

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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US-Saudi Ties Prove Crucial in War

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When the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, flew to Saudi Arabia in October, his hosts denied that the visit had anything to do with the looming war in Iraq. Use of Saudi territory to facilitate a U.S. attack on Iraq was out of the question, senior Saudi officials told reporters.

In retrospect, the Myers trip marked the start of five months of intensive military cooperation between Washington and Riyadh that played a crucial role in the U.S. victory over Saddam Hussein. According to sources close to the negotiations, Saudi Arabia ended up agreeing to virtually every request made by the Bush administration for military or logistical assistance.

In addition to allowing the United States to run the air war against Iraq out of a Saudi air base, the Saudi government provided U.S. Special Operations forces secret staging grounds into western Iraq and granted overflight rights to U.S. planes and missiles, officials said. Saudi Arabia also tapped into its vast oil reserves to help restore stability to the oil market at a time when prices had hit their highest levels in more than a decade, oil industry sources said.

Taking place against a background of enormous public unease in both countries over U.S.-Saudi relations, the cooperation over Iraq suggests that the controversial alliance between Washington and the Saudi royal family is stronger than often portrayed, and will survive the aftermath of the U.S. military ouster of the Iraqi government. While some adjustments are inevitable -- including a scaling-back of the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia -- the basic oil-for-security bargain struck between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Saudi King Abdul Aziz in February 1945 remains intact.

On the public level, U.S.-Saudi relations have been seriously troubled since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in New York and on the Pentagon. According to recent opinion polls, 97 percent of Saudis now view the United States in a negative light. Americans have been alarmed by the Saudi funding of extremist religious groups and the fact that 15 out of the 19 hijackers who took part in the 2001 attacks were Saudi citizens.

The evidence of the past few months, as well as conversations with U.S. and Saudi officials, suggests that both governments seek to cast the relationship in a light that fits their domestic needs and foreign policy goals. At the very time Saudi leaders were denouncing U.S. policies toward Iraq, for example, they made a strategic decision to facilitate a U.S. invasion. While U.S. officials talk about the virtues of democracy in the Middle East, they have shown little interest in

free elections in Saudi Arabia, which would almost certainly be won by Islamic groups opposed to the United States.

The relationship could come crashing down if, as some commentators predict, Saudi Arabia is swept by political and economic turmoil. For the time being, however, official Washington is continuing to bet on the autocratic House of Saud as the best means of ensuring continued U.S. access to a quarter of the world's proven oil reserves.

With such exceptions as the governments of Britain and possibly Israel, few foreign governments enjoy the degree of diplomatic and personal access to the heart of the Bush administration as Saudi Arabia's.

During the run-up to the war, contacts between the two sides deepened, officials said. While key decisions were taken by the political leaders, the details were handled by senior military officials, particularly Air Force Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, who commands U.S. air operations in Saudi Arabia. As the war drew closer, U.S. requests for Saudi military and logistical support gradually increased.

The generally smooth cooperation between Washington and Riyadh contrasted with the much more turbulent, and ultimately unsuccessful, negotiations with Turkey over the opening of a northern front against Iraq. The administration has pointed to Turkey as a democratic model for the rest of the Muslim world. In practice, however, the administration found it much easier to negotiate with an authoritarian government free of the constraints of public opinion.

Now that the war is over, both the U.S. and Saudi governments have signaled that they will soon begin talks about the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, and particularly the 4,500 U.S. Air Force personnel stationed at the Prince Sultan air base south of Riyadh. The aviators' principal mission -- enforcing the southern "no-fly" zone in Iraq -- ended with the toppling of the Hussein government.

The presence of U.S. troops on Saudi soil has been one of the major grievances exploited by al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in his diatribes against Washington. But even if the Air Force role is sharply reduced, officials say that other U.S. troops will remain, including those responsible for training the Saudi defense forces and coordinating command-and-control systems.

The Saudi decision to cooperate with the United States over Iraq reflected a political calculation that the administration was determined to go ahead with the ouster of Hussein, no matter how much opposition it encountered. While the Saudi cooperation was not nearly as extensive as it was during the 1991 Gulf War, at least 10,000 U.S. troops passed through the kingdom in connection with the Iraq operation, sources said. The Pentagon declined to comment.

The Saudis "bent over backwards not to get in the way of the U.S. military plans, while reassuring their own population that they weren't doing anything extra," said Chas Freeman, a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. "From the point of view of political acrobatics, it was quite a skillful show."

In addition to turning a blind eye to the use of the Prince Sultan air base to coordinate the air war against Iraq, through the Combined Air Operations Center, Saudi Arabia permitted U.S. Special Operations forces to operate out of the northern Saudi airports at Arar and Tabuk. Ostensibly, those forces conducted search-and-rescue operations inside Iraq. In reality, according to knowledgeable sources, they helped secure airfields in western Iraq, thereby preventing Iraqi Scud missile attacks on Israel.

Under the guise of continuing to enforce the southern no-fly zone, U.S. warplanes flying out of Prince Sultan air base stepped up their attacks on Iraqi air defenses in the weeks leading up to the war. The Saudi government provided fuel at sharply discounted prices for logistical support missions by AWACS command-and-control aircraft and JSTARS jets, which scoop up battlefield information from the air.

Riyadh also permitted overflights of Saudi territory by US fighter planes and cruise missiles operating from carrier battle groups in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, including ships diverted from the waters of Turkey. Several cruise missiles went astray and landed in Saudi territory, causing panic but no injuries.

U.S. concessions to Saudi Arabia in return for its cooperation over Iraq were fairly modest, officials said. The most significant military concession was ending a 25-year-old restriction barring the Saudi air force from using the Tabuk airfield as a base for F-15 fighter planes purchased from the United States. The Israeli government had long objected to Saudi F-15s flying in and out of Tabuk, from which Israel would be within easy striking distance.

More important from the Saudi point of view were Bush administration assurances about pushing forward with the Middle East peace process and the creation of a Palestinian state. While there is great skepticism among ordinary Saudis that Washington will bring serious pressure on Israel, Saudi officials appear to have been heartened by a series of initial diplomatic steps taken by the administration.

The Israeli-Palestinian dispute still has the potential of causing major problems between Washington and Riyadh, as does the Saudi financing of Wahhabi religious groups around the world. The Saudi government has "to get out of the business of pouring huge amounts of money into promoting an extremist version of Islam, including here in the United States," a senior Bush administration official said.

"We should develop strategic alternatives to reliance on Riyadh," conservative commentator William Kristol told the House International Relations Committee last year, in remarks that reflected the thinking of some administration officials, particularly in the Pentagon.

"Removing the regime of Saddam Hussein and helping construct a decent Iraqi society and economy would be a tremendous step forward toward reducing Saudi leverage," Kristol said.

The prospects for Iraq taking over the role of swing oil producer now played by Saudi Arabia seem remote, however. Although Iraqi oil reserves are second only to those of Saudi Arabia,

huge investments will be required to bring the oil on stream. According to oil industry sources, it could take the better part of a decade to increase Iraqi production from two million barrels to 3 1/2 million barrels a day.

"You are never going to replace Saudi Arabia as the central bank of oil," said Robinson West, chairman of Petroleum Finance Co., an energy consulting firm. "It is able to use its excess production capacity to provide liquidity to the market."

According to oil industry sources, Saudi Arabia used its unique spare capacity over the past few months to calm a market spooked by an extraordinary combination of circumstances, including a strike in Venezuela, civil unrest in Nigeria, disruption of Iraqi supplies and an abnormally cold winter. U.S. stock of crude were at record lows, creating conditions, by the end of February, for what oil analyst Nathaniel Kern called a "perfect storm" in the oil market.

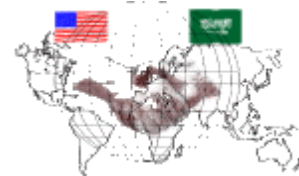
According to Kern, Saudi Arabia began increasing production beginning in December to about 9.5 million barrels a day, 1.5 million barrels above its formal OPEC quota. It also began quietly building up its own stocks of crude to an estimated 500,000 barrels, letting it be known in mid-March that it had chartered 14 supertankers for May deliveries to the United States.

The effect on the oil market of the Saudi moves, as soon as they became known, was dramatic. Even before any fighting in Iraq had begun world oil prices tumbled from \$37 to \$27 per barrel.

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