174.

¹²³ Newsweek, *Defining Victory/Reforming Islam*, Question 27, USPSRNEW.01NW22.Q20C, Princeton Survey Research Associates, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2001), Dataset, DOI: <https://doi.roper.center/?doi=10.25940/ROPER-31096752>.

2003, however, shattered the Saudi's false sense of security. On May 12, 2003, al Qaeda bombed three residential compounds in Riyadh, killing 39 people and wounding 160.¹²⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, an expert on jihadism, asserts that American military presence on Saudi soil during the 1991 Gulf War triggered these bombings.¹²⁵ The House of Saud abandoned its previous ambivalence and began a sustained anti-terrorist campaign inside the Kingdom. This push proved successful, and within three years, the Saudi government eliminated many al Qaeda networks operating in the Kingdom.¹²⁶ As a result of the 2003 Riyadh bombings, U.S. and Saudi security interests converged. The 9/11 Commission declared in 2004, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is now locked in mortal combat with al Qaeda."¹²⁷

As a result of the Riyadh compound bombings and the Saudi government's newfound dedication to counterterrorism, a critical partnership formed that proved vital to achieving both countries' interests. In 2008, the United States and Saudi Arabia entered a formal agreement on technical counterterrorism cooperation. This agreement provides Saudi funding in exchange for American security advisors and assistance in military training.¹²⁸ This partnership produced multiple successes; for example, in 2010, Saudi intelligence enabled the U.S. to intercept expertly concealed bombs inside cargo packages destined for America.¹²⁹ Furthermore, the Saudi government forbade its citizens from traveling abroad to join extremist groups, arrested over 1,600 citizens suspected of supporting the Islamic State,¹³⁰ assisted the U.S. government in

¹²⁴ "One bombed compound owned by pro-Western Saudi". CNN. 13 May 2003. Archived from the original on 18 January 2012. Retrieved 15 April 2021.

¹²⁵ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 160, 203.

¹²⁶ Tankel, 178.

¹²⁷ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: 2004), 373.

¹²⁸ Byman.

¹²⁹ Mark Mazzetti and Robert Worth, "U.S. Sees Complexity of Bombs as Link to Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, 30 October 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/world/31terror.html>.

¹³⁰ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, 12 February 2014, 11-12, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>.

stopping terrorist financing, and instituted a terrorist rehabilitation program.¹³¹ Consequently, American and Saudi security interests converged as a result of the 2003 attacks on Saudi soil, and this merger produced a strong counterterrorism relationship.

The Freedom Agenda

In contrast to their cooperation on counterterrorism, U.S.-Saudi relations were strained by Bush's bold call for democratic reform in the region. After 9/11, President Bush raised the importance of liberal hegemony in American foreign policy in the Middle East. Bush exclaimed, "We're pursuing long-term victory in [the global war on terror] by promoting democracy in the Middle East so that the nations of that region no longer breed hatred and terror."¹³² This quote exemplifies a key aspect of Bush's understanding of the issue and the role of spreading democracy in creating his foreign policy stance. From the President's point of view, the absence of political and economic freedom enabled terrorist organizations to radicalize individuals.¹³³ Therefore, the solution to the spread of terrorism was the promulgation of democracy across the Middle East. President Bush solidified the freedom agenda in his second inaugural address when he asserted:

"America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this Earth has rights and dignity and matchless value... Now, [advancing American ideals] is the urgent requirement of our Nation's security and the calling of our time. So it is the policy of the

¹³¹ Byman.

¹³² George W. Bush, Remarks on Signing the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense and for the Reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, 2004, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/212624>.

¹³³ Emiliano Alessandri, Oz Hassan, and Ted Reinert, "U.S. Democracy Promotion from Bush to Obama," EUSPRING, 4, http://aei.pitt.edu/64170/1/us_dem_promotion_april15.pdf.

United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”¹³⁴

This conclusion questioned the traditional U.S. support for “friendly tyrants” in the Middle East and sparked a debate in Washington. It was unclear how democracy promotion would affect the attainment of other U.S. interests, such as oil.¹³⁵ However, while Bush publicly supported the spread of liberalism, he never placed considerable pressure on the Saudis (although a majority of the 9/11 hijackers hailed from the Kingdom). I argue that security interests related to counterterrorism prevented Bush from encouraging the monarchy to reform. If the Saudis had shied away from the war on terror, perhaps Bush would have responded differently. Nevertheless, the House of Saud quickly proved their importance as a key counterterrorism partner, and their utility in this fight protected them from direct American pressure.

Although Bush did not pursue reform in the Kingdom, his democracy promotion horrified the Saudis. What would stop the United States from overthrowing the Saudi monarchy and installing a democratic regime? For the first time, the President’s rhetoric admonished monarchies and dictatorships, thereby breaking an important precedent that had supported U.S.-Saudi relations for decades. The Saudis responded viciously. In 2004, King Abdullah called for the end of American involvement in Iraq and criticized the war for empowering Iran. At the Arab summit three years later, the Saudi King supported a joint statement that denounced the American presence in Iraq as “an illegal foreign occupation.” Prince Turki ridiculed the American promotion of democracy in Iraq, stating that it was a disaster.¹³⁶ Turki asserted,

¹³⁴ George W. Bush, Inaugural Address, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/214048>.

¹³⁵ Thomas Carothers, “U.S. Democracy Promotion During and After Bush,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_after_bush_final.pdf.

¹³⁶ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 148.

“Democracy turned to a hateful sectarianism, justice turned to oppression, the rule of law ended up being the rule of militias and human rights became death warrants.” This statement enraged the White House, and despite Bush’s lack of success in democracy promotion, relations between the two countries deteriorated.¹³⁷

The Iraq War

In addition to Bush’s unabashedly liberal rhetoric, his decision to go to war with Iraq strained U.S.-Saudi relations. As early as September 2001, President Bush directed the Pentagon plan for war with Iraq. Advisors to the president argued that overthrowing Saddam Hussein was critical in the new war on terror.¹³⁸ Consequently, President Bush began building American support by accusing Iraq of building weapons of mass destruction and by asserting the relationship between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. Shortly thereafter, Congress approved the use of force against Iraq by wide margins.¹³⁹ Bush responded swiftly, and on March 20, 2003, U.S. forces invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam.

From the outset, the Saudis were hesitant to support the invasion of Iraq. Although the monarchy wanted Saddam removed, they were concerned about what would follow. Prince Turki feared that a Shia-dominated government would rise to power, but the Saudis simultaneously wanted to avoid breaking with the U.S. on such a critical issue. As a result, the Saudi government quietly supported the United States, allowing the use of the Prince Sultan airbase and the presence of American troops along the Saudi-Iraqi border.

¹³⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 148-149.

¹³⁸ Gause, 184.

¹³⁹ Gause, 148-149.

Although the American invasion initially appeared successful, Saudi doubts were quickly realized. First, the Bush administration confessed that its rationale for the invasion was based on false evidence. A presidential commission concluded that no intelligence on weapons of mass destruction was accurate. David Kay, the leader of the Iraq Survey Group's search for weapons of mass destruction, conceded to Congress, "We were almost all wrong."¹⁴⁰

Secondly, the U.S. government was ill-prepared for the post-war administration of Iraq. Bush's administration initially believed the political transition would be quick and easy. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice claimed, "[t]he concept was that we would defeat the army, but the institutions would hold, everything from ministries to police forces. You need to be able to bring new leadership but we were going to keep the body in place."¹⁴¹ However, Iraq quickly devolved into sectarian chaos as insurgents retaliated against the American occupation. By 2006, American intelligence analysts concluded that the Iraq War "helped spawn a new generation of Islamic radicalism and that the overall terrorist threat [had] grown since the Sept. 11 attacks."¹⁴²

Finally, the Iraq War undermined U.S. security interests concerning Iran. Saddam Hussein and the Taliban previously opposed and counterbalanced Iran. However, after their removal and the chaos caused by American intervention, "Tehran was able to extend its influence into Afghanistan and Iraq in ways unimaginable under the old regimes."¹⁴³ This transformation in the previous Iran-Iraq-Saudi Arabia regional power distribution concerned American, European, and Arab analysts, who feared the rise of Iranian power and its development of nuclear weapons.

¹⁴⁰ "The Iraq War," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed 10 April 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>.

¹⁴¹ Michael Gordon, "The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a Second War," *New York Times*, 19 October 2004.

¹⁴² Mark Mazzetti, "Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terrorism Threat," *New York Times*, 24 September 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/24/world/middleeast/24terror.html>.

¹⁴³ Gause, 168.

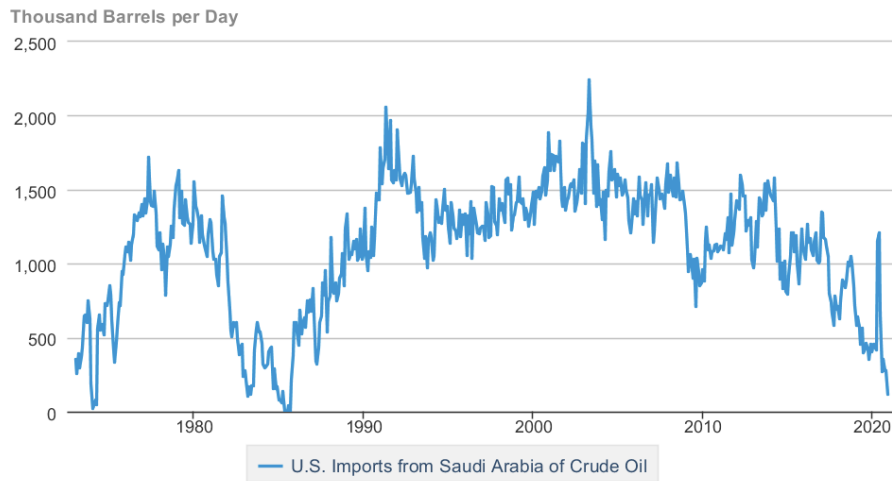
The Rise of Energy Independence

In addition to the monumental events of 9/11 and the subsequent Iraq War, Bush's presidency saw the height of energy dependence, as well as the rise of independence. In the 2006 state of the union address, Bush exclaimed that "America is addicted to oil" and insisted the United States "break this addiction."¹⁴⁴ Figure 5.1 demonstrates that U.S. imports of crude oil from Saudi Arabia peaked in 2005 and have decreased since. Figure 5.2 shows that since this 2005 peak, American energy production as a share of energy consumption increased rapidly, thereby decreasing the United States' direct dependence on foreign oil. This shift was caused by declining demand and a domestic energy revolution that combined hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling to unlock enormous reserves of oil in shale rock formations.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ David Sandalow, "President Bush and Oil Addiction," Brookings, 03 February 2006, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/president-bush-and-oil-addiction/>.

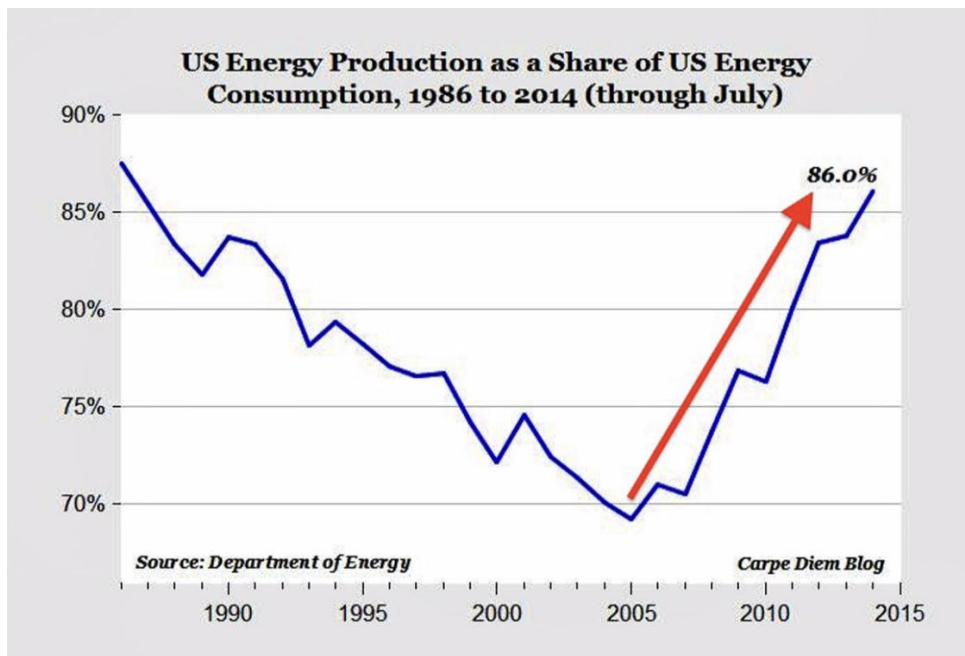
¹⁴⁵ "Timeline: Oil Dependence and U.S. Foreign Policy," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed 05 April 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/oil-dependence-and-us-foreign-policy>.

U.S. Imports from Saudi Arabia of Crude Oil



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

Figure 5.1



Source: Department of Energy

Carpe Diem Blog

Figure 5.2

Conclusion

The events of 9/11 and the Iraq War profoundly changed the United States and its relationship with Saudi Arabia. American attitudes toward the Kingdom soured, and the Saudis were initially slow to respond to al Qaeda. However, the 2003 Riyadh bombings transformed the monarchy's perspective, and the United States and Saudi Arabia subsequently developed a strong counterterrorism relationship based on mutual security interests. These interests regarding terrorism sustained the relationship, despite significant strains from Bush's Freedom Agenda and the Iraq War. Thus, the foreign policies of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia were driven by security interests during this period, rather than liberal reform.

CHAPTER 6: The Obama Presidency

As a result of the failures in Iraq and Bush's Freedom Agenda, President Obama inherited a relationship in shambles. Although Obama supported the spread of democracy, he was eager to ameliorate relations with the Saudis for security reasons related to Iran and terrorism. For example, during a meeting with King Abdullah, Obama criticized Bush's freedom agenda and assured him that his administration would not force democracy on Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁶ However, this reassurance was unconvincing considering his actions during the Arab Spring. Obama's support for Egypt's democratic transition damaged relations with Saudi Arabia, which left him little room to encourage liberal reforms in the Kingdom.¹⁴⁷ Despite this key stressor, enduring security concerns related to Iran and terrorism continued to undergird the U.S.-Saudi relationship during this period. Moreover, rising U.S. energy production continued to diminish the importance of oil in American strategy toward the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The Arab Spring

According to Riedel, President Obama's support for the Egyptian revolution during the Arab Spring was "the key reason for Saudi disenchantment" with the United States.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the Arab Spring revolutionized many relationships across the Middle East. In December 2010, a revolutionary tide swept across the Middle East in response to poor standards of living and corrupt governments. The outbreak of revolutions began in Tunisia, where President Zine al Abedine Ben Ali was quickly overthrown, and it swiftly spread to Egypt. Hosni Mubarak, then President of Egypt, was a long-time ally of the United States and Saudi Arabia. For example,

¹⁴⁶ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 154.

¹⁴⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 177.

¹⁴⁸ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 177.

Mubarak upheld the 1979 peace treaty with Israel and sent troops to protect the Saudis from Iraq during the Gulf War. The White House, however, deemed the demonstrations against Mubarak's corrupt rule as a positive step for democracy and threatened the halt of aid to Egypt if the army used force and violence to protect Mubarak's rule. Obama publicly supported the opposition to Mubarak, calling for an orderly transition of power and exclaiming that "the arc of history has bent toward justice once again."¹⁴⁹ Within 18 days, the Egyptian revolutionaries removed Mubarak from power, and the Saudis were outraged by the United States' support for the revolution.

The Saudi's deemed American support for the Egyptian revolution a serious betrayal. The monarchy was astonished that the U.S. helped overthrow an ally, and they began to wonder what would happen if revolution spread to the Kingdom. After the revolution spread to neighboring Bahrain, this concern was amplified, and King Abdallah told the White House that if it intervened in Bahrain, there would be serious consequences for the U.S.-Saudi relationship. While the United States did not engage with the Bahraini revolution, the Saudis quickly stepped in and utilized force to quell the opposition.¹⁵⁰ According to Riedel, "This was the first time Saudi Arabia had used force to stem the Arab Spring, and it exposed a massive break with Washington. The intervention in a close neighbor underscored the House of Saud's conclusion that the Arab Spring was an existential threat to its survival."¹⁵¹

Thus, the American support for the Egyptian revolution of 2011, alongside the threat to the Bahraini monarchy, caused a significant deterioration in U.S.-Saudi relations. The Saudis worried that any successful attempt at democracy in the Middle East would set an example for

¹⁴⁹ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 157-158.

¹⁵⁰ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 158-160.

¹⁵¹ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 160.

every Muslim country.¹⁵² Although the subsequent counter-revolution and coup relieved the House of Saud, Obama's transgression was not forgotten. Riedel explains: Since the Arab Spring, the Saudis "want any American president to stay away from awkward and difficult issues like religious freedom, freedom of the press, gender equality, and political reform. In November 2016, the Saudis got a U.S. president who would avoid such issues, Donald J. Trump."¹⁵³

Mutual Security Concerns

Despite significant tensions resulting from the Arab Spring, the U.S.-Saudi relationship continued due to mutual security concerns regarding counterterrorism and Iran. John Brennan, the former CIA director, declared during the Obama administration that "Saudi Arabia is among our closest counterterrorism partners."¹⁵⁴ The question of Iran also cemented the importance of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. President Obama was concerned about Tehran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and regional hegemony, and King Abdallah feared its goal of regional dominance and its use of Shia subversion.¹⁵⁵ This common security interest triggered an enormous U.S. arms sale to the Kingdom, which aimed to bolster Saudi capabilities for defense against Iran. The sale cost upwards of \$60 billion and included the purchase of eighty-four new F15S fighter planes, upgrades for the seventy F15S jets the Saudis already owned, twenty-four Apache attack helicopters, and seventy-two Blackhawk helicopters." At the time, this was the largest U.S.-Saudi arms deal in history,¹⁵⁶ and it resembled the extent of Washington and Riyadh's security concerns.

¹⁵² Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 163.

¹⁵³ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 177.

¹⁵⁴ John Brennan, "CIA's Strategy in the Face of Emerging Challenges: Remarks by CIA Director John O. Brennan," Brookings Institution, 13 July 2016.

¹⁵⁵ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 155.

¹⁵⁶ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 156.

The threat of Iran's growing power extended into the Yemen Civil War. This war began in late 2014 between the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi-led Yemeni government and the Houthi armed movement. Saudi support for the Loyalists (supporters of Hadi) depended on curtailing Iranian influence, and it was amplified by sectarian divides (the Loyalists consisted of Sunni Muslims, while the Houthis were Shia). Saudi involvement in the war was driven by Iranian support for the Houthis. The Houthis maintained connections with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Iranian advisors assisted them in the fight against the Loyalists, and Iran provided around \$10 to \$20 million in aid per year. Moreover, Iranian newspapers boasted that Tehran now controlled four Arab capitals: Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Sana'a. According to Riedel, although the Houthis were not Iranian pawns or allies, the situation was "intolerable" for the Saudis.¹⁵⁷

The Obama administration, anxious to improve and maintain relations, provided the Saudi government with military and diplomatic assistance despite the massive humanitarian crisis caused by the war. Throughout Obama's presidency, the Kingdom purchased \$111 billion worth of arms, part of which aided Saudi support for the Yemeni Loyalists.¹⁵⁸ Micah Zenko, an American political scientist and critic of U.S. support for the war in Yemen, argued, "The Obama administration is establishing a troubling precedent, whereby it has no obligations for military operations conducted by other countries for which the United States is playing an essential, enabling role."¹⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch echoed Zenko's sentiments and elaborated on the role of U.S. diplomatic assistance to the Saudis:

¹⁵⁷ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 171.

¹⁵⁸ Blanchard, 39.

¹⁵⁹ Micah Zenko, "Obama's War of Choice: Supporting the Saudi-led Air War in Yemen," Council on Foreign Relations, 25 September 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/obamas-war-choice-supporting-saudi-led-air-war-yemen>.

“When the UN finally named Saudi Arabia on its ‘Global List of Shame,’ of the worst offenders against children, for its attacks on children in Yemen, the US stood silent as Saudi Arabia strong-armed the UN. Then-Secretary General Ban Ki Moon resisted for a while, but finally caved in and removed Saudi Arabian from the list, admitting that Riyadh had threatened to cut its funding to various UN agencies. Twice during the Obama administration, the US had the opportunity to push for a UN inquiry into abuses by all sides in the Yemen conflict, and twice it did not—the Saudi-led coalition didn’t want one. Despite repeated queries about whether the US supported the first proposed UN inquiry, Obama officials responded with silence or words of deflection, which spelled the political demise of such an initiative.”¹⁶⁰

Despite the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the White House remained intent on preserving relations with Saudi Arabia due to Iran and counterterrorism. Thus, security concerns constituted the foundation for the U.S.-Saudi relationship, despite enormous stressors from the Arab Spring.

The Effect of U.S. Energy Production

In contrast to the steadfast dominance of security interests in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, oil interests evolved during this period. Although energy prices during the 2000s skyrocketed due to increased global oil consumption and conflicts in oil-producing nations, Obama’s presidency saw the growth of U.S. energy production (figure 6.1). U.S. and Canadian companies were motivated by the high prices to begin drilling for crude in Alberta’s oil sands and North Dakota’s shale formations, and this transformed the U.S. energy market.¹⁶¹ The rise in cheap

¹⁶⁰ “Obama Officials’ Incomplete Reckoning with Failure on Yemen,” Human Rights Watch, 19 November 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/19/obama-officials-incomplete-reckoning-failure-yemen#>.

¹⁶¹ Brad Plumer, “Why oil prices keep falling — and throwing the world into turmoil,” Vox, 23 January 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2014/12/16/7401705/oil-prices-falling>.

energy and the decline of American dependence on foreign oil decreased the importance of petroleum in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Moreover, the U.S. led the world in natural gas production, which further decreased dependence on OPEC. Obama celebrated this progress, declaring that the United States was now the “Saudi Arabia” of natural gas.”¹⁶² While the United States was previously dependent on foreign oil, the 2010s saw the rise of relative energy independence, and oil imports from Saudi Arabia decreased (figure 6.2).

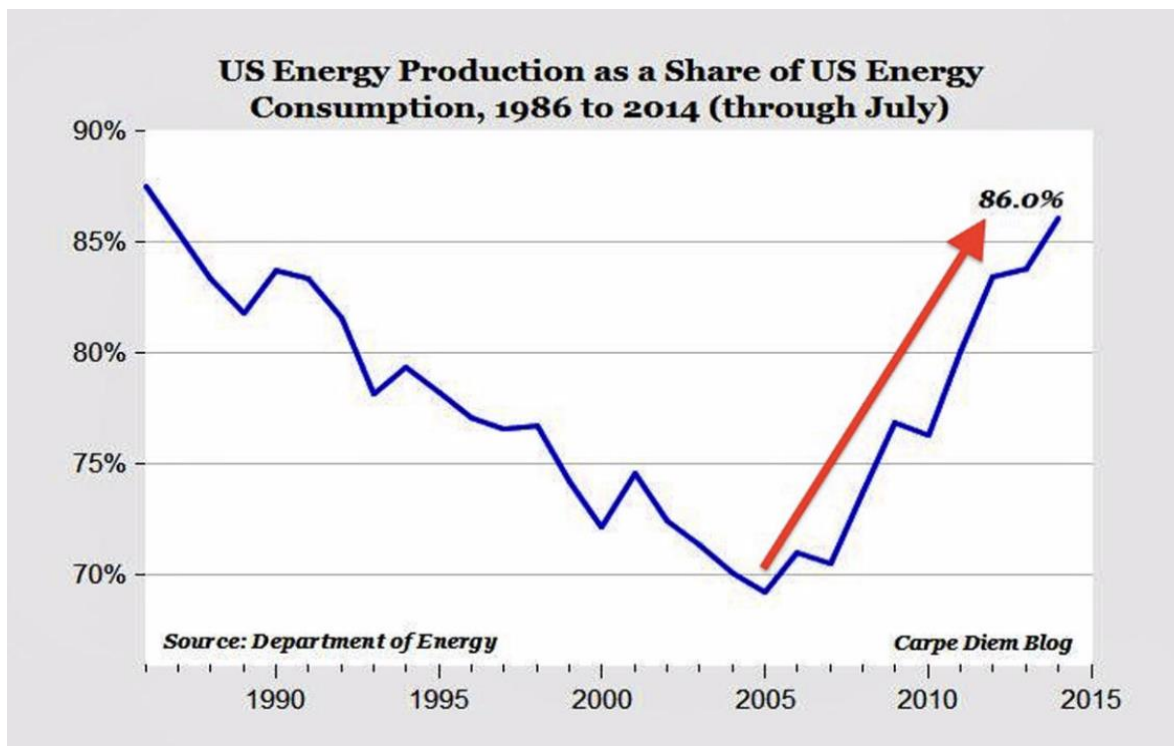
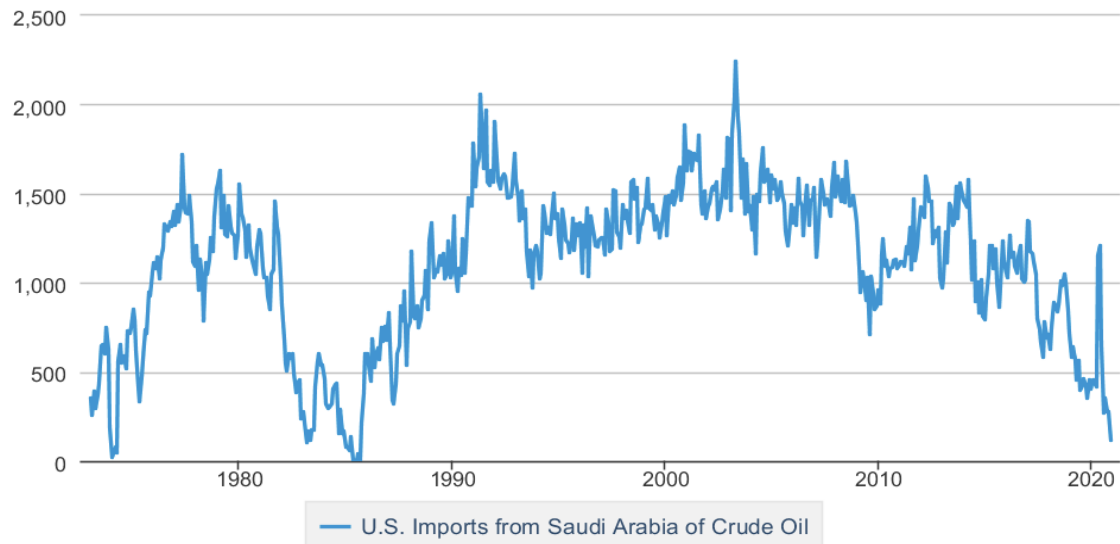


Figure 6.1

¹⁶² McClatchy Tribune, “Obama Tells Shippers U.S. Is ‘Saudi Arabia Of Natural Gas,’” Tampa Bay Times, 27 January 2012, <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/2012/01/27/obama-tells-shippers-u-s-is-saudi-arabia-of-natural-gas/>.

U.S. Imports from Saudi Arabia of Crude Oil

Thousand Barrels per Day



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

Figure 6.2

Conclusion

Throughout the Obama presidency, security interests related to Iran and counterterrorism dominated the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Arms sales to the Kingdom and the Yemeni humanitarian crisis fueled domestic criticism as the White House attempted to salvage relations after the Iraq War. However, although Obama initially promised not to support democratic reform in the region, his betrayal of Mubarak in the name of progress appalled the Saudi government and deteriorated relations, leaving Obama unable to press for liberal reforms in the Kingdom. Finally, oil was no longer a key driver of U.S.-Saudi diplomacy as American energy production increased and oil prices fell.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I demonstrated that security and oil interests, rather than human rights, dominated U.S. foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia, and I revealed that despite significant tensions, these core interests preserved diplomatic relations. Throughout the 1960s, security interests drove this partnership, as both states focused on containing communism. This mutual security concern provided President Kennedy the opportunity to convince King Faisal to institute democratic reforms. Kennedy framed reform in terms of security: If Faisal failed to modernize the Kingdom, his rule would likely be threatened by the revolutionary tides of communism. However, despite Kennedy's success at bringing the U.S. and Saudi Arabia closer together, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War strained U.S.-Saudi relations. The swift Israeli victory caused the United States to ally itself with the Zionists, while the fall of Nasser empowered the Saudis to champion the Palestinian cause. This divergence produced significant tensions within the relationship, and for the first time, the Saudis instituted an oil embargo against the United States. However, the Saudi oil weapon was ineffective, and mutual security interests related to containing communism preserved U.S.-Saudi relations.

Unfortunately for the U.S., this period of energy independence did not last long, and during the 1970s, oil became a core interest that shaped America's relationship with Saudi Arabia. In response to American aid to Israel in 1973, the Kingdom, along with other OPEC countries, initiated a second oil embargo against the U.S. In contrast to the 1967 embargo, this retaliation succeeded, and the United States now viewed the Saudis as a key swing producer. Consequently, during this period, oil rose to prominence as a core interest, alongside security interests related to communism, and the United States did not pursue liberal reform in the Kingdom.

The U.S.-Saudi relationship was further defined by security interests after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. With the fall of the Shah and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, the United States lost a critical Middle Eastern partner. The Saudis, too, experienced distress, as Iran attempted to export its Shia revolution to the Kingdom. Alongside security interests related to Iran, concerns related to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan shaped U.S.-Saudi relations. Consequently, by the end of the seventies, security interests had cemented the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Furthermore, oil remained a critical interest. The Iranian Revolution caused a global oil shortage, and the Saudis proved once again their significance as a key swing producer. Access to oil remained critical for the United States because American energy consumption continued to outpace domestic production. Consequently, as the United States' economy now relied on foreign oil, security and oil were key interests. Although President Carter previously vowed to focus on human rights, the events of 1979 caused him to declare that the United States would now use military force to protect its oil and security interests in the Persian Gulf region.

In 1990, the pattern continued, and security and oil interests remained the United States' primary concerns, and human rights reform was once again placed on the backburner. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent 1991 Gulf War brought U.S.-Saudi relations to new heights. To protect its oil and security interests in the Persian Gulf, the United States stationed troops on Saudi soil to defend the Kingdom from an Iraqi invasion. This move was unprecedented, and it revealed to both countries' citizens the depth of this partnership. However, while President Bush justified the war in terms of Saddam Hussein's human rights abuses, the United States ignored the many violations recorded by the Department of State's Report on Human Rights Practices in Saudi Arabia. U.S. disregard for Saudi human rights abuses was

further revealed by the American government's ambivalence toward the harsh Saudi crackdown on the women's driving protest.

While the 1990s featured the peak in the U.S.-Saudi partnership, the events of 9/11 produced a major rift in relations. The attacks on the twin towers by Islamic terrorists, many of whom hailed from Saudi Arabia, provoked massive American outrage at the Kingdom. The Saudis were initially hesitant to support counterterrorism efforts, and Bush's Freedom Agenda and the Iraq War infuriated the monarchy. Nevertheless, the relationship endured due to mutual security interests. After the 2003 Riyadh bombings convinced the Saudis of global jihadism's danger, the United States and the Kingdom developed a strong counterterrorism relationship. Additionally, this period saw the decline of oil as a driving interest. Following 2005, domestic oil production increased, and oil steadily decreased in importance within U.S.-Saudi relations.

Security interests remained the primary driver of foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia during the Obama administration. The United States and Saudi Arabia continued their strong partnership on counterterrorism, despite Obama's support for democracy in Egypt. The U.S.-Saudi relationship was also motivated by security concerns regarding Iran's efforts to strengthen its regional influence. Although the Saudis contributed to Yemen's humanitarian crisis, the Obama administration provided the monarchy with massive military and diplomatic assistance to preserve relations for the sake of American security interests. Thus, the threat of Iran and the Kingdom's utility as a partner in counterterrorism caused the United States to not pursue liberal reform.

Therefore, I conclude that the United States never served as a moral authority for Saudi Arabia. Moreover, I believe that Trump's support for Prince Mohammed, despite Khashoggi's murder, was unsurprising considering the United States' historic inaction on Saudi human rights

abuses. Prince Mohammed's shocked reaction to American outrage, therefore, is understandable, given the lack of U.S. demands for liberal reform in the Kingdom. However, the rift between the executive branch's partnership with the Saudis and the public's distaste for the monarchy poses an important question: Is it possible for the United States to promote liberal reform in the Kingdom while maintaining relations with the House of Saud?

I assert that there exists a middle path to encouraging liberal reform in the Kingdom. Like Kennedy's approach in 1962, the United States government could assert that Saudi stability depends on liberal reform. Indeed, the monarchy faces significant threats by internal instability, and opposition threatens to erupt at any time within the Kingdom. According to Madawi al-Rasheed, a Saudi Arabian professor of social anthropology, "Several years of falling oil prices, a year of COVID-19, rising unemployment, and vanishing foreign direct investment have weakened the kingdom's economic position and fanned popular discontent. Political repression, including the jailing of dissidents, has put further pressure on the monarchy—as, of course, has the international fallout from the Khashoggi murder."¹⁶³ Al-Rasheed suggests gradual reform towards a constitutional monarchy that replaces the Saudi Consultative Council with an elected government. Thus, the Biden administration could argue that modest democratic reforms will ensure that the monarchy will be protected in the long run.

Although this middle path remains a viable option, the Biden administration's recent actions render the prospects of encouraging reform unlikely. Despite promising to hold the monarchy accountable, President Biden refused to penalize Prince Mohammed for Khashoggi's death after determining that the costs of doing so were too high; for example, officials cited the

¹⁶³ Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Only Stable Saudi Arabia is a Democratic Saudi Arabia," *Foreign Affairs*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2021-03-15/only-stable-saudi-arabia-democratic-saudi-arabia>.

importance of Saudi Arabia in sharing antiterrorism intelligence and countering Iran.¹⁶⁴

Nevertheless, historical precedent demonstrates that it is possible to maintain relations while encouraging reform. If the Biden administration carefully frames reform as necessary for the monarchy's survival, the chances of blowback would decrease significantly. However, despite protests by human rights activists, it remains improbable that President Biden will pursue this path due to the enduring importance of security interests in shaping U.S. foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia.

¹⁶⁴ David Sanger, "Biden Won't Penalize Saudi Crown Prince Over Khashoggi's Killing, Fearing Relations Breach," *New York Times*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/politics/biden-mbs-khashoggi.html>.

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