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US Challenges and Choices

Saudi Arabia: A View From the Inside

Saudi Arabia has come under increasingly strong criticism in the United States in recent months. This report summarizes a briefing designed to provide Saudi perspectives on bilateral relations. It is based on the discussion at the tenth in a jointly sponsored series of congressional staff briefings on “US Challenges and Choices in the Gulf.” To receive information on future briefings, contact Jennifer Davies at jdavies@stanleyfoundation.org.

I. Overview

Since September 11, 2001, US-Saudi relations have deteriorated, fulfilling a primary goal of Osama bin Laden: to drive a wedge between the two longstanding allies. Immediately after the attacks on New York and Washington, Saudis reacted in disbelief to the news of the hijackers’ identities. And while Saudis struggled to accept the idea that their fellow countrymen would perpetrate such an atrocity, many in the United States reached the conclusion that some Saudis, including possibly Saudi leaders, had supported, or at least condoned, the terrorists. A year later, the stress on the relationship caused by this “context-changing” event has been amplified by tension relating to fighting terrorism, a possible US-led war on Iraq, the deepening conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and the treatment of Saudi nationals in the United States.

II. Terrorism

Most Saudis remain shocked that 15 of the 19 September 11th terrorists were Saudis. The political elite tend to believe that this was by design, as one of Al-Qaeda’s primary stated goals is to undermine the Al-Saud regime and to damage its ties with the United States. Accordingly, the Saudi political elite are supportive of the US campaign against terrorism. The Saudi Crown Prince, Foreign Minister, and Defense Minister have been publicly supportive, and, among other cooperative efforts, have taken steps to curb Islamic charities on terrorism watch-lists. While these steps have been criticized by many in the United States as inadequate, the Saudis have had to deal with real institutional challenges in controlling illegal financial flows. Saudi officials have acknowledged that they need to do more.

The Saudi public, however, remains skeptical towards the US policy of “zero tolerance” for terrorism. While September 11th was a context-changing event for US citizens, it has not changed the key role of the Palestinian issue in the thinking of many Saudis. Many of the actions of the Israeli occupation are considered terrorist in nature, and there is resentment that “zero tolerance” does not apply to Israel. The perceived contradictions in US policy on terrorism are underscored by a Saudi sense of an Israeli-US, Judeo-Christian alliance. Increasing numbers of Saudis subscribe to the view that US policy has underwritten that of Israel’s Likud Party and that the war on terrorism is actually a war on Islam.

III. Iraq

Like terrorism, Saddam Hussein and Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction are of great concern to Saudis. However, Iraq is not seen by Saudis as an imminent threat to either its neighbors or the United States. Moreover, US policy is increasingly viewed as hypocritical in its emphasis on enforcement of UN resolutions dealing with Iraq but not those dealing with Israel. For the Saudi political elite, a better order of priorities would be to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict first, thereby creating a political and security environment for success in Iraq, as well as for rooting out terrorism. Though Saudi leaders have agreed to go along with the rest of the world under the political cover provided by UN Security Council Resolution 1441, they are taking some risks with their own people, who do not support the US goal of regime change. Saudi support for US efforts to oust Saddam Hussein is further undercut because, unlike in 1990-91, when there was an understanding that an effort to forge peace between Arabs and Israelis would follow the war, there has as yet been no similar US commitment in the current situation.

IV. US Treatment of Saudi Nationals

The United States and Saudi Arabia have enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership for close to 70 years. The Saudi political elite have traditionally studied in US schools, preferred US products, and looked to the United States as the world's international political leader. In addition, the United States has enjoyed Saudi admiration for being a strong proponent of international law. This personal affinity has underpinned the strategic partnership. Since September 11th, however, increasingly onerous visa requirements, incidents of harassment by US customs, and the fear of unforeseen detention or seizure of assets have been deterrents to Saudis considering travel to the United States. Such conditions directly undermine bilateral trade and finance. In addition, many Saudi university students have not returned to school since September 11th. The consequent decline in personal interaction and relationships may remove a barrier to anti-Saudi sentiment in the United States and to anti-US sentiment in Saudi Arabia.

V. Saudi View of the Bilateral Relationship

Historically, liberalizing and modernizing initiatives in Saudi Arabia have come from the political elite, which has been supported by the US government. But, as with any government, the survival of the Saudi leadership is dependent upon the satisfaction of its political base. If this base does not support US policy on Palestine and Iraq, the leadership must take account of this. For while the Saudi political elite tend to share US concerns about global terrorism and Saddam Hussein, they perceive current US policy on these issues to be short-sighted and ultimately detrimental to the United States' own interests and to the US-Saudi relationship. This perception is underscored by the general public's rejection of US policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to the rationale for possible war with Iraq. As a result, the Saudi leadership is under pressure to distance itself from Washington.

Women and the younger generation of Saudis, in particular, are increasingly vocal in their criticism of US policy with regard to Palestine. They have been the most supportive of a boycott of retail products perceived to be American, such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Pampers. This sort of consumer resistance regarding soft goods may have some effect, as 40% of the wealth in Saudi Arabia is in the hands of women (53% of university graduates and 35% of government employees are women; 70% of bank accounts are held by women). Moreover, support for the boycott is not limited to the lower classes; it also finds some backing among wealthy, educated, and "Westernized" Saudis. The boycott's impact, both real and symbolic, reflects growing concerns about the future of US-Saudi relations.

Because of this pressure, a delicate balance of accommodation is seen by Saudi leaders as preferable to absolute support for the United States and those US policies that could call into question their political legitimacy or even, in the extreme case, the regime's survival. Indeed, the Saudi government can look to the Shah of Iran's alliance with the US government and the subsequent Islamic revolution as a cautionary example.

Finally, the United States is seen to have bypassed a landmark opportunity when it chose not to pursue the Abdullah Peace Plan in March, 2002. This proposal was undertaken with significant political risk by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. Many contend that embracing it would not only have strengthened the peace camp and liberals throughout the region, but that it might also have sparked a transformation in Saudi Arabia itself. Following the 1991 Gulf War, it was implicitly understood by the United States and by Arab leaders that an equitable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict was a goal that would be pursued – and the Bush administration did move ahead immediately with the Madrid process. Part of this understanding was that Arab states would, in turn, move toward political reform. The sense now is that the United States did not deliver on peace and therefore has little leverage with the Arab world. There is little support in the region for the US view that renewed Palestinian violence against Israel early in the new century made progress towards an Israeli-Palestinian agreement unattainable because of the absence of a Palestinian negotiating partner committed to peace.

VI. Conclusions and Implications for US Policy

A significant deterioration in the US-Saudi relationship would be a major loss for both countries. It could threaten both regional stability and global energy security. The United States should thus be mindful of the parameters within which the Saudi regime must attempt to effect domestic change, support US policies, fight terrorism, and yet maintain political legitimacy. Although the Al-Saud family has not been a major catalyst for liberalization, it has selectively promoted moderate political and social reforms and it represents a unifying institution for Saudi society. It would be premature to speculate about the downfall of the current regime as a result of the current challenges it faces and the difficulties in US-Saudi relations. Moreover, even though discussion is growing in the United States of the need for democratization throughout the Middle East and the Gulf, there is little reason to believe that an alternate Saudi regime, particularly one brought about through revolution or even immediate democratization, would be friendlier to the United States or more open to liberalization than is the current government.

The United States should certainly continue to press its Saudi allies to help cut off funding to terrorist groups. However the United States must also be realistic in its expectations and seek to demonstrate an understanding of the issues that impact Saudi society, including a growing Saudi perception that the war against terror is actually a war against Islam and a widening consensus that the United States cares little for a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.