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# THE NATURE OF SAUDI ARABIAN STRATEGIC POWER: IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

—FRANK J. MIRKOW—

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*An important foreign policy debate in the U.S. has arisen over the direction U.S.-Saudi relations should take in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Frank J. Mirkow examines the nature of Saudi power and assesses the strategic value of the U.S.-Saudi relationship with respect to United States policy objectives.*

The Middle East has been an area of vital importance for United States foreign policy since the beginning of the post-World War II era. The current period of momentous upheaval and change in the region underscores this fact.<sup>1</sup> The Gulf War and its aftermath as well as continued attempts at negotiating a regional peace have demonstrated both the changes in the region and American interests in this strategically vital area.<sup>2</sup>

A key player in the Middle East is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This complex society, simultaneously medieval and ultra-modern, conducts an even more recondite foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> Since the end of the Gulf War, many analysts have advocated a closer relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some policymakers would have Saudi Arabia play the role of the key ally and partner of the United States in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

The Gulf War was fought largely to prevent Saudi Arabia's vital strategic position and oil reserves from falling under the hegemonic ambitions of Iraq, thus acknowledging the Arabian peninsula's prominence in US foreign policy.<sup>6</sup>

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1. For a restatement of past U.S. interests in the Middle East and a view of some possible future interests, see J. Robinson West, "A New Middle East," *The Washington Post*, 31 December 1991, sec. A.
  2. Rex Brynen and Paul Noble, "The Gulf Conflict and the Arab State System: A New Regional Order?," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1 & 2 (Winter/Spring 1991): 117-39.
  3. James E. Akins, "The New Arabia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Summer 1991): 37.
  4. Several authorities on U.S. policy in the Middle East, among the most distinguished of which is J.B. Kelly, have long seemed to advocate such an active and high profile policy simply because it differs from past U.S. "non-policy." See J.B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West* (London: Basic Books, 1980), 439, 480.
  5. Several respected authorities on the Middle East and its strategic environment have advocated closer U.S. ties with Saudi Arabia that range from strengthened outright military alliance to generally closer military, political and economic ties between the two nations. See John C. West, "U.S.-Saudi Arabian Relations: Toward a New Parity," *Middle East Insight*, Vol. 7, Nos. 2 and 3 (1990): 41-3; see also Michael Sterner, "Navigating the Gulf," *Foreign Policy*, No. 81 (Winter 1990-91): 41.

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Additionally, the war was fought in cooperation with the Saudi government — a partnership that successfully achieved many of its goals for both nations. Furthermore, closer ties to Saudi Arabia become more tempting as relations with the United States' other Middle East ally, Israel, become more strained. Since the fall of the Shah of Iran, the United States has sought a strong partner to support its foreign policy in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Saudi Arabia seems an obvious candidate.

Such a view, however, neither takes full measure of Saudi Arabia's true strategic capabilities nor, as a consequence, its value as an ally. Given the nature of Saudi Arabian power, it is unlikely that the country could exercise the influence in the Middle East required of a key U.S. ally. Unlike Israel and pre-revolutionary Iran, the nature of Saudi Arabia would not allow itself to become a pillar of U.S. policy in the region. Saudi military or political influence will never be able to substitute for, or contribute to, U.S. influence in the region. Any U.S. policy that depends on Saudi Arabia's strategic influence is bound to go awry.

### The Nature of Saudi Power

Saudi Arabia possesses one of the most technologically advanced armed forces in the region, if not the world.<sup>7</sup> It has drawn high technology armaments from powers such as the United States and France in addition to Silkworm missiles from the People's Republic of China. As a result of the upsurge in new U.S. military aid during and after the Gulf crisis, the Kingdom has developed an even more technologically sophisticated military structure, with an increasingly powerful voice in Saudi ruling circles. At the same time, that force presents a formidable deterrent to many of Saudi Arabia's enemies in the region. Saudi Arabia is situated on the strategically vital Arabian Peninsula and has benefitted greatly from the massive influx of petrodollars. These factors have enabled the country to amass its military forces.

This expensive and advanced military arm has not been an entirely effective deterrent, however, as Iraq's aggression illustrated. Despite its technological strength, much of Saudi strategic and military power is somewhat illusory. Perhaps the most important weakness is Saudi Arabia's relatively small population of 14 million people spread over a vast expanse of territory.<sup>8</sup> This small population is not always educationally equipped to manage and operate a modern military force. Moreover, the Kingdom depends on a large contingent of foreign workers for much of its labor requirements.<sup>9</sup> While essential for

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6. Sterner, 44.

7. Jacob Goldberg, "The Saudi Military Buildup: Strategy and Risks," *Middle East Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Spring 1989): 3-13.

8. This estimate is based on several available figures. The exact population figures are unavailable due to the nomadic nature of a portion of the Saudi population and the Saudi government's disinformation for national security purposes. See *The Middle East Review*, (Edison: Hunter Publishing, Inc., 1992), 11.

maintaining the economic efficiency of the Kingdom, this foreign labor force holds little allegiance to Saudi Arabia. Hence, much of actual Saudi military power is simply a facade of high technology.<sup>10</sup>

Saudi oil fields, more than any other economic asset, provide the country's fundamental source of material power.<sup>11</sup> Saudi Arabia contains the largest known petroleum reserves in the world. On its own and through the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Saudi Arabia has become an economically prosperous and vital player in the world economy. Saudi petrodollars have brought astounding economic power to this once primarily nomadic nation. The Saudis have sought to use this power to increase their influence and security while preserving the stability of the world economic system.<sup>12</sup>

Relying on oil as a source of strategic influence has not always proven a useful or effective weapon. Saudi Arabia's influence as a controller of oil production levels and prices has not been effective during the past five years. In many cases the country has assumed the role of "swing" producer, cutting its production level to maintain prices while other OPEC nations violate their allotted quotas. But even this effort did not prevent oil prices from declining during the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s. This decline in petroleum prices (and consequently of OPEC members' influence) has made oil a much less fungible weapon in the international sphere. Additionally, most Saudis realize that the viability of petroleum as a source of power is linked to the stability of Western economies that depend on petroleum. Should the industrial economies falter, the value of the oil on which Saudi power is so dependant would decline. Petroleum has become less an object of dependence than a source of interdependence.

The Saudi domestic economy is also no longer the growing source of power that it once was. In the last year and a half, Saudi Arabia has been forced to borrow \$4.5 billion from foreign lenders, including the World bank.<sup>13</sup> As the Kingdom realizes its actual fiscal position after a year of operation on "provisional" budgets, the country has incurred a massive budget deficit. Rather than address these financial shortfalls, the Saudi government has embarked on a course of massive public sector subsidization.<sup>14</sup> Such spending can only further harm Saudi Arabia's long-term economic potential. The economic might that once seemed Arabia's central strength has declined drastically.

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9. Fouad Al-Farsy, *Saudi Arabia: A Case Study in Development*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1986), 87-91.

10. These doubts were confirmed repeatedly during the war. "Many Saudis have expressed their pride at the manner in which particularly their air force and National Guard subsequently performed, but little has happened to dispel the anxiety that was generated over the reactions and determination of the country's main armored units." Roger Matthews, "Changing Attitudes," *Financial Times*, 30 January 1992, sec. 3.

11. Peter M. Oppenheimer, "Arab Oil Power: Permanent Eclipse? or Temporary Fading?," *Middle East Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Spring 1988): 9-16.

12. Al-Farsy, 63.

13. Roger Matthews, "Resting on its Assets," *The Financial Times*, 30 January 1992, sec. 3.

14. "Fahd Approves Major Cuts In Gas Prices, Utility Fees," *Saudi Gazette*, 25 March 1992.

In addition to military and economic strength, moral and ideological forces can serve as tools of international power. Saudi Arabia displays both strength and weakness in this realm, too. In such an ancient and culturally rich region, Saudi Arabia is conspicuous for its dearth of artistic, historical, or intellectual contributions to either the Arab or Muslim traditions. When the great Muslim cities such as Cairo, Damascus, and Istanbul were producing great works in Islamic art, literature, and philosophy, the Arabian peninsula contained little more than a vast Arabian desert with nomadic inhabitants.

Even in the modern Arab world, Saudi Arabia has been unable to inspire intellectual and ideological movements that have periodically swept across the Middle East. Baathism, Pan-Arabism, and even Islamic fundamentalism found their birth and nurturing in other areas and nations of the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> None of these intellectual or ideological forces has been a source of Saudi leadership in the Arab or Islamic worlds.

Rather, the Saudi Kingdom draws all its moral leadership and pride from a very different source. The intangible influence that Saudi Arabia exercises is due to its tradition of austerity and Islamic purity. The puritanical sect of Wahhabism to which most Saudis belong combines with the harsh life of the nomadic tradition to produce what many in the Arab world consider the most essential of Islamic traditions. This religious authority is confirmed by the status of Saudi Arabia as birthplace of the Prophet Mohammed and the Saudi custodianship of two of the three holiest mosques in Islam. Any moral or religious influence that Saudi Arabia wields in the Middle East is a product of these factors.<sup>16</sup>

Yet this influence too has declined. Some of Saudi Arabia's poorer neighbors view the ruling house of Saud as profligate, thus further eroding the Kingdom's prestige. Its acceptance of an American presence during the Gulf War infuriated Arabs who view the United States primarily as a friend of Israel and an enemy of the Arab people. In effect, while Arabs of the Middle East envy the Kingdom's wealth and luxury, they do not admire or seek to emulate their affluent neighbor. Saudi Arabia's potential role as a spiritual, intellectual, or ideological leader in the Middle East is limited.

### Saudi Society

Saudi society mirrors and reinforces these strengths and weaknesses. The Kingdom is currently experiencing pivotal change and struggle<sup>17</sup> evidenced by the conflicting forces of traditionalism and modernization that have ruptured

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15. Akins, 40.

16. Even this level of moral authority is being questioned by many in the Arab world. See "Arab Unity's Paling Symbol," *Economist*, 13 December 1991, 44; see also "Weak at the Top," *Economist*, 3 January 1992, 42.

17. The Saudi government's call for a *majlis al-shura* or consultative body (a tactic used whenever it feels threatened) reflects the internal and external pressures on the Kingdom. See Caryle Murphy, "Saudi Arabia Plans Consultative Body," *Washington Post*, 31 December 1991, sec. A.

Saudi society.<sup>18</sup> For the last 20 years, the Kingdom has been the scene of increasing change and modernization. Saudi Arabia has been on a course of accelerated transition into the modern world since the formation of OPEC and the subsequent inflow of oil revenues; the Gulf War only intensified this movement. As is often the case, transition entails instability and conflict.

For many Arabs in modern Saudi society, mass change has meant social disorientation, materialism, and alienation. To this group, transition has meant the loss of Saudi Arabia's sacred identity and austere character. The Royal family itself has become less a symbol of the strength and religiosity for which the nation long stood and more a symbol of a materialistic society moving away from its founding Islamic creed. Faced with such social and intellectual dislocation, many in the Kingdom have sought security in a stable and reliable pillar of Arab society.

To escape this trend toward modernism, many Saudis have returned to the central religious wellspring of their country, Wahhabist Islam. Orthodox Islam has experienced a revival throughout the Kingdom. Anti-materialist, anti-Western, and often anti-royal, Wahhabist Islamic fundamentalism prescribes a return to the basic teachings and traditions of Islam as a solution to the Kingdom's perceived problems. This element in Saudi society was silenced and restrained during the Gulf War. As the Kingdom returns to normality, this conservative group has been attempting to thrust Saudi society toward its Islamic roots. To this end, it has overtly preached against all things Western and infidel, publicly attacked members of the royal family considered "unIslamic," and called for a revival of the Saudi Society for the Preservation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or *mutawain*.<sup>19</sup> This element of Saudi society has responded to the social instability of modernization by advocating a return to the traditional and Islamic heritage of which Saudi Arabia is the keeper.

An opposing force in Saudi society is the small group of mostly Western-educated Saudis who advocate more modern social and governmental structures.<sup>20</sup> This group, comprised of the academic, professional, and business elite, sees no inherent conflict between modernization and a preservation of the Kingdom's traditional values. Although they represent a small minority, these professionals are influential because of their social position.

Another group is the traditional Saudi establishment. Consisting of the House of al-Saud, its tribal and governmental allies, and the traditional religious establishment, this sector of society draws from the views of both funda-

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18. There is a profound American and Western belief that modernizing and liberalizing tendencies will eventually prevail in these struggles. Turn of the century Europeans "were too easily persuaded that Moslem opposition to the politics of modernization — of Europeanization — was vanishing. Had they been able to look ahead to the last half of the twentieth century, they would have been astonished by the fervor of the Wahhabi faith in Saudi Arabia, by the passion of religious belief in warring Afghanistan, by the continuing vitality of the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere in the Sunni world, and by the recent Khomeini upheaval in Shi'ite Iran." David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, (New York: Avon Books, 1989), 564.

19. Roger Matthews, "Rulers Under Pressure," *Financial Times*, 30 January 1992, sec. 3.

20. Matthews, "Resting On Its Assets."

mentalists and modernists. Thus, while wishing to preserve the traditional, royalist, and authoritarian strains in Saudi society, this segment of society seeks to advance the Kingdom economically as well as improve its diplomatic relations. The House of al-Saud in particular displays a subtle and brilliant understanding of political patronage. It consistently plays one social extreme against the other, rallying the nation first in one direction and then in another, always taking care to concentrate true power within the House of al-Saud. Recently, the greatest threat to the royal and traditional authorities has come from the Islamic fundamentalist fringe. In response, the *mutawain* and many like-minded preachers have been repressed. Indeed, the promised *majlis al-shura* (consultative council) may be used as a weapon against the fundamentalists while the establishment takes refuge behind the veil of popular rule and Islam.<sup>21</sup> It is extremely difficult to determine whether a majority exists. Saudi Arabia is a police state with all the censorship, propaganda, and regulations that are associated with such a polity. Additionally, Saudis are uncomfortable with open manifestations of aggression or conflict.

Though the majority of Saudis may desire some measure of political and social freedom, the Kingdom is not a liberal republic waiting to burgeon. The Monarchy and the religious state are consistent enough with religious traditions and the essentially tribal and paternalistic nature of Saudi politics to avoid appearing like abhorrent violators of liberty. Nor is the Saudi government in imminent danger from the conservative extreme. The Saudi royal family has maintained its Islamic character and identification despite its profligate nature. The House of al-Saud has protected itself from the most vocal of extremist groups, the traditionalists, in this manner. How long this political stability will remain is uncertain.

The outside world continues to press in on the Kingdom. Social tensions that lie beneath the surface remain unresolved and perhaps unresolvable. As the traditionalists clearly sense, modernization entails more than a modern infrastructure and high technology: it must also address the social and political aspects before true and long-term stability can exist in Saudi society.

### Saudi Foreign Policy

This blend of assets and liabilities in the strategic, political, and social realms yields a Middle Eastern power that is both potent and fragile. Saudi foreign policy, much like its domestic consensus, displays the prudence of a well-executed tightrope walk. It also exhibits cautious use of its limited but potentially powerful resources.<sup>22</sup> The country often follows the lead of other nations and rarely commits to anything more than financial contributions. Though long a moral and financial supporter of the Palestinian cause, Saudi Arabia has never put its full political weight behind the effort to establish a Palestinian homeland.

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21. "Islam Bedrock of Policy — Fahd," *Arab News*, 2 March 1992.

22. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), 659.

Similarly, in the decade-long struggle in Yemen, the Saudis waged war by proxy rather than direct involvement. Wary of its latent weaknesses, Saudi Arabia has usually abstained from exerting force in the international arena. Rather, it harbors its strengths and carefully selects its opportunities.

There are two significant exceptions to this moderate trend. In the midst of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Saudi Arabia initiated a policy that would make the West in general — and the United States in particular — consider the consequences of backing Israel. Yet even here the Saudis acted in strict accordance with their past policy. The Saudi oil embargo that disrupted the economies of the industrial nations, though in many ways decisive, was not a grave commitment for Saudi Arabia to make. The embargo that thrust Saudi Arabia to the fore of American foreign policy confirmed the Kingdom as the leader of OPEC. It generated massive oil revenues for the country without fundamentally destabilizing the world economy on which those revenues depended. The embargo was eased when Western tolerance seemed at its breaking point. Saudi Arabia never receded to the minor role it had played in U.S. policy before 1973.

Similarly, Saudi policy in the Gulf War was decisive and bold, but the alternatives seemed even more perilous. The Kingdom's decision to allow U.S. and other foreign troops into Saudi Arabia — the holy land of Islam — as well as its open conflict with the Palestinian cause, would have been unimaginable even days before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.<sup>23</sup> Yet here, too, the decision was less risky than allowing a possible Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia or permitting the permanent and intimidating presence of an unchastened Iraq in Kuwait.

Since the end of the Gulf War, Saudi foreign policy has been more visible than in the past, but no less complex. It has acted as a facilitator rather than a protagonist in the regional peace process, in which it participated as a part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) delegation.<sup>24</sup> Saudi Arabia has also aimed to stabilize world oil prices and foster economic predictability.<sup>25</sup> The exact course of Saudi foreign policy, however, is difficult to predict.

### Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

U.S. policy in the Middle East is inextricably tied to Saudi Arabia's diplomatic course.<sup>26</sup> U.S. policy in the region consists of two goals that further U.S. national interest: preserving the oil supply and maintaining regional final stability.<sup>27</sup> A free flow of oil from the region (and subsequent world economic stability) is a

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23. Hermann Frederick Eilts, "The Persian Gulf Crisis: Perspectives and Prospects," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Winter 1991): 8.

24. Thomas L. Friedman, "A Step Ahead in Madrid," *New York Times*, 4 November 1991, sec. A.

25. Yahya Sadowski, "Arab Economics After the Gulf War: Power, Poverty, and Petrodollars," *Middle East Report*, No. 170 (May 1991): 7.

26. Raymond W. Copson, "Persian Gulf Conflict: Post-War Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service Issue Brief*, IB90132 (June 1991): 2.

27. For an alternative view of U.S. foreign policy goals in the Middle East see Leon T. Hadar, "The United States, Europe and the Middle East: Hegemony or Partnership?," *World Policy Journal* (Summer 1991): 421-49.

central goal for the United States in the region.<sup>28</sup> The United States fought the Persian Gulf War primarily to guarantee the West's access to oil. U.S. policy should promote the regional and Saudi domestic conditions that allow this flow to proceed uninterrupted.

The promotion of regional stability can take two forms. First, the United States should seek an acceptable compromise to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which must take into account Israel's security requirements and the Palestinian's demand for a homeland. Second, the United States has an interest in maintaining stability in the moderate, non-expansionist nations in the Middle East. Iraq, Iran, and Syria, therefore, must be neutralized to maintain a regional balance of power structure.

U.S. policy should attempt to relate these goals to the realities of Saudi power.<sup>29</sup> Such a policy would continue to hold to the Carter Doctrine, which states that the Gulf and its oil are vital to U.S. national security. Continued consultations on oil prices that promote the stability of the world economy are essential.

Military aid to, and cooperation with, Saudi Arabia should continue. It is essential, however, for Saudi domestic and international reasons, that this cooperation be discreet and unobtrusive. This implies a small number of permanent air bases and few permanently stationed troops on Saudi soil. Any U.S. military presence should maintain a low profile. Those that advocate a large, permanent U.S. presence within Saudi Arabia ignore the fact that such a presence would undermine the domestic and international legitimacy of the Saudi government making U.S. goals more difficult to achieve.

The Kingdom's legitimacy is important because, as the previous discussion suggests, Saudi Arabia may be characterized as a moderate nation. While it is true that Saudi Arabia remains an undemocratic monarchy and a theocracy, there is no democratic alternative. True and profound stability emerges when governments respect the will of the people. This kind of stability best reflects American national interest; however, the realities in the Middle East do not make such an option likely at this time.

U.S. policy should encourage the current Saudi role as facilitator in the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>30</sup> The fluidity in the political and strategic situation, which the Gulf War produced, may make conditions viable for progress toward a lasting peace. U.S. policymakers should furthermore realize that Saudi Arabia is not comparable to Israel or Iran under the Shah. Saudi Arabia is not, nor can it be, a U.S.-armed surrogate in the region maintaining the peace. The United States should not come to base its Middle East strategy on the vagaries of the Kingdom. If the United States seeks such a player in the region, a partnership with Egypt would be more stable and predictable.<sup>31</sup>

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28. Sterner, 44.

29. West, 43.

30. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "New World Order or Hollow Victory," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall 1991): 63.

31. William B. Quandt, *The United States and Egypt* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990), 54.



### Conclusion

As a major and vital player in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is important to any policy the United States pursues in the region. Yet, the uneven nature of Saudi power and the complex foreign policy such power produces, makes it essential that the United States not rely solely on the Kingdom for its regional policy. Saudi Arabia's internal consensus and international position make it too fragile to serve as linchpin of U.S. policy. Moreover, its status as a theocratic police state makes any friendly commitment to the Kingdom undesirable and, in the long run, domestically unsustainable for the United States. A U.S. policy that takes full measure of these realities may nevertheless prove useful in achieving U.S. goals in this strategically vital area of the world.



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*A Journal of International Affairs*

Volume 13, Number 1

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