

# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

March 13, 2003

## **Interview with Colonel Bernard Dunn, Former U.S. Defense Attache to Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabian-American Relations – A Special View

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The Saudi-American Forum thanks *GulfWire* for permission to reprint this issue of "Perspectives"

### **GULFWIRE EDITOR'S NOTE:**

A National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations delegation, led by Dr. John Duke Anthony, visited Saudi Arabia from September 20-28, 2002. *GulfWire* Editor-in-Chief Patrick W. Ryan joined other members of the delegation that included American defense representatives, strategists, and specialists. Among them was Colonel Bernard Dunn, fresh from his two-year posting to Riyadh as the Defense and Army Attache, and, now, newly retired from the U.S. Army.

It was a special opportunity to travel across the Kingdom with Colonel Dunn and gain from his first-hand experiences and insight on Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. His posting at the U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia was the capstone of a career that included extensive exposure to Middle East military developments, political affairs, and life and culture. Colonel Dunn's wide-ranging service in the Arab world [see bio below] afforded him an opportunity, limited to a handful of military officers, to witness the full range of American interests in the region -- in war and in peace.

Colonel Dunn's assignment as a member of the US country team coincided with significant developments in the American-Saudi Arabian partnership -- cooperation and support for ongoing Operation Southern Watch missions, the impact of the 9-11 terrorist attacks and the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom and much more.

As the delegation neared the end of its travels in the Kingdom, *GulfWire* was pleased to sit down with Colonel Dunn in Jeddah for the opportunity to share his knowledge and insight on U.S.-Saudi relations with you.

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Jeddah, Saudi Arabia  
September 27, 2002

**GULFWIRE (GW):** What are U.S. interests in the relationship with Saudi Arabia?

**COL BERNARD DUNN:** The United States has an interest in strong ties with Saudi Arabia for a number of reasons.

One, because of Saudi Arabia's geographical position it is in many ways at the center of the world, between east and west. You can hardly get from one side of the world to the other without flying across Saudi Arabia.

We need strong ties with Saudi Arabia because of energy issues. We need strong ties with Saudi Arabia because of security issues in the Gulf.

We are interested in a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia because of its important position as the defacto leader of the Islamic world, because of King Fahd's role as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, because of its great leadership role of the Arab world in general, and because of its size and the weight it carries in Arab issues.

There is an Arab piece, an Islamic piece, an energy piece, a security piece and a geographic piece as to why we need a strong relationship with this country.

**GW:** What has been the nature of these various "pieces" over the years?

**DUNN:** The relationship with the US has been uniformly strong ever since the day in 1945 when King Abdulaziz set the relationship on that course in his meeting with President Roosevelt aboard the USS Quincy at the Great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal. But frankly it started before that because of oil interests.

King Abdulaziz had decided, and told his sons, that Americans were was their only true friends in the world and that they should put their money on the United States. He was fully aware of the Arab-Israeli problem at the time and opposed America's position on it at the time. However, he realized that the United States represented Saudi Arabia's best interests in other areas and so he put his country on a course with ours a long time ago. It has remained on that course, although the relationship is probably more problematic now than it has ever been.

**GW:** Can you talk more about the elements of the relationship, starting with the geographic dimension? How has it played a role and how has the United States benefited from that aspect of the relationship.

**DUNN:** Strictly from the geographical position, whether Saudi Arabia possessed any oil or not, whether it possessed an important position in the Arab world, the Islamic world or not, it occupies a piece of geography that is important to us because it is the hinge between east and west.

First of all the kingdom has coastlines on two very important bodies of water: the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf. It also provides easy access to and from the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean

and the Arabian Sea for our forces. All of those places are very important for security issues -- the Eastern Mediterranean, South Asia and the Horn of Africa.

Saudi Arabia is astride trade routes up through the Suez Canal as well as traditional routes of maritime commerce between South Asia and Africa. It occupies the traditional trade route from the caravan days up from the Arabian Sea across Yemen and up to Palestine and to the Mediterranean. It is also in proximity to Mesopotamia, now Iraq and to Iran. From the geographic standpoint Saudi Arabia occupies a position that cannot be wished away. We must deal with it, particularly from a military standpoint. We must deal with it because of its geography.

**GW:** In terms of the energy "piece," everyone knows Saudi Arabia has a quarter of the world's proven oil reserves. With regard to energy supplies, how has it been a friend to the US over the years?

**DUNN:** That's another aspect of our interests that can't be wished away. Saudi Arabia's oil production capability and its residual swing capability, its excess capacity, are unsurpassed in the world. The kingdom produces seven and a half to eight millions barrels a day and can expand that by another three million barrels a day virtually by turning a switch.

No other country or combination of countries can provide that kind of energy security, or if taken another way, energy danger.

In the case of the Saudis it has been energy security because they have used their production and excess capacity to stabilize oil prices rather than to cause drastic swings in oil prices which could destabilize the global economy.

Saudi Arabia's interests and America's interests in oil prices and a stable economy are identical. People who write things in the US media implying that Riyadh intends to use its oil as a weapon have no idea what the country's true interests are in terms of maintaining stable oil prices. They seek a price within a band that is beneficial to all and especially to the industrialized countries including the US. It is not in Saudi Arabia's interests to seek short term, high profits and destabilize the world economy. The kingdom's leaders know that, and we know that, and they have worked very hard to do things that are ultimately in both country's interests in terms of oil security.

**GW:** You mentioned the "security piece" among the bases for our strong ties with Saudi Arabia. Can you share your view of this aspect of the relationship?

**DUNN:** Since World War Two when America emerged as a superpower, Washington has always found Saudi Arabia on our side in terms of addressing the threats the United States perceived in this part of the world.

Earliest among those threats was the rise of radical pan-Arab nationalism in the Arab world, most closely identified with Nasser in Egypt and the extremism it produced. Saudi Arabia viewed that as a threat and cooperated with the United States in countering that threat in the

region.

Simultaneously, but not secondary to that, there was the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the fear that it was going to penetrate the Gulf to find a warm water port. Moscow's alliances with certain Arab countries led to a radicalization in those states and caused such a sharp division within the Arab world.

It was Saudi Arabia that came up on the side of the United States in that polarize, fragmented and radical Arab world that we saw back in the '50s, '60s, and '70s. So we had Nasserism, we had the Soviet Union, and we found Saudi Arabia a staunch ally of the United States.

In Iran in the late 1970s yet another variant of radicalism emerged with the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and that was the next threat Saudi Arabia sided with the United States against. Virtually everyone in the Arab world viewed Khomeini and Iran as a threat. In a low key and effective way Saudi Arabia cooperated with the United States extensively in fighting the threat from revolutionary Iran.

Recognizing its mutual interest with the United States, the kingdom cooperated in the building of an enormous military infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia designed to counter the threats from both the Soviet Union and Iran. Little did we know at the time that that infrastructure would play a key role in our fight in 1991 against Iraq. Without that infrastructure we would have had a very difficult time ejecting Iraq from occupied Kuwait.

Saudi Arabia, of course, cooperated with us in combating the next threat that emerged in the region -- Iraq. We need not describe Saudi Arabia's vital contributions as a platform and a coalition partner in reversing Iraq's aggression against Kuwait.

Since the Gulf War the major threat in the region has been the rise of Islamic extremism. Saudi Arabia has viewed Islamic extremism as a threat to the Kingdom just as we view it as a threat to the United States. In fact, Saudi Arabia recognized the threat before we did and took steps before we did to counter that threat. The rise of Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda was recognized much earlier by Saudi Arabia than it was by the United States. There were many negotiations and discussions back and forth between the US and Saudi Arabia in the '90s regarding that threat. We ignored much of it until the tragedy of 9-11. Both sides now recognize the serious threat of global terrorism and the threat of Islamic extremism. Saudi Arabia is cooperating fully in the fight against terrorism. Moreover, it provided support, both moral and physical, in the fight in Afghanistan this last year and as it continues right now.

**GW:** The last point you made had to do with one of Saudi Arabia's most recent leadership roles in the Islamic world and the Arab world. How does its leadership position benefit the United States?

**DUNN:** Saudi Arabia is viewed by the Islamic world as the symbolic head of Islam. There is no longer an Islamic Caliph as there was throughout the centuries until the Ottoman Empire fell during World War One. There has been no central authority in Islam since then. Leadership in the Islamic world is diffused, but if there could be said to be a symbolic seat for the center of

Islam, it would be Saudi Arabia, because of its custodianship of the two holy mosques, Mecca and Medina.

The head of state of Saudi Arabia is viewed as the one to turn to on Islamic matters by the heads of all the other Islamic states. I recall in the summer of 2000 I had the opportunity to sit in on a discussion Crown Prince Abdullah had with American visitors. He described the calls he was receiving from heads of states in Islamic countries around the world, expressing their concerns about what was going on at Camp David. That negotiations then were addressing Jerusalem, which is an issue that is larger than just the Palestinians -- it is an Islamic issue -- it is of concern to them. Many were worried about the direction those negotiations were going. Who did they turn to? They turned to the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the de facto head of state to appeal to him, to ensure that Islamic interests were protected.

Saudi Arabia and the head of state of Saudi Arabia will continue to be where the Islamic world turns to for guidance, leadership and defense of Islamic interests.

On the leadership role in the Arab world, certainly the economy of Saudi Arabia is huge. Despite the current economic problems Saudi Arabia will continue to be a heavyweight economically in this region.

Saudi Arabia also casts a very long shadow across the Gulf states. The Gulf states tend to feel constrained in sensitive areas to cooperate with America and the US military if they are not provided both an Islamic 'overlay' and a political 'overlay,' and a 'head nod' from the Saudis.

A perfect example is the US operation in Afghanistan. The Gulf states received a firm head nod from Saudi Arabia. It came in the form of a number of statements and, no doubt, some back channel communications indicating that, from the Islamic standpoint, the United States had a right to react to the wrong that had been done. So from the Islamic standpoint assisting the Americans was acceptable and from the political standpoint the Gulf states were more open to the presence of American forces and allowing us to operate from their bases. Without Saudi Arabian approval, both tacit and overt, Islamically and politically, those Gulf states would have felt constrained to take such actions. I believe that will continue despite whatever happens with Iraq. You need Saudi Arabia.

**GW:** What are your thoughts on the Saudi bashing headlines, such as the "Saudi Arabia, Ally or Enemy?" questions raised in some quarters?

**DUNN:** Well I think it is wrong and I think it does represent a campaign. I don't understand it. The Saudis don't understand it. Obviously, the media can say what they want. I think that Saudi Arabia will continue its close relationship with the United States and it will do its best to counter the media campaign, perhaps with a campaign of its own.

There is no doubt that the Arab world, and Saudi Arabia have had bad public relations problems on issues in the US media. A certain lack of sophistication on how to handle the media and the public in the United States has allowed others who are more sophisticated in that way to have the upper hand.

It is very strange that the pundits and others who talk about Saudi Arabia as the enemy seem to forget the vast and close cooperation on a number of sensitive issues that have occurred over decades, that I mentioned before.

Saudi Arabia has been a tremendous friend and ally of the US. It is now, and I hope it will remain, an ally of the US. I believe it will. I believe there is a strong desire on the part of Saudi Arabia to remain allied with the United States. If damage comes to the relationship it will be as much our fault as it will be the fault of the Saudis. We are not treating this important country the way we should.

**GW:** Besides the anti-Saudi media storm there has been a lot of attention in government circles to the US-Saudi relationship. For example, on July 10 a consultant to the Rand Corporation briefed the Defense Policy Review Board said Saudi Arabia was an enemy of America. He recommended the United States threaten Saudi Arabia with a takeover of its oil installations and seizure of its financial assets overseas. How do you see the positions of some in the Pentagon and elsewhere in the US government who have doubts about the US relationship with Saudi Arabia?

**DUNN:** I cannot explain how an organization with the stature of the Defense Policy Review Board could have been exposed to a briefing such as that. That was a piece of trash to be quite honest, not a piece of professional work. How that happened I could not explain. I was as shocked as anybody when I heard about it and when I viewed the briefing slides on a website. I was astonished that the process could be so politicized as to be presented as a serious briefing for a serious advisory body. I can't say much beyond that. It was astonishing.

**GW:** Can you comment on the reactions in Saudi Arabia to these anti-Saudi eruptions -- the recent rash of stories, charges and statements regarding the reliability of Saudi Arabia?

**DUNN:** There is no doubt there are problems in Saudi Arabia, and there is no doubt there are issues that the Saudis must grapple with that they have not grappled with before. I believe they are moving forward on facing and addressing those issues just as we have issues in the United States that we must constantly face and address.

To suggest that Saudi Arabia is no longer an ally of the US is to demonstrate a total lack of understanding about what this relationship is about and why Saudi Arabia is important to the US.

I can tell you that the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the government officials I dealt with, to a man, and a large portion of the population, remain positively disposed toward the United States and positively disposed toward a good relationship with the us.

They are disheartened by what they are seeing and they cannot really understand why they are being treated like an enemy when they are not an enemy. Sometimes, as the Saudis are fond of saying, "A true friend is one who tells you what he really thinks rather than what you want to hear." The Saudis have been doing that and right now we are often getting a message we don't

want to hear.

I think that mature governments today don't vilify each other because they get a message they don't want to hear. This relationship is too important to dismiss it out of hand or to condemn a religion or a people because certain elements of that religion or people have participated in an act that hurt the United States. As tragic as 9-11 was, it was not the first terrorist attack in the world, nor will it be the last. People forget that Saudi Arabia has been the venue and victim of terrorist attacks directed against the royal family as well as against Americans. They know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of a terrorist attack. Many places around the world know what it feels like.

**GW:** Are there practical steps people who appreciate the importance of the U.S.-Saudi relationship can take to ensure the continuation of those ties?

**DUNN:** I think delegations such as the National Council [on U.S.-Arab Relations] delegation we are participating in are an outstanding means of providing an understanding of both sides. There is no substitute for exchanges, face-to-face discussions and visits to each other's countries. I mean that on all levels of the relationship.

On the military side, I believe the United States should encourage as many exchanges, visits and attendance in each other's schools as possible. We should encourage the continuation of the military exercise programs. Our countries should work together as closely as both sides possibly can.

In the realm of finance and trade, we should continue and, in fact, boost our interaction at all levels to the extent we can. We should facilitate rather than hinder visits from policymakers and key leaders in commerce, industry, banking, the military and government from each to the other.

In my experience with visitors to the Arab world, I saw this in Syria, which is vilified by many in the United States, and in other countries I have served. Once you actually arrive and settle down in a place it is completely different from what you thought it would be. You discover that it tends to be a friendlier place and much more amenable to American interests. It sure looks a lot different than what you thought.

Saudi Arabia is no exception. Once a visitor arrives in Saudi Arabia and sits down and talks to people, he realizes that they are intelligent and capable. They have the same personal goals. Their country has the same security interests. You realize we're in this thing together. We are not enemies. We are friends.

**GW:** It was reported in the local press today [Sep. 27] that Saudi Arabian Interior Minister Prince Naif criticized what he called the "double standard" in US policies toward the Middle East. Given your extensive experience in Saudi Arabia and the region can you provide background on that charge?

**DUNN:** That's not only a Saudi Arabian view. It tends to be an Arab view and an Islamic view. I would tell you that it is shared by many others, including quite a few Americans. It is the issue

of the Arab-Israeli dispute and the dichotomy of what people here see in US policies regarding Israel and US policies regarding the Arab countries. The United States is against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, although Israel has weapons of mass destruction. We do not allow our arms to be used against civilians around the world except when it comes to Israeli use of those weapons against Palestinians. I could go on. There is a list of contradictions that the Arabs and many others in the world see -- the way the United States makes exceptions for the Israelis.

**GW:** In what ways do Americans misunderstand Saudi Arabia?

**DUNN:** Americans, and Saudis, use the phrase that we are two countries with shared interests, not shared values. In some respects, that is true, but I would argue there are many shared values as well.

If I could say only one thing, I would tell Americans that just because a person dresses differently than you, and just because he has a different religion than you, and maybe has a different outlook on the issues than you, it doesn't mean he is not your friend. It doesn't mean he doesn't want the same things in his life as you.

Americans are good people and Americans are universally loved when other people can get to know them. My advice to Americans would be to just continue to be who you are but let yourself be exposed to other people and you will find that they like you and you in turn will like them.

The Saudis love Americans. They have a traditional affinity for America. The destination of choice for vacations has always been America. Saudis bypass Europe and go to America. They have always looked to the United States for guidance and leadership both in national politics as well as in their personal lives. They ask, "How do the Americans do this?" They want their children to be educated in American universities. The American military has been a model for the Saudi military. In every aspect of life the place to turn to has been the United States.

The US visa and travel policies, designed to stop terrorists, are having the negative effect of stopping hundreds of thousands of good people from this part of the world, including Saudis, from coming to the US. My fear is that, slowly over time, they will turn away from us and toward other places. That's a danger and a real shame for both countries but particularly for the United States.

We have benefited from this affinity the Saudis have for the United States. We certainly benefited in the Gulf War. If we lose that affinity, we will have lost a major treasure that it took us a long time to build. It is based on the fact that we are two people who have more that draws us together than which divides us.

**GW:** Thank you, Colonel Dunn.

## **ABOUT THE SPEAKER**

**COLONEL BERNARD J. DUNN**, U.S. Army (Retired) -- Colonel Dunn was raised in El Paso, Texas. He entered the Army in 1975, upon graduation as a Distinguished Military Graduate of the ROTC program at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Infantry. He served in a variety of infantry command and staff positions in Germany and the US, and entered the Army's Foreign Area Officer program in 1982.

After completing Arabic language training and a Master's Degree in National Security Affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, Colonel Dunn served a year in Jordan as a Foreign Area Officer trainee. The principal focus of that year was a six-month course of study at the Jordanian Infantry Officer's Advanced Course, followed by intensive travel throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Colonel Dunn was then assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a, North Yemen, where he served as a security assistance officer from 1985 to 1987.

After a year at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Colonel Dunn was once again posted to Germany serving in the VII Corps Headquarters G-3 section, then as Executive Officer of a Bradley Infantry Battalion. When Europe-based forces were alerted for deployment to Saudi Arabia in November 1990, Colonel Dunn was attached back to VII Corps Headquarters. He served during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm as Chief of VII Corps' liaison cell to the Egyptian force, which occupied a critical sector on VII Corps' right flank. Colonel Dunn saw action with the Egyptians in Kuwait, earning a Legion of Merit and the Combat Infantryman's Badge. Upon announcement of the cease-fire, Colonel Dunn was detached and deployed to Safwan, Iraq, where he assisted in preparations for the cease-fire negotiations between Iraq and coalition forces, then remained in Safwan as liaison officer to Iraqi forces until the establishment of the United Nations observer mission (UNIKOM) in May of 1991.

Colonel Dunn subsequently entered the Defense Attache System and served as the U.S. Army Attache in Jordan from 1992 to 1994. He then became Middle East Branch Chief in the Politico-Military Division of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Army Staff, in the Pentagon.

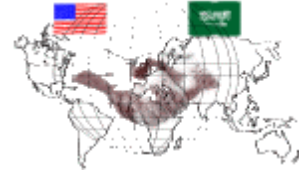
Colonel Dunn served as the Defense and Army Attache in Syria from 1997 to 2000, and was the Defense and Army Attache to Saudi Arabia from June 2000 until June 2002. Colonel Dunn retired from the U.S. Army on October 1, 2002.

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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.

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