

Viewpoints
No. 62

A New Chapter in the Tangled U.S.-Saudi Relationship

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After three years of constant discord, relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia have taken a definite turn for the better as they team up to lead a coalition of Arab and Western nations in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. But the two old partners have different goals and immediate concerns that could come to test once again their long-time tangled relationship.

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RIYADH--In April 2013, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal went to Washington to plead for greater U.S. engagement in Syria on the part of President Obama, who was then dithering about arming moderate Syrian rebels being crushed on the battlefield. The same month, a little-known Iraqi Islamic militant by the name of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the foundation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Prince Saud had only Syria on his mind, just as Saudi Arabia still does today. He told U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that Syria had become “a place of great tragedy” and that President Bashar Assad was “hell bent” on continuing to wage war on his own people. Iran, the Saudis’ regional arch rival, constituted a “triple threat” to the Saudi kingdom on both the military, social, and theological levels, and Iran would be the main beneficiary if Assad stayed in power.

“They [the Iranians] see themselves in competition with all powers, even the United States. They could achieve hegemony in the region,” Prince Saud told a group of American Saudi experts a day after his meeting with Kerry. The American role in stopping Iran was “crucial” as the United States was “the most powerful country in the world.” His pleadings fell on deaf ears.

At the time of Saud’s meeting with Kerry 17 months ago, 100,000 Syrians had already died, the Syrian army had begun using chemical weapons, and Assad had just launched a nationwide offensive to take back territory held by disparate rebel forces. Saudi Arabia, initially encouraged by Obama’s statements that Assad must yield power, had gone out in front among Arab countries right from the start working to make this happen. Saudi Arabia had assumed the United States would come in to back it up just as it had done in Libya under NATO cover to unseat Muammar Qaddafi. But this had not happened.

Obama’s failure to match action to his verbal demand for Assad to leave has been at the heart of what had been an ever deepening malaise in U.S.-Saudi relations. The decline in the relationship dates back to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq that had led to the 2006 election of a pro-Iranian government, with Washington’s backing, under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki only now leaving power. The Saudis were furious that the United States, its main foreign protector, had turned Iraq over to Iran “on a silver platter.”

As late as August, the Saudi Foreign Ministry’s monthly magazine *The Diplomat* was still decrying the “credibility gap” in U.S. policy toward the Middle East and Obama’s wiping of his hands of responsibility for what was happening in Syria and Iraq. As a result, the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council of six Arab states was reviewing its military links to Washington.

Not any longer. Obama’s decision to confront ISIS militarily in both Syria and Iraq marks a major victory for Saudi diplomacy and will inject new life into a relationship troubled both by Obama’s dithering and allegations of Saudi support for Islamic extremism. Once again, the Saudis and Americans who led a successful coalition of Arab and Western countries during the First Gulf War in 1990-91 are teaming up to lead another one against a threat emanating from the same country: Iraq.

The Saudis have agreed to allow U.S. training of 5,000 Syrian rebels inside the kingdom and participated in the first U.S.-led bombings of ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups inside Syria. They risk a rebirth of opposition to the Saudi royal family from militant Saudi youth and dissident clerics who led an “awakening” campaign against it in the aftermath of the First Gulf War.

The Saudi delight at seeing the United States engage militarily was reflected in Prince Saud’s remark at a joint press conference with Kerry after his meeting with 10 Arab foreign ministers in Jeddah on September 11, 2014. Asked about past bitter Saudi criticism of Obama’s hands-off policy toward Syria, Saud replied, “I only see agreement. I don’t see disagreement.”

However, both sides still risk a falling out over their respective goals. The first U.S.-Saudi coalition had the single, clear objective of ousting Saddam Hussein’s army from Kuwait, period. This time, however, the two partners have different focuses and immediate concerns. For the Saudis, the overriding goal remains the removal of Assad; for the Obama administration, it is to “degrade and destroy” the Islamic State now stretched across more than one quarter of Iraq and most of eastern Syria.

The Saudis will doubtlessly seek to pull the U.S. intervention toward concentrating on the daunting task of forcing Assad from power. Unlike the Obama administration, they view ISIS as a long-term challenge to the kingdom’s security, not an immediate one. “ISIS is less of a threat than an opportunity for the Saudis to engage America,” said Mustafa Alani of the Gulf Research Center. The Center recently co-hosted a conference in Riyadh with the Saudi foreign ministry on regional challenges facing the Gulf Arab states in the wake of ISIS’s military successes in neighboring Iraq.

The atmosphere in Riyadh is surprisingly relaxed. Saudi authorities have not stepped up security in the streets or around hotels in anticipation of possible ISIS terrorist attacks. The reason for the government’s confidence, according to Saudi participants of the conference, stems from its success in facing down a serious challenge from al-Qaeda terrorism inside the kingdom in the mid-2000s. It managed to drive al-Qaeda out of the kingdom after uprooting scores of secret cells, overcoming multiple terrorist attacks and imprisoning thousands of its supporters. The Saudis also set up two “rehabilitation centers” for captured terrorists. In the past nine years, they have “graduated” 2,795 prisoners, according to Ministry of Interior spokesman Maj. Gen. Mansour al-Turki, who said that less than 10 percent had reverted to terrorism after being released.

Al-Turki claimed there had been no “rush” by Saudis to join ISIS since its summer battlefield successes in Syria and Iraq. Since King Abdullah had condemned in March both ISIS and the Syrian al-Nusra Front as “terrorist organizations,” only 124 Saudis had gone abroad to join them, while 134 others had returned home. “This is not drawing people the way al-Qaeda did in Afghanistan,” he said referring to the thousands of Saudis who went to fight the Soviet occupation there during the 1980s.

Yet, the prospect of blowback from Saudi “graduates” fighting on behalf of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is clearly a present, if not yet imminent, danger to the Saudi kingdom. Al-Turki said his

ministry had documented 1,900 cases of Saudi *jihadis* who had gone abroad and estimated the total at 2,500. He also said 574 were known to have come back home. How many of them had been arrested remained unclear, but trials of large numbers of them are ongoing and at an accelerated rate.

Other non-official Saudi sources reported that ISIS propaganda was in fact attracting the attention of many young Saudis addicted to social media sites, where in August an alleged “poll” of an undisclosed number found 92 percent believed ISIS’s goals “conform to the values of Islam and Islamic law.”

Despite the official confidence, there are multiple signs the new ISIS challenge is indeed considered an emerging security threat to the kingdom and a challenge to Saudi religious leadership of the Muslim world. King Abdullah has repeatedly called upon his own and other Arab countries’ religious leaders to roundly denounce ISIS’s perversion of Islam as well as its horrendous terrorist tactics. In mid-September, the Saudi Council of Senior Ulama (religious scholars) issued a formal *fatwa*, or decree, calling terrorism a “heinous crime, injustice and aggression” against all Muslims and “contrary to the purposes of this great religion.” The government has criminalized any kind of support for militant Islamic groups, including fundraising or fighting on their behalf. And it has been imposing long jail terms, even the death sentence, on those caught and convicted.

On September 22, a special court set up to deal with terrorists sentenced four Saudis to death and 16 others to prison sentences of up to 23 years. The official Saudi Press Agency said they were part of a terrorist network that comprised 94 members who had been “issuing religious edicts against Saudi rulers, making preparations to wage war against the Kingdom and attacking the country’s oil installation.” Earlier in September, the government announced it had rounded up 88 people, 48 of them Saudis, “on the verge of carrying out [terrorists] operations” at home and abroad or belonging to ISIS and al-Qaeda. Most disturbing to Saudi authorities was the discovery that 59 of them had already served prison sentences for similar activities despite attending the rehabilitation program.

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The author wrote a book in 2008 entitled *The King’s Messenger: Prince Bandar bin Sultan and America’s Tangled Relationship with Saudi Arabia*.

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