

# Saudi-American Forum

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## **Rough Waters: U.S.-Saudi Relations in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress – Personal Insights**

**By David T. Dumke**

*“How can a relationship that has been strong and solid for over six decades be questioned like this? I sense that there is some resentment about the relationship and of the Kingdom that I frankly don't understand. Somebody must be trying to drive a wedge. I want to make something very clear: there is no enmity at all between the Saudi government and the American government, or between the Saudi people and the American people.” - HRH Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz on February 26, 2002*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Crown Prince Abdullah's words sum up what many observers of U.S.-Saudi relations have been pondering over the past year. Clearly, times are not good, and the US-Saudi relationship is at a critical juncture. While it is clear this bilateral relationship has stood the test of time and proven to be mutually beneficial, a wedge is being driven between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Those who have invested in the relationship -- economically, strategically, or emotionally -- today have a choice to make as Americans and Saudis as to whether they should, in the face of difficulties and misunderstanding, push away from each other or recommit themselves to friendship and cooperation on all levels: economic, political, and cultural.

In the last year, as U.S.-Arab relations have been scrutinized and reexamined, Washington has seen a steady stream of visitors from the Arab world. These visitors have come from all sectors of society, from the realms of government, business, religion, and academia. All carry with them a profound concern for what is transpiring, and for what the future holds for relations between the United States and this vital region.

While the messages the visitors carry vary and are at times muddled, their presence in itself speaks volumes and is profoundly important. Now -- as Congress and the Administration examine domestic and foreign policy in the wake of September 11, the ongoing Intifada, and Iraq -- is the time for voices to be heard: voices of caution, concern, understanding, and friendship. The U.S. faces challenges in its role in the world. Congress and the American people are concerned about the decisions being made today, and the repercussions of those decisions.

I consider myself an "average American." I grew up in St. Joseph, a small town (by American standards) of 9,000 in western Michigan. People in my hometown did not have a great interest in

the Middle East, nor, for that matter, with foreign policy. Like most small towns, the political concerns of the average person from St. Joseph revolved around "the issues" that touched their daily lives. The Middle East was thought of infrequently, and on those rare occasions when it was, as an area of great instability, religious acrimony, sectarian strife, and of spectacular oil wealth, particularly in the Saudi context. There was no emotional connection to the region, as St. Joseph had few Jewish American and fewer, if any, Arab American residents. Thus, the Middle East was not an area I was accustomed to thinking about when I began working on Capitol Hill.

In my time on the Hill, I worked on both sides of the aisle, starting with Republican Congressman Fred Upton and eventually landing in the office of Democratic Congressman John D. Dingell, the most senior member of Congress. Working for Congress, and in particular for Mr. Dingell, who represents the largest Arab American community in the U.S., forced me to study the history and regional dynamics of the issues at play. Given my background, I was quite surprised at what I learned about the Middle East -- a region that plays such a prominent role in questions of world peace and prosperity.

However, it is difficult for the average American to understand the complexity of the issues. In fact, knowing of my work on the Middle East, my mother called me excitedly one night to tell me she had just heard a great speaker at the local economics club. He was discussing peace, stability, and democracy in the Middle East. "That's great mother, who was it?" I asked, proud that she had taken an interest in issues I deal with. "Benjamin Netanyahu," she said.

I have told that story on numerous occasions to Arab friends to help them understand the perception of the average American. Congress reflects, to a very great extent, this perception. That is why it is important to educate Congress and the American public alike about the issues we face today.

I was recently asked to speak to a distinguished group of Saudis about the mood on Capitol Hill in regard to their country. Simply put, it is not good. However, as with the American public, there is a hunger on Capitol Hill for information on the Middle East. Largely because foreign policy is now an issue that affects the average American, Members are interested in learning, hearing different perspectives, and understanding a region they have not intensely focused on in the past.

In the House of Representatives, the Democratic Caucus launched a new Middle East and Central Asia study group that meets with area experts each week to listen and learn. Attendance has been strong, which indicates a high level of interest. Generally, over the past year, numerous discussions, debates, and forums have taken place in the halls of Congress aimed at educating Members of Congress and congressional staff. I would note, however, that not all the information put forth is accurate, nor is it presented in an objective manner. However, now more than ever Congress is listening.

In the past year, Saudi Arabia has been heavily criticized. This trend started after September 11, but began in earnest after the Beirut Summit in March 2002, when HRH Crown Prince Abdullah's peace proposal was announced. Since that time, differences between our governments' positions on the Intifada and Iraq have been highlighted and underscored. Saudi

Arabia has been attacked on a host of issues ranging from child custody to women's rights to education. These attacks, in the media and Congress, have worked to question, in a profoundly negative way, the nature of the bilateral relationship.

All the Arab states in the region have suffered to varying degrees in the court of U.S. public opinion. All suffer from a regional stigma which has been triggered by a combination of factors: 9-11 and the war on terrorism, the Intifada, Iraq, and differing views about the Middle East and world. All these issues are, in a sense, connected.

I would add that as Israel has been more heavily criticized in the international community, the lobbying efforts of pro-Israeli groups in Washington have increased significantly. This is not a coincidence.

## **SAUDI ARABIA AND THE 107TH CONGRESS**

The Saudi-US relationship has remained strong for 60 years. It has been characterized, from King Abdulaziz and President Franklin Roosevelt to the present, as a relationship based on cooperation, shared objectives, and understanding. It has been a mutually beneficial relationship. Acting as full partners, the United States and Saudi Arabia have battled the "isms" -- Nasserism, Communism and terrorism -- and have worked to maintain regional stability.

Of course, the economic links between the United States and Saudi Arabia are strong. This is another area in which Saudi and American policy has the same goal: maintaining a stable, affordable, reliable supply of oil. It is clearly in the interests of the United States -- the largest consumer of oil -- and Saudi Arabia -- the largest supplier of oil -- to maintain good relations, and to work together to keep global energy prices stable.

Regarding cultural links, one needed to look no further than the delegation I addressed. When I asked the Saudi delegation I addressed how many of them were educated in the United States, most raised their hands.

Setting aside that history of cooperation, there are other selfish reasons why it is advantageous for the United States to maintain a strong alliance with the Kingdom. From an American vantage point, Saudi Arabia's geographic position on the Arabian Peninsula sets it precisely at the halfway point of the world. Its resources are needed. And due to its unique stature in the Arab and Islamic world, Saudi support is instrumental in legitimizing U.S. regional political objectives.

These considerations are not new, but they are largely overlooked by the majority of the Members of Congress, and virtually unknown to the average American. While the Saudis I meet are generally aware of the basis for our bilateral relationship, the average American and Member of Congress alike do not know the history of U.S.-Saudi ties. Because the Saudi relationship has generally been handled by the Administration, over the last decade little debate about Saudi Arabia occurred on Capitol Hill. That changed greatly after the outbreak of the Intifada and the September 11 attack. Both events contributed significantly to a rapid decline in support for Saudi Arabia on the Hill. One can only wonder what would happen today, for example, if Congress

was again debating the sale of AWACS to the Kingdom.

We must understand there is a "circle the wagon" mentality prevailing among the political elite in Israel and their American supporters. Israel realizes there is little sympathy for its position vis-à-vis the Palestinians outside the United States. Thus, prior to September 11, 2001, Israel felt increasingly isolated in the world. In fear of losing the sympathy and unwavering support of its main benefactor, the pro-Israeli lobby, specifically those supporting Likud positions, flexed their considerable political muscle on Capitol Hill. This trend accelerated after September 11. Israel felt fearful that, in an attempt to address the causes or rather excuses of terrorism, it would be left, in Prime Minister Sharon's words, "like Czechoslovakia." This was because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the U.S. support for Israel, clearly engenders considerable ill will in the region.

I add the caveat about those advocating Likud positions, because, despite rhetoric to the contrary, there is no consensus as to the meaning of "pro-Israel." Many groups and individuals who consider themselves strong supporters of Israel believe that a balanced, fair peace that includes an end to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are in Israel's best interest. One must certainly not conclude that all "pro-Israel" groups endorse all the actions of the Sharon government.

What did this trend mean for America's Arab allies? In Congress, America's two most important Arab allies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have been continually rebuked. In my opinion, this criticism is due to the fact that these two nations in particular are close the United States, do much to promote U.S. interests in the region, and have been supportive of efforts to resolve the Israeli- Palestinian dispute. Thus, by tarnishing them, the notion that Israel's importance is paramount to the U.S., and that it is the strategic regional partner of the United States, is reinforced.

For Saudi Arabia, long exempt from such attacks, the fact that many of the September 11 assailants were Saudi nationals automatically dented the image of the Kingdom in Congress and more broadly amongst the American people. The Abdullah peace plan was visionary, bold, and offered a real opportunity to bring a just end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, for the Sharon government and its allies in the United States, a plan that called for Israel to return to its 1967 borders was perceived as a threat. Thus, American September 11 anxiety coupled with the Israeli fear that the balanced Saudi peace plan would be accepted by the United States set the table for what has since happened to Saudi Arabia in Congress.

Certainly, the pro-Israeli lobby on the Hill is powerful. On issues that directly affect Israel, these groups weigh in and shape policy. This can be seen by looking at any of a number of resolutions passed in the 107th Congress declaring solidarity with Israel, and that tend to demonize Palestine generally, and Yasser Arafat specifically. But pro-Israel groups will not generally weigh in directly on issues that attack its neighbors. They don't have to; other groups can do that more effectively.

I do not want to say that all the grievances that have been leveled against Saudi Arabia and Egypt are completely groundless, nor that all the Members who address these issues do so

simply to discredit these nations. However, concerns that do not directly involve Israel, such as human rights, women's issues, democracy, education reform, religious persecution, gay rights, and anti-Semitism are often raised as red herrings. Again, while they may be worthy issues, in the context of the region, they serve as wedge issues that divide the U.S. from its Arab allies politically and culturally. It is also noteworthy that each of the aforementioned issues are associated with advocacy groups and lobbies that are active in Washington and across the United States. Thus, once these issues surface, the political push is generated by influential non-Middle East related interest groups.

"Dear Colleague" letters are how Members of Congress communicate ideas and advertise resolutions and legislation to their colleagues. Often, "Dear Colleague" letters feature reprinted articles and editorials that a Member wishes their colleagues to read. Thus, articles such as Charles Krauthammer's Washington Post column "The Saudi Peace Sham" were circulated to all Members. Letters to the President critical of Saudi Arabia's treatment of women, educational system, and alleged anti-Semitic press also made the rounds last year. Other Saudi-related topics -- child custody, assistance to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers, and the meaning of Islam and Wahhabism -- were also raised.

Many of these criticisms were exaggerated, unfounded, or not unique to Saudi Arabia. However, in light of the atmosphere in the United States and Congress, they had resonance. The Saudi Embassy and Riyadh have been quick to respond to the charges that have been leveled. But resources -- time, people, and money -- that normally would have been used to promote the Kingdom, were instead devoted to defending it. Regardless of their merits, the attacks on the Kingdom hurt its standing and limited its ability to communicate its concerns to Congress.

## **WHAT MOTIVATES CONGRESS**

The motivations of Congress vary, but a few points must be kept in mind when one looks at influences on it. For the majority of Members, the primary goal is to get reelected. Political parties aim to keep power or win it. This is not to say that Members, or parties, are void of values and principles. Rather, a Member who fails to do what is necessary to get reelected is unable to accomplish their legislative mission, or promote the interests they feel are important to the district, state, country, or the world. This argument can be analyzed as a chicken and egg debate. Keeping the reelection motivation in mind and applying it to Middle East policy is key. First of all, few Members are willing to ignore pressure from their parties, interest groups, or constituents simply to vote precisely what they think is right. Members do not operate in a vacuum; rather they operate by balancing different pressures.

- A few more general principles about Congress:
- Members respond to what they know.
- Members respond to what they hear in Washington, but more importantly what they hear from constituents.
- Members have a short attention span, so the KISS rule applies when delivering a political message: Keep It Simple Stupid.
- Members of Congress are concerned with the here and now, not what has happened in the past.

- Members respond to business concerns, most importantly local business concerns.
- Members respond to what is said in the press, not just CNN, the Washington Post, or the New York Times, but also to the South Bend Tribune, the Bloomington Herald-Tribune, and the Quad City Times. Local media matters.
- Members respond to positive arguments more than defensive arguments.
- Members respond to their core supporters, whether they are constituents, interest groups or campaign donors.

These principles must be applied to the issues one cares about if policy is going to be addressed. This is true in regard to the Middle East just as it is true in regard to health care, the environment, or any other domestic or foreign policy matter. The only difference, and this is important to keep in mind, is that Americans, particularly those residing between the two coasts, are traditionally ambivalent to international issues. They are more concerned with bread and butter issues. This isolationist mindset, however, is being tested in the wake of September 11. Americans have a growing sense that events around the world and American foreign policy cannot be ignored, and, in fact, are bread and butter issues.

It is not advisable to compare the pro-Israeli lobby to the Arab lobby, because framing arguments as Us vs. Them is counterproductive. In Congressional politics a zero sum game usually benefits no one. But I will note that the pro-Israeli lobby, like the Cuban exile lobby, has been enormously effective. They have built a base of support in Congress by focusing on grassroots, media, and message. With great foresight, they have won friends and intimidated foes by building a formidable, multi-faceted political network. It takes time, money, and patience to build a powerful organization. But it is the only way to sustain a high level of support with lawmakers.

American politics is about a lot of things. To a great extent it is about familiarity. In 1997, for example, pro-Israeli groups took 100 Congressional delegations to Israel. Egypt was the closest Arab country in terms of Congressional delegations that year. It hosted six. And that's just in Congress. My hometown mayor, who represents a town of 9,000, was taken to Israel with a delegation of small town mayors. It should come as no surprise that Congress specifically, and the American public generally, is more familiar with Israel and its concerns.

With that in mind I want to note the importance of what groups like the National Council on US-Arab Relations have been doing for years. The NCUSAR has taken numerous delegations to the Kingdom, and in so doing has opened the minds of many. Non-political educational programs serve broader interests, including business and political interests. Familiarity builds understanding, and understanding can make a difference in Congress over time.

## **PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS**

I recently left Capitol Hill to work toward addressing U.S.-Arab political dynamics. Set aside my affinity for friends in the region, my interest in the culture and history, and my sense of justice. I am an American first. The United States is on a dangerous path, perhaps on the edge of a precipice. American policies toward the Middle East must be carefully reexamined. Today, more than ever before, the moves the American government makes will have long-lasting

consequences in the region. There is an opportunity, with the support of the American people, to make sure today's actions do not hurt America or our allies tomorrow. In their hearts, Americans are fair people. Moreover, they are not stupid. They will do the right thing if they see the big picture.

Without a focused, continuous, coordinated effort to shape the views of Congress and public opinion, U.S. policy will not change, and the government-to-government, business-to-business, and people-to-people relations between the U.S. and the Arab world will suffer greatly. Indeed, all three relationships are essential in order to influence policy.

I believe it is possible to change U.S. Middle East policies over time as they are shaped by Congress, the elected representatives of the American people. It can be done by going directly to the American people -- they are often misinformed, or may not have formed an opinion, but they generally remain open-minded.

Today it is incumbent upon all who have a stake in U.S.-Saudi and U.S.-Arab relations to work together to achieve the common goal of bringing balance to U.S. policy and stability to the Middle East, and to building an understanding between our people.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**David T. Dumke** is the former Legislative Director for Rep. John D. Dingell (Democrat-Michigan), who is the most senior member of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Ranking Member of the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee. With a combined experience of more than two decades of political work, Dumke and Maya M. Berry recently established the MidAmr Group to improve U.S. bilateral relations with the Arab World.

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### **ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM**

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues -  
- impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to

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contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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