The Long Divorce

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Articles & Testimony

The Obama administration may have launched a new era in U.S. ties with Saudi Arabia, one marred by suspicion over Iran, anti-American radicalization, and lingering questions about the September 11 attacks.

The initial defining moment of President Barack Obama's attitude toward Saudi Arabia, for many people, was when he bowed to King Abdullah as he shook his hand at the London G-20 summit meeting in April 2009. The gesture, which the White House vehemently denied was a bow at all, was variously interpreted as the new president groveling toward an important ally, or an early sign of Obama's capacity to charm.

The Saudis themselves probably weren't fooled. They would have known of Obama's 2002 speech in Chicago, just over a year after the terror attacks of 9/11. That speech is most famous for Obama's opposition to President George W. Bush's planned invasion of Iraq, which he referred to as a "dumb war." But the then-state senator also had a pointed message about the two countries that formed the pillars of U.S. influence in the Middle East.

"You want a fight, President Bush?" Obama asked. "Let's fight to make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East -- the Saudis and the Egyptians -- stop oppressing their own people, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality."

So much has changed in the world since that awkward bow in 2009, never mind since 2002, and the nature of the U.S.-Saudi relationship has changed along with it. As the eight years of George W. Bush came to an end, the oil price was less than $50 per barrel, and would climb to well over $100 in 2014. Few people had heard of shale oil -- mention of the possibility of U.S. energy independence, which the oil could soon make possible, would have been met with derisive laughter. In the Middle East, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was very much in power, as was Syria's Bashar al-Assad. It would be two more years before uprisings would seize those countries, and Washington's

response in both cases would dismay Saudi officials.

Obama will meet King Salman in Riyadh on April 20, during what will likely be his final trip to Saudi Arabia during his presidency. Such meetings between national leaders are usually used for discussions about common interests rather than detailed agendas. The common question is: Are the allies on the same metaphorical page? But with the United States and Saudi Arabia today, it will be more interesting to see whether they can plausibly suggest they are still reading from the same book.

Although the upcoming visit is being touted as an effort in alliance-building, it will just as likely highlight how far Washington and Riyadh have drifted apart in the past eight years. For Obama, the key issue in the Middle East is the fight against the Islamic State: He wants to be able to continue to operate with the cover of a broad Islamic coalition, of which Saudi Arabia is a prominent member. For the House of Saud, the issue is Iran. For them, last year's nuclear deal does not block Iran's nascent nuclear status -- instead, it confirms it. Worse than that, Washington sees Iran as a potential ally in the fight against the Islamic State. In the words of one longtime Washington-based observer: "Saudi Arabia wanted a boyfriend called the United States. The United States instead chose Iran. Saudi Arabia is beyond jealousy."

Despite the possible pitfalls, both sides will have assembled lists of "asks" for the visit. These will probably be expressed in side meetings, given the king's increasing delegation of his powers to Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, known as MbN, and particularly his son, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, aka MbS. Besides the Islamic State and Iran, the topics are likely to include Yemen, where the kingdom is increasingly bogged down, though there is hope for peace talks. The crucial interlocutor will be MbS, the 30-year-old who is increasingly expected to become king sooner rather than later -- though the notional succession currently in place would first hand the crown to his cousin, MbN. MbS is known for touting his vision of a modernized Saudi Arabia with an economy that has moved beyond oil.

Obama's attitude toward Saudi Arabia does not seem to have changed since his 2002 speech, and his comments about the kingdom's rulers will be an elephant in the room during these talks. The president's criticism of America's "so-called allies" is a recurring theme in Jeffrey Goldberg's cover story for the *Atlantic*, "The Obama Doctrine." The 19,000-word article begins with Obama's retreat from his "red line" after Bashar al-Assad's forces used sarin gas against civilians in 2013 -- an event that shocked U.S. allies in the Middle East and forced them to reconsider what U.S. security guarantees actually meant, but which the president described as a decision that made him "very proud."

Why Obama decided to give the interview now -- rather than, say, in April 2017 -- is a mystery to many, who see it as damaging his diplomatic credibility. The profile will cast a dark cloud over Obama's meetings in Riyadh and make the platitudes of his public statements less convincing. Counterterrorism cooperation, for instance, will be a key element in the talks -- but in the *Atlantic*, Obama questioned "the role that America's Sunni Arab allies play in fomenting anti-American terrorism," Goldberg wrote, and "is clearly irritated that foreign-policy orthodoxy compels him to treat Saudi Arabia as an ally."

When Malcolm Turnbull, the new Australian prime minister, last year asked Obama, "Aren't the Saudis your friends?" Goldberg writes: "Obama smiled. 'It's complicated,' he said."

Obama's skepticism appears to have permeated his entire administration. It's gotten to the point where Saudi officials fear that the administration prefers their rivals in Tehran to their longstanding ally. "In the White House these days, one occasionally hears Obama's National Security Council officials pointedly reminding visitors that the large majority of 9/11 hijackers were not Iranian, but Saudi," Goldberg wrote. When the author observed to Obama that he wasn't as likely as his predecessors to instinctively back Saudi Arabia in a dispute with Iran, Goldberg

continued, Obama "didn't disagree."

Obama simply doesn't seem to share the view of many Middle East leaders that the Islamic Republic of Iran wants to diminish U.S. influence and change the balance of power in the region. Saudi leaders increasingly fear the president has no interest in constraining Iran's regional ambitions. The single line that probably generated the most apoplexy in Riyadh when the *Atlantic* profile was published was when the president implored Iran and its rivals "to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace."

Saudi Arabia has no interest in sharing the Arab world with its archrival. It sees Iran as challenging its leadership of the Islamic world and undermining its standing in the Arab world. Given Iran's nuclear agreement and its revival in oil production, Riyadh's status as a leader of the energy world is also threatened -- even if it will be years, if ever, that Iran can rival its standing as the world's largest oil exporter.

These fundamentally different perspectives on the Middle East may be the cause of the tensions between Riyadh and Washington, but Obama and King Salman will face other problems when they come face-to-face this week. Meetings with the 80-year-old Saudi monarch are carefully choreographed to obscure, at least to the public gaze, Salman's increasing infirmity. Obama has already encountered this. When he came to Riyadh early last year to offer condolences on the death of King Abdullah, he had a conversation with Salman during which the king simply walked away without warning. Aides attempted to excuse him, saying he needed to break for prayers. Last September, when King Salman visited the Oval Office, he brought his favorite son, Muhammad bin Salman, to do the talking.

For most meetings, King Salman has a computer screen, often obscured by flowers, in front of him, serving as a teleprompter. With a recent U.S. delegation, the royal court devised another stratagem -- the king spent the meeting looking beyond the group at a widescreen television suspended from the ceiling. An aide off to one side furiously hammered talking points into a keyboard.

The two heads of state will not be able to avoid discussing their rival interpretations of the events of 9/11, when 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudi. The issue has been revived by the calls in Congress for the publication of the missing 28 pages from the 9/11 Report, which have remained classified, supposedly to spare the Saudi government embarrassment because of possible connections between the hijackers and Saudi officials. Riyadh's continuing sensitivity on this point was underscored over the weekend, when the kingdom warned that it would sell off U.S. assets worth hundreds of billions of dollars if Congress passes a bill allowing the Saudi government to be held responsible in American courts for any role in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

How this issue will play out is hard to predict. But as I first wrote in an August 2002 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, there is much more to the links between the hijackers and the House of Saud than many are willing to admit. That article cited a Jan. 9 story in *U.S. News & World Report*, titled "Princely Payments," in which senior intelligence officials and a former Clinton administration official said that two senior Saudi princes had been paying off al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden since a 1995 bombing in Riyadh, which killed five U.S. military advisors.

Saudi officials vehemently denied the claim, with current Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir quoted as saying: "Where's the evidence? Nobody offers proof. There's no paper trail."

As I wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2002: "I followed the lead and quickly found U.S. and British officials to tell me the names of the two senior princes. They were using Saudi official money -- not their own -- to pay off bin Laden to cause trouble elsewhere but not in the kingdom. The amounts involved were 'hundreds of millions of dollars,' and it continued after Sept. 11. I asked a British official recently whether the payments had stopped. He said he hoped they had, but was not sure."

If the Saudi leadership hopes to repair its relationship with the United States, it must find a way to put questions like this to bed. But the starkness of the president's criticisms in the *Atlantic* probably make rapprochement to the

former levels of diplomatic and economic intimacy between the United States and Saudi Arabia impossible, in any case.

The president certainly doesn't intend to travel to Riyadh to sign the death certificate of the relationship. Nevertheless, the Obama administration may have ushered in a new era in ties between Washington and Riyadh -- one more distant and marred by suspicion than in years past. One way or another, it will be a historic trip.

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