

‘Forging a New Relationship’:

The Future Agenda for U.S.-Saudi Relations after the Crawford Summit

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Brief Analysis

On April 25, President George W. Bush and Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, held a three-hour meeting in Crawford, Texas, producing a joint statement in which both leaders agreed “to forge a new relationship” between the two countries. Both sides reportedly saw the meeting as an important opportunity to re-engage and begin easing strains in the relationship that emerged following the September 11 attacks. The [full text \(http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/04/20050425-8.html\)](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/04/20050425-8.html) of the statement reflects this perception but also indicates that difficulties persist across a range of subjects.

Despite any personal rapport suggested by the widely publicized photograph of the two leaders walking hand in hand, the joint statement itself—whose wording was no doubt drafted by top aides before the meeting—points to significant policy disagreements. This was effectively confirmed by the April 26 comments of Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, who told journalists “all problems were discussed frankly and plainly,” diplomatic code for little agreement. Similarly, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley characterized the conversation as “candid.”

Textual Analysis

Portions of the statement are puzzling, if not bizarre. The first sentence makes traditional reference to the historic summit between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Crown Prince Abdullah’s father, King Abdul Aziz. Yet, instead of repeating the historical detail that the summit took place on the USS Quincy in the Suez Canal, the statement describes the leaders meeting on “a sturdy ship,” perhaps an obscure literary allusion (hopefully not to Janice Jordan Shefelman’s 1983 novel *A Paradise Called Texas*, the top search result that Google.com generates for the phrase).

Equally unexplained is an early paragraph that states, “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia recognizes the principle of freedom upon which the United States was founded, including the freedoms enshrined under the first amendment of the United States Constitution.” This might be Washington’s way of saying that it cannot do anything to halt criticism of the kingdom in the free U.S. media, a source of irritation for Riyadh. At the same time, however, it serves to highlight Saudi Arabia’s dearth of such freedoms, including a free press, freedom of religion (the kingdom’s establishment creed is the strict Wahhabi form of Islam, whose leadership is partnered with the Saudi royal family),

freedom of speech (coincidentally, the trial of three Saudis who had called for constitutional reform began on April 25), and the right to peaceful assembly. Indeed, the parties seemed sensitive, if not contradictory, about internal reform in Saudi Arabia. One portion of the statement reads, “The United States applauds the recently held elections . . . and looks for even wider reform.” After the meeting, however, Prince Saud asserted that Saudi domestic affairs had not been discussed, though Stephen Hadley noted discussions about “developments within Saudi Arabia” and congratulated the kingdom for “advancing the cause of reform.” Similarly, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that “the importance of reform” had been addressed.

Another paragraph of the statement claims more agreement than might actually be the case. It asserts that the two nations reaffirm the principles agreed to at an international conference on counterterrorism hosted by Saudi Arabia in February 2005. Specifically, it refers to the principles enshrined in the “Riyadh Declaration,” which called for “fighting any form of thinking that promotes hatred, incites violence, and condones terrorist crimes.” Yet, among the more than fifty countries attending the conference were Iran and Syria (the latter just days before the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in Beirut, probably by Syrian agents). Both are on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. Israel was not invited, which was hardly surprising given its lack of diplomatic relations with the kingdom. Discussions at the conference reportedly included heated arguments about the definition of terrorism; at one point, Prince Saud stated, “We agreed not to discuss situations in occupied countries, territories, or countries in a state of war,” a formulation that may well excuse attacks in Israel and on U.S. forces in Iraq (for more on the Riyadh conference, see [PolicyWatch no. 956 \(templateC05.php?CID=2254\)](#)).

Perhaps the biggest source of U.S. disappointment at the Crawford summit, and the focus of the greatest media attention, was the lack of progress on oil issues. Washington had hoped to gauge the kingdom’s ability—as the world’s largest oil exporter and effective leader of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)—to influence prices downward from their present peak of more than \$55 per barrel. Although the two countries pledged to continue their cooperation “so that the oil supply from Saudi Arabia will be available and secure,” the statement’s wording was a significant departure from the usual Saudi formulations of “market stability” and “reasonable prices.” The media had made much of previous Saudi statements, first made in 2004, to expand total production capacity from around 11 million barrels per day (b/d) to 12.5 million b/d and, eventually, to 15 million b/d. After the summit, however, Prince Saud stated that “there was no Saudi commitment to increase oil production” to these figures.

The summit also witnessed important new nuances regarding Saudi views on Iraq. The joint statement commits both leaders to supporting a “unified nation” in which “Iraqis of all religions and ethnic groups are free to participate in its institutions.” After the summit, however, Prince Saud stated that Crown Prince Abdullah had underlined the importance of participation by all religious and ethnic groups in the political process (an implicit call for Iraqi Sunnis, from whom Saddam Hussein received his core support, to play a full role), while “the Americans . . . emphasized their keenness on preserving the unity and independence of Iraq and the establishment of a government capable of managing the affairs of Iraq.”

The portion of the statement addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict betrays even sharper differences. It speaks of a joint desire for “a just, negotiated settlement wherein two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace and security,” a U.S. formulation. There is no mention of refugees or borders. The statement does indicate U.S. gratitude for Crown Prince Abdullah’s “bold initiative . . . to encourage an Israel-Palestinian and Israel-Arab peace,” but it does not link this gesture with the Quartet Roadmap to Middle East peace, as the Saudis had reportedly desired.

The statement ends with Washington’s pledge to permit more Saudis to enter the United States for travel and study (the number of such visitors was greatly reduced after the implementation of tougher visa controls following September 11). It also calls for an increase in military exchange programs. In addition, it establishes a high-level

joint committee, headed by the Saudi foreign minister and the U.S. secretary of state, to deal with strategic issues “of vital importance to the two countries.” Oil, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, terrorism, and internal reform are all vital strategic issues. Clearly, the committee has much hard work ahead of it.

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