The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia And The United States of America: Foes And Friends

By

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and The United States
America: Foes and Friends

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States is crucial to understanding the current state of play in the Middle East. Yet the dynamics of the relationship itself are far more difficult and contested. While liberal international relations theorists see the relationship as fraught largely economic, a realist theory demonstrates that the perseverance of the relationship rests on mutual interests rooted in the desire to maintain the status quo. By analyzing the historical development of the Saudi-US relationship, this thesis shows how the realist perspective can be used to provide an insightful analysis into the history of relations between Saudi Arabia and the US. Using a comparative historical perspective, the thesis unravels that interests and ideology are not necessarily complementary. Since 9/11, there have been significant ideological divergences in perceived interests on both sides, yet long term economic and security interests prevailed. The significance behind this finding lies in the fact that while President Donald Trump is in the White House while Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman in control of Saudi foreign policy, the relationship between both countries has been consolidated in a realist framework. Thus, understanding the dynamics from a realist perspective that have underpinned the relationship in recent years is crucial to the framing of both countries foreign policy outlooks.

Keywords: US-Saudi Relation, Middle East, Realism, Liberalism, September 11, Oil Embargo.
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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background

The Saudi Arabia-US relationship has been one of the more stable relationships dating back to the Second World War. For the US, Saudi Arabia has arguably been its most trustworthy ally throughout the decades. However, looking around at the geopolitical landscape around World War II, the relative stability of the relationship is certainly an outlier. In other words, the circumstances on the global and Middle East arena were not expected to produce such a stable relationship. For instance, the US is the largest crude oil consumer in the world and therefore benefits from low oil prices while Saudi Arabia, the kingpin of OPEC, is the world’s largest exporter and therefore tries to drive prices upward. This alone could have soured the relationship, yet the two countries have found ample room to cooperate. Another potential issue could have been the US’s strong support for Israel. As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and curator of a particularly fundamentalist form of Islam, the Saudi monarchy has a vested interest in maintaining a strong Pan-Islamist stance. Maintaining a strong anti-Israeli (and therefore anti-American) position could be in its interest, yet the Saudi Arabia has successfully sustained its good relations with the US while not appearing to be purely aligned with all US positions. Therefore, one of the crucial aspects on display is how the
differences and possible points of contention did not come to derail the relationship in the first place.

Equally astonishing is the sheer changes both countries underwent due to the ever-changing political landscape in the twentieth century—all the while remaining committed allies. When the US first began to adopt former relations with Riyadh in the 1930s, the American political establishment was deeply committed to isolationism and could be said to have almost no geopolitical interests in the Middle East. After all, oil had yet to be discovered in Saudi Arabia until the late 1930s (Yergin, 1991). The Saud family was mainly concerned at that point with governing its massive, largely deserted country by maintaining tribal alliances and good relations with neighboring regimes. The advent of World War II saw the US adopt a far more proactive role globally (including in the Middle East) while Saudi Arabia quickly grew into a massive oil producer in the same decade. Securing oil became a vital strategic interest for the US while Saudi Arabia suddenly found itself a major player in a region polarized by Arab nationalism, the cold war, and the Palestinian question. In a variety of countries—from Lebanon to Egypt to Iran—these fundamental geopolitical concerns led the region to become a massive ideological battleground that in some cases saw massive bloodshed. Saudi Arabia, however, experienced no coups and was able to retain a semblance of security throughout the turbulent cold war in the Middle East.

More recently, there were ample reasons for Riyadh and Washington to fall out. Having survived Communism, the rise of revolutionary Iran and Baathism together, the War on Terror period inaugurated after the September 11 attacks could easily have collapsed the relationship. Saudi Arabia, after all,
was the home of Osama Bin Laden, a major sponsor of political Islamism in the greater Middle East, and the home country for 15 of the 19 September 11 hijackers. The Bush Administration’s messianic quest to bring democracy to the region could have easily been perceived as a threat to the highly undemocratic Saudi regime. Yet, the relationship maintained a strong continuity throughout this trying time. Barack Obama’s liberal foreign policy could have also taken its toll on the relationship, but he too carefully cultivated America’s strongest Arab ally. When Donald Trump became president in 2017, his first major foreign policy trip was to Saudi Arabia. His relationship with Saudi’s new firebrand leader Muhammad Bin Salman is considered to be particularly strong, signaling a continued strength in the relationship. However, given all the pressures on the relationship, the question immediately emerges to any observer: what factors have contributed to the continuously strong relations between Riyadh and Washington? This guiding question underpins the research questions of this thesis, with an emphasis on looking at the dynamic post-9/11.

1.2 **Research Questions:**

1) How have successive governments in both countries acted in the alliance since 9/11?

2) What were some of the main points of contention that occurred between the two countries since 9/11?

3) What overarching geopolitical and ideological interests have kept the two countries close allies?
4) What is the role of oil/energy in the relationship, and how big of a contributing factor is it to the United States’ continued support for the regime there?

1.3 **Main Argument:**

What are the various perspectives and responses from international relations theories and views that provide rational interpretations to the dynamic relationship between both countries? The main argument posed in this thesis is that the Saudi-American relationship has been so enduring historically because, although the region and geopolitics of the world have changed, the US and Saudi Arabia have remained status-quo powers in the region—both deeply committed to the existing order and its maintenance. Many countries either with interests in the region or located there have been strongly revisionist powers bent on upsetting the established order. These include outside powers like the Soviet Union but also radical forces within the region like revolutionary Iran, the Baathist regimes, and so forth. Thus it is a commitment to maintaining hegemonic order that binds the US and Saudi Arabia, and this requires an analysis of both country’s prerogatives as well as the dynamics of the relationship itself.

On the US side, after World War I, the US found itself a revolutionary power in the US compared to England and France. As MacMillan (2003) argues, the US position during the Paris Peace Conference was actually one closer to the Soviets than the Entente powers: to propose self-determination in the region. After the King-Crane commission and other efforts were halted, the mandate system took over and the US had relatively little impact on the
Middle East until post-1945. After World War II, the situation had changed. America found itself in power and competing with the Soviets all over the globe. Suddenly, it sought conservative allies in the Middle East like Chamoun’s Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq—part of which manifested itself in the 1958 Baghdad Pact. Since, the US has battled revisionist powers like Baathist regimes, Nasser, and others with the help of status quo allies like Saudi Arabia. This explains why the US has been a close friend of the ever-stable Saudi Arabia: when a country is a superpower in the world, benefitting economically from the status quo, there is no incentive to change it and a great incentive to keep it in place.

On the Saudi side of the relationship, the US has been a great benefactor. Through cooperation with Saudi Aramco, the fight against revisionist powers like Nasserist Egypt in Yemen, and most recently the geopolitical conflict with Iran, the US has been a great strategic ally to the embattled regime in Riyadh. Saudi gives the US a strong place to act from in the Middle East, and in return, Saudi gains the strength to overcome challenges to its legitimacy.

The thesis is an attempt to bring this debate and discourse into the 20th century up until the present day. That means these perennial factors will be analyzed with respect to the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations as well as the reigns of Fahd (1982-2005) but especially Abdullah (2005-2015) and Salman (2015-present). The thesis takes the perspective that the alliance perpetuates because of shared interests between the two countries, but equally important to this analysis is the consideration of how these perceived interests change over time.
1.4 **Purpose and Significance:**

The purpose of this thesis is straightforward: to demonstrate realism instead of other actors in explaining the underlying factors maintaining the relationship between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since 9/11. The underlying rationale, however, is that by studying this case of interstate cooperation, we gain access to one of the most enduring and important relationships in modern political history. Because these two countries have such a strong cooperation, one could be likely to assume that it is simply an axiom of modern political affairs, but as we have already seen, there are significant reasons to also believe that the outcome of this relationship could have been very different. The purpose here is to uncover why things unfolded the way they did.

This leads to the question of significance: the ultimate value and significance of this thesis is that it not only gives a thorough analysis of Saudi-American relations, but what it says about the nature of states and international politics. If countries can overcome massive obstacles and potential reasons to escalate conflict, it says something about why countries behave the way they do. Ultimately, the main revelation from this thesis is that despite reasons to fall out, the mutual desire to maintain the status quo is a massive motivating factor in international politics. This thesis, through thorough analysis of the case and the use of theory, shows this to be the case, and in doing so provides an important contribution to future research.
1.5 **Overview of Chapters:**

The second chapter of this thesis outlines the main theories of international relations and explains why applying realist theory, along with the concept of status quo versus revisionist powers, is the best way to analyze the given case, with an emphasis on how past scholars have tried to understand this relationship. Specifically, it will examine different theoretical relations explaining the Saudi-US relation in both conversions and diversions. Chapter three provides a look at the history of the relationship by highlighting the main changes and continuities in its development—thereby investigating the aspects of the relationship that pertain to chronology and development. The fourth chapter focuses the American side of the relationship since 9/11, recounting how different dilemmas have arisen and how the different administrations have handled them. The fifth chapter looks at the same period and issues as chapter four, but instead focuses on matters from Riyadh’s perspective. The last chapter offers the conclusions of the study and makes recommendations for future research pursuits.
Chapter Two
IR Theory And The Us-Saudi Relationship

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a theoretical framework through which the case, the endurance of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, can be enriched and better understood. Therefore, the theories of international relations will be explored here with reference to the case that has been selected here for analysis. The use of theory in politics provides a systematic mechanism through which reality can be understood. As Segbers (2006) argues, “theories are not something scary but simply general assumptions about how factor ‘a’ causes factor ‘b’. This is what science is about […] even when we try to describe something we again cannot avoid using a guiding assumption as a roadmap” (p. 5). In other words, theory provides the researcher with a system to organize and analyze phenomena, which, without an overarching theory, would simply appear as a scattered array of events. The first section highlights realist theory, specifically structural realism, as the type of international relations theory to be used in this thesis and looks at some of the main applications of the theory with regards to the US-Saudi relationship. The second section looks at liberal theories of international relations and some of the major scholarship that uses this approach to analyze Saudi Arabia and the US. The chapter then ends by giving reasons why the realist position is adopted for this thesis.
2.2 Realism and The US-Saudi Relationship

International relations is essentially the branch of political science that deals with the relationship among governments in the world. As the 20th century gathered pace with World War II and then the Cold War, this discipline committed to the study of international relations took form. One of the main schools of thought that developed was realism, which can be defined as a “school of thought that explains international relations in terms of power. The exercise of power by states toward each other is sometimes called realpolitik, or just power politics” (Goldman and Pevehouse, 2011, p. 43). According to international relations theorist Walt (1998), “realism remains the most compelling general framework for understanding international relations” (p. 43). The realist school has its roots as far back as Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes; the birth of modern realism, however, grew out of the Cold War tradition following the collapse of liberal thought after World War II. There are three general types of realism: classical realism, structural realism and neoclassical realism, and these differences are crucial to explaining why states (like the US and Saudi Arabia) act the way they do.

Classical Realism:

Established after World War 2, classical realism is a theory of international affairs that focuses on human nature in explaining relations between states. Morgenthau (1998)—widely considered the father of realism—wrote after World War II, and concluded that “objective laws governed by human nature” were the primary driver of state behavior (p. 7). Morgenthau’s brand of realism, although not particularly useful or widely cited today, still
underpins some of the core ethos in realist thinking. Unlike the structural realists who believe in international cooperation as a structure, the classical realist take is essentially that human nature is confrontation and inherently prone to violence and power domination. One can see the application of classical realism to the US-Saudi partnership in a variety of texts. Most notable is Hart’s (1999) work on the relationship, in which he argues that “the Saudi Kingdom … depends on the United States and the West to help it fend off the predators and potential enemies that inevitably arise in a region plagued by political and economic instability” (p. 11). He criticizes scholarship that assumes “US-Saudi collaboration as a logical manifestation of the two countries’ strong common interest in protecting the Saudi kingdom and its vast oil resources” because it underplays the very human and “difficult” aspects of the partnership. Here we see a clear example of how a classical realist looks at the US-Saudi relationship.

**Structural Realism:**

Structural realism, like all realist theories, uses power as the main unit of measure in international politics (Mearsheimer, 2007). Unlike classical realism, however, structural realism takes power only as the means to the ends of the state, which is survival. More specifically, according to Mearsheimer (2006), structural realism is based on five assumptions: first, that the main actors in today’s world politics are great powers, which also operate in a system that is anarchic to them: no centralized authority that can stand above them. The second assumption is that all states have a form of offensive military ability, and so, the power to inflict harm on other states. The third and final
assumption is that there can never be certainty about the intentions of other states, especially with regards to whether the states want to keep the balance of power (status quo states) or change it through the use of force (revisionist states). For Mearsheimer (2006), “The problem, however, is that it is almost impossible to discern another state’s intentions with a high degree of certainty. Unlike military capabilities, intentions cannot be empirically verified. Intentions are in the minds of decision-makers and they are especially difficult to discern” (p.3). Finally, the forth assumption of this theory is that survival is the main objective of any state, and accordingly these states are rational actors which make decisions that maximize their survival prospects.

To summarize, according to Mearsheimer, the leading structural realist theorist, there are five main assumptions of structural realism:

1. States are the main actors in world politics and act in an anarchic system.

2. All states possess the ability to inflict harm on other states.

3. States are unsure about the intentions of other states—present or future.

4. The primary aim of the state is its own survival.

5. States are rational actors.

This theory helps in explaining why Saudi Arabia has invested in its military spending and in its relationship with the United States, as this, according to Saudi Arabia, would help it maintain its dominant position in the region and secure its survival in the face of potential threats, whether from Iran or competing neighboring states. It also helps in explaining why the United States has invested its foreign policy resources and efforts towards
strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia, in order to prolong and strengthen its power and influence in the Middle East region.

Moreover, Mearsheimer has famously referred to states as “black boxes,” meaning that a state’s only defining feature is its power, and its identities, elites, political system, domestics concerns, etc. do not affect its behavior. Thus looking at how states behave from a perspective of democracy versus non-democracy or economic system does not yield any important information about how they conduct foreign policy. This is interesting, particularly when compared with Waltz’s early work because it totally eliminates individuals and states as explanations for behavior (Keohane 1989). This “black box” approach deeply informs the content of this thesis: an international relations perspective more interested in the peculiarities of domestic politics and ideology would focus less on state interests and more on the way domestic factors affect the state’s behavior. Of course domestic factors do have their role with countries like the US and Saudi Arabia—both of which have very different and distinct features—but the more important point in our analysis comes down to the interests of these countries (i.e. security, energy, stability, etc.) rather than fulfilling domestic objectives.

The transactional, “black box” theory of international relations is very commonly used by scholars writing about the United States and Saudi Arabia because it helps overcome the stark contrast between the country’s ideological, religious and cultural differences. For instance, Cordesman (2009) looks at the Saudi military, and by extension the US role in the kingdom’s decision making, from a “black box” perspective—analyzing its main threats, strengths and weaknesses with little reference to the particular dynamics at
play in the kingdom. In fact, in a 400 page book on the strategic dynamics
Saudi plays and how its relationship with the US affects them, only three pages
is paid to “economic, demographic, and political dynamics”. Baalke (2014)
takes a similar approach, arguing that Saudi domestic politics never factored
into US foreign policy at all: rather, the State Department saw Saudi Arabia,
like pre-revolutionary Iran, as an obvious ally from whom the US could easily
gain allegiance and therefore increase its odds at survival as a global power.

It should be noted that revisionist states are not necessarily
more likely to use violence than status-quo states. The difference is revisionist
states use violence to change the status quo, while a status quo state will use
violence to preserve it. A famous and often-cited example actually involves US
policy in the Middle East. After the United States “won” the Cold War with the
fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, it found itself to be the global hegemon in the
world and the Middle East. Its first post-Cold War conflict was the Gulf War,
which was itself a response to Saddam Hussein’s decision to invade and
attempt to annex neighboring Kuwait—a strong western ally and key oil
producer. Saddam Hussein was a clear revisionist power, who was unhappy
with the status quo in the Middle East and willing to use force to defend it. The
US, which strongly prized its hegemonic role in the region, therefore intervened
to retain the status quo—an independent and sovereign Kuwait. The US as
world power in the contemporary era has used violence on many occasions
and for a variety of strategic objectives, but the underlying principle has
consistently been to preserve the status quo to some degree. Even the second
Gulf War, which involved regime change, only occurred because George W.
Bush believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that would threaten the
order in the Middle East (however erroneous his intelligence reports were). Importantly, Saudi Arabia went along with the US invasion of Iraq and supplied logistical support to the Americans. The crucial point here is that when a revisionist power (like Saddam) attempts to use force to change the regional status quo, status quo powers will band together to prevent this from happening.

On the other hand, revisionist powers are constantly trying to use force to increase their power relative to the balance, and this is often used by scholars to understand the Saudi (and American) position toward Iran in the region. Rachman (2014) points out that Iran’s “obvious dissatisfaction with the regional order in the Middle East” is a key driving factor behind its behavior: it tries to upset the status quo in countries like Lebanon and Iraq by supporting candidates attempting to change the regional order. Thus, Saudi Arabia (especially since the rise of Muhammad Bin Salman) has risen up to confront this revisionism—offering a clear example of how scholars use realist theory to explain the Saudi-US behavior. In the next section, we will see an overview of liberal international relations theory departs from realism on key questions.

2.3 The Development of Neoclassical Realism

After discussing realism, it is important to discuss the neoclassical realism approach of theorizing about international relations. This approach is very methodological, and addresses questions that relate to the topic of Saudi-US relations, mainly: how balances of power are developed, why wars and conflicts take place, and why cooperation and negotiations can be complex
and not possible. According to Baalke (2014), “neoclassical realists utilized these efforts and incorporated the positivist methodology that the classical realists lacked. They approached the international field with the assumption that it is possible to derive testable hypotheses and specify predictions and/or observable implications of the hypotheses to then test the hypothesis against the neoclassical realist theory and alternative hypotheses using empirical evidence” (p.2), and it is on that basis that the neoclassical approach has been chosen to be included in this research. More specifically, it assists the researcher through a “top-down” view of the state of affairs of the Saudi-US relations. It maintains that within the definition of a state, the main actors are both the key institutions and key decision makers. Then, the state (the US or Saudi Arabia in our case), acts by evaluating the threats and adjusts its strategy and position in the international arena accordingly. This should begin with elites on the Saudi (the Royal family) and the US side (Republican and Democratic senators in addition to the economic actors) realizing the changes in the distribution of power, intentions of non-state and state actors. In the regard, the author Fareed Zakaria maintains that main side in international foreign policy and international affairs creation is the statesmen, not the state. Specifically, it is these statesmen’s perception of power changes rather than the objective measures of power changes are the most influential in designing the actions of the state in the international arena (a strong example of this case is US President Donald Trump, especially in his current trade war with the EU and China, and his strong support for Saudi Arabia in its face-off with Qatar).

Secondly, the neoclassical realist maintains that the structure of the state is also important, because a statement can only use the resources of power
through that structure, and that foreign policy at the end is a result of such structures in the state (Baalke, 2014). Among the most notable scholars of neoclassical realism include William Wohlforth Thomas J. Christensen, Alastair J. H. Murray and Gideon Rose, who have written publications that had ideas and arguments associated with neoclassical realistic thought.

**US-Saudi Points of Diversion and Conversion:**

Based on the above discussion, specific variables relevant to this case study and are considered to have a strong influence on the Saudi American relationship include:

- Monetary support in the form of funds, loans, supporting a conflict or war financially
- Military support in the form of arms sales, military trainings and bases
- Manipulation of oil prices through decrease and increase in production and taxes, increase and decrease in prices
- Coercive international policies: using sanctions, oil and embargoes as weapons, closing borders, assassinations, attacks on embassies
- Diplomatic relations (OPEC, Camp David Accords, GCC, Egyptian-Israeli Treaty, OAPEC, UN, OECD, among others)

From a neoclassical realist standpoint, the points of diversion and conversion as a state interest can be noticed in the following instances:

Key junctures affecting the US state interests: the oil shock of 1973-74 (point of diversion), then the 1979 Iranian revolution (point of conversion), the 1980
cold war (point of conversion), and the 9/11 terrorist attacks (point of diversion) and finally the US negotiations with Iran (point of diversion).

Then the critical junctures that influenced the Saudi state interests include: the demand by OPEC countries for higher tax rates and prices, the Camp David accords in 1967 (point of conversion), the 1970 accord with Libya and the transfer of oil production ownership from companies to countries (Aramco as an example), then the 1979 Iranian revolution (point of conversion), the US role in Iraq (point of conversion) the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (point of conversion) and the 2001 start of the war on terrorism (point of diversion, then conversion), finally the war in Yemen (point of conversion) and the US role in the Syrian civil war (point of diversion).

Based on the above points of conversion and diversion between the two countries, they were mostly driven by state interests, whether economic, geopolitical or security related, and show that however we can see that most of the occurrences of diversion were related to security and terrorism issues, where the paradox is that while the Saudi leadership has an interest in receiving protection from the US from terrorism, whether it was Al-Qaeda terrorism or threats from Iran, it is a fact that the Saudi side remains far from being free from supporting terrorist groups in its own region which then threaten the security of the US and KSA itself. Perhaps this paradox is best explained by Daniel Byman (2016), a professor and Senior Associate Dean at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service and also a member of the Brookings Institute, in his testimony before the house committee on foreign affairs where he said:
“Saudi Arabia represents a paradox for US. counterterrorism. On the one hand, the Saudi government is a close partner of the United States on counterterrorism. On the other hand, Saudi support for an array of preachers and non-government organizations contributes to an overall climate of radicalization, making it far harder to counter violent extremism. Both these problems are manifest today as the United States seeks to counter the Islamic State and its allies” (p.1)

So here we can better understand how diversion between the two countries is more reoccurring as a result of the Saudi weakness in controlling the climate of radicalization that exists within its borders and the American inaction or perhaps lenience towards this climate because no US administration wishes to weaken the economic ties that bond the two countries and have been bonding them for decades.

2.4 Liberalism and The Saudi-US Question

The main competitor of the realist theory of international relations throughout the 20th century is liberalism, also known as idealism. Liberal scholars focus on the ways in which states cooperate, the role that political economy and global trade play in fostering political cooperation, the conditions for a peaceful world order, and the way in which the domestic affairs of the state influence the outward looking nature of the state. In direct contrast to realism, liberalism focuses heavily on the specific situations that give evidence to believe that cooperation is increasing—and there are reasons to validate this view. For instance, there is no denying that the world has become a less
violent place. As Pinker (2012) has shown at length using statistical analysis, warfare has dramatically decreased throughout human history and today we are actually living in the most peaceful time. This simple fact calls into question the classical realist assumption that political reality is a zero-sum game between adversarial powers.

Somewhat ironically, the persistence of the US-Saudi alliance can actually be explained from a liberal point of view. Liberalism is often associated with values and normative research, but in international relations, it can also look at how economic interdependence fosters cooperation. Economic considerations are an important aspect of US-Saudi cooperation—particularly on the issue of energy. As Mason (2014) notes, Saudi Arabia is the United States’ biggest trading partner in the Middle East, with total trade around $71 billion in 2013. Trade from Saudi Arabia was mostly oil and from the US, it was mostly automobiles and machinery. This strong trade relationship is an important aspect of the broader political relationship, so the argument basically goes that the strong economic cooperation is a major factor in maintaining ties over decades. In a recent publication, Wald (2018) offers an in-depth look at Saudi Aramco—the biggest oil company in the world and 100% owned by Saudi Arabia. She uses the profile of this company to show how much economic interests (and Saudi Arabia’s economy is mostly oil) influence the foreign policy decisions. Top Aramco official are involved with decision making and frequently foreign relations officials have ties to Aramco. This goes to show how closely Saudi’s economic views and the geopolitical concerns coalesce.

Saudi Arabia, despite having the highest military spending in the Arab world, has only gone to war officially a handful of times, mostly during the
Yemen civil war in the 1960s and the one today in the 2010s. The lack of war, despite being in a dangerous region, is also a strong liberal case. Since World War II, the world community of nations has actually cooperated more than ever, according to the liberal view. Throughout the Cold War, conflicts took place among proxies, but more importantly, a major inter-state was between great powers was diverted. The fact that the United States and the Soviet Union never went to war despite 45 years of tension—partially due to the UN security council—is a stark contrast to what rivals have done in previous centuries (like Britain and France, or France and Prussia, for example). Liberals tend to play up the role that international institutions play within this process. Burchill (2005) points out that these international institutions help aid cooperation between countries, compelling liberals to believe that “international relations need not be a zero-sum game, as many states feel secure enough to maximize their own gains regardless of what accrues to others. Mutual benefits arising out of cooperation are possible because states are not always preoccupied with relative gains” (p. 65). The “relative gains” point refers to a structural realist assumption that states are always trying to “one up” each other. But actually, Burchill argues, states acknowledge the fact that (as with free trade) mutual cooperation is often a more lucrative option than constant warfare. Within these political regimes, such as the United Nations or the European Union, mutual cooperation actually benefits each state more than competition and distrust. Therefore, the emergence of these regimes—particularly in post-WW2 Europe—has an immense impact on creating a lasting peace. Liberalism essentially focuses on these structures
and how they facilitate cooperation, and thus deny the central tenet of realism, which is the international system is anarchic.

On the liberal side, there is also a more radical element that looks at the domestic transgressions of Saudi Arabia and how the relationship contributes to that. Radical feminist writer Benjamin (2016) argues that “oil, weapons sales, and other business interests” are the basis for the relationship, arguing that the “dystopian regime” is able to use this money to fund think tanks (like the Clinton Foundation) and therefore influence perceptions of it (p. 4). Thus while adopting a radical liberal perspective, Benjamin refuses to accept the case that economic cooperation is necessarily good. For her, it is a means to oppress. Aarts and Roelants (2015) argue that this could spell through for the Kingdom, which has unethically hoarded its wealth among the elites, producing a repressive society with double standards for the rich and everybody else.

The Liberal View of Conversion and Diversion:

Now that this thesis has given an overview of how the liberal theory explains the Saudi-US relations, it is important to specifically discuss the liberal view with regards to the points of diversion and conversion between the two countries ever since the start of their relationship in the early 1930s:

Democratic issues and human rights

Points of Conversion Articulated by US Administrations (Republicans and Democrats) over the decades:

The US and Saudi Arabia cemented decades-long relationships during the meeting between King Abdelaziz and the Democrat US President Roosevelt, during which they discussed security and oil and mutual benefits, and the US
specifically requested access to build its first military base in the kingdom (in Dharhan). The economic mutual benefit was also cemented through the 1950 agreement to do a 50/50 profit sharing split between Aramco and Saudi Arabia, which also included economic opportunities for US companies to invest and profit from the Saudi oil industry. In 1951, a mutual defense assistance agreement was signed, whereby the US democratic administration led by President Truman sells arms to Saudi Arabia and the construction of US military installations in the kingdom begins, providing economic benefits to the US and security protection to the kingdom. This economic benefit was further solidified in 1975 when Saudi Arabia and the US signed 2 billion dollars in military contracts led by the Republican President Gerald Ford. From the liberal point of view, such agreements support international trade between the two countries, and when their economies are interconnected through trade, they are less likely to diverge from each other or go into a conflict with each other, from the liberal point of view.

**Points of Diversions:**
A key point of diversion took place in 1973, where King Faisal of Saudi Arabia decided that the KSA will take part in the oil embargo to support the Arab position in the October War of 1973. Another point of diversion was in 2001, when the 9/11 attacks in the US mobilized public opinion in the US against KSA, since 15 out of the 19 attackers were Saudi nationals and a number of Saudi nationals were financing al-Qaeda. However, this point of diversion did not reach the top leadership, as the Republican Bush administration at that time recognized that Al Qaeda and Bin Laden were an equal threat to the US
and Saudi Arabia. This helped in keeping the cooperation between the two countries.

Other points of diversion occurred during the Presidency of Democratic US President Barak Obama, who served two terms during which there were increased tensions between the US and Saudi Arabia, first because of the US negotiations with Iran, which the KSA did not view positively, and the second because of differences in opinion over the US’s role in Syria, which the KSA considered as inactive and insufficient against the rule of Bashar Al-Assad.

The elimination of Osama Bin Laden was another point of conversion since it was hoped by both countries as being a step towards supporting the overall international efforts against terrorism. The Saudi-US relations then started taking a positive upturn in 2017 when crown prince Mohammad Bin Salman visited Washington and was warmly welcomed by the US President, who said that the US is committed to protecting Saudi Arabia, in return for economic support from the kingdom.

Another point of diversion, this time from the economic perspective, was in 2014 when the US started shale oil production causing Saudi oil exports to fall by up to 50 percent, crashing from $110 in 2014 to less than $27 in early 2016.

Economic considerations also had a role in the 2016 diversion between the two countries where Saudi Arabia warned the US that it would sell up to $750 billion dollars in treasury securities, besides other US assets, in response to any step taken by congress in passing a legislation that would allow families of the 9/11 victims to hold the Saud government responsible in US courts. The legislation was indeed passed, and this brought the US-Saudi relations to new lows.
Based on the above conversions and diversions, it can be argued that the security and economic cooperation between the two countries often take precedence over other key values and considerations upheld by the liberal point of view. Specifically, issues related to human rights and democracy are often overlooked: although the US and Saudi Arabia differ greatly in liberal values, these differences were never translated into real conversions between the two sides.

Two viewpoints debate this issue: one viewpoint maintained by Fahad Nazer (2017) in his article “The United States and Saudi Arabia Have More In Common Than Mere Common Interests,” argues that in addition to the economic and security interests, US-Saudi relations are also based on shared core values of civil rights, religious tolerance and women’s rights, as a result of the important cultural shift that was taken by Saudi Arabia, led by Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, towards a vision of Saudi Arabia that is more inclusive, open and reformed. For Nazer (2017), this will further support the ties between the two countries.

However, another view disputes these claims, specifically from Christian Bischoff (2017), a research intern at the Project on Middle East Democracy and Amy Hawthorne (2017), the Deputy Director for Research at the Project on Middle East Democracy at the Washington Institute, who argue that the KSA continues to be a monarchy with one of the most repressive systems in the world, with zero resemblance to liberal democratic and human rights values which were upheld for long by the United States. For instance, intolerance is deeply rooted in the Saudi system, which is based on an alliance between the Al-Saud royal family and ultraconservative Muslim clerics.
Furthermore, the legal system in KSA discriminates against any individual who is not Sunni Muslim, in reference to documentations by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Specifically, the countries’ Shia population experiences frequent instances of arrests, discrimination and even executions under the pretext of countering terrorism. Even Abdul Rahman Al Sudais, who is the Imam of Mecca’s Grand Mosque, declared an all-out war against Muslim Shiites as documented in an April 2015 audio recording. Finally, in reference to the US. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the law in Saudi Arabia requires all citizens to be Muslims and those who are non-Muslims are not allowed to practice their faith publicly and can be detained by the country’s religious police. Furthermore, by law, individuals who criticize Islam in anyway can be punished by imprisonment, flogging or death, and any declaration of atheism can be punished by around 20 years of imprisonment.

The being said, it is safe to conclude that the overarching geopolitical and ideological interests which have kept the two countries close allies were related to:

1) The security of the ruling elite of Saudi Arabia and the country in general mainly from Al-Qaeda terrorism and Iran’s increasing influence and growing military power in the region

2) The economic security of the US administrations characterized by access to oil and being militarily present in key oil trade routes in the gulf region

3) The national security of the US characterized by countering terrorism that has publicly announced its animosity against US interests (Al
Qaeda – ISIS) and which requires support and facilitation by the Saudi leadership to the American military presence in that region. Accordingly, given that the above are pure state interests and are far from being related to democratic values, emphasize power politics and the security principle of realism, the International Relations school of realism and neoclassical realism is best in explaining the areas of conversions and diversions between the two countries.

### 2.5 Assessment and Conclusion

Having briefly introduced and compared these different approaches to international relations theory, realism has been chosen as the best theory to apply to the case of the Saudi Arabia-United States relationship. While liberalism has its merits and uses when applied to the Saudi-US relationship, it quickly becomes clear that the US relationship is more dominated by geopolitical interests than by the benefits of economic cooperation. At present the US is allied with Saudi Arabia against regional nemeses like Iran and its allies. Their close cooperation on military affairs in Yemen reveals that far from being an alliance based on shared values, it is actually one based on maintaining order and supremacy in the region (as we will see later). In other words, the main reason behind cooperation becomes quickly one of power and supremacy versus cooperation and liberal values. Furthermore, the alliance has traditionally taken part on bi-lateral lines without the involvement of international and transnational organizations. An analysis of, say, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a means of understanding cooperation in the Middle East might be an interesting study to utilize liberal theory, but because
this case involves two countries working bilaterally, liberalism might struggle to explain the relationship—especially since Saudi Arabia and the US’s incentives for economic cooperation are little.

To conclude, this chapter has looked at the question of theory in international relations and how to best apply it to this thesis. This involved first surveying the main theories of international relations—realism and liberalism. When realism was decided to be the best theoretical model for explaining Saudi Arabia and the US’s relationship, we looked much closer at its major tenets—including the fundamental differences between classical realism, structural realism, and then offensive versus defensive approaches to the question. Once this was examined, we looked specifically at the idea of status quo versus revisionist powers that is crucial to understanding the power dynamics at play. This was chosen as a main theoretical component because both of our case countries could be classified as status quo powers, and under realist theory, this can be given as a strong explanation as to why these countries have continued their cooperation since it was first begun in the 1940s.
Chapter Three

Us-Saudi Relationship, A Background: 1930s To 9/11

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a chronological history of relations between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Though the purpose of this thesis is to examine some of the underlying reasons for the relationship’s historical persistence and the interests that bind the two nations since 9/11, but of course the relationship did not begin in September 2001. Therefore, if this thesis is to make any sense of the political relationship since 9/11 and the different approaches that have been taken since then, a crucial starting point is the period that happened before then. That is the purpose of this chapter.

3.2 Origins of the US-Saudi Relationship

Until the mid-twentieth century, the United States was what could be described as an isolationist state—particularly as it pertained to Europe and the Middle East. Ambrose and Brinkley (2011) argue that World War II was the event that saw the US enter the global stage, where it has remained ever since. So while our study will largely be confined to the post-War period where the
US saw its interests in the Middle East rise precipitously, it is also worth looking briefly at the pre-War American interests in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, which did not exist as a political entity until the 1930s, was a hodgepodge of tribes and small villages controlled by various clans and factions. The Holy cities of Mecca and Medina were under Ottoman auspices. The Saud clan was a major player in the affairs of the peninsula, and use religious authority as part of its claim. According to a report from the Council on Foreign Relations (2017), “Modern Saudi Arabia traces its roots to an alliance between the Saud family and descendants of Sheikh Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahab, a prominent Hanbali Muslim cleric, who followed the most conservative school of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. This pact has endured for centuries, influencing the country's domestic and foreign policy” (para 3). The rise of the Saud family is crucial here because as a major notable class, the family was diametrically opposed to Ottoman rule and thus formed a strong alliance with the British (who in turn were closely allied to the Americans) who undermined Ottoman authority in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century and eventually fought the Ottomans in World War I.

The British maintained very close relations with the Arabs throughout World War I for two main reasons. First, the Arabs were a key ally in fighting the Ottoman Empire (who was allied with the Germans). Second, the British had imperial interests in the region which necessitated control over Arab lands (Barr, 2011). The infamous Sykes-Picot agreement solidified these interests, and although Saudi Arabia was allowed by the British to become an independent state, the context of the US-British alliance is important here. But the US eventually reneged on its role in the region following World War I. As
MacMillan (2003) argues, the US position during the Paris Peace Conference was based on the principle of self-determination and independence for peoples around the world—actually one closer to the Soviets than the Entente powers. The US solution to the Eastern Question was to ask people in the near east what they wanted, which famously became the King-Crane Commission. After the King-Crane commission and other efforts were halted, the mandate system took over and the US had relatively little political impact on the Middle East until post-1945.

The Republicans won the presidency and controlled Congress throughout the 1920s, leading to a largely isolationist foreign policy. Britain maintained a strong presence in the region, being close to the Saud family and the first country to recognize the independence of Saudi Arabia. The US recognized Ibn Saud as the legitimate head of the sovereign Saudi state in 1932, and given its isolationist tendencies in the interwar period, diplomatic relations during this period were not particularly strong. Ironically, however, likely the most significant and enduring aspect of the two countries’ relationship entered into play in this interwar period with the beginnings of the oil relationship between the two countries.

In the early 1930s, it was becoming increasingly evident that the Arab countries around the Persian Gulf were rich in oil reserves—although, as Yergin (1991) points out, western oil companies like Anglo-Persian Oil (later BP) considered Saudi Arabia’s reserves to be meager. This would turn out to be a massive miscalculation: Saudi Arabia is the most influential oil exporter in the world today, in charge of Opec and able to produce between 12 million and 15 million barrels a day. It was actually an American firm, Standard Oil of
California, that earned the first concession with the Saudis to develop their fields. The California-Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC) was established in 1934 and headquartered in Jedda, and its first commercial discovery was made in the east of the country in 1938. Very quickly, the significance of Saudi Arabia’s recoverable oil reserves was discovered—thereby changing the nature of Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the US—and everybody for that matter—until the present day. CASOC was renamed Aramco in 1945 (the Arabian American Oil Company) and eventually became Saudi Aramco when the Saudi Government bought out the American government in the 1980s.

### 3.3 FDR and World War II

Saudi Arabia did not play a major role in World War II from a political perspective. King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud had strong relations with Britain at this point, which meant that like many countries in the world, it was compelled to cut diplomatic ties with the Axis Powers (Germany, Japan, and Italy) was the war commenced around 1939. The major impact that Saudi Arabia did have was through oil sales to Britain and later the United States. As was already stated, the Americans were brought onboard in the 1930s to help explore and later produce crude oil in Saudi Arabia through the joint venture of CASOC. First oil was produced in 1938, but by the 1940s, the Kingdom was becoming a significant oil producer, which helped support Allied supply lines throughout the conflict, to the tune of about 7 billion barrels throughout the conflict. As America entered the conflict after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, relations with Saudi Arabia became slightly more important but particularly
through the prism of resources to supply the fleets. After the Italians attacked a CASOC facility, rendering oil output from the Kingdom (to the Allied powers) completely debilitated, the US increased its role in protecting oil infrastructure (and therefore American interests) in Arabia (Grayson, 1982).

As war progressed, US President stated explicitly (first in February 1943) that protecting Saudi Arabia was a vital interest to the US, and in doing so, attempted to sign up Saudi Arabia to the lend-lease program through which it supplied aid to its allies. The biggest moment during World War II, and arguably in history, for the development of US-Saudi relations came on February 14 1945, when President Roosevelt met the Saudi King Ibn Saud on the USS Quincy to discuss regional affairs and the long-term basis for relations. According to former CIA officer and expert on the US-Saudi relationship Riedel (2017):

“As the Second World War was coming to an end, President Roosevelt met with King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al Saud in Egypt, and the two forced a partnership that has endured, despite occasional severe strains, for the last seventy years. Even today, every Saudi official recalls the meeting vividly” (p. 2).

The war was nearly over: Britain, the US and its allies were marching toward Berlin and the US had pushed Japanese positions back in the Pacific theater. Saudi Arabia, as many official neutral countries would, declared “war” on Germany in March 1945, but when the two men met in February 1945, the war effort was not the biggest issue on either leaders’ mind. The more important point was that both men were looking to develop a long-term, sustainable relationship.
The two leaders were coming from very different contexts. President Roosevelt, along with Prime Minister Winston Churchill and leader of the Soviet Union Josef Stalin, had won the war. Unlike Europe, the US had emerged relatively unscathed from the conflict with a massive economic boom, and was looking to expand its global presence. As Riedel points out, the Saudi monarchy was at a low point: “he and his country were broke. The depression and the war had hurt Saudi Arabia badly. The British had been subsidizing the Saudis for years, but they, too, were broke. Only the United States had the resources to help the Saudi economy cope until oil production grew to make the Kingdom solvent” (p. 4).

Essentially what came out of the Quincy meeting between the two leaders—despite the fact that President Roosevelt would die from a cerebral hemorrhage just months later—was an agreement to ensure the stability and the long-term objective of balance in the region. From the American perspective, securing access to Saudi Arabia’s oil fields and a regional base for operations were the main objectives—and with the Dhahran air base and concessions for US companies, this objective was satisfied. On the Saudi side, the King secured guarantees of military protection, but in terms of stability, the Jewish-Palestine question, about which the King fought very hard against President Roosevelt’s sympathies for Zionism, remained unsolved. The basic elements of the US-Saudi relationship were born from this meeting on three main tenets: 1) the US would be involved in the production and consumption of Saudi oil; 2) the US would maintain a military presence in Saudi Arabia while also serving to protect the Saud family’s interest; 3) the two countries would
cooperate on maintaining a conservative, status quo in the region by combatting revolutionary powers.

King Ibn Saud lived until 1953, which meant through the presidency of Harry Truman (1945-1953). In general, Truman’s foreign policy adopted the main tenets of Roosevelt’s and witnessed the beginnings of the Cold War. The one notable exception, which angered the Saudis profoundly, was Truman’s considerably more sympathetic treatment of Israel. Truman immediately recognized the state, angering the Saudis profusely, whereas Roosevelt attempted to strike a middle ground between Zionist demands for a purely Jewish state and Palestinian demands for recognition and a halt to Jewish immigration. Nonetheless, the relationship persisted, and with the discover of Ghawar oil field in 1948, by far the biggest oil field in the world, the stakes became considerably higher as the 1950s commenced.

3.4 Relations in the Mid-20th Century: the 1950s to the 1970s

The death of King Abdul Aziz (reign 1932-1953), the end of the Roosevelt/Truman era, the massive rise of Saudi oil production, the commencement of the Cold War, and the rise of radical Arab nationalism in the Middle East meant the 1950s saw the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United State grow considerably in importance.

On the surface, the Republican president, Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) appeared to be a rather hands-off, or even aloof, president when it came to foreign policy. But as Yaqub (2004) argues, Eisenhower and his doctrine of pledged economic and military aid to allies in the Middle East who were threatened by “international communism” (i.e. revisionism), “marked America’s
emergence as the dominant Western power in the Middle East, a role the United States continued to play long after the policy itself had been abandoned" (p. 1). In the United States, President Eisenhower’s relaxed forward appearance and the excellent performance of the economy during the “golden decade” give an air of stability when one looks back on the 1950s. But in the Middle East, the situation could not have been more different, and US policy was at the center of this dynamic—and as we will see, all of this stirring had a major impact on the Saudi-American alliance.

After World War II, most of the mandatory countries (which were Jordan, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq) were granted full independence, joining the growing state system in the Middle East. The expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the Nakba and subsequent Arab-Israeli War of 1948 deeply politicized the region. Syria faced coup after coup, while Lebanon became a central battleground for Arab nationalism versus Lebanese nationalism—manifesting itself in the Civil War of 1958. The Egyptian monarch was overthrown in 1952, ushering in military control under (by 1954), the sole control of the charismatic (and later Saudi foe) Gamal Abdul Nasser—with tacit help from the Soviet Union. The Iraqi Hashemite monarchy, installed by the British in 1921, was overthrown in an officer’s coup in 1958 resulting in the execution of Faisal II and his family. President Nasser, preaching Arab nationalism, was even able to establish a United Arab Republic with Syria, backed strongly by the Soviets. In other words, the region was in complete turmoil. Friendly pro-western governments and monarchies were falling one after another, now with the backing of the US’s arch rival, the Soviet Union (Yaqub, 2004). This spelled troubled not only for the US, by perhaps even
more directly for the Saudi royal family, now under the rule of King Saud, who ruled from 1953-1964. The upheaval of regional stability, led by a secularist force in Cairo, was of great threat to the Saudis, who watched monarchs from neighboring countries killed or exiled. This dynamic of chaos—both regionally and internationally—is where we find the Saudi-US alliance in the 1950s.

For his part, King Saud found himself in a very precarious position during this period: if he attempted to remain completely allied to its western partners at the expense of the Arabs, it would have given the populace all the more reason to violently confront him. On the other hand, if Saudi Arabia appeared too close to Nasser and his comrades, it could have jeopardized foreign support from the US. One of the main mechanism through which King Saud attempted to address this problem was by adopting a more Pan-Islamist position, especially given Saudi Arabia’s role as custodian of the two holiest sites in Islam—Mecca and Medina. An example of Saudi Arabia’s complicated foreign policy under King Saud was his effort to remain independent from major pacts and blocs in the Middle East (Yaqub, 2004). During the Suez Crisis, which involved an Israel-Britain-France led attack against Egypt to regain control of the Suez Canal, both the United States and Saudi Arabia condemned the effort. In the case of Riyadh, this helped bolster its credibility amount Arab countries. Similarly, the US pressured Saudi Arabia heavily during the late 1950s to join the Baghdad pact, which was a coalition of pro-western powers in the region committed to holding off the spread of Communism. This pact, signed in 1958 between Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and Turkey, attempted to solidify a pro-western stance in the case of radical regimes and growth of Baathism. King Saud was wholeheartedly sympathetic
to this cause, which was also promoted by the US, but refrained from joining the bloc because it could have made Saudi Arabia appear excessively committed to the pro-western stance in the increasingly polarized region.

But King Saud’s attempts at a more neutral foreign policy in order to balance between Arab and Western interests ultimately backfired. President Nasser called for the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy in 1958, citing an attempt on his life that he blamed on the Saudis. The Soviet Union, furthermore, was doubling down on this dynamic and becoming increasingly troublesome for the region’s status-quo regimes. In the Saudi royal family, there were increasing concerns over the competence of the ruling regime. Oil revenues during the 1950s had increasing exponentially even with the Americans’ cut, and yet the Kingdom was running deficits every year. This led to a power struggle within the royal family that eventually ended with the coup against King Saud in favor of King Faisal who officially became king in 1964. Faisal, who was the crown prince before eventually taking power, had already played a major role in the Kingdom’s politics, which made the transition less abrupt.

The relations between the US and Saudi Arabia were particularly stretched in the early years of the 1960s, when President John F. Kennedy adopted a particularly sympathetic position toward Gamal Abdul Nasser—eventually exchanging letters with the Egyptian leader and Saudi nemesis. When the conservative king of Yemen died in 1962 and a power struggle emerged between the Saudis and the Egyptians over who would rule Yemen, Kennedy cautiously backed the Yemeni royal family (supported by Saudi Arabia) against the Nasserite, Soviet-backed military coup. As Faisal
increased his grip on power and eventually ousted the existing king, he doubled down on Yemen with American support—which he secured from Kennedy as crown prince during a meeting in Washington between the two in 1962. Hart (1998) that Washington’s support for Saudi Arabia as the regional conflict heated up was largely based on an agreement for Saudi Arabia to adopt ten points, including reforms like abolishing slavery and providing basic services to its citizens, the author calls “a unique example of an American president convincing a Saudi leader to make major reforms in the region, with no president before or since having done so. Kennedy’s timing was excellent. Faisal knew the revolutionary tide was strong and that he needed to reform the Kingdom. The president also used discretion and tact; by making his case privately in the intimacy of the White House he spared Faisal any public embarrassment” (p. 40). This episode is especially crucial because it reveals the extent to which Washington was involved in Saudi internal affairs by the 1960s, and its external affairs as well.

Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, and his vice president Lyndon B. Johnson took over. As Mansfield (2004) notes, Johnson had a far less patient and nuanced vision of the Middle East as compared to Kennedy, so many of Kennedy’s longer term visions about bridging gaps—particularly Kennedy’s ongoing attempt to woo Nasser away from the Soviet Union—collapsed when Kennedy died. Johnson immediately embraced America’s long-held allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia and doubled down on his opposition toward radical regimes. As Riedel (2017) notes, Johnson only met once with Faisal, but the meeting had a strong impact on Johnson. The president found Faisal to be a man “a lot more modern than he looks” and
assured the king that “we will not let Nasser swallow up Saudi Arabia” (Riedel, 2017, p. 46). Johnson also assured him of America’s massive commitment to Saudi Arabia because of the energy side of the mix—with the US’s biggest overseas investment being ARAMCO. However, it is fair to also point out that of all the decades after World War II, the 1960s was the one in which the focus on the Middle East as a geostrategic asset decreased the most for the United States. With Johnson, and then Richard Nixon, embroiled in the increasingly costly war in Vietnam, focus on the Middle East (and by extension, Saudi Arabia) was significantly small than it was in previous decades or would be in the coming years.

3.5 The Oil Embargo

The so-called Six Day War, which took place in June 1967, was perhaps the most consequential event in the second half of the 20th century in the Middle East. It saw Israel, which since 1948 had been a fledgling state, rise to the role of a major Middle Eastern powerhouse with the victory of Nasser’s Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. It was a great humiliation for all Arabs elevated Israel to a hegemonic power in the region (Shlaim, 2001). The US was not particularly involved in the conflict, and after it unfolded, largely played a passive role in brokering a peace settlement through UNSC Resolution 242. The US was willing to live with this status quo, but King Faisal appeared particularly unsettled by the status quo—particularly in East Jerusalem where the Israelis now found themselves in control of Al Aqsa mosque and other Islamic holy sites. According to Riedel (2017), King Faisal was increasingly making it clear to the US that “he would use the oil weapon, cutting off exports
if the United States did not take action to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and compel Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967” (p. 50). It appears that the US, and Kissinger in particular, did not take these threats very seriously, but the October 1973 war between Israel and the Arab states (known in Israel as the Yom Kippur War) further pushed King Faisal toward his position. In the summer of 1973, Faisal even talked to the US publication Newsweek, saying “Saudi Arabia would use its oil as a political weapon if the United States continued to support Israel’s policy of aggression against the Arab world.” So when the October War occurred, it constituted the “straw that broke the camel’s back” as the saying goes.

The oil crisis, as Bini and Garavini (2016) point out, had a monumental impact on the US and indeed the global economy. Prices rose well above $20 a barrel and widespread shortages plagued both Europe and the US. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which included Iran and Iraq in addition to Saudi Arabia, began to utilize its cartel structure to raise prices in 1971 when Saudi Arabia joined, and the embargo further shot up global prices by creating a supply shortage. But the impact on the broader US-Saudi relationship was even more profound. As Bacevich (2017) points out, the 1973-1974 oil embargo was the first time Americans came to fully experience and realize their addiction to foreign imported oil. He recounts how, prior to 1973, oil was incredibly cheap in the US and most Americans did not even realize just how dependent the country was on foreign imports. On the Saudi side, the 1973-4 embargo also revealed Saudi Arabia as more than a western client state. Its stature as an oil producer had grown to a level where it could bring the entire global economy to its needs simply by organizing an
embargo, or more consequentially perhaps in the long term, being able to affect the price of oil through its hegemonic role in OPEC.

The embargo itself did not last long. By March 1974, it was lifted and oil prices came down slightly, but Saudi Arabia now had the leverage to keep them permanently higher. Ironically, as Gause (2009) notes, the increased revenues the Saudis received from higher oil prices enabled them to sign several major defense contracts with the Americans between 1975 and 1978. Thus while the relationship took a massive blow with the embargo, it was healed through economic means, and by the mid-1970s, the relationship had largely been healed. Especially with the upcoming polarity of the region due to the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the rise of Shiite Iran, the US and Saudi Arabia would need each other as status-quo powers to help preserve the power balance in the region.

### 3.6 The Late 70s to September 10 2001

The 1967 War, among other things, helped unleash forces that the US and Saudi Arabia would both confront and also cajole for the rest of the century. Chief among them would be the rampant explosion of political Islam that followed in the wake of the failure of Arab nationalism (Mansfield, 2004). For the next 50 years, both Saudi Arabia and the United States would selectively fund and support certain Islamist groups (like the Mujahidin in Afghanistan) in order to accomplish strategic objectives in third-party countries (Coll, 2004), while in other cases fight virulently to limit their influence. Political Islamism would also grow to threaten both Saudi and American interests. The overthrow of the Shah in Iran in 1979 presented a major problem to the US
and Saudi Arabia from its inception until the present day because it brought an extremely revisionist regime to the forefront in one of the Middle East’s most populous and prominent countries. More importantly for the purpose of this thesis, the rise of political Islamist groups—again, some funded and supported by the US and Saudi Arabia—saw the emergence of an extremely revisionist force in the Middle East just as Arab nationalists were beginning to lose their widespread support on the Arab street. The replacement of one regional manifestation of revisionism with another is crucial to understanding how the Saudi-American relationship went forward.

To understand the person looking at the Saudi perspective, we must begin with King Khalid Bin Abdul Aziz, who ruled Saudi Arabia after Faisal’s assassination from 1975-1982. This broadly corresponded with the years of Jimmy Carter’s presidency and the beginning of Ronald Reagan. This period was extremely turbulent in the Kingdom. As House (2013), the year 1979 may have been the most turbulent and consequential in the country’s history. First, as we already mention, the Iranian revolution saw a wave of massive popular uprising overthrow one of the region’s seemingly stable monarchies in Iran. And worse yet, the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini argued that they were the true practitioners of Islam versus the corrupt practices of kings. Second, the Grand Mosque in Islam’s holiest city, Mecca, was attacked by Jihadists who held the city for a while, prompting Riyadh to use deadly force. Third, the Iran-Iraq War broke out, bringing two revisionist powers into direct confrontation. Finally, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.

For reasons that should be obvious by now, these events deeply affected the United States as well—particularly after having helped facilitate
the Camp David accords, which were supposed to bring peace to the region. The relationship by the mid-to-late 1970s between the Saudis and the Americans had survived the oil embargo and was now at an all-time high, especially with Carter forcing through the sale of 50 F-15 fighter planes to Saudi Arabia—an unprecedented military sale to the Kingdom at that time—and the chaos in Iran and elsewhere only forced the two closer together. Saudi Arabia was realizing that the rise of political Islam had the potential to undermine its own authority both overseas and domestically, and therefore doubled down on its own brand of Wahhabist conservative in the Kingdom while also doubling down on its American ally. The Americans, having lost one of its “two pillars” in Tehran, now looked to Saudi Arabia to be its closest ally in the Gulf.

The transition from Carter to Reagan was especially traumatic because of the Iranian hostage crisis, which involved a group of 52 American citizens, mostly workers at the US embassy in Tehran at the time of the revolution, being held for 444 days in what some scholars have called the beginning of America’s confrontation with militant Islam in the Middle East (Bowden, 2007). The hostages were not released until Reagan was inaugurated in January 1981. Reagan was a far more hawkish foreign policy president than Carter, who in part lost the election for his mishandling of the crisis, and the Reagan presidency (followed by that of George H.W. Bush, Reagan’s vice president) also coincided with the ascension of King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud with King Khalid’s death in 1982. King Fahd would rule Saudi Arabia from 1982 to 2005, providing immense stability on the Saudi side of the relationship.
When both Reagan and Fahd were in their first years, the situation in Beirut was at the top of the priority list for both. The Israelis had invaded Lebanon to displace the PLO, and the US Embassy attack and Marine barracks attack in Lebanon brought the conflict to the forefront of American attention—with both attacks being eventually traced back to Iran. In Afghanistan, the US and Saudi Arabia were in joint cooperation with the Mujahidin fighting the Soviet Union, including the support of a young Saudi man named Osama Bin Laden. According to Riedel (2017), Saudi Arabia was slightly wary of Reagan’s favoritism toward Israel, which the Saudis still regarded as a potential threat, and thus turned toward the British for weapons deals in the late 1980s. Furthermore, the Iran Contra scandal, which involved the CIA selling weapons to Iran to fund the cause of the Contras in Nicaragua, severely hurt relations with Saudi Arabia, who was essentially bankrolling Saddam’s side against the Iranians. Riedel writes that “Fahd felt betrayed by Reagan’s foolish initiative with Iran, especially given its Israeli inspiration. Fahd turned to London and Beijing for arms […] Saudi distrust of Reagan never really diminished” (p. 98). But the upcoming presidency of George H.W. Bush would provide an ample opportunity for the US to regain favor.

The Gulf War constituted a near perfect alignment of US and Saudi interests, providing the two countries with opportunity for cooperation. Saddam Hussein, despite being deeply in debt after eight years of war (mainly to the Saudis) did not moderate his regional ambitions. Saddam quickly went from a convenient ally for Saudi Arabia in its pursuit to limit Iran, to itself a revisionist power bent on shaking up the region—and Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait on August 2 1990. The US now found one of its important Gulf allies, Kuwait, on
the brink of non-existence with 120,000 Iraqi troops storming the border. Both Saudi Arabia and Washington were caught completely by surprise. The Saudis were reluctant to use force, but the Americans eventually convinced them that force was the only reprimand Saddam would respect in pushing him to abandon Kuwait, and so Operation Desert Storm commenced with joint US-Saudi effort. The overall war effort was swift and successful, removing Saddam's forces from Kuwait and restoring the status quo in remarkable fashion.

Due to his poor health, King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995, and his designated successor, Crown Prince Abdullah Abd al Aziz al Saud managed the Kingdom’s affairs until he officially took over as King in 2005. As crown prince, Abdullah maintained strong relations with President Bill Clinton, though it was inevitable, Riedel (2017) points out (who served as director of Gulf Affairs under Clinton), that the relationship would take a step backward from the unprecedented closeness that existed under Bush. Overall, the Saudi-US relationship remained relatively calm under Clinton. The main area of cooperation was Operation Southern Watch, which involved the US maintaining 5,000 troops in Saudi Arabia to maintain the no-fly zones in southern Iraq. The Saudis overall were supportive of Clinton’s Middle East peace initiatives, although the failure of an Israeli-Syria peace was troubling, and Clinton’s overall unsuccessful attempt at solving the Israel-Palestine dispute undermined Saudi trust in American diplomatic efforts. Washington and Riyadh also did not see eye to eye on intelligence sharing regarding terrorist groups—the consequences of which would be all too visible in the first year of the successor of Clinton’s presidency, George W. Bush.
Chapter Four
Us Diplomacy Toward Saudi Arabia Since 9/11

4.1 Introduction

Having examined about 80 years of history in the last chapter, and having developed a theoretical model to be used in the chapter before that, this thesis can now move on to its more important task: detailing and then analyzing the dynamics of the US-Saudi relationship first from the American perspective and then from Saudi Arabia’s perspective. This chapter is divided into four main parts: an examination of the Bush administration, a look at President Obama’s foreign policy, a look at the early part of Trump’s administration, followed by an analysis of the similarities and differences between the three contexts. Of course, the limitation of this approach is that it only looks at one side of things, and therefore adopts the narrative of events that was utilized by the US. However, this is countered overall by the next chapter, which uses the Saudi side to tell the rendition of events.

4.2 9/11 and The War On Terror: Crisis and Cooperation

When George W. Bush, son of the former president, ran for the presidency in 2000, an expansive and transformational foreign policy was as far from the plan. In fact, Bush’s main foreign policy position could be described as isolationist, since he insisted that the US cease the “nationbuilding” it had embarked on during the Clinton years. Leffler (2013) argues that although
Bush would go on to be the most radical president in modern American history in foreign policy terms, he initially lacked confidence in his aptitude given his background as a governor rather than a bureaucrat or a senator. If anything, Bush was to be a status quo foreign policy president that cherished long-time allies and maintained America’s strong position in global affairs.

The election of George W. Bush was seen positively in Riyadh. After all, the Saudis expected Bush operate much in the manner of his father—who as we have already seen, maintained excellent relations with the Saudis. Furthermore, Bush’s reputation as a Texas oil man served to bolster his image in Riyadh. Many of Bush’s inner-circle (including Vice President Dick Cheney) had worked closely with the Saudi intelligence during the Gulf War. The table was therefore set for an extremely good relationship between the two countries, but then reality intervened.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Washington almost immediately plummeted when Bush took office, with Crown Prince Abdallah extremely disgruntled over Bush’s apathy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, which was at a particular high point due to the Second Intifada. Riedel (2017) goes so far as to call this period “the darkest moment in American-Saudi relations since 1973, with the first explicit threat of the oil weapon since the spring of 1974” (p. 134). In a letter, Crown Prince Abdallah threatened a “fundamental reevaluation of the relationship” unless America committed to stopping the violence in Palestine. There was even chatter in Washington about Saudi Arabia possibly using the “oil option” as a mechanism to force the Americans to intervene in the conflict directly. The Second Intifada, explains Pappe (2006) involved Israel using some of its most controversial and legally questionable
tactics to stop protesting Palestinians. Across the Arab world, these were viewed as terrible violations of Palestinian rights—and the US was perceived as the only force powerful enough to stop the violence. Interestingly. The massive discontent caused by Bush’s lack of action, like the US support for Israel in the October War of 1973, shows how consequential the Israel issue can be for the relationship.

This spat was interrupted on September 11, 2001 when 19 hijackers (15 of Saudi extraction) flew two planes into the World Trade Center in New York City and one into the Pentagon, with well over three thousand civilian casualties recorded. The attack amounted to the greatest loss of civilian life on American soil in the history of the republic, and caused a national sense of trauma, outrage, and horror. The culprit behind the attack was Osama Bin Laden, who the US already knew from its support for Islamist fighters in the Afghan-Soviet War, and some allege cooperated with the CIA (Coll, 2004). Needless to say, the composition of the attackers, the nationality of the main assailant, and the nature of their grievances propelled the Saudi-US relationship right into open light. As the 9/11 Commission Report (2004) concluding after years of studying the attack,

“the history, culture, and body of beliefs from which Bin Laden has shaped and spread his message are largely unknown to many Americans. Seizing on symbols of Islam’s past greatness, he promises to restore pride to people who consider themselves victims of successive foreign masters […] He inveighed against the presence of US. troops in Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam’s holiest sites” (p. 48-49).
In the report, some blame is laid on the Saudis for the attack. Looking to explain why the attacks were not discovered, the report points out VP “Cheney called Crown Prince Abdullah on July 5, 2001, to seek Saudi help in preventing threatened attacks […] they discussed topics like Iraq, not al Qaeda” (p. 207). In other words, the Saudis were partly to blame for not alerting the US to the attacks. According to Lacy (2009), Americans grew increasingly cognizant of the fact that Saudi Arabia had a long record of Islamic charity money going toward financing groups like Al Qaeda. If the breakdown of relations in early 2001 over the Second Intifada was the worst relations had been since 1973, the immediate aftermath of 9/11 arguably pushed relations to their worst levels in the history of relations between the two countries.

September 11, argue Daalder and Lindsay (2003), had a profound impact on Bush’s foreign policy vision: “Rather than transforming Bush’s beliefs about the world and America’s place in it, September 11 confirmed them. He suddenly had both the motive and the opportunity to act on those beliefs and develop them in full. Foreign policy became not just the priority of his administration but its mission” (p. 2). It appears that Bush did not personally fault Saudi Arabia for the attack, but rather immediately began to blame Saddam Hussein, his father’s old nemesis, for the dispute. But even with this being the case, the relationship was set to stay fraught with problems.

But unlike previous instances of rocky relations, the relationship did not improve immediately after the incident. The publics of both countries were hostile about how the situation unfolded. Saudi Arabia insisted for two years that the attack was a Zionist plot, while Americans considered the Saudi government particularly responsible for the attack. Furthermore, as
Cordesman (2006) points out, the Saudis did not go along with the American operations in the region after 9/11. The Saudis did not endorse the American “war on terror”, and did not go along with the invasion of Afghanistan to fight the Taliban the way the Saudis did in 1990 in the Gulf War. As the US built its case for the invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein (however flawed it may have been), the Saudi foreign minister warned that the US would possibly destabilize the region to a point where it could spread throughout Saudi Arabia as well (Cordesman, 2016). This was an especially difficult blow for the Americans because Bush was pushing as hard as he possibly could to build a respectable international coalition. Outright support for the invasion of Iraq in the Middle East was very low, despite the relationships between Iraq and many Arab countries being frozen since 1990.

Here, interestingly, we see a case where Saudi Arabia and the US are diametrically opposed to a political decision on a policy basis, but fundamentally committed to the idea of maintaining the status quo. For Saudi Arabia, who turned out to be correct, the invasion of Iraq would cause utter turmoil in the Middle East, with the ethnic and religious components of Iraq—which has been in place since the British mandate—seemingly reversed, and one of the region’s longest serving leaders deposed. From the American perspective, the Iraq invasion was also about maintaining the status quo, which was (at least as Bush articulated it) a Middle East where no major power (besides Israel) had a nuclear weapon. For the Americans, Saddam was a loose cannon capable of invading a country on a couple days’ notice, and if he obtained a nuclear weapon, it would completely change the dynamic in the region. In this context, tying Saddam to Al Qaeda (and 9/11) was a simple
pretext for regime change, which would help mitigate the threat of a nuclearized Middle East. The Americans here probably made a grave miscalculation, but nonetheless it is clear their fundamental objective was the same as Saudi Arabia’s.

Since the war in Iraq from 2003-2009 was the centerpiece of American Middle East foreign policy, the relationship with Saudi Arabia could never advance over this hurdle as it had in the past. Riedel (2017) concludes that “by the end of the Bush administration, the American relationship with Saudi Arabia had soured immensely […] What had seemed, eight years earlier, to begin as a return to the good old days of George H.W. Bush has turned into a failed partnership. Bush’s successor would have to try to get things back on track” (p. 148). Though not always pointed out by scholars, it is easy to see why Bush was unable to court Saudi Arabia after its initial condemnation for the war. In short, after the Shock and Awe campaign deposed Saddam, the aftermath was a complete debacle. Perhaps the Saudis would have warmed to regime change after, but both the international community and the majority of Americans turned against Bush. Once Shiite parties won in the first elections in Baghdad and moved closer to Saudi Arabia, there was even less reason to patch up the relationship. It fell, as Riedel says, on Obama to restore the relationship.

4.3 The Obama Years: Total Rest?

The presidency of Barack Obama walked a very fine line between trying to reset the American relationship with the Middle East back to where it was before Bush (i.e. as a status quo power with strong alliances) while also
attempting to be a transformational president who championed the liberal values of human rights, freedom of expression, and prosperity. In the Middle East, where in 2008 no state could clearly be called democratic, this was a tough ask. Especially when the US’s closest allies—Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt, Benjamin Netanyahu’s Israel, and Saudi Arabia—were hardly bastions of liberalism. But Obama’s first public statement of his policy with the Arab world—his 2009 Cairo speech—impressed the Saudis with its emphasis on cultural understanding and an even-handed approach in the region. Obama’s internationalism butted heads with the Saudis throughout his presidency. As Blanchard (2017) notes, “the Obama Administration endorsed Saudi citizens’ rights to free assembly and free expression. Saudi leaders reject foreign interference in the country’s internal affairs” (p. 2). Obama also objected to the Saudi hardline on countries like Iran and Yemen, as we will see later, because of his idealism and commitment (at least rhetorically) to freedoms for people in the Middle East. Coming from a liberal mentality, Obama was more inclined to blame a lack of freedom for the massive issues in the Middle East rather than a lack of order (as conservative typically argue). Nonetheless, Obama was also able to play the realpolitik game.

Obama went out of his way to meet with and send emissaries to King Abdullah in Riyadh after his Cairo speech and made sure to line up military deals with the kingdom ... That the US signed a $61 billion arms sale to the Kingdom in 2010—the largest US arms sale in history—was merely icing on the cake, and signaled a great degree of trust between the two countries. But relations with Saudi Arabia began to sour when the Arab Spring broke out across North Africa and the Middle East in the early months of 2011 (Al-
In particular, Obama’s treatment of President Mubarak in Egypt was considered to be a grave treachery in Riyadh (Riedel, 2017). Mubarak, who was a close American ally and defended the Egyptian peace with Israel, was suddenly thrown under the bus at a moment’s notice as soon as protests broke out—particularly given that a major faction of the opposition hailed from the Muslim Brotherhood movement. The message Obama was conveying basically said that if popular will was strong enough, the US would be willing to renege on even its oldest allies. Obama and his administration essentially applied the same rhetoric to its longstanding ally Egypt that it did the traditionally anti-American regime in Damascus, this meant trouble for America’s autocratic allies in the region. For Saudi Arabia, whose domestic control is largely tied to coercion and a strong state, this was a dangerous precedent.

Obama’s trip to Riyadh in 2014 offers an important case for how exactly the relationship deteriorated after Obama’s lukewarm behavior during the Arab spring. An assessment report from the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (2014) analyzed Obama’s much anticipated trip and noted that the “deterioration in relations started with Saudi’s lack of confidence in American military protection following the Arab Spring revolutions … On top of this the US has been mysteriously hesitant in its support for the Syrian Revolution, which is the only uprising supported by the Saudi Kingdom” (p. 4). Obama’s visit was an attempt to reassure the kingdom on these exact issues. A statement released by the White House just before the visit assured that the US would not touch on issues of human rights and religious freedom, and would instead focus on security issues. ACRPS’s report concluded that
“Obama’s visit served as an attempt to quell these fears and reaffirm the US’s commitment to the Gulf region’s security…yet at the same time, there were no signs that the US would adopt different policies toward Iran or its allies, especially in Syria” (p. 7). So essentially, Obama’s big attempt to assure the Saudis failed because he was more committed to lowering the US role in the Middle East than we was supporting a key ally, and the 2015 Iran deal shows just that.

From a Middle East and Saudi focused perspective, the biggest years of the Obama presidency were 2011 with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and 2015 with the groundbreaking Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) plus Germany signed with Iran on 14 July 2015. The agreement basically functioned as a nuclear non-proliferation agreement and forced Iran to halt its nuclear program, agree to strict oversights from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in return for lifting of (some) sanctions that were crippling the Iranian economy. John Kerry, Obama’s secretary of state, was tasked with negotiating the deal alongside his Iranian counterpart Muhammad Javad Zarif.

The deal, later repealed by President Trump, was a cornerstone of Obama’s foreign policy, which basically revolved around trying to foster more international cooperation in the region. It is hard to argue, however, that is was a positive development for the US-Saudi Arabia relationship. As Guzansky (2015) notes, the deal was “not good news for Saudi Arabia, because the agreement means that Iran, Riyadh’s main ideological and geo-strategic rival, has received international recognition as a nuclear threshold state. Saudi
Arabia regards this highly significant development as evidence of Iran’s growing power” (para 1). Thus the Iran deal had extremely negative implications for the relationship. Obama and his administration argued that it was actually in the interests of the Saudis that the nuclear deal be signed. After all, the point of the deal was to reduce the possibility that Iran would get a nuclear weapon. One of the main reasons the US was so concerned with making a deal with the Iranians is because the state department believed if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, it would trigger an arms race in the Middle East whereupon other major players such as the Saudis and the UAE would have to get a nuclear weapon as well.

The nuclear deal, for Obama advocates, was the signature foreign policy achievement of his presidency. Yet some have noted that was not exactly a hard break with existing policy. Unger (2016) argues that “Obama’s strategy for a nuclear with Iran built on the efforts of his predecessors to form a broad international coalition willing to use the pressure of tough economic sanctions to induce Tehran’s ruling mullahs to slow their uranium enrichment programs, thereby delaying their achievement of nuclear weapon capability” (p. 8). Obama’s main innovation, he argues, was using a realist approach that included dealing directly with hardliners in the regime. This meant not dealing with Iran’s broader political and regional issues, but instead dealing with the nuclear question directly and on its own. Arguably, this was the only way to attain a result, but Saudi Arabia believed this was to bring Iran to the bargaining table and not address its post problematic aspect—its regional role. Thus Saudi Arabia nominally praised the agreement when it came out, but quickly
walked back from it—finally praising Trump when the United States left the agreement 8 May 2018.

As should be clear throughout this thesis, the United States has tended to be the bigger player in the US-Saudi relationship, while the Saudis were often left reacting to American pressure or to the fallout of a big decision made in Washington. An important trend since the last couple years of Obama’s presidency has been the emergence of a far more active and aggressive policy coming from Riyadh. In 2015, the old and ailing King Salman appointed his 30-year-old son Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) as Defense minister, followed later as his successor. Basically every Saudi Arabia analyst now agrees that MBS is running the country, and his brief tenure has been filled with extreme dynamism and active pursuits of objectives. While this will be looked at in greater detail in the next chapter, the implications of the new leadership were important for the US-Saudi relationship in the last couple years of Obama as well.

The most consequential issue here was MBS’s decision in April 2015 to begin bombardments against Houthi positions in Yemen. Again, this will be addressed in greater detail, but the reaction from the Obama administration is important to note. Oakford and Salibury (2016) call the Obama administration’s handling of the conflict in Yemen an utter failure. The “graveyard of the Obama doctrine,” they say, citing the fact “Obama has said little about the war in Yemen. With mere months left in his presidency, there is scarce indication that he will” (para 26). Essentially, it appears that because of the poor relations between Obama and the Saudis, and the fact that Obama felt the need to placate due to the poor relations, the result was that Obama did very little to
curb the humanitarian disaster that was developing as a result of MBS’s move to conflict the Houthis in Yemen. The United States did not directly act in the war, but did refuel Saudi jets involved in devastating air strikes and did provide intelligence. Given that the war is largely regarded as controversial and perhaps even a human catastrophe, Obama’s reluctant support for the Saudi war effort, led by an inexperienced 30-year-old, shows the grave limitations of his approach. When the election was underway, the Saudis likely considered both candidates preferable—Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, signaling just how lukewarm the relationship was by the end.

4.4 A Year and A Half Of Trump

Just over a year into Donald J. Trump’s first term as president of the US, it is difficult to gauge how the presidency will go for several reasons. First, Trump has proven to be a volatile and mercurial figure in foreign affairs. His basic axiom of behavior is “if you like me, I like you” and the foreign policy implications are already obvious. Certain figures that Trump has praised, like Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have become enemies at the first sign of disagreement. Figures Trump has mocked, like North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, have suddenly fallen subject to Trump’s praise. Leaders like France’s Emmanuel Macron have been able to curry favor with the White House by somewhat sycophantically praising Trump. So forecasting down the road till the end of Trump’s first term, or even beyond that, is a very difficult task. Where the relationship with Saudi Arabia will end up is anyone’s guess.

The second reason the relationship is currently up in the air is because Saudi Arabia arguably has its strongest leader in decades. While King Salman
is still nominally in charge, he is reportedly ailing with dementia, and instead his Crown Prince is running affairs in the Kingdom. And unlike decades of Saudi rule that emphasized consensus and moderation in the royal family, MBS is acting on a different level completely (Friedman, 2017). Since being elevated to Crown Prince in 2015, the 32-year-old leader has enacted an extremely daring and aggressive posture—both foreign and domestic. In the realm of domestic policy, MBS has called for a diversification of the economy away from oil, massive spending projects on entertainment and technology, and a move away from post-1979 conservatism, including letting women drive automobiles and bicycles. In the foreign policy realm, his pursuits have been more damning. He has conducted a campaign in Yemen against Houthi militants with a massive human cost. He has organized a blockade against neighboring Qatar. He has forced Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign due to Iranian pressure. On a personal level, he loathes corruption and kept many “corrupt” businessmen locked in the Ritz Carlton in Riyadh for months until he regained a reported $100 billion in “stolen” assets. Yet he has also bought a $500 million yacht impulsively, and allegedly bought the most expensive painting in the world for $500 million. In other words, both Trump and MBS appear less committed to the status quo the way more traditional leaders have been. Having analyzed almost the last 100 years of Saudi-US relations, certain trends have become abundantly clear—both as they relate to perennial reasons for cooperation as well as the main themes over which the two long-time allies had issues. With these caveats in mind, there are nonetheless a few important developments in the relationship since Trump
took office: Trump’s visit to Riyadh, the Qatar crisis, MBS’s visit to Washington, and most recently the decision to leave the nuclear deal.

Trump could not have started his reset with the Saudis any better than making his first trip overseas to Saudi Arabia in May 2017 for the Riyadh Summit. Leaders of 55 Arab countries were in attendance, but the eyes were mainly on the Saudi king and Trump. There was particular scrutiny and analysis of Trump’s speech because he ran on an “America first” mantra that implied a lack of emphasis on Saudi Arabia. The speech lasted 36 minutes and included Trump critiquing a “crisis of Islamic extremism” in the Muslim world. The speech also displayed an unusual amount of tact and discretion, suggesting that the speech was prepared well in advance by key foreign policy thinkers. At its core, the speech outlined what would be the Trump approach to the Middle East—and the speech could easily be regarded as music to Saudi Arabia’s ears. On human rights, Trump remarked that

“Our partnerships will advance security through stability, not through radical disruption. We will make decisions based on real-world outcomes – not inflexible ideology. We will be guided by the lessons of experience, not the confines of rigid thinking. And, wherever possible, we will seek gradual reforms – not sudden intervention.”

In other words, Trump was asserting that gulf countries (especially Saudi Arabia) would not have their human rights records questioned the way more liberal circles in Washington have called for. On Trump’s main objectives with Saudi Arabia, he said the following:

“We signed historic agreements with the Kingdom that will invest almost $400 billion in our two countries and create many thousands of jobs in
America and Saudi Arabia…It should increasingly become one of the great global centers of commerce and opportunity. This region should not be a place from which refugees flee, but to which newcomers flock.”

Finally, Trump adopted a considerably more isolationist tone than did his predecessors. He said regarding US involvement in the region that:

“The nations of the Middle East cannot wait for American power to crush this enemy for them. The nations of the Middle East will have to decide what kind of future they want for themselves, for their countries, and for their children.”

These main principles—a strategic emphasis, a transactional relationship, and a more isolationist approach—are key aspects of his foreign policy with regards to Saudi Arabia.

The first big test to Trump’s relationship with Saudi Arabia came in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia imposed a massive embargo on Qatar. Trump’s reaction was decidedly mixed. Saudi state-owned publication Al Arabiya (2018) writes that “Trump wants the rift healed to restore unity among Gulf countries and present a united front against Iran, an official who requested anonymity, was quoted by some media outlets” (para 15). There was considerable speculation that Trump actually signed off on the embargo as a means to placate Saudi Arabia and confront Iran. A report from The Intercept reported this year that just weeks before the blockade on Qatar, the Qatars refused to back Jared Kushner—Trump’s son and law and closest advisor—for a loan that could potential save his business career (Swisher and Grim, 2018). The authors conclude that while Saudi Arabia pitched the idea of a blockade in May 2017 during Trump’s visit, Washington initially vetoed the
plan. It was only after the Qataris met with Kushner to discuss his ailing fiscal position, that the White House gave the Saudis the go-ahead to move forward. The Saudi-led embargo certainly would not have gone forward without the White House’s blessing, and it seems in more recent months that the Trump administration has reversed course on this issue as well. Harris (2018) reports that with the embargo nearly a year old, former CIA director and recent Secretary of State appointee Mike Pompeo told Saudi officials that the dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia needs to end immediately. The statement, though somewhat reflective of earlier US policy under Rex Tillerson, appears to be a strong push to resolve the dispute.

Another important aspect of the relationship was MBS’s three-week trip to Washington DC in early 2018. The trip will be covered in greater detail during the discussion of Saudi decision-making, but the crucial aspect for this section is how Trump sold the meeting to the American people. Sitting next to MBS, Trump awkwardly held up poster showing weaponry the US had sold to Saudi Arabia as part of a massive $200bn arms deal that was officially signed last year. Some commentary noted how humiliating the gesture was for the Saudi monarch, but from Trump’s perspective, it showed his domestic supporter that he prioritizes manufacturing jobs (here, specifically for weaponry) and will therefore put this over a carefully cultivated foreign visit.

The most recent development in the relationship has been Trump’s decision on 8 May 2018 to pull the US out of the nuclear deal with Iran—the JCPOA. In the speech, which counted as Trump fulfilling a campaign promise, Trump did not even mention Saudi Arabia one time. Yet the Saudis were ecstatic with the decision—having privately lobbied the Trump administration
to leave the agreement. Trump spoke language that would be welcomed in Riyadh:

The Iranian regime is the leading state sponsor of terror. It exports dangerous missiles, fuels conflicts across the Middle East, and supports terrorist proxies and militias such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Over the years, Iran and its proxies have bombed American Embassies and military installations, murdered hundreds of American service members, and kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured American citizens. The Iranian regime has funded its long reign of chaos and terror by plundering the wealth of its own people. No action taken by the regime has been more dangerous than its pursuit of nuclear weapons — and the means of delivering them.

The merits of Trump’s decision and the fall out in the Middle East surrounding it are, due to proximity between the decision and the completion of this thesis, obviously nearly impossible to complete. Nonetheless, the decision appears to be a major boon to the Saudis, who feel Washington’s characterization of Iran is close to their own. Even if Trump made the decision primarily to undo a key Obama foreign policy issue it was still a huge benefit to Saudi Arabia, who have wanted a strong partner in the US confrontation of Iran that was lacking in Obama.

4.5 Analysis and Conclusion

This section offers a brief analysis of the materials already presented in this chapter, offering some useful conclusions. Clearly, the three presidencies that were examined in this thesis—Bush, Obama and Trump—all have had very
different approaches to the Middle East. Bush shook up the region after 9/11 by first invading Afghanistan and then by beginning a war in Iraq that would see long-time strongman Saddam Hussein overthrown and Baghdad become a capital with strong Iranian influence. Obama’s presidency oversaw the spread of democratic leanings in 2011 followed by a brutal counterrevolution in many places. Obama tried to walk the tightrope between not calling for the immediate overthrow of friendly regimes, while also not fully weighing in behind the protesters. This, coupled with his signature Middle East policy in the JCPOA, were his key Middle East policies. So far, Trump’s main victory has been the repeal of the JCPOA.

On paper, these policies seem extremely disjointed and would suggest that the US presidents have very different approach to foreign policy. But interestingly, all three were acting in what they thought would keep the Middle East as stable as possible, and in each of the three cases, this revolved around nuclear proliferation. In the case of Bush, this meant invading Iraq to ensure Saddam did not get a nuclear weapon. In the case of Obama, this meant signing an agreement with Iran to ensure Tehran did not get a nuclear weapon. In the case of Trump, this meant stopping the “terrible” nuclear deal to ensure peace and stability on that front. This shows that although all three administrations have made very different choices, their main focus in the Middle East has focused on keeping stability—a key realist tenet.

As for how this affects the US-Saudi relationship, it is clear that the Saudis have preferred (so far) the approach of Trump above those of Obama and Bush. That is largely because of the means with which Bush and Obama tried to affect change in the Middle East. Whereas Bush and Obama were
more active presidents and attempted to upset the regional order, Trump appears keen on preserving it by re-isolating Iran. This constitutes a clear and important difference in the relationships between the two countries.
Chapter Five
The View From Riyadh

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this short chapter is to look at some important dynamics from the Saudi side of the US-Saudi relationship in greater detail. The overwhelming emphasis of this thesis focused on the United States in the last chapter for three main reasons: first, the United States is the dominant figure in the US-Saudi relationship; second, much of the information about Saudi positions was already noted in the chapter on the US perspective; and third, until the emergence of MBS in the last three years, Saudi foreign policy since the Bush administration has remained largely consistent. Nonetheless, as half of the overall relationship, a look at Saudi Arabia is critical. The country is a key strategic partner in the region, and acts as a peer to the US on many occasions. Therefore, a brief look at how the foreign policy adapted and changed throughout the 2000s is an important piece of the puzzle.

5.2 King Abdullah: Crown Prince and King

The important point to remember about King Abdullah, who reigned from August 2005 until his death in 2015, is that whilst only being a king for the final ten years of his life, his regency lasted from 1996 and his overall influence goes back to 13 June 1982—the day that Fahd became king and Abdullah became Crown Prince. King Fahd suffered a massive strike in 1996 that left
him unable to rule the kingdom. Therefore, Abdullah can actually be considered the key pillar in the Saudi side of the US-Saudi relationship dating all the way back to the Clinton administration. Since the previous chapter began with the Bush presidency, we will look at Abdullah’s reign beginning with the election of George W. Bush.

Abdullah had very good relations with the Americans dating back to the 1970s and 1980s—especially given Feisal’s relatively fiery reputation as an independent. As a junior figure, Abdullah met with President Gerald Ford in 1976, and later visited Washington in 1987 to meet with the Vice President of the US George H.W. Bush—fomenting what would become a strong and enduring relationship. But even Abdullah’s strong Washington ties were barely enough to salvage the relationship in the early Bush years.

The Saudis were uneasy with President Bush’s lack of support for the Israel-Palestine peace process from day one of the Bush administration. According to Riedel (2017), Bush had a small dinner for Israeli president Moshe Katsav in early 2001 and told one of the guests there “The Saudis thought this Texas oil guy was going to go against Israel, and I’ve told them you have the wrong guy” (p. 131). The lack of initiative on the American side to a peace deal deeply disturbed Abdullah and his close advisers, who regarded American initiative on solving the Israel-Palestine dispute as literally a prerequisite for cooperation with the US. With the Second Intifada raging and no effort in Washington to quell the violence, Abdullah actually refused to meet with Bush altogether. Abdullah’s position, Riedel writes, was that he would “not see the president until Bush took action on Palestine. He wanted Bush to take dramatic action to halt the violence between Israel and the Palestinians; he
wanted Bush to see Arafat; and he wanted the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza to end. He was already framing in his mind a peace proposal that he would put forward in 2002” (p, 132). Upon meeting defense Chief Colin Powell in 2001 in Paris, Abdullah even passed a graphic book of Palestinians death photos to Powell showing the gravity of these killings. Abdullah’s extremely angry letter to the president, which was covered in the last chapter, was really Riyadh’s last line of attack in that it threatened oil for the first time since 1974. While these issues remained important, the attack on 9/11 sublimated the major issues from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the impending war.

Riyadh fully supported the American decision to go after the Taliban in Afghanistan. Relations between the Taliban and the Saudis had weakened considerably and clearly an invasion of Afghanistan did not threaten any of Saudi Arabia’s core interests. The Americans were bound to attack after the 9/11 attack, so it was wise for the Saudis to go along with the effort. Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz, the ambassador the United States from 1983 to 2005 served as a crucial intermediary during this period, and as Riedel writes, “had to devote much of his attention after 9/11 to the mounting anger in the United States at Saudi Arabia” (p. 135). Saudi Arabia suddenly found itself with a public relations crisis.

The big question emerged when rumors began to circulate in foreign policy circles that Bush was planning a war in Iraq. The first Middle Eastern group that was made aware of the plan was the Kurds, since the two heads of the two most important political families the Barzani and Talabani met with officials in DC in 2002. Riedel argues that the US held off on telling Saudi Arabia because it knew the Saudis would not be happy. The Saudi position
here is very interesting. On the one hand, the Saudis had completely severed relations with Iraq after Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990. It was a threat to a fellow oil rich Gulf monarchy, and such a precedent was extremely dangerous to Riyadh. On the other hand, the Saudis were adamantly opposed to Bush’s plan for regime change in Iraq. As the Saudis got wind of the coming change, they issued an official policy clarification in 2002. Bandar reached out to the president and was alerted in early 2003 that the Americans had decided to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein. Abdullah’s response was that 1) the Americans must make more progress on the issue of Palestine and 2) the job must be done quickly. Saudi Arabia had no pretenses about publicly supporting the American decision but also knew they could do little to deter Bush. Thus, their strategic position was to not openly confront the Americans while also not being seen by the rest of the Arab world as supportive of the American decision to overthrow an Arab government.

Terrorist attacks in the Saudi Kingdom in the mid-2000s decisively changed policy as well, since the Saudis increasingly realized the possibility of Al Qaeda becoming a threat to its own regime. Osama Bin Laden, who was himself from a prominent Saudi family, accused “the House of Saud of betraying the Ottoman Empire to the British in the First World War and opening the door to Western (Crusader) and Jewish (Zionist) domination of the Muslim world” (Riedel, 2017, p. 142). Bin Laden opposed gulf monarchies altogether and argued for an alternative form of government, which essentially worried the Saudis. Moreover, by 2005 it became clear that the Iranians were holding sway over Baghdad—the prospects of both were perceived in Iraq to be
America’s failure and more importantly, major factors in Saudi Arabia’s souring relations with DC (Engel, 2005).

Furthermore, Abdullah’s ascension to King in 2005 did not do much to change the relationship, since he had already been ruling since 1996. Therefore, there were little changes in the relationship. Saudi Arabia had little sympathy for either the ideal on which Bush supposedly invaded Iraq (democratic promotion) or for the reality it created (a stronger Iran). This fact drove the end of the Bush administration’s relationship with Saudi Arabia, which simmered down to a low level by the end of the second term.

Abdullah, as a long-time pro-American figure in Riyadh, was clearly excited for the coming of Obama and the reset of Saudi-American diplomacy. Riedel (2017) argues that the Saudis, and Abdullah in particular, were excited by the prospect of Obama partially because of his father’s Muslim roots and the fact that Obama had a particular interest in the region. Yet, the author also mentions that the Saudis were extremely disappointed by Obama’s showing when he visited Riyadh in 2009. Despite appearing as a reformer, the Saudis were disappointed by his lack of willingness on the question of Guantanamo prison. Obama’s pursuits on the question of the Israel-Palestine conflict also frustrated the Saudis. As O’Malley (2015) writes, “the Israelis were deeply insulted that Obama did not follow up his Cairo speech with a trip to Israel and furious that he would admonish Israel on settlements before an Arab audience” (p. 2). This meant almost immediately that the hardliners in Tel Aviv were unwilling to work with Obama, which in turn took the possibility of a peace agreement off the table. Ending Israeli settlement construction and solving the
Palestine question was a massive issue for Abdullah, who eventually died not being able to claim a victory in this sphere.

The last crucial point in examining Abdullah’s foreign policy with the United States was the performance during the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia immediately moved to denounce popular protests, which Riyadh alleged were stoked by Muslim Brotherhood support and Qatar-owned Al-Jazeera. In Egypt, this certainly did appear to be the case. But as Kamrava (2012) argues, the Saudis were actually able to take advantage of the system by exploiting the weak state system. This enabled the Saudis to grow their influence by spending money both domestically but more importantly abroad like in counter-revolutionary Egypt, for Syrian rebels, and eventually in the war in Yemen to gain control.

5.3 King Salman and MBS

As Saudi insider Riedel (2017) notes, despite Salman having an extremely good reputation for being fair-minded and noble, his main influence as the king was the fact that upon his ascension, he “quickly moved his favorite son into important positions of power … it is an extraordinary and unprecedented accumulation of power in the hands of one very young prince” (p. 170). In a stark break with the Saudi foreign policy we have grown accustomed to in this thesis, MBS has not shown himself to be concerned about the Palestine-Israel question and not particularly concerned about the preferences of the United States in the general conflicts. MBS appears to prefer working alone and only consulting the Americans for advice rather than asking for their permission to act. The first major case was Yemen, where Saudi Arabia cooperated with the
UAE to fight the Houthis and forces led by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. While the war has not brought ringing success to Riyadh, it shows an independent streak that is a fundamental break with the past. MBS’s other major move was the Qatar embargo. This policy is a clear break with past Saudi policy of trying to use its influence through the GCC and other forms of soft pressure to exact outcomes.

5.4 Analysis and Conclusion

The main limitation in trying to analyze MBS’s foreign policy toward America is that it is still too soon to tell how exactly it will come out. On the one hand, MBS by no means appears to me less of an ally to the US than his predecessors. He visited the United States as part of his massive world tour and is said to have exceptionally good relations with Jared Kushner—Trump’s closest adviser. The crown prince clearly believes the US is a valued ally, and has even dropped the pro-Palestinian position that led to many problems between Washington and Riyadh in the past. Yet at the same time, the crown prince also appears far more willing to use the UAE and other allies in the Arab world to influence events rather than relying on the United States. The Yemen war was controversial in Washington, and many have pointed to its civilian killings as war crimes. But MBS has not been deterred. He is far more likely to engage in an activist foreign policy and take risks than Abdullah was, and this has already shown in the mere three years that the 32-year-old has been in charge. Again, it is extremely difficult to gauge the long-term prospects of MBS’s control going forward, but from the beginning he has moved to
consolidate his power, increase Saudi’s role in the region, and build a more powerful operation base regardless of the White House’s blessing.
Chapter Six

Findings And Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is meant to summarize the main findings of the thesis and offer a conclusive look at what was covered throughout the scope of the analysis. The first section, on key findings, attempts to make some generalizations about the subject matter based on the research conducted for this paper. The second section concludes the thesis itself by overviewing the main conclusions from each chapter. Finally, a set of recommendations is offered—both for practitioners and researchers.

6.2 Key Findings

The First main question that was asked dealt with how successive governments dealt with each other, with a particular emphasis on post-9/11. As Sir Winston Churchill once said, “there is only thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.” This quote very clearly captures a fact present throughout the history of the modern Middle East, and particularly as it pertains to the long-standing relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Ultimately, the reason why Saudi Arabia and the United States have remained steadfast allies since the Second World War is because both states emerged from 1945 as status quo powers who stood to benefits immensely from keeping the existing order in place. If we look at the exact
context of the post-World War II order, this becomes immensely simple. Looking at this question with a long scope helps us understand the relationship in the post 9/11 world because there are immense parallels between the fight against Arab nationalism and a resurgent Iran.

That being said, the major components of the Saudi-US conversions and diversions given different administrations in both countries were diversions based on economic interests and security needs, and diversions on political differences related to the US role in the Middle East region, which was sometimes viewed by Saudi Arabia as being insufficient (the US role in the Syrian civil war) or negative (the US negotiations towards Iran during the Obama administration) or biased (the US support to Israel during the 1973 war). However, it is safe to say that these points of diversion were limited in scope, scale and duration and cannot be considered as the dominating aspect of the relationship between the two countries. It is clear that despite the radical differences and incompatibilities in democratic and human rights values between the two countries, these differences did not succeed in breaking the decades-old bond between them and were never seen a higher priority than the continuously pressing security and economic interests that bring them together and reinforce their need to cooperate, sign deals and invest in security and counter terrorism efforts.

The two powers have historically seen eye to eye, and the issues on which they appear to have disagreed. In terms of issues of agreement, both countries have sought to maintain and preserve conservative regimes in the Middle East. Both Saudi Arabia and the US are big donors to countries like Jordan and Lebanon (which have historically been conservative, pro-western
countries) and have cultivated relationships with other monarchies like Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, (until recently) Qatar, etc. The fact that the Saudi-US partnership has basically formed a bloc in the region for the last 70 years demonstrates how aligned these interests are. Both countries have viewed revisionist powers as a threat. Leaders like Gamal Abdul Nasser, Hafez al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, and Ayatollah Khomeini have spoken as populists disparagingly about the US and Saudi Arabia. They have argued (often with good reason) that despite the magnificent wealth of regimes like the Saud family, the region remains poor and backward. This type of narrative is exactly what threatens conservative interests in the region, and the perennial existence of these radical forces in the Middle East is clearly why the US and Saudi have remained allies: it is not some matter of love or affection, but rather clearly identified mutual interests.

This may seem broadly historical, but it is important to note when we look at the relationships after 9/11 because it was the historical precedent of cooperation and alliance that kept the Saudi-American relationship strong throughout the difficult years of Bush and Obama. During Bush, the relationship suffered and tended to have cooperation minimized. Nonetheless, the threat of Al Qaeda, which called for the overthrow of the Saudi regime, and the threat of Iran, which called for a confrontation with the US and Saudi Arabia as well, were big enough threats to keep things together. During Obama, the two countries were able to rally around a fear of Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria, and fought together to try to minimize this dynamic. Again for the trump administration, it appears to soon to generalize—especially given his eccentric foreign policy. But for now it is clear the main arbiter is Jared Kushner.
The second question asked focused mainly on the points of disagreement and departure among the two countries. For one, there is the reality that when administrations change—particularly very different ones like Eisenhower to Kennedy or Carter to Reagan or Bush to Obama—the relationship experiences a “reset”. The stability in the Saudi royal family is completely different. Kings tend to appoint crown princes and foreign advisers long in advance, which gives them time to build relationships with officials in Washington DC and acclimate to the political environment. This “royal court” approach means more consensus and politics remaining within the family. The implications have been clear with recent kings like Abdallah and Salman because they both worked extensively with the US on policy issues before becoming King, which meant that despite the transition, they already were acclimated. MBS, for example, will have several years of experience as Saudi Arabia’s premier foreign policy chief before he takes over as king upon Salman’s passing. Thus one factor is that relationships between the US and the Saudis tends to flip often and this means it takes years to rebuild trust between a new president and his counterparts.

Another issue is the threat of domestic politics in the relationship. While this is obviously a secondary force in state behavior, the role of America’s democratic system has revealed itself in the past with implications for the relationship. For instance, a law passed by populist politicians in the US in 2015 opened the door to individuals suing the Kingdom for deaths and damages surrounding September 11 (Van Voris, 2018). From a foreign relations perspective, such possibilities can only serve to threaten the relationship. Thus while Saudi Arabia must be vigilant regarding the domestic
affairs in the US, the Americans can worry less about instability in the Saudi regime.

There is a strong pattern regarding issues over which the two countries have disagreed over the years: namely US interventionism and the role of the Israel-Arab/Palestine conflict—clear dissatisfaction in the relationship, it should be noted, has historically come from the Saudi side rather than the American side. The biggest dispute between the two countries in the history of the relationship, as was noted in the last chapter, was the US decision to invade and overthrow the Baathist regime in Iraq. The interesting issue here it seems was whether the US decision could be regarded as a status-quo-keeping decision, or an uncharacteristic case of revisionism—and this comes down to what one thinks President Bush’s decision-making process was. If the impetus to overthrow Saddam actually was driven by a desire to democratize the region, then why only invade Iraq? Other countries in the region (Saudi Arabia chief among them) were certainly as undemocratic. Furthermore, if the issue was to drive out Al Qaeda, then why not look at Saudi Arabia, from where most of the 9/11 hijackers came? It appears more likely that President Bush, like his father, regarded Saddam as an unstable revisionist and attempted to remove him. Riyadh predicted this would unleash regional chaos, and 15 years later with Iraq still hardly a functioning state, being overrun with Al Qaeda then pro-Iranian militias then the Islamic State (ISIS) and finally again pro-government troops, the Saudis proved more prescient. But just because the two states disagreed strongly does not mean they had two vastly different philosophies, rather, they simply identified the largest source of instability differently—a testament to their similar status-quo views.
Israel also offers a similarly telling point. For the United States, the existence of Israel as a Jewish and sovereign state in the Middle East is an axiom that cannot be questioned. Only Israel can claim to be a closer ally than Saudi Arabia in the region. From this perspective, maintaining the Jewish state is the ultimate status-quo issue. By contrast, Saudi Arabia sees the Israel-Palestine conflict as a massive source of instability. Riyadh officially has no diplomatic relations with Israel, but as Dekel and Guzansky (2013) point out, the relationship does involve a tacit acceptance of each other, and allegedly a degree of cooperation on security matters. On April 2 2018, Muhammad Bin Salman recognized this reality, telling *The Atlantic* that he recognizes the Jewish peoples’ “right to their own land” (Goldberg, 2018). Therefore, it is unlikely the existence of Israel itself, but rather the persistence of the conflict, that bothers Riyadh. As evidence, can simply look at the two times Saudi Arabia grew so upset that it either used, or threatened to use, the oil card against the US: 1973 and 2001. The first instance followed the October War, which arguably constituted an Arab victory. The second came at the peak of the Second Intifada. These two dates are interesting because they suggest Saudi Arabia is most threatened by the destabilizing force the conflict has, and equally important, the radical groups that profit from the issue in the Arab world (the Syrian regime, Hamas, etc.). Again this exception to good relations shows us that the dispute over Israel may be more a matter of priorities than a fundamentally different world view.

Taking a more realist tone, the next main findings were in regards to the question what overarching geopolitical and ideological interests have kept the two countries close allies since 9/11? It was found that one of the defining
features of the US-Saudi relationship is that different US administrations have held different policies toward the Middle East, and these have in turn affected the relationship with the Saudis. Having conducted a thorough analysis of the history of these relations, a political analysis of how different US administrations deal with the Saudis crucial to understanding the core of this relationship. In general, it appears that although different administrations deal with the Saudis in various ways, there are three main factors that determine how political leadership from the American side handle the relationship: 1) the personal commitment of the president to Riyadh; 2) whether the administration is the same party as the last administration; 3) the regional climate at the time.

Even from a realist perspective that analyzes interests and strategy, it is still difficult to disentangle personalities from this question. After all, US presidents are heavily involved in shaping US foreign policy, and the Saudi leadership comes from such a small circle. Our analysis showed that when presidents have strong personal relations with the king and his inside circle the relationship tends to thrive. President Roosevelt set this as the status quo during his meeting with King Ibn Saud in 1945—a meeting in which the mutual affection of the two leaders undoubtedly came to have a profound effect on the relationship going forward. Another example of a warm personal relationship (so far) is the strong ties shared between Donald Trump, and particularly his son-in-law Jared Kushner, and Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman. It remains to be seen how this relationship turns out, but at present cooperation between Washington and Riyadh is stronger than it has been going back into the 1990s, signaling the extent to which this relationship can revolve around personal understanding.
Nonetheless, geopolitics is an important part of the equation. The thread running throughout the history of the Saudi-American alliance, whatever the regional challenges may be, is a stalwart commitment to maintaining relative supremacy over other powers in the region and keeping the status quo intact.

For the United States, the maintenance of the status quo has involved fending off the threat of the Soviet Union from 1945-1990, and from 1990-2018 dealing with potentially risky revisionist politicians (like Saddam) or groups (like Al Qaeda) that are bent on disturbing the regional power balance. For Saudi Arabia, the specific destabilizers may be different than America’s but the overarching approach is the same.

Therefore, there are a few geopolitical interests that have not changed and are shared by both countries. The first is a commitment to regimes versus ideologies. Both countries will support friendly governments, be they republics (like Lebanon), military autocracies (like Mubarak and Sisi’s Egypt), Sultanates (like Oman), or conservative Islamic states (Bahrain, the UAE, etc.). The more important issue is loyalty and a commitment to the political-economic order. Ideology matter far less in the region. Both Saudi Arabia and the US will support Islamist groups when it suits their interests (Syria, Afghanistan) and then turn around act with suspicion when it does not (Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). The more important principle is alliance and a commitment to the status quo.

The last finding that was assessed was the role of energy in the relationship. Beginning with the origins of the relationship in World War II, we see that actually Saudi Arabia was as interested in the US as a buyer for Saudi crude as the US was in Saudi Arabia as a source for it. This power dynamic,
as the last chapter showed, was born out of the fact that Saudi Arabia was a cash-strapped economy in the years during and immediately following World War II. It is important to remember as well that from the 1930s until 1980, the American had a joint partnership with the Saudis over oil exploration and production in the Kingdom—first through CASOC which later became Aramco. Particularly from the 1930s until the oil embargo in 1974, the oil price remained extremely cheap globally. People also tend to forget that throughout the 20th century, the United States was not only the world’s largest oil consumer, but also the world’s largest oil producer. As a commodity, oil is globally traded meaning that the United States can simply import crude from another major producer rather than solely rely on one country to meet its excess demand (Downey, 2009).

Of course, it is also important to remember that as a status quo power, the United States had an expressed interest in keeping oil flowing from the Middle East for a variety of reasons. As the 20th century progressed, Yergin (1991) writes, the importance of oil became increasingly crucial to the global economy and military apparatus. One of the clear examples of this dynamic was Winston Churchill’s choice during World War I to switch the Royal Navy fleet from coal power to oil power, which then meant Britain had to take a constant oil supply (of which Britain itself produced almost none) when looking at geopolitics (Dahl, 2001). Given the US’s quest to balance the global economy, keeping countries like Saudi Arabia producing was crucial to keeping the global marketplace flowing. Thus, oil has to be regarded as a part of every foreign policy decision the US took, but not the only driving factor.
6.3 Exception or Pattern?

A key question to ask at the end of this thesis: is the foreign policy relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia an exception or a pattern in international relations?

Looking at the Middle East itself, it can be argued that regimes which are secular are those which are most independent from the United States while those that are Islamic in their politics were most close to the United States. The author Timothy Mitchell (2017) explains this point by saying that “Egypt under Nasser, republican Iraq, the Palestine national movement, post-independence Algeria, the Republic of South Yemen, Ba’thist Syria — all charted courses independent of the United States” (p.1), adding that in these states, the Islamic movements were repressed and the system was mostly secular. In contrast, countries with an Islamic authority showed a pattern of dependence on the United States, such as Jordan (a monarchy claiming to be a descendant of the prophet), Morocco, North Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which has rulers that claim to be the sole protectors of the faith. On the other hand, “When other governments moved closer to the United States — Egypt under Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, Pakistan under Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s — their political rhetoric and modes of legitimation became avowedly more Islamic” (Mitchell, 2017, p.1). And so, with the exception of Iran’s pro-American Shah government, there appears to be a pattern in the Middle East where the United States relies on the support of conservative regimes like Saudi Arabia to fortify its position in the region and justify its dominance on one hand and the power and legitimacy of these conservative regimes, as is the case with Saudi Arabia.
6.4 Conclusion

This section is to serve as a general conclusion to the thesis, focusing on the overall argument that was made, followed by some recommendations both for policy makers as well as for academics on how to pursue this issue further.

To begin, the main purpose of this thesis was to answer the straightforward yet deceptively complex question of “why has the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia endured for so long.” As Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman recently noted on American television show 60 Minutes, Saudi Arabia is the US’s oldest ally in the region—even more than Israel or any other Arab state. On the surface, the answer is not intuitive. After all, both countries appear to stand for very different values. The US is a liberal democracy committed to free enterprise and the freedom of expression, with secularism being the official religious policy of the state. In Saudi Arabia, the economy follows a rentier model based on oil revenues, religious police ensure freedom of expression is severely limited, and conservative Sunni Islam is the state religion with other religious buildings (like churches or synagogues) forbidden. But these facts also rule out an alliance based on affinities, and allows us to look deeper at the factors underpinning the relationship. The objective of this thesis, then, was to look in detail at the dynamics of the relationship, and in doing so, pick out the deeper underlying factors why this alliance has sustained itself until the present day.

The first point of departure was to establish a basic theoretical understanding to analyze the case. This thesis has refrained from becoming overly theoretical, but in Chapter 2, realism was established as the main
analytic framework that would be used to analyze the relationship. More specifically, it was determined that a form of structural realism, which assumes that states cooperate with each other on bases of power and mutual interests, would be the main lens used. One particular concept from this school of international relations, status quo powers versus revisionist powers, was selected in particular for its ability to explain why some states, despite divergent interests, act in concert with each other while other states do not. Status quo powers use influence and violence to maintain the current situation, whereas revisionists are committed to using force to change the current situation. With this framework in place, the thesis moved forward with its long analysis of the history of the relationship. This analysis included reference to several different references to major works on Saudi Arabia and the US with the aim of showing how they fit into the realist versus liberal schools, etc.

Chapter 3 took an integrative approach to working toward the main research question. Rather than breaking up the Saudi-American alliance thematically, we embarked on a detailed analysis of the relationship from its origins in the 1930s up until the beginning of the Bush administration. Using a wide array of resources, this section looked at the regional dynamics Riyadh and Washington contended with throughout their relationship—stressing how these different issues either necessitated greater cooperation between the two states or actually hurt the relationship. And while like any alliance it faced its ups and downs, it became clear throughout the chapter that certain themes emerge in the relationship. More importantly, the main reasons behind cooperation became evident.
Chapter 4 looked at the US approach to the relationship since the Bush administration by analyzing the key policy decisions made either toward Saudi Arabia directly or toward the region more broadly (and then in turn looking at how these affected the Saudis). We saw that the Bush administration essentially displayed tunnel vision with regards to Iraq. Bush could not be deterred from his goal of overthrowing Saddam Hussein, despite the negative effect the decision had on the relationship with Saudi Arabia and on broader regional dynamics. Obama looked to be a more promising figure than Bush: he immediately courted the Saudis and signed a record weapons deal in 2010. His pro-democracy rhetoric, however, scared the Saudis and his reluctant support for protesters in the Arab Spring did little to quell their fears. The nuclear agreement made with Iran in 2015 similarly raised suspicions, which Trump helped quell with his repeal in 2018. The Trump tale has yet to be completed, but already some interesting insights were able to be made. In particular, there was a close analysis paid to Trump's first visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2017 and his treatment of the Qatar crisis.

Chapter 5 looked at the Saudi side of the relationship. Although King Fahd died in 2005, his declining health meant King Abdullah was largely ruling at crown prince from at least 2000. Thus the reign of Abdullah was analyzed with regards to his tumultuous relationship with Bush starting with his reticence over Bush's handling of Israel during the Second Intifada. After looking at Saudi Arabia under Abdullah, the thesis then looked at the reign of Salman, with a specific interesting in the dealings of his crown prince, the daring and controversial Muhammad Bin Salman.
This chapter attempted to take all of this theoretical understanding and historical content and answer the main questions that were asked in the first place, and look at some of the main findings of this thesis. This first meant asking why the relationship has been so resilient, questioning how both governments have acted in the relationship. Using realist theory to interpret the historical record, it was argued that the relationship has persevered because the fundamental interest of both countries in the region is the same. As major powers, both are committed to protecting their own hegemony through the maintenance of the status quo. This fundamental interest’s overrides all of the other concerns each country has in the region, and although sometimes, particularly when a crisis arises, the two countries advocate different ways to deal with the problem, the fundamental commitment to the status quo remains. The second question asked what factors account for contention between the two sides since 9/11. The main finding here was that although personal and domestic factors do play a role, the overarching variable is the regional climate at that given time. Of course, certain presidents have placed more effort on cultivating the relationship than others, and certainly the preceding administration affects how the current one will operate. But most importantly, the Saudi-US alliance has been one of responding to constant crises and developments, and how certain presidents tackle these issues has major implications for the outcomes. The role of the Iran issue figured heavily in this section. The third question that was asked was what underlying geopolitical or ideological interests are at play in the relationship. Looking at the historical data, two phenomena—support for regimes and an emphasis on using military force to keep trade routes open—were historical continuities.
The main finding is that when one compares the types of regimes the US and Saudis have jointly backed throughout the 20th and 21st century, the actual ideological content varies widely. Rather, the real common denominator turned out to be their adherence to the status quo and the strength of their relations with the west. This showed largely that geopolitical interests and maintaining stability was the overwhelming factor behind the interests shared by the two allies. Lastly, the question of oil was addressed and an attempt was made to dispel the “it’s all about the oil” narrative that often emerges when the Middle East is discussed. We saw that in the early days of the relationship, Saudi Arabia was dependent on the US as a big export market, and as time went on, the specific oil issue actually became a point of contention. If anything, the US-Saudi relationship, it was found, functions in spite of the oil question, which usually comes up in times of strife between the two countries. Thus, it was argued that geopolitical concerns over maintaining stability and the status quo were far more important than issues of ideology or oil. From a realist perspective, which looks at state interests within the prism of power, this made complete sense.

6.5 Recommendations

Before completing the thesis, it is necessary to offer a few points for both policy makers. These are based on the outcomes of this research process as well as personal insights about the case that has been discussed in this thesis.

For policy makers:

- Liberals in the United States have often regarded Saudi Arabia as a serial violator of human rights (and with good reason), and they have
called on the US to harden its stance on the Kingdom. But based on the structural realist perspective utilized in this thesis, this would be a counter-productive enterprise. It is clear from the analysis that the US views Saudi Arabia overwhelmingly from the perspective of a fellow status quo power, and attempting to push the Saudis toward reform would likely push them toward Russia, which is their main partner now in Opec/Non-Opec and emerging as a stable ally in the Middle East.

- Political figures on each side of the relationship should be very wary of conducting exceedingly forceful foreign policy in the region because it could disturb the emphasis on the status quo, just as George W. Bush did in 2003. Today, MBS looks like the most obvious figure that could help facilitate such an outcome, as his policies in Yemen and toward Qatar could threaten to disturb the status quo in the Middle East. The United States has much better relations with Qatar, and if MBS pushes too hard for to confront Iran, it could constitute the first time Saudi Arabia conducted itself too much in a revisionist manner, to the US’s chagrin.

- The Israel-Palestine conflict, despite appearing less important today than in the past, still has the ability to derail the US’s relations with Arab states. Although MBS appears to be more open to the Israeli state, the US only stands to lose from appearing too close to the Israel and jeopardizing relationships around the region.

- On the US side, policy makers (if they can work with Trump) must try to constrain some of MBS’s radical moves. In particular, the war in Yemen threatens to be a cataclysmic catastrophe—even more than it is now.
For Researchers:

- The main issue dealing with the US and Saudi Arabia is a lack of primary sources. Both the US and Saudi Arabia keep diplomatic and foreign policy information quite secret. In Saudi Arabia this is because there is little transparency in government, and in the US this is because confidential documents are not released for decades. Thus for researchers to make a contribution, using discourse analysis or content analysis would be the best way to look in depth at Saudi Arabia and the US’s relationship (perhaps by analyzing speeches) without having access to diplomatic documents.

- From a constructivist perspective, there is a great deal to be done on how states (their leaders especially) conceptualize what the “status quo” and “revisionist” powers actually are. For the sake of this thesis, these ideas were used as factual concepts, but in reality it is important to remember that to an extent, leaders imagine their own reality. Looking at how the US and Saudi Arabia conceive of threats to their power would be a fascinating perspective on how the relationship is conceived.

- The existing scholarship on the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States would benefit immensely from more work from experts on the internal affairs of the Saudi royal family. Because of my limitations, this thesis focused mainly on the US and on what the Saudi king/crown prince was doing at a given time. But an especially interesting contribution would be to look at how the different factions
within the Saudi royal family and intelligence apparatus prefer some positions over others with the Saudi relationship with the US.
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