

## Getting Back on an Even Keel

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**The director of the Institute's Gulf Program answers questions on a variety of U.S.-Saudi issues, including how the next president will be in a much better position to improve the frayed bilateral relationship.**

**D**espite U.S. President Barack Obama's trip to Riyadh in April, and Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman's visit to the U.S. this week, friction in the U.S.-Saudi relationship remains palpable. According to Simon Henderson, a Saudi expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Saudis have essentially "lost faith in the Obama White House" and "are just waiting for the day that the Obama Administration ends." However, Henderson adds the Kingdom remains reliant on the U.S. for security and "wants to reinforce U.S.-Saudi ties by having a strong military supply relationship."

**The Cipher Brief:** What is the current state of the U.S.-Saudi relationship?

**Simon Henderson:** At the moment, the relationship is not good. This is a consequence of the last few years of U.S. policy in the Middle East. If you want to put a date on it, it would be President Obama's decision to set a red line in Syria (over Syria's use of chemical weapons) and to walk away from that red line. From that point onwards, Saudi suspicions of whether President Obama is on their side have only increased. To put it bluntly, they haven't lost faith in the United States, but they have lost faith in the Obama White House.

The confirmation, at least in the Saudi mind, that they were right was reporter Jeffrey Goldberg's interview with the President for his article on the Obama Doctrine in *The Atlantic*, where Saudi Arabia came in for critical comment, either directly or indirectly, more often than any other country in the world, ally or otherwise. They are just waiting for the day that the Obama Administration ends. The fact that the choice is either Hillary Clinton, who is supported by left wing Democrats, or Donald Trump, who is as much a mystery to them as he is to anyone else, is a problem down the road. For the moment, they are looking forward to a post-Obama United States, whatever that might be.

**TCB:** What steps can the next president take in order to mend the friction in the relationship?

**SH:** There are great amounts of overlap between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. and quite a few differences. It's a relationship as much as any other that needs to be managed, and possibly managed more than any other. It doesn't help that Saudi Arabia's attitude towards the role of women is a hard sell in the United States, especially when they chop off the head of somebody in the street. This doesn't go down well in the days of YouTube. Similarly, when they flog a blogger, this doesn't go down well either. This can all be put down to cultural differences.

The Saudis in general, and the Saudi royal family in particular, look empathetically towards the United States and see it as a friend, an ally, a place that they like visiting and one, which at least in the past, they could look to as being the ultimate security blanket. So the next president, whoever he or she may be, from a Saudi point of view, needs to be able to get the relationship back on an even keel.

**TCB:** In light of this strain in relations, could Saudi Arabia turn to other partners -- Russia, China, Israel to name a few -- in search of closer ties?

**SH:** Saudi Arabia has a limited choice -- particularly in the security realm -- of diplomatic partners. The UK and France are already prepared to have a naval and air force role in the Gulf and are also in a military supply relationship with the Saudi armed forces. But these are only add-ons to what is the main Saudi dependence, which is on the United States. The Saudis want to reinforce U.S.-Saudi ties by having a strong military supply relationship.

Having said that, the Saudis have been looking at Eastern European equipment and ammunition. Saudi Special Forces use a version of the Kalashnikov rifle, which is a bit curious. I think they hope it buys them diplomatic *entre* in Moscow. The reality is that the Saudis don't trust the Russians at all. They see them as rivals in oil producing terms and see them as essentially untrustworthy.

China isn't much of a prospect.

The great danger for Saudi Arabia is Iran, which means that notionally, there is probably a common view between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Sure there are contacts -- some of them are sort of semi visible -- but it's a work in progress, and I don't think it delivers on anything. Somebody asked me the other day if Iran went nuclear, would Saudi Arabia look to Pakistan or to Israel to supply a nuclear deterrent. My response was, I'm sure they would still look in the direction of Pakistan. At least for the moment, a very open relationship with Israel is a complete non-starter. The Saudi general population has not been prepared for anything like that, and it would not go down well in the wider Arab and Islamic world. If Saudi Arabia heads in that direction, it would only be an add-on in terms of foreign relationships. They need to do a lot of initial ground work on that.

**TCB:** What is the current level of cooperation between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia on the counterterrorism front?

**SH:** There is a great deal of common effort. The U.S. is involved in liaison and training missions with the Saudi military, and it has separate liaison and training missions with the Saudi National Guard to make sure there is never a military coup against the royal family. There's another set of relationships with the Ministry of Interior. Unlike in the United States, the Saudi Ministry of Interior is not about forests or wildlife -- it's about internal security.

In terms of actual men under arms, various bits of the Ministry of the Interior, whether it's the traffic cops, internal security forces, or coast guard, number probably the single largest armed contingent in Saudi Arabia, far greater than the military or national guard.

Now, there is a relationship, but whether it's a good relationship depends on the standard to which you adhere. I've heard many stories that there are close working relationships between the U.S. and Saudi, but I'm told that these relationships are hard work. They can function at a working level, but on anything approaching a significant decision, they need intervention from the very top in Saudi Arabia in order for a go-ahead on any enhancement or development of the relationship.

**TCB:** What can we expect from Saudi Defense Minister, Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's visit to the U.S.?

**SH:** Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as far as I can make out, is mainly here in the U.S. wearing his Vision 2030 economic hat. Leaving aside any sort of nasty comments coming out of the White House that we don't have a continuing good relationship with the Saudis, discussions could not only focus on the usual issues of energy and regional security, but on the particular issues of fighting the Islamic State and constraining the mischievous behavior of Iran in the region. So to the extent Prince Mohammad has contact with the White House and perhaps even the President, I'm sure there will be asks on our side.

Prince Mohammad is powerful, but he's not all-powerful. The list of things we're interested in may tend to be the prerogative of the Saudi Minister of the Interior, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef. So Prince Mohammed isn't necessarily the right person to have certain conversations with. He's coming here to sell the Vision 2030 Saudi economic plan to the U.S. business community, and they will be, I think, keen to meet him in order to get what looks to be a slice of a very significant cake.

*Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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