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**Saudi-American Forum  
Interview  
Ambassador Chas W. Freeman  
Part II - A Relationship in Transition --  
9/11, Then What?**



**Editor's Note:**

In the first installment of our interview with Ambassador Chas Freeman, he noted the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia had undergone a transformation by the time America was attacked on 9/11. After the fall of the Soviet Union potentially fractious issues set aside during years of Cold War cooperation, coupled with U.S. policies and military footprint in the region as well as a social reform agenda among some Americans, emerged as irritants in the relationship. Meanwhile the effort to bridge the understanding gap between American and Saudi publics fell well short of what was necessary to ensure both sides appreciated the nature and importance of the relationship.

When Al Qaeda attacked the United States in September 2001 the relationship was already showing fault lines. The pre-9/11 vulnerabilities coupled with the fact that 15 of 19 attackers were Saudi nationals under direction of another Saudi, Osama bin Laden, quickly led to the vilification of the kingdom under the spotlight of American official, media and public attention.

The Saudi-American Forum is pleased to present part two of our 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.

The final segment of our interview with Ambassador Freeman will be distributed to the Saudi-American Forum next week. For part one of the interview visit the [Saudi-American Forum](http://www.Saudi-American-Forum.org) on-line.

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September 4, 2003

## A Relationship in Transition -- 9/11, Then What?

**Saudi-American Forum:** How would you characterize the nature of our ties with Saudi Arabia two years on from the 9/11 attacks and in the midst of US efforts to reshape the region?

**Ambassador Chas Freeman:** Americans and Saudis continue to share important interests. The importance of Saudi Arabia in the energy markets and to global energy security in both the short and the long term is not in any respect diminished. The centrality of Saudi Arabia, therefore, in global commodities trade and in the realm of the dollar, the dollar-zone if you will, is not diminished.

Saudi Arabia is still and always was astride the lines of communication and transport routes between Europe and Asia. Its geopolitical significance has not in any respect been diminished. Finally, not only is Saudi Arabia's centrality in the Islamic world and its moderate approach to the management of the Islamic holy places in the interest of the U.S., but its denial of the pulpits in Mecca and Medina to extremists is arguably more important than ever.

From an American point of view, I would say that this relationship requires careful tending. From a Saudi point of view the United States has the capacity to cause enormous trouble for Saudi Arabia if the relationship is not managed well or to be enormously beneficial to Saudi Arabia as we have been on numerous occasions. The Saudi interest attending to good ties with the United States is clear. That is especially the case in the military and security side because given the preponderance of American military power in the world, there is no alternative to the measure of dependence on the United States for Saudi Arabia's defense and for its weaponry. Saudi Arabia can perhaps dilute this reliance on the United States or it could diversify its international relationships to some extent; but, in the end, there is no substitute for the United States.

**Saudi-American Forum:** What about the war on terrorism?

**Ambassador Chas Freeman:** The interests on both sides are clear. They demand a strong and healthy relationship, and this is perhaps even more so in the area of terrorism, where Saudi Arabia is either part of the problem or part of the solution, or both. The United States cannot deal with the issue of Islamic radicalism and terrorism related to Islam without the cooperation of the Saudis. Not only is Saudi cooperation necessary to ensure Saudi Arabia is not a incubator for future terrorists or a source of funding for them, but Saudi help is needed in legitimizing the American effort globally and in tracking down terrorists. After all, the terrorists have as their primary objective, the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy with their attacks on the United States merely being a means to that end - a means to compel the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Saudi Arabia.

I guess that is the great irony that Osama bin Laden's objective was to drive wedges between and bring about serious deterioration and withdrawal of American support from Saudi Arabia and to a great extent he has succeeded on the mass level, even though the administration has not acceded to that.

**Saudi-American Forum:** What has to be done?

**Ambassador Chas Freeman:** Well, first of all a great deal more of education. There is no short-term fix for this. What I would say to both Saudis and Americans is this is not the kind of thing that a few delegations traveling to the other capital can fix. This requires a broad effort in public education and public diplomacy in both societies. It requires a broadening of dialogue so the dialogue is not a narrow and secretive one between government officials and a few business people but rather a much broader one. It will require a great deal of time and effort by both countries to overcome and correct negative stereotypes and serious misunderstandings on the part of their own publics and of the other country and its culture.

**Saudi-American Forum:** Do you see either side or both sides moving in any of those directions?

**Ambassador Chas Freeman:** I think there is more effort being made on the Saudis' side than there is on the American side, but frankly I think the level of activity and engagement by Saudi Arabia, again in its own interest, remains pitifully inadequate. The kingdom has done some very useful things. It has made itself a great deal more open to the press, and therefore, the level of press understanding of Saudi Arabia and the level of coverage of Saudi Arabia has increased. It has experimented with different ways of trying to reach the public at large -- none of them terribly successful in my view.

**Saudi-American Forum:** It seems all the efforts by Saudis to explain the nature of the relationship and to refute erroneous charges are viewed very cynically and turned against them.

**Ambassador Chas Freeman:** Well, this is of course. This is what it means to have been successfully vilified. Everything you do is regarded as suspect or self-serving or duplicitous or deceptive in some respect, even when it's absolutely straightforward and sincere and should be taken on face value, and it is not.

**Saudi-American Forum:** A recent book review in Time on Robert Baer's critical examination of the US-Saudi relationship said, "According to Baer, the Saudis can do no right. Even when they sink a trillion dollars into US banks, he sees only potential blackmail and warns of dire consequences if the money is ever withdrawn. Or when the Saudis help the US by keeping a lid on oil prices, he labels the assistance nothing more than blood money." It seems no good deed goes unpunished.

**Ambassador Chas Freeman:** Yes, I think that's true. I think the reality is that Saudi Arabia had a great deal of closet detractors prior to 9/11. 9/11 gave them the public respectability to come out of the closet and wallop away. That's what they've been doing. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, I have to say the mood of anti-Americanism has very sharply increased for obvious reasons.

Getting back to what needs to be done -- I think the two governments do seem to be able to continue to cooperate; the Crown Prince and the President appear to have a good relationship and a productive one. Of course leaders change and one should not put too much weight on individual leaders. We have an election coming up, and Saudi Arabia has emerged as a campaign issue. This is an illustration of why support for the relationship needs to be broadened.

There has also been an enormous amount of misinformation -- some of it disinformation -- about Islam that has found its way into our press. There is a misunderstanding of some of the issues surrounding the relationship. For the benefit of your readers I'd like to say that there are really only a handful of broadly based American institutions that are trying to educate the American public about Arabs in general and Saudi Arabia or Islam in particular. Each one does quite a different thing.

The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations obviously, in addition to operating GulfWire it organizes an annual policy conference that's coming up on [Sep. 7-8] and conducts a series of exchanges that are very useful for professionals and congressional staff and journalists. Therefore, it plays a key role in facilitating human contact of different kinds that no other organization does.

There is the Middle East Institute, a sister organization of the Middle East Policy Council. It's a membership organization that provides a forum for discussion among its members and between visitors and its members. It has a first rate scholarly journal and a research library, and it teaches Arabic, Farsi, Turkish and Hebrew to the public. All of them are very useful functions, which no other organization performs.

I would like to say the Middle East Policy Council, of which I am president, does three things, each of which is also unique. The first is to ensure that controversial or politically incorrect or awkward policy issues of interest to Arabs and Americans are publicly aired in a fair and balanced way on Capitol Hill. The Middle East Policy Council Capitol Hill series -- we conduct about four conferences a year -- does take up issues that are not taken up elsewhere or which are taken up first by us and only picked up later by others. Transcripts from these conferences become the first item in *Middle East Policy* -- the quarterly journal of the Middle East Policy Council. It is the most often cited in the field and has quite a broad readership in the United States and in Europe as well as in the region. *Middle East Policy* is focused on American national interests as they relate to the region and is, again, unique.



Finally, and I think most relevant in the context of all we have been talking about, the Middle East Policy Council conducts teacher-training programs for high school teachers throughout the country on how to teach about Arab civilization and Islam. Obviously given the intense focus on Saudi Arabia at the moment, Saudi Arabia is an important part of the curriculum. We have trained over 14,000 teachers so far and we reach about a million high school kids every year with our programs.

These are the three non-advocacy organizations -- public education and outreach focused -- that try to counter negative stereotypes with facts. I would say that all three organizations are in the same rather parlous financial condition -- that is to say we live month to month. We don't get a lot of help from our Arab friends. I go back to the problem that there is a propensity in the region for short-term fixes and trying to address problems by individual contacts or small delegations. This isn't the way to address the fundamental problem of a broad lack of understanding. It's sad that nobody in the region seems to understand the need for a long-term effort of the sort that only an endowment for

organizations like these can produce.

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*The final part of this interview will be presented next week.*

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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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