

THE ARABIAN PENINSULA ENGULFED IN TURMOIL: HOW SAUDI ARABIAN-UNITED STATES MILITARY POLICIES SHAPE THE REGION

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War was supposed to usher in a time of peace and global tranquility. That peace has proven elusive at best with enemies who do not always wave their banners proudly leading to much confusion as to who the enemy really are as well as their intended goals. The end of the Cold War roughly coincided with the first major involvement of US forces in the Persian Gulf region with Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991. This massive troop buildup and deployment has been cited by many experts and historians as the genesis of today's conflicts between the United States and several terrorist organizations most notably Al-Qaeda.¹ The superficial answer for the reason behind US involvement at that time was oil, but as are many explanations for occurrences in the region, it is just not that simple. The special relationship that the United States has with Saudi Arabia played a major part in the decision to base operations for Desert Storm in Islam's most holy country.

Since the end of what has been called "The Gulf War" or "The First Gulf War" in recent lexicon, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has mirrored that of a married couple long since their nuptials. There have been ups, working together to defeat terrorist plots

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¹ Sebastian Gorka. "Inside Al-Qaeda" (*Armchair General*, May 2012), 48.

and to strengthen the region, as well as downs,² the immediate aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, yet the future is still uncertain. Golden years could await the relationship as it transitions with its aging leadership or perhaps a divorce is looming on the horizon. Both parties are well aware that their future is tumultuous at best and are more than willing to work for their own best interests at the expense of the other.³ As long as they share similar goals; however, the relationship still has merits and is tenable. Both parties have vested interests in stability throughout the region, especially since the Arab Spring of two years ago that claimed so many governments throughout the Islamic world. They also share a concern for some sort of binding resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, combating terrorist organizations, blunting Iran's influence abroad, as well as preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.⁴ These shared interests make up the mainstay of US foreign policy with regards to the Middle East. As long as there remains a common vision, these two nations will continue to work together steering the boat towards the horizon with each eyeing their own desired destination.

Overview

The purpose of this research paper is to examine what is known about the often secretive relationship that exists between Saudi Arabia and the United States and how agreements between those two nations have shaped US military involvement in Saudi Arabia and the nation states adjacent to it. It will briefly cover the history of cooperation between the two nations, but it will focus on the period from the end of the Cold War to the present. This time range was selected because it comprises the lion share of interaction between the two nations as well as the most crucial intersections of their paths.

Some of the specific questions that this paper intends to answer, or at the very least shed light on, are as follows. What was the genesis of the relationship between these two nations? This

² Mohammad Ayoob. *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 165.

³ Gregory Gause, F. *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*. Center for Preventative Action (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011), 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

question is intended to expose the factors that led these two nations to choose each other for a shared vision and why they did not align themselves with other countries instead. Why did Saudi Arabia choose to allow US troops to be stationed on its sovereign territory in 1990 instead of relying on fellow Muslims like the Mujahidin fighters that had recently returned from Afghanistan? This question was chosen because of its perceived importance to the growth of insurgent networks after the fact. What is the origin of transnational terrorists groups like al Qaeda, and what is their real intent? By better understanding these international Islamist groups' desires it may prove easier to not provoke them or learn how to defeat them. How have the transnational groups that are deemed by both Saudi Arabia and the United States as terrorists changed the policies and doctrines of those two nations? This question is posed to determine if the governments in question are reactive or proactive in how they deal with perceived threats against them. Both nations, the United States and Saudi Arabia have experienced changes in leadership in the last decade. How have changes in leadership affected both nations in regards to their policies when dealing with groups like al Qaeda? The final question is one that will be answered by calculated speculation. What does the relationship between these two world powers look like going forward?

Literature Review

Careful examination of numerous sources from a wide range of places has revealed inklings to the answers of the questions that have been posed. The types of media used in this paper include, but are not limited to; books, magazine and journal articles, speeches, embassy and diplomatic cables, executive memos and directives, newspaper entries, interviews, and eyewitness accounts of events. The books that were reviewed provided the timeline for the period of events in question. Once this framework was established the other sources were used to clarify the picture and deduce overarching themes.

The first secondary source that was consulted is titled *The Secret History of Al Qaeda* by Abdel Bari. A sizeable portion of the book is dedicated to terror networks in Saudi Arabia and the surrounding region. The author spent several days with Osama bin Laden prior to the September 11th attacks on the United States. This gave Bari unique insight into what drove the al Qaeda leader to carry out his international campaign of terror. Bari also worked for a news outlet that

was often sent emails and communications from al Qaeda that verified their involvement with many of the events in question. Bari also postulates as to how terrorist networks will likely evolve in the near future.

The second secondary source that was used is *The Many Faces of Political Islam* by Mohammed Ayoob. This book provides important pieces in the quest to answer the research questions because it provides insight into the mix of politics and religion that dominate the region. It also devotes some of its pages to explaining the genesis of al Qaeda's hatred of the United States as well as how this terrorist organization has changed over the last two decades. Ayoob also succinctly states why al Qaeda and other transnational jihadi groups will more than likely fail over time.⁵

The third secondary source I used was *Decision Points*, by former US President George W. Bush. *Decision Points* is Bush's personal account of the major events that occurred while he was Commander-in-Chief. Large parts of the book are devoted to the September 11th attacks on the United States by al Qaeda and the subsequent reaction to the events that transpired that day. This book is also important because it highlights the personal relationship that President Bush shared with King Faud and his commitment to working with the Saudis on a broad spectrum of issues. It also helps to frame the Bush Doctrine and how the struggle with transnational jihadi networks helped to define it.⁶

The fourth important secondary source of information that was utilized for this research paper is *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* by John Esposito. This book was selected because it provides an excellent biography of Osama bin Laden and an overview of the al Qaeda network. Esposito succinctly summarizes the network's early years when it was still struggling to shape its

⁵ Ayoob, *Many Faces*, 131.

⁶ George W, Bush. *Decision Point* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2011), 286.

identity.⁷ It also provides a plethora of information about the interworkings of the region that can be used to help answer a few of the research questions that have been posed.

Once the skeleton of the period under the microscope was put in place by the secondary sources, specific events were researched in detail. By going after primary sources and excerpts from other secondary sources, the whole and unbiased story fell into place. The bulk of the research that was used to determine how Saudi Arabian and United States' policies influence the Arabian Peninsula came from primary sources. Many newspaper, magazine, and journal articles were utilized in this endeavor. Careful attention was used to select from a wide range of credible sources to give this paper more depth and commonality. Declassified and public sources of information from both the Saudi Arabian and United States governments also compose a sizable chunk of the information contained within this report. These sources came from Presidential memos and directives, policy recommendations to Congress, Department of State communications, embassy cables, and official telegrams to list a few of the types of media employed. The rest of the material used in answering the proposed research questions came from individuals who were directly involved in the events in question. These accounts come in the form of speeches, interviews, press releases, and eyewitness reports.

The American and Saudi Alliance from the 1930s to 1990.

The United States has an official history with Saudi Arabia that dates back to November 7, 1933, when diplomatic relations were established between the two nations.⁸ The unofficial relationship dates back farther than that to roughly the end of World War I when the premier of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz, was enamored with President Wilson's call not to partition the Middle East and Wilson's pro self-determination stance.⁹ It was not until the discovery of oil, however, that Saudi Arabia's importance began to be partially visualized. After humble beginning in the 1930s crude oil was slowly flowing from Saudi wells by the start of World War II. President Franklin

⁷ John Esposito. *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20-25.

⁸ Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Information Office. "Saudi - US Relations" (Washington: Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Information Office, 2012), 1.

⁹ Ibid.

Roosevelt saw the long term benefits that a strategic alliance between the two nations would provide. On February 14th, 1945 Roosevelt met with King Ibn Saud on the deck of the naval cruiser *USS Quincy*.¹⁰ To highlight the monumental nature of the occasion this was the King's first trip outside of his country.¹¹ The two leaders dined together and talked for over four hours. The meeting ended with a pledge from the US President to help with the defense of Saudi Arabia stating that it was "a vital interest for the defense of the United States of America."¹²

Saudi – US relations were cordial but dormant and lackluster for over a decade after that fateful meeting on the *USS Quincy*. The next blip on the radar occurred with the issuance of the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957. President Eisenhower stated that any country could request economic or military aid from the United States if it felt threatened by another nation.¹³ This was nothing more than a thinly veiled disguise to fight the spread of communism during the Cold War, but it did work to strengthen the relationship between the two nations as well as deter the Soviets from attempting to establish a foothold inside the Kingdom.

The 1970s were a turbulent time for both countries. That decade saw the first major evaluation in how the Saudis and the Americans viewed each other and their strategic importance. The first incident of note occurred with the rising of oil prices following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. The increased revenue flushed the Saudis with petrodollars that they quickly reinvested in the United States primarily in conjunction with the oil lobbies. Plus, the Saudis began to purchase vast amounts of US military hardware.¹⁴ This two pronged incursion into US policy lobbying and business circles helped the Saudis to increase their voice inside Washington DC.

¹⁰ FDR Presidential Library. "February, 14, 1945." *Franklin D. Roosevelt Day By Day* (February 14, 1945), 1.

¹¹ FDR, *Day By Day*, 2.

¹² Mustafa al-Labbad. "Obama's Presidency Brings Uncertainty to Saudi-US Relations" (*Al Monitor*. March 11, 2013), 1.

¹³ Office of the Historian. "Milestones: 1953-1960. The Eisenhower Doctrine, 1957" (*US Department of State*), 1.

¹⁴ al-Labbad, *Obama's Presidency Brings Uncertainty*, 2.

What the US received in return was the coordination of Saudi oil production capacity to increase and decrease as needed as to not upset the world markets.¹⁵

1979 was a watershed year in the Middle East. This was especially true for the United States and Saudi Arabia. Three major events roughly coincided that emphasized why the two nations needed each other more than either had previously realized. Early in 1979 the United States' biggest military ally, the Shah of Iran, was overthrown by a conglomerate of religious fanatics, students, and those opposed to the Shah's oppressive regime.¹⁶ The anti-American backlash was so intense that ties between Iran and the United States are still strained today some thirty plus years later. The new Shia dominated Iranian regime quickly emerged as a reinvigorated source of conflict with Saudi Arabia and their Sunni style government. This played into the hands of the United States as the US needed a new military stalwart to help regain the perceived balance in the Middle East.

The second event that transpired in 1979 was the escalating situation in Afghanistan. The Soviets did not enter Afghanistan until December 24th of that year, but by that point US support had already been flowing into the country for over five months. On July 3rd, 1979 President Carter signed a directive to secretly "aid the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul."¹⁷ The Saudis were also highly critical of the communist leaning government in Kabul. They agreed to match the United States' monetary contributions dollar for dollar over the course of the next decade.¹⁸

The third event of note that occurred in 1979 was the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia by homegrown terrorists. Early on the morning of the 20th of November the call to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nikki Keddi. *Modern Iran*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 214-240.

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski . interview by Le Nouvel Observateur. *The CIA's Intervention in Afghanistan* (January 15, 1998), 1.

¹⁸ Abdel Bari Atwan. *The Secret History of Al Qaeda*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 44.

prayer was interrupted by a group of roughly 500 gunmen who took the mosque by force, locked the doors, and holed up for days.¹⁹ The exact number of terrorists that stormed the mosque was never known as evidenced by the Saudi's secret communications with the US. One such message went as follows, "Unknown number of gunmen and hostages still remain in part of the basement of Mecca's Grand Mosque."²⁰ This cable transpired eight days after the initial seizure. The Saudis found themselves in a bind that they could not solve on their own. They were forced to call on foreigners, the French and the Pakistanis, to help retake the Grand Mosque. This incident, apart from being Saudi Arabia's first major brush with terrorism, showcased the need for a stronger Saudi military option both internally and externally. All three of these events coalesced into a stronger relationship between the Saudis and the Americans.

In the waning days of the Carter Administration the President went so far as to redefine the Eisenhower Doctrine with NSC-63. This Presidential Directive redefined the framework for Persian Gulf security. It specifically mentioned providing aid to the Arabian Peninsula to increase its internal stability and the use of the Saudis to help meet regional security needs.²¹ The events that were transpiring in Afghanistan and what had occurred at the Grand Mosque clearly influenced White House policy. NSC-63 also included language that covered the shipping lanes around the Straits of Hormuz while protecting the nations in the region that might be affected by the Iran-Iraq War.²² This was a direct response to the challenge of the new government in Teheran and its anti-US and Saudi policies.

The ascension of Ronald Reagan into the Oval Office did not see a curtailing of US – Saudi cooperation. In fact, it saw a greater reliance on mutual support between the two nations.

¹⁹ Kamal Astal,. "An Examination of the View that Political Power in the Arab World Rests Simply on a Regime's Control of the Military and Security Services" (*Pakistan Journal of Applied Sciences*. 2002), 315.

²⁰ American Embassy - Jeddah. "JIDDA 8219" (United States Department of State, 1979), 1.

²¹Zbigniew Brzezinski. "Presidential Directive/NSC-63" (Washington: The White House, January 15, 1981), 3.

²² Ibid., 1.

President Reagan was not above bypassing Congress or bending the law to achieve his desires. In 1987, *the Washington Post*, ran a front page article highlighting how after a meeting with high level Saudi officials Nicaraguan Contras began to receive \$1 million a month in a private account.²³ This covert activity went on for roughly two years with the aid doubling in the second year. The article also corroborated that the United States, through the CIA, was funneling money into Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, and the Saudis were matching US funding dollar for dollar although Woodward grossly underestimated the amount of aid that was reaching Afghanistan.²⁴

Operation Desert Storm and the Rise of Transnational Jihadists

The transition of leadership from President Reagan to President George H. Bush in Washington was a smooth one that saw a continuation of most of the former's policies. The first President Bush found himself in charge of the sole superpower left in the world as the Soviet Union finally imploded under his watch. The process of that fragmentation had been set in motion well before his time and was hastened by the Soviet's debacle in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, President George H. Bush received his major Middle East test on August 2nd, 1991 when Saddam Hussein's armies invaded Kuwait. This came somewhat as a shock to the Americans as just one week prior the Iraqi premier had sent a "message of friendship to President Bush."²⁵ The message contained language that stated the nature of Iraq's complaints against Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Stated succinctly the two nations were overproducing their oil quota which was driving global prices lower and severely hindering Iraq's ability to rebuild itself after the Iraq-Iran War.²⁶ The diplomatic cable laid out a potential framework for a peaceful resolution to the dispute. It also contained vague overtures to a military settlement if the talks between the Iraqis and the Kuwaitis in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia fell through.²⁷ Saddam claimed

²³ Woodward, Bob, and David Ottaway. "President, Saudis Met Twice; Funds Flowed to Contras After Talks." (*The Washington Post*, May 12, 1987), A1.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ April Glaspie. "Saddam's Message of Friendship to President Bush" (*Baghdad 04237*. Baghdad: US Embassy Baghdad , July 25, 1990), 1-3.

²⁶ Ibid., 1-2.

²⁷ Ibid., 3-5.

that since he never received a response from the United States he assumed that he was being given the proverbial green light to proceed with action against Kuwait once the talks failed. Saddam severely miscalculated the international response to his actions.

Besides the West many Middle Eastern nations were highly alarmed by Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait. At no place was this tension more palpable than in Saudi Arabia. Many Saudis had long feared an enlarged Ba'athist footprint in the region. It was in fact a returning Saudi mujahedin fighter from Afghanistan who was among the first to sound the alarm that Iraq had plans to take over the entire Gulf region well before August 1990.²⁸ The alarmist's name was Osama bin Laden. After the August 2nd invasion he wrote a letter to the Saudi Minister of the Interior, Prince Nayif bin Abdul Aziz, where bin Laden suggested mobilizing the remnants of the Afghanistan mujahedin, which included his fledgling group al Qaeda, to liberate Kuwait with upwards of 100,000 fighters.²⁹ The Saudis rejected his offer, and instead called upon the United States for help.³⁰ Bin Laden was furious that the Saudis were not only allowing but inviting US forces into the land of the two holy mosques. He drew parallels between Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia as well as between the US and the USSR.³¹ Bin Laden saw this upcoming fight against the lone superpower as a continuation of his previous fight where he was victorious against the Soviet Union.

Desert Storm, the name of the military operation to dislodge the Iraqi Army, was a swift one-sided affair once it finally commenced six months after the occupation of Kuwait. The Iraqis were beaten on all fronts, forced to flee Kuwait, and sign peace treaties thus ending the war and accepting all blame for causing it. The coalition that had fought against the Ba'athists proudly waved their flags and patted themselves on the back for their efforts, but what they missed was the residual anger that many in the Middle East felt after the guns fell silent. The United States did not remove all of their forces from the Kingdom, and instead sought to increase their

²⁸ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 45.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gorka, "Inside Al-Qaeda", 48.

³¹ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 46.

presence throughout the region. On February 18th, 1992 a Department of Defense draft was developed that called for the United States to do what was necessary to remain the sole superpower in the world.³² Policy moves like these as well as the continued military cooperation between the United States military and Saudi Arabia gave bin Laden all the proof that he required to show that the infidels would not be stopped unless ordinary Muslims fought back against them. Bin Laden coupled this logic with a loose interpretation of a fatwa by Saudi cleric Sheikh bin Uthaymin who had called for all Muslims to be ready to battle against invaders.³³ Vague interpretations of religious law combined with military and political maneuverings formed the basis of bin Laden and al Qaeda's raison d'être.

Bin Laden and members of his al Qaeda network arrived in Sudan in December, 1991.³⁴ He claimed that he was there under the auspices of working with his construction company which was undertaking civil engineering projects. Bin Laden did succeed with many improvements to the infrastructure of Sudan including the Port Sudan airport and the Defiance Highway at great expense to his personal fortune³⁵, but this humanitarian facade was merely the front that he employed to hide the training of al Qaeda warriors.

It did not take long before the opportunity presented itself to strike at American interests. In 1992 US forces were preparing to intervene in Somalia, across the Gulf of Aden from the Arabian Peninsula. Al Qaeda had pinpointed a hotel in Aden, Yemen that was housing members of the US military. A successful bomb attack was carried out, but it failed to kill any US servicemen.³⁶ They had left the hotel shortly before the explosion. The following year al Qaeda forces were the masterminds behind the incident in Mogadishu where the United States

³² William Burr. "Prevent the Reemergence of a New Rival" (*The Nuclear Vault*. March 8, 1992), 3.

³³ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

witnessed two of its Blackhawk helicopters being shot from the sky and several military members killed as well.³⁷³⁸

The acts in Yemen and the Horn of Africa strengthened bin Laden's resolve, but they also brought considerable pressure on him from many nations that wanted him removed or at the very least contained. Bin Laden knew he had to leave Sudan, and it was at this time that he decided to go all in and devote himself to a larger military campaign against his perceived enemies.³⁹ In 1995 the al Qaeda network struck again. This time it was a military building in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Five Americans were killed and sixty were injured when a car bomb was detonated outside the structure causing mass damage.⁴⁰⁴¹ The following year, June 25, 1996, another al Qaeda attack was undertaken in the Kingdom. This time the target was the Khobar Towers, a military barracks in Dharan.⁴² This attack dwarfed the previous year's attack in its ferocity and its destruction. Nineteen Americans were killed and approximately 500 were wounded.⁴³⁴⁴ The bomb was estimated at upwards of 8,000 pounds of TNT, which was more than thirty times more powerful than the previous al Qaeda attack in Riyadh.⁴⁵ Osama bin Laden's transnational jihadist network was growing exponentially.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Esposito, *Unholy War*, 14.

³⁹ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 49.

⁴⁰ Bacon, Ken, interview by CNN. (November 13, 1995).

⁴¹ Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Information Office. "Saudi - US Relations" (Washington, 2012), 10.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 49.

⁴⁴ Bacon, interview by CNN.

⁴⁵ Secretary of Defense. "Volume 11, Number 88." (*U.S. Department of Defense*. September 16, 1996), 1.

In August 1996 shortly after the attack on the Khobar Towers, bin Laden released a lengthy statement that has since been called his first fatwa or a declaration of war against the United States. In his letter he calls for a struggle against the West since they have conducted “the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places –the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message and the place of the noble Ka’ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims – by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies.”⁴⁶ With these words bin Laden outlined his main problem, the occupation of Saudi Arabia, and who the guilty parties were. The United States and its allies, to include the Saudi royal family, were the perpetrators. This call to arms, while widely unknown to most Americans at the time, did catch the eye of many in Washington. That same year John Brennan was sent to Riyadh to run the CIA’s intelligence station there.⁴⁷ Under Brennan’s tutelage the CIA began to work more closely with Saudi counterterrorism experts.

In February 1998, bin Laden released his second fatwa.⁴⁸ It was a revision and extension of his first statement. The same reasons and guilty parties were identified, but this time the message was expanded. Bin Laden announced that his group, al Qaeda, was partnering up with several other Islamic jihad groups to form the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders.⁴⁹ He declared to all Muslims that, “the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilian and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque (Mecca) from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of the land of Islam.”⁵⁰ This ruling is important because in it bin Laden makes clear that to al Qaeda there is no longer a

⁴⁶ Osama Bin Laden. "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places." (London: Al Quds Al Arabi, August 23, 1996), 1.

⁴⁷ Max Fisher. "Beyond secret drones: The roots of the awkward, improbable, contradictory, U.S.-Saudi relationship." (*The Washington Post*. February 6, 2013), 1.

⁴⁸ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 79.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Osama Bin Laden. "Al Qaeda's Second Fatwa." (*PBS Newshour*. February 23, 1998), 1.

distinction between civilians and military members. All are the enemy. Bin Laden also emphasized that attacks should not be limited due to geographical constraints. They should occur wherever possible, and that it is an implied duty of all who are able to do so. Bin Laden punctuated his claims by two attacks on US embassies in Africa that killed more than 220 people.⁵¹

In 2000 al Qaeda was ready to show that they were willing to select and attack more brazen targets. In January of that year al Qaeda operatives attempted to get a small boat filled with explosives alongside the *USS Sullivans* and detonate it.⁵² The boat filled with explosives sank, but the terrorists were able to salvage their equipment and plan the attack for a later date.⁵³ That date was October 12th, 2000. On that day al Qaeda agents successfully carried out essentially the same plan from January on the *USS Cole*. The attack killed seventeen people on the ship and wounded dozens more.⁵⁴ Bin Laden anticipated a US military response to this suicide attack, but none was forthcoming. He vowed to keep selecting bigger and higher profile targets until he got the United States' full attention. Bin Laden used the attack on the *USS Cole* to help make propaganda videos that he widely disseminated in Saudi Arabia in order to seek new recruits for al Qaeda.⁵⁵

Bin Laden's associates scored their most successful attack on September 11th, 2001. On that date nineteen al Qaeda members hijacked four planes and attacked multiple locations in the United States by flying the passenger airliners into prominent targets.⁵⁶ After it was revealed that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, Saudi – US relations suffered adversely. This

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Global Security. "Attacks on US Warships in Port of Aden" (globalsecurity.org), 1.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kean/Hamilton Commission. *9/11 Commission Report*. (Washington: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004), 207.

⁵⁵ Global Security. "Attacks on US Warships", 2.

⁵⁶ Kean/Hamilton. *9/11 Commission Report*, 285-310.

forced the Saudis to wage an expensive and prolonged campaign to bolster their image as fighters of terrorism and the premier partner of the United States in the Middle East.⁵⁷ To illustrate this from the Saudi perspective consider the words that King Abdullah wrote in 2002 on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continues to stand solidly against terrorism. We shall act, independently as well as collectively, with the US-led international coalition to wage a fierce and merciless war against the terrorists in order to eradicate this deadly disease that threatens all societies.”⁵⁸

The US – Saudi Relationship Redefined

Behind the scenes the two nations began to collaborate more freely with regards to counterterrorism and specifically al Qaeda. Both countries were alarmed with the level of terrorist activities that were originating out of Yemen, Saudi Arabia’s southern neighbor. In March of 2002, less than six months after the September 11th attacks, US President George W. Bush signed orders sending 100 troops to Yemen to help train the Yemenis how to conduct counterterrorism campaigns against insurgents operating in and around their country.⁵⁹

President Bush outlined how his administration planned to deal with terrorists as well as highlighted his commitment to working with the Saudis publically in his post 9/11 National Security Strategy.⁶⁰ In his 2002 original and his 2006 revision of the strategy Bush cites working with other nations as a necessity to deny terrorist networks what they need to survive: financial support, protection from certain nation states, and a safe haven from which to operate. Bush thanked the Saudis directly for their “effective efforts to capture or kill the leadership of the al Qaeda network.”⁶¹ Bush also specifically mentioned how the US must take the fight to terrorist networks where they operate in order to prevent future attacks on the United States.⁶² When

⁵⁷ Al-Labbad. "Obama's Presidency Brings Uncertainty", 2.

⁵⁸ Saudi Arabia Information Office. "Saudi - US Relations," 11.

⁵⁹ Michael Gordon. "A Nation Challenged: The Military; U.S. Broadens Terror Fight, Readying Troops for Yemen." (*The New York Times*. March 2, 2002), A3.

⁶⁰ George W Bush. "The National Security Strategy" (*The White House*. March 2006), 2-6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*

summed up, this strategy required more coordination with the Saudis and a sharing of knowledge to achieve the common goals shared by both nations.

It may have taken the tragedy of the September 11th attacks to awaken most Americans to the threat of terrorism from transnational jihadist groups, but by that time Saudi Arabia was already well entrenched in its struggle against such networks. As previously mentioned, the 1995 car bombing in Riyadh and the 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers were both works of terrorism conducted on Saudi Arabian soil.⁶³ The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, however, would have a profound effect on Saudi Arabia culminating in increased terrorist activity within its borders. When the United States went to war against Afghanistan in October 2001, with Saudi support, many jihadists left the area and returned home to the Kingdom.⁶⁴ Back home in Saudi Arabia they conspired as to how best strike out against the ruling family and weaken the Saudi – US relationship.

The opportunity presented itself when the Americans became bogged down in Iraq, which they had invaded in March of 2003.⁶⁵ A new branch of al Qaeda known as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was created with Yusef al-Ayeri as its first leader.⁶⁶ The initial focus of AQAP was on foreigners working inside of the Kingdom. This was evident by their selection of foreign national housing compounds as their first targets. On May 12th, 2003 a coordinated attack by nine suicide bombers destroyed large parts of three housing compounds for foreign workers in Riyadh killing thirty-four people.⁶⁷ A similar attack occurred in Riyadh on November 8th, 2003 killing another seventeen individuals.⁶⁸

⁶³ Saudi Arabia Information Office. "Saudi - US Relations," 10.

⁶⁴ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 169.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶⁷ Saudi Arabia Information Office. "Saudi - US Relations", 10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

In 2004 AQAP switched their aims from attacking foreigners in housing complexes to attacking oil facilities and Saudi infrastructure. The belief was that if they could disrupt the flow of oil al Qaeda could affect the global economy thus paralyzing the West. On May 1st, 2004 al Qaeda gunmen attacked the Yanbu Petrochemical complex killing five including two Americans.⁶⁹ Four weeks later more oil facilities were targeted. A lengthy gun battle ensued at multiple locations that claimed the lives of nineteen foreigners and three Saudis at several oil company offices.⁷⁰

There was a brief pause in attacks on petroleum facilities towards the end of 2004. On the 6th of December al Qaeda operatives attacked the US consulate in Jeddah.⁷¹ Five people were killed in the attack. On the 29th of that month al Qaeda attacked the Saudi Special Forces recruitment station and the Ministry of the Interior simultaneously.⁷² These attacks showed that al Qaeda was disciplined and unpredictable.

After the pause al Qaeda continued to seek out petroleum targets in hopes of slowing the flow of crude and driving up oil prices. The largest oil refinery in the world is the Abqaiq processing plant in Saudi Arabia.⁷³ Al Qaeda attacked it on February 24th, 2006 with multiple cars loaded with explosives.⁷⁴ The plan was to ram the gate and detonate the bombs in the vicinity of the heart of the facility thus crippling the flow of oil to the west. The plan failed, but it still caused a spike in oil prices due to nervous investors who were finally realizing just how fragile the oil delivery network really was.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 170.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷⁴ BBC. "Saudis foil oil facility attack" (*BBC News*. February 24, 2006), 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Although AQAP initially experienced success against oil related targets and foreigners in 2003 what it failed to account for was the Saudi's counterterrorism response. While coordinating with the United States on al Qaeda threats throughout the region the main focus of Saudi efforts went towards thwarting AQAP in the Kingdom. Al-Ayeri, AQAP's first leader, was ambushed and killed by Saudi forces in June 2003.⁷⁶ His replacement, Khaled al-Hajj, was killed nine months later in Riyadh.⁷⁷ In June, 2004 the third leader of AQAP was killed by Saudi police. The fourth leader, Saleh al-Ufi, had the longest tenure of the early leaders at fourteen months.⁷⁸ The Saudi security forces were getting better at infiltrating AQAP's network. In April, 2007 they announced the arrest of 172 Islamist militants.⁷⁹ This action proved to be the coup de grace for AQAP operations based inside the Kingdom. Early in 2008 many in AQAP's leadership moved south to Yemen where they felt they would have greater freedom of movement to carry out their operations.⁸⁰ AQAP leadership did enjoy a few months of relatively unhindered operating time, but the nature of the Saudi – US relationship ensured that the tranquility would not last long.

In 2009 the assault against AQAP and transnational terrorists hiding in Yemen began. The latest US President, Barack Obama, used cruise missiles to attack a suspected al Qaeda training center.⁸¹ However, instead of a training center, it turned out to be a Bedouin village where fifty-five people were killed.⁸² Most of the dead were not terrorists but civilians. This kind of indiscriminate lethality was not acceptable to the Obama Administration, and a better means to dispatch AQAP operatives was sought out. The best solution was deemed to be targeted drone

⁷⁶ Atwan, *History of Al Qaeda*, 177.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Scott Macleod. "The Saudi Arrests: How Big a Plot?" (*Time*. April 27, 2007), 1.

⁸⁰ Christopher Blanchard. "Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations" (*Congressional Research Service*. November 27, 2012), 13.

⁸¹ Gregory Johnsen. "Losing Yemen" (*Foreign Policy*. November 5, 2012), 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*

strikes. Drones are preferred over missile strikes because drones possess the ability to monitor a situation and circle about near the target for hours. This gives the drone operators the ability to choose when is the most opportune time to engage a target as well as how to best minimize collateral damage.

Shortly after the first errant cruise strike the CIA began building a secret drone base inside Saudi Arabia that is used to engage targets inside Yemen and Saudi Arabia.⁸³ The Saudi government is more than happy that the US drone base is housed on its territory, as it feels that drones help to improve the security of the Kingdom.⁸⁴ The first admitted use of the secret drone base was to strike at the American born Anwar al-Awlaki in September, 2011.⁸⁵ This was a controversial move because for the first time a US launched drone attack, with full Yemeni support, had targeted and killed a US citizen without neither an arrest nor a trial. Since the secret base's inception the US has launched over fifty strikes on Yemen alone killing more than 250 suspected AQAP members.⁸⁶

According to the Obama Administration, conducting a war against transnational jihadists in this manner is a delicate but necessary evil that is composed like a house of cards. The Saudis provide the base. The Americans provide the technology, and the Yemenis provide consent to strike in their country and often taking the credit. Putting a Yemeni face on many of these operations is essential so as not to seem like the United States has gone rogue in a country we are not officially at war with. The Saudis prefer that their residents are left in the dark about what the Americans are doing on Saudi soil since the housing of US troops was one of al Qaeda's reasons for declaring war on the royal family and the United States after Operation Desert Storm. The US would also prefer not to publicize the amount and ferocity of its drone campaign,

⁸³ Worth, Robert, Mark Mazzetti, and Scott Shane. "Drone Strikes' Risks to Get Rare Moment in the Public Eye" (*The New York Times*, February 5, 2013), 3.

⁸⁴ Max Fisher. "Beyond secret drones" (*The Washington Post*, February 6, 2013), 3.

⁸⁵ Robert Worth, et al. "Drone Strikes" 2, 3.

⁸⁶ Bill Roggio and Bob Barry. "Charting the data for US air strikes in Yemen, 2002 - 2013" (*The Long War Journal*, April 21, 2013), 1-2.

especially when the issue of killing suspected terrorists without a trial emerges. That aspect though, killing without apprehension, is what the Obama Administration seems to prefer.⁸⁷ When the war on terror is conducted in this manner there is no interrogation or Guantanamo Bay needed.

Alliances Post 9/11

The relationship between the Saudis and the Americans fundamentally changed in the wake of the September 11th, 2001 attacks in the United States. The two nations still shared common interests with regards to Iran and the flow of oil, but combating terrorism became a centerpiece in the partnership that necessitated greater cooperation. In President Bush's memoir, *Decision Points*, he says the following, "After 9/11, I developed a strategy to protect the country that came to be known as the Bush Doctrine: First, make no distinction between the terrorists and the nations that harbor them—and hold both to account. Second, take the fight to the enemy overseas before they can attack us again here at home. Third, confront threats before they fully materialize. And fourth, advance liberty and hope as an alternative to the enemy's ideology of repression and fear."⁸⁸ Saudi Arabia was a key partner in implementing this strategy. Together the two nations worked hand-in-hand to weaken and defeat transnational terrorist networks for the betterment of both countries.

In the summer of 2003 the Saudis and Americans announced that they had a set up a joint task force under the auspices of dealing with terrorist attacks.⁸⁹ This was an important early step in counterterrorism as it allowed law enforcement and intelligence members from both nations to coordinate, share information, and strategize about how best to defeat insurgent networks. One way of attacking the networks was financially. Several times beginning after the creation of the joint task force the Saudis and Americans froze bank accounts and dried up the money flow to several organizations that it felt were financiers of global terrorism.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Peter Baker. "Obama's Turn in Bush's Bind" (*The New York Times*. February 9, 2013), 2.

⁸⁸ Bush. *Decision Points*, 650.

⁸⁹ Saudi Arabia Information Office. "Saudi - US Relations", 12.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

Many other agreements and recognitions of each other's efforts have been made since the joint task force. In April 2005, Crown Prince Abdullah met with President Bush in Texas where a strategic dialogue was established.⁹¹ The purpose of this dialogue was to better coordinate US – Saudi policy with regards to strategic and political issues. On October 19th, 2007, President Bush certified Saudi Arabia as an anti-terrorism ally.⁹² This speaks volumes as to the amount of behind the scenes cooperation that existed between the two nations as it was only six years prior that it was confirmed that fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were Saudi Nationals. In May of 2008 a bilateral agreement was signed in support of protecting critical Saudi infrastructure.⁹³ Infrastructure is a big word that comprises many things, but what is really being protected by this agreement are the wells, refineries and delivery methods of petroleum that exist in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Perhaps the biggest symbol of cooperation between the two can be referenced in the 2010 US Congressional approval of a \$60 billion arms package.⁹⁴ The relationship between the two nations is very close indeed. How else could you categorize a partnership where one nation sells the other eighty-five F-15 advanced fighter jets, thirty-six Apache attack helicopters, and numerous other weapons and military hardware?⁹⁵ The two nations often conduct joint training and exercises together and the addition of more American manufactured hardware into the Kingdom ensures that the two will have a sustained military partnership for years to come.

Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss

Saudi Arabia and the United States have a long and sordid history that dates back almost a hundred years. While it may be true that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first American

⁹¹ Ibid., 9.

⁹² Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. "Chronology of Saudi-U.S. Relations" (*Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia*. January 15, 2013), 2.

⁹³ Blanchard. "Background and U.S. Relations", 6.

⁹⁴ Michael Coleman. "U.S.-Saudi Relationship Weathers Arab Spring" (*The Washington Diplomat*. January 31, 2013), 2.

⁹⁵ Blanchard. "Background and U.S. Relations", 5.

leader to meet directly with the King of Saudi Arabia, US – Saudi relations were further defined by events that occurred in 1979, 1990, and 2001. With the three issues that were discussed earlier that occurred in 1979: seizure of the Grand Mosque, the fall of the Shah of Iran, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States and Saudi Arabia began working more closely together to meet their shared common goals. On April 26th, 1984 President Reagan outlined his proposals to combat international terrorism to Congress.⁹⁶ In this proposal Reagan notes that cooperation with other governments is essential to tackling the terrorism problem.

The first President Bush saw his presidency defined not by how he fought terror but by his handling of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The basing of US troops on Saudi soil in 1990 was cited as an impetus by Osama bin Laden for using al Qaeda to fight the United States and its allies. By the time al Qaeda got around to attacking US interests, it was President Clinton's problem. Clinton greatly influenced the Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995 that was proposed to Congress by then Senator Joe Biden.⁹⁷ The Act further delineated the principles put forth by Reagan that all nations who have a stake in combating terrorism must cooperate and work together. It also went further by targeting the financing of terrorist groups in order to deprive them of the means to carry out their jihad against others.

The September 11th attacks and the US response to it defined the second Bush's Presidency as well as influenced President Obama's handling of the Middle East. In 2002 George W. Bush defined how the war against terrorism would be fought. His plan was essentially a tweaking of Clinton's plan. The Bush Doctrine would utilize a multipronged offensive that required international cooperation to go after transnational terrorist organizations militarily and financially.⁹⁸ Bush's personal relationship with the House of Saud was a key component of the Doctrine. President Obama "might be the least pro-Saudi president in the history of American-

⁹⁶ Roland Reagan. "Message to the Congress Transmitting Proposed Legislation to Combat International Terrorism" (*Reagan Archives - University of Texas*. April 26, 1984), 1.

⁹⁷ Biden, Joe. "Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995" (US Senate bill S.390. February 10, 1995), 1-111.

⁹⁸ Bush. "National Strategy", 1-4

Saudi relations,”⁹⁹ but he has chosen to continue the majority of Bush’s policies under his watch as Commander-in-Chief.¹⁰⁰ That policy includes using Guantanamo Bay to house terrorists, targeted killings, domestic spying, and secret presidential memos authorizing great powers to the President when waging war abroad.¹⁰¹ The major difference between Bush’s and Obama’s approach to counterterrorism is the latter’s unfettered use of drones to dispatch suspected terrorists.¹⁰² Drone strikes have increased exponentially since the not-so-secret drone base opened for business in Saudi Arabia in 2011. The reasons for this are many, but one major positive for the Obama Administration is that dead suspected terrorists do not have to be interrogated or housed off US soil in places like Guantanamo Bay.

The Horizon

The Saudi – US relationship has been at the bedrock of American Middle Eastern foreign policy for decades. That policy was built upon oil, regional stability, and common interests during the Cold War. However, counterterrorism has come to rival oil for a position par excellence in the relationship. The names and faces have changed over the years, and the policies originating out of Riyadh and Washington have too, but in spite of all of their differences, they tend to echo the same refrain, “Saudi Arabia pumps the oil, and the United States offers protection for it.” If the oil dried up or the power began to wane there would be a reshuffling of the players for sure. However, as long as the two nations share common interests: regional stability, the free flow of oil, containing Iranian influence, and a comprehensive counterterrorism policy, there is no need to think that the relationship is headed for trouble anytime soon. It is true that the Saudi ruling family is due for a potentially messy change in leadership. It could also be argued that too many in the royal family live in ostentatious luxury at the expense of the people. There are not enough skilled workers of Saudi descent in the Kingdom, and that the Arab Spring led to much turmoil in the region, but the Saudis tend to be one step ahead of such a looming crisis. Starting in 2011

⁹⁹ Al-Labbad. "Obama's Presidency Brings Uncertainty", 3-4.

¹⁰⁰ David Kravets. "Former CIA Chief: Obama's War on Terror Same as Bush's, But With More Killing" (*Wired*. September 10, 2012), 1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Peter Baker. "Obama's Turn in Bush's Bind" (*The New York Times*. February 9, 2013), 1-3.

and continuing through today, they sank millions of dollars into infrastructure and housing improvements across the peninsula in order to placate the people. The royal family's continued throwing of money at problems as they arise has worked for over eighty years, and it will ensure their rule for many years to come.

The Saudi – US relationship has been characterized as hypocritical at times, but it has staying power. The human rights issues that occur inside the Kingdom are a black eye to all Washington administrations that deal with Riyadh,¹⁰³ but, unfortunately, it appears to be a cost of doing business with a nation that sits on roughly one fifth of the world's proven oil wells. Yes, the United States would like to be partnered with a nation that is more democratic and open, but on the flip side, the Saudis would prefer if the United States was more like them in many ways as well. Time has proven that neither the Americans nor the Saudis are going to change each other. The best that each can hope for is to continue being strategic or transactional partners whenever and wherever their desires and common needs coincide.

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¹⁰³ Doug Bandow. *The U.S. Alliance with Saudi Arabia*. (Policy Recommendations for the 108th Congress, Washington: CATO Institute, 2002), 544.

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