



## Saudi Arabia – US Relations and the Failure of Riyadh’s Securitization Project

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*“the friendship and cooperation that exist between the United States and the Gulf countries has been consistent for decades [...] so what is true between the United States and the GCC, as is true with all of our allies and friends, is that at any point in time, there are going to be differences in tactics”.*<sup>1</sup>

Following the signing of the nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran in late 2015, relations between the US and Saudi Arabia – along with other GCC states – became increasingly strained. Different perceptions of regional security meant that long-standing positions on the organisation of security in the Gulf became strained. For Saudi Arabia, the nuclear deal added to a number of serious policy considerations that are concerning many in Riyadh, including economic challenges, the rise of Da’ish, the fragmentation of regional order and the threat posed by Iran, with whom Riyadh has had a fractious relationship since 1979. Over the past 6 months, the dynamics of Gulf security have changed, stemming from the P5+1 agreeing a nuclear deal with Iran, yet building on long-standing anti-Iranian sentiment across Sunni Arab states. Indeed, since the revolution of 1979, Arab Gulf leaders have expressed concern that Shi’a minorities located across the region are ‘fifth columns’ loyal to Iran and any unrest in Shi’a communities has been framed as orchestrated by Iran, as noted in previous FPC briefings.

This briefing sets out the nature of contemporary relations between Washington and Riyadh. It begins by setting out competing understandings of regional security within the Persian Gulf before turning to perceptions of Iranian manipulation. It looks at Saudi Arabia’s efforts to securitize Iran to a US audience and the failure of such attempts. The stability of the US-Saudi relationship characterised by military co-operation, regional security and energy security is under pressure but there is scope for alternative sources of co-operation.

### **Gulf Security, Saudi Arabia and The Securitization Process**

Following the nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the US became increasingly tense. For Saudi Arabia, the US has historically played an important role in ensuring the security of the Gulf region – seen in diametrically opposed terms by Iran – and many in Riyadh felt betrayed by the deal that brought Iran in from the cold. Yet these tensions, stemming from the burgeoning rapprochement between Washington and Tehran, have their roots much deeper in Saudi efforts to securitize the Iranian threat.

Since the revolution of 1979 Saudi-Iranian relations have been tense, stemming from competing visions over the nature of regional security and a competition for Islamic legitimacy that was increasingly seen in zero-sum terms. A number of issues defined the nature of relations, increasingly spinning out into proxy conflicts in Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.<sup>2</sup> Underpinning this were competing views about the organisation of regional security, with Tehran perceiving itself as qualified to shape regional security but with Riyadh reliant upon Washington to ensure its security.

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Saudi Arabia sought to demonstrate to the US that Iran was manipulating affairs across the state, undermining security and stability by

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<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama, Q&A with the Press – Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, April 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/remarks-president-obama-qa-press-riyadh-saudi-arabia>

<sup>2</sup> Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2015).



supporting the increasingly sectarian politics of governments in Baghdad along with militias controlling 'the street'.

These concerns about the apparent Iranian penetration of Iraq only served to fuel Saudi suspicions at Iranian actions across the region and, from this, intensified Riyadh's efforts to securitize the Iranian threat. US diplomatic cable 08RIYADH649\_a documents how on one occasion the Saudi Ambassador to the US, Adel Al Jubeir recalled

*'the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. "He told you to cut off the head of the snake," he recalled to the Charge', adding that working with the US to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq is a strategic priority for the King and his government'.<sup>3</sup>*

Moreover, in a discussion relayed to a US official, Abdullah's views on Nouri al Maliki, then Prime Minister of Iraq demonstrated the extent of Saudi suspicions at Iranian actions. "I don't trust this man," the King stated, "He's an Iranian agent."<sup>4</sup> Such comments feature prominently within the US diplomatic cables released Wikileaks pertaining to Iran and reflect Riyadh's concern at Tehran's rising influence across the region. Moreover, it also demonstrates Saudi Arabia's reliance upon the US for security.

In more recent years, however, this relationship has become increasingly fractious. The Obama administration's failure to stand by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, or indeed, their own red lines in Syria has only fuelled Riyadh's concerns about Washington's abilities and intentions in the region. Despite this pressure from Riyadh, the US has been reluctant to take action against Iran, much to the chagrin of many in Saudi Arabia and Israel, who are concerned at the geopolitical intentions – and aspirations – of a revitalised Iran.

### **The US in the Gulf**

Washington's involvement in the Gulf is predominantly shaped by the US position towards Saudi Arabia and the two have long maintained a strong bi-lateral relationship. In recent years, the US has begun to pivot away from the Gulf and with it, from Saudi Arabia, in part because of changing geopolitical interests but also because of a number of normative concerns stemming from conflict in Yemen and human rights issues domestically.

In Jeffrey Goldberg's *The Obama Doctrine* article, Obama is quoted as suggesting that Gulf politics must be determined by those in the region, in contrast to a decades-long policy of the US being a security guarantor and causing concern to many in Riyadh.

Obama suggested that conflict in the Gulf would be

*"The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace. An approach that said to our friends 'You are right, Iran is the source of all problems, and we will support you in dealing with Iran' would essentially mean that as these sectarian conflicts continue to rage and our Gulf partners, our traditional friends, do not have the ability to put*

<sup>3</sup> 08RIYADH649\_a SAUDI KING ABDULLAH AND SENIOR PRINCES ON SAUDI POLICY TOWARD IRAQ, April 2008, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html)

<sup>4</sup> 09RIYADH447\_a COUNTERTERRORISM ADVISER BRENNAN'S MEETING WITH SAUDI KING ABDULLAH, March 2014, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RIYADH447\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RIYADH447_a.html)



*out the flames on their own or decisively win on their own, and would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East”.*<sup>5</sup>

Obama was also critical of a range of states across the international system that, in his view, had failed to act in a responsible way in the fight against terrorism.

*“So what I said at that point was, we should act as part of an international coalition. But because this is not at the core of our interests, we need to get a UN mandate; we need Europeans and Gulf countries to be actively involved in the coalition; we will apply the military capabilities that are unique to us, but we expect others to carry their weight”.*<sup>6</sup>

Of course, domestic politics within both Saudi Arabia and the US is shaping the nature of relations between the two. Following the rise of Da'ish since June 2014, the Salafist ideology at the heart of Saudi Arabia has raised concerns about the relationship between Washington and Riyadh amongst many in the American population. Moreover, further complicating relations between Riyadh and Washington is an inquiry as to whether 28 pages of the 9/11 Commission report that had previously been classified should be made public. These pages contain information about foreign involvement in 9/11 and with its publication and a change in legislation, could leave Saudi Arabia open to litigation from the families of those killed in the 9/11 attacks, seemingly in contravention of international law.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Saudi Response**

Given Riyadh's reliance upon the US to ensure regional security, Washington's burgeoning rapprochement with Tehran and the increasingly fractious relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia is a cause of great consternation. As a consequence of this, Saudi Arabia has employed eight PR firms in Washington in an attempt to propagate its agenda; along with other Gulf states it has also invested heavily in think tanks as an alternative way of achieving this influence. In 2015, the Kingdom spent \$9.4 million on lobbying firms.<sup>8</sup>

In response to the aforementioned threat of litigation, prominent Saudi figures threatened to withdraw \$750 billion in assets from the US economy if the terrorism bill is passed.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the relationship was not helped by Obama's comment about free riders, which many in the Gulf felt was predominantly directed towards them.<sup>10</sup>

### **'Days when things were different'?**

President Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2016 was an effort to mend relations between the two countries that have become increasingly frayed in light of these issues. While in Saudi Arabia, Obama spent two and a half hours with King Salman, 'clearing the air'

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, The Obama Doctrine, The Atlantic, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/#5>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Wright, The 28 Pages, The New Yorker, September 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/twenty-eight-pages> and Curtis Bradley and Jack Goldsmith, Don't Let Americans Sue Saudi Arabia (The New York Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2016) Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/opinion/dont-let-americans-sue-saudi-arabia.html>

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Ho, Saudi government has vast network of PR, Lobby firms in U.S., The Washington Post, April, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/04/20/saudi-government-has-vast-network-of-pr-lobby-firms-in-u-s/>

<sup>9</sup> David A. Graham, The Ever More 'Complicated' U.S. Relationship With Saudi Arabia, The Atlantic, April, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/saudi-arabia-911-bill-congress/478689/>

<sup>10</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Institutionalising Ties and Rebuilding Relations, Atlantic Council, April 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/institutionalizing-ties-and-rebuilding-relations>



and talking through events in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. In a press conference shortly after, Obama answered questions on the nature of US-Saudi and GCC relations. When pressed on areas of tension between the US and GCC states, Obama noted that there were several areas of increased co-operation in efforts to prevent cyber attacks, in intelligence sharing – and the fight against terrorism – and on missile defence. Moreover, that collective security was increasingly important, that US military objectives could not be achieved without the assistance of GCC states. Of course, this begs the question about how security threats are understood and it is here when differences emerge, particularly over Iran. Obama suggested that these differences emerged as a consequence of tensions about dialogue with Iran and the consequences of an emboldened, pro-active Tehran for the Middle East.

As Turki Al Faisal, an outspoken member of the Al Saud family notes, “America has changed, we have changed and definitely we need to realign and readjust our understandings of each other.”<sup>11</sup> Quite how much either side has changed – and is ready to listen to the other – is, of course, a question to be answered in time. Al Faisal also stressed the need for “a recalibration of our relationship with America -- how far we can go with our dependence on America. How much can we rely on steadfastness from American leadership? What is it that makes for our joint benefits to come together.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite this, as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen notes, there are a number of areas around which the agendas of both Saudi Arabia can coalesce. While historically Washington was reliant upon Riyadh to meet its energy needs, recent developments in the US energy market have freed Washington from Riyadh’s grip, yet other economic issues - such as commercial interests – will provide scope for continued economic relations between the two. Additionally, with rapid growth in Asian economies increasingly reliant upon Gulf energy and the US experiencing a pivot to Asia, Gulf and US interests will find renewed traction.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, both are concerned about maintaining regional security and, on the whole, have similar perceptions about what a secure Gulf region would look like.

Of course, Riyadh’s efforts to securitize the Iranian threat, coupled with tensions about events in Syria and Yemen have resulted in a breakdown of trust and a fracturing of relations. Determining whether Obama’s vision of US-Saudi relations is more accurate than Turki Al Faisal’s will go some way into understanding the extent to which recalibration is necessary.

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<sup>11</sup> Mick Krever, ‘Yesteryear’ U.S.-Saudi relations are gone, says former intel chief ,CNN, April 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/20/world/saudi-prince-turki-amanpour/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ulrichsen, Op. Cit.