

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Interview #1/Part I

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Saudi American Forum Interview Ambassador Chas Freeman Part I – A Relationship in Transition – Then 9/11

The Saudi-American Forum is pleased to present this interview with Ambassador Chas Freeman who, in a career of distinguished service for the United States, served as U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia 1989-1992. SAF talked with Ambassador Freeman by telephone on September 4, 2003. This interview is presented in three parts.

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A Relationship in Transition -- And Then 9/11

Saudi-American Forum: Two years have passed since the terror of 9/11 changed the fundamental nature of the US-Saudi relationship. How would you characterize the state of the relationship and the challenges facing 'stakeholders' who seek to maintain strong ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia?

Ambassador Chas Freeman: I think the word restoring is probably more accurate than maintaining because the relationship is in great difficulty. I would say that the last two years, as we mark the anniversary of September 11th, have seen a major deterioration in the atmosphere and tone of the U.S.-Saudi relations broadly written, even as the two governments have continued a fairly cordial and cooperative relationship.

The irony is that both Washington and Riyadh have ended up defending the value of the relationship and the quality of the relationship against, frankly, often very ignorant and uninformed, but malicious attacks from their own publics. So you have the two governments each confronting an atmosphere domestically, which is increasingly skeptical or actively hostile to the relationship and to the other country.

This has come about because the U.S.-Saudi relationship was essentially really rather narrowly based and did not have a mass media or broad public dimension to it. It was managed at the top of the governments in both countries without much engagement by the respective bureaucracies. It did not involve, on the U.S. side, the Congress in a very active manner, and the number of Americans who actually were involved with and engaged with Saudi Arabia, or who had any direct knowledge of it was really quite small. So, the relationship was being managed in a

narrow band. 9/11 took this rather narrowly based relationship and suddenly made the people in both countries intensely interested in it. It turned out that there was not the level of understanding to sustain the relationship against all the detractors in the wake of 9/11.

Saudi-American Forum: How have Americans' and Saudi Arabians' understanding of each other been transformed?

Ambassador Chas Freeman: On the U.S. side I think it is fair to say that Saudi Arabia has been successfully vilified in the eyes of the American public. And it has a terrible image of unreasoning and animus and even complicity with Al-Qaeda and other enemies of the United States. On the Saudi side, the attitude toward the United States, and increasingly toward Americans, is one of resentment and disaffection or active hostility, not because what the United States stands for or what Americans believe, but it's because of Americans' behavior. By behavior I mean American policy in the holy land, the American military occupation of Iraq and critical statements by prominent Americans about Islam, Saudi Arabia and Arabs in general of the sort that would be highly objectionable to anybody.

So, there is a level of mutual invective and a chill in the relationship that is really quite unprecedented and is very difficult to deal with. And, this contrasts I think with the continued confidence that the leaderships of both countries have to each other and with the continuing interest of each country in engaging the other. So, there is a great disconnect between popular mood and national interest.

Saudi-American Forum: Was the nature of the relationship changing before 9/11?

Ambassador Chas Freeman: There were increasing frictions that arose from the fact that the original basis of the relationship in many respects no longer existed or had been transformed. This is not to cite a list of difficulties, and imply that they are not manageable or the problems are not resolvable -- but the fact is that resolving problems, I think, starts with recognizing what they are and the degree of gravity that they have. In this case, the U.S.-Saudi relationship began as a fairly simple and unadorned bargain between the United States, a powerful country far away from the kingdom with no ambitions or agendas of its own in the kingdom's region, acting to backstop the kingdom's security on one hand while the kingdom on the other hand undertook to meet the energy requirements of the United States and the global economy.

This basic bargain was really that simple, it was security for energy, and it led to a broader partnership and joint ventures, if you will, on many issues. Among them, and probably the greatest of them, the collaboration in support of the mujaheddin in Afghanistan, which ultimately brought down the Soviet Union. The United States was a desirable partner for Saudi Arabia for really two reasons. First, there was a common interest in opposing godless communism. That was seen by the Saudis as the principle threat to the kingdom and to Islam and to the region. It was seen as the principle strategic threat globally and in the region by the United States. So, there was a common interest there that allowed other issues on which we differed to be deferred or set aside for later resolution.

The most prominent among the other issues was differences over the Israeli-Palestinian issue, or

the Israeli-Arab issue in its early phases. That Israeli-Arab and later Israeli-Palestinian issue was made manageable in the U.S.-Saudi relations by the fact that both sides recognized there were greater interests at stake. It was the end of the Cold War that common interests in opposing godless communism became irrelevant. And not surprisingly, issues like the Israeli-Arab issue, which had been less salient before, became much more salient.

So, we have a totally different context in which to manage the relationship. One in which we retain the fundamental national interests in exchanging security for the kingdom and energy for the world, but in which our ideological differences and our differences on particular issues in the region are far less easy to handle. So, that's the first part of this.

Saudi-American Forum: What other considerations, besides the disappearance of the unifying threat posed by the Soviet Union and the ascendancy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, helped to transform the Saudi-US relationship?

Ambassador Chas Freeman: The second part is that the United States began to develop its own ambitions and agenda for the region. In the 1990s, the defeat of Iraq's military and the liberation of Kuwait did not bring down Saddam Hussein and his regime, much to everyone's surprise. That led the United States to station forces in Saudi Arabia long after we would have expected them to be withdrawn. It led to increased friction on the very issues that Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda had exploited during the Gulf War. So, we also had differences over the force presence to manage there.

As the United States began talk of using force against Iraq, other differences, including different views of the utility of sanctions or the justice of sanctions and the effect on the Iraqi people and questions about the legitimacy of the use of force arose to divide us. Meanwhile, Americans were developing an ideological agenda of social change - focused on women's rights and human rights in Saudi Arabia - that added to the friction. So, these issues arose in the mid-nineties to complicate and some ways darken the American understanding of Saudi Arabia and sympathy for it. And I would say that neither the Saudis nor other Arabs either took advantage of the partnership of the Gulf War or even the earlier Cold War period to build a broad base of support in the United States.

Saudi-American Forum: What should have been done to build a "broad base of support" for the relationship?

Ambassador Chas Freeman: The level of effort financially and in human terms that has been devoted to public diplomacy or public relations or building bridges between Arab peoples and Americans is very small - probably, in terms of the importance of these relationships, the most extraordinarily miniscule level of effort of any major American relationship in the world.

In a sense, you get what you pay for, you reap what you sow, and if you don't put out the money and sow the seeds, you have very little to show for things at the end of the year, and 9/11 was the end of the year.

There was no broad base of support for the relationship, no broad understanding of Saudi

Arabia. The kingdom, at the time, was a largely closed society, which rarely allowed the press in. There was very little literature of any kind, scholarly or otherwise about the kingdom. While Saudis in large numbers visited the United States, many had houses here, and quite a few had been educated here - their level of understanding of the United States wasn't reciprocated by us.

When 9/11 happened to us, it happened that it involved 15 Saudis among the 19 perpetrators. I would say the inadequacy of the earlier effort to educate each other and the Saudi effort to educate Americans or to engage Americans in Saudi Arabia made this relationship extraordinarily vulnerable. And it was in fact deeply wounded by 9/11.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambassador Chas. W. Freeman, Jr. succeeded Senator George McGovern as President of the Middle East Policy Council on December 1, 1997.

Ambassador Freeman was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs from 1993-94, earning the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm). He was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the historic U.S. mediation of Namibian independence from South Africa and Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola.

Chas. Freeman served as Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d'Affaires in the American embassies at both Bangkok (1984-1986) and Beijing (1981-1984). He was Director for Chinese Affairs at the U.S. Department of State from 1979-1981. He was the principal American interpreter during the late President Nixon's path-breaking visit to China in 1972. In addition to his Middle Eastern, African, East Asian and European diplomatic experience, he served in India.

Ambassador Freeman earned a certificate in Latin American studies from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, certificates in both the national and Taiwan dialects of Chinese from the former Foreign Service Institute field school in Taiwan, a BA from Yale University and a JD from the Harvard Law School. He is the recipient of numerous high honors and awards. He was elected to the Academy of American Diplomacy in 1995. He is the author of *The Diplomat's Dictionary* (Revised Edition) and *Arts of Power*, both published by the United States Institute of Peace in 1997. Ambassador Freeman is Chairman of the Board of Projects International, Inc., a Washington-based business development firm that specializes in arranging international joint ventures, acquisitions, and other business operations for its American and foreign clients. He also serves as Co-Chair of the United States-China Policy Foundation and Vice Chair of the Atlantic Council of the United States. He is a member of the boards of the Institute for Defense Analyses, the regional security centers of the U.S. Department of Defense, and the Washington World Affairs Council.

Previous Positions

1995 - Present Chairman of the Board, Projects International, Inc.
1994-95 Distinguished Fellow, United States Institute of Peace
1993-94 Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs
1992-93 Distinguished Fellow, Institute for National Strategic Studies
1989-92 U S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
1986-89 Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, African Affairs

Recent Honors

1995 Elected to American Academy of Diplomacy
1994 Distinguished Public Service Award (Policy innovation in Europe)
1994 Distinguished Public Service Award (Contributions in Defense Policy)
1994 Order of 'Abd Al-'Azziz, 1st Class (Diplomatic Service)
1991 Defense Meritorious Service (Desert Shield/Storm)
1991 CIA Medallion (Desert Shield/Storm)
1991 Distinguished Honor Award (Desert Shield/Storm)

Recent Major Publications and Writings

Arts of Power: Statecraft and Diplomacy, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C., 1997.
The Diplomat's Dictionary, Second Edition, revised, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C. 1997

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

The Saudi-American Forum is a FREE service provided to the public by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. The Forum consists of a web site and an email information service. Visit the web site at: <http://www.saudi-american-forum.org>

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You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the Forum through use of the "Feedback" form on the website or through direct email to the Forum at: info@SaudiAmericanForum.net

Thank you for your support of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the Saudi-American Forum.