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Friday, April 29, 2005


Item of Interest



## US-Saudi Milestone

by Robert W. Jordan

### United States - Saudi Arabia Summit

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Sixty years ago, President Franklin Roosevelt and the founding ruler of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz ibn Saud, huddled over richly patterned carpets spread across the deck of the cruiser USS Quincy. This meeting in the Great Bitter Lake of the Suez Canal marked the beginning of a unique relationship: The U.S. promised security and technology in exchange for Saudi guarantees of reliable supplies of reasonably priced oil.

Despite inevitable moments of tension and crisis, this deal worked well for both sides: We generally managed to provide the security and technology, and the Saudis generally managed to provide the oil. In Operation Desert Storm, the Saudis provided more than oil, and joined us in combat against Saddam Hussein. In our efforts to liberate Afghanistan and Iraq, the Saudis provided coalition forces the critical use of a state-of-the-art air command center, air clearances for military flights, and other support that saved American lives when other allies, such as Turkey, backed away from our requests.

Yet this week, as President Bush and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah met in Crawford, Texas, we mark the 60th anniversary of this relationship with a sense of unease. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks by Saudi terrorists, the loss of American lives to terrorist attacks in Riyadh and elsewhere, the funding of madrassas and charities preaching hatred in the name of Islam, and recent reports of books and pamphlets promoting anti-Western venom in American mosques, many wonder if this relationship is worth preserving.



And in the midst of increasing media criticism and frustrations ranging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Iraq to our visa and travel restrictions, it is not surprising many Saudis wonder the same thing. So after 60 years, how do we assess and improve such a tangled and contradictory relationship?

For years, our relations have been conducted by government and business elites. The two countries' citizens know little about each other, except for the 30,000 Saudi students who formerly studied here each year or the thousands of Americans who lived and raised their families in Aramco or defense contractor compounds.

Our two countries have learned more about each other since September 11, 2001, but with mixed results. Immediately after the attacks, we struggled to communicate on intelligence and counterterrorism. But we persisted and matters have improved.

The recent convocation of an International Counterterrorism Conference in Riyadh, attended by representatives of 50 nations, heard Crown Prince Abdullah call for setting up an international counterterrorism center, to share methods and information. Despite significant issues regarding such broad intelligence sharing, there is much common ground to explore.

We are seeing a democratic process in Saudi Arabia develop with the recent elections for half the seats on the kingdom's municipal councils. While male-only voter registration and turnout pale when compared with the courageous spectacle we saw in Iraq, or with the elections held in Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories, it is at least a beginning.

Saudis campaign with brochures, billboards and lamb roasts. Running for municipal council may seem inconsequential. But the people are learning the building blocks of a democratic society that ultimately will include elected regional and national councils with more than superficial power. Schools will teach the meaning of popular participation.

This may be democracy on training wheels. But a tribal society that lived in mud huts 50 years ago has to start somewhere. President Bush's vision of freedom in the region is not merely a fantasy, even though it will not happen overnight.

Like the meeting on the USS Quincy, the topic of discussions in Crawford focused on oil and security. The discussions -- and the relationship between the two countries for the next 60 years -- should move beyond oil and arms. It should be based upon other principles as well. That process has begun, but it has a long way to go.

We now have candid conversations about human rights, religious freedom and women's rights. Work on Saudi accession to the World Trade Organization has produced laws improving transparency and regularity of commercial dealings. A Saudi stock market is booming.

However, despite our successes countering terrorist attacks, we have less success countering the ideology that fuels terrorism. Saudi religious leaders' recent condemnations of intolerance, extremism and violence are welcome. But hatred lingers in mosque sermons and cassette recordings.

What the Saudis teach in their schools and preach in their mosques can no longer be viewed as a purely internal matter. It is a matter of our national security as well.

But our own society evolved from now-forgotten days of witch hunts, slavery, civil war, women's suffrage and violent civil-rights struggles. A society that has only recently seen the rise of skyscrapers and paving of superhighways can also evolve in its own way to an Islamic state prepared to lead the Muslim world in the 21st century. Neither they nor we have another 60 years to wait for that day.

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Robert Jordan was selected by President George W. Bush to serve as the United States Ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the most critical point in the history of the relationship between our two countries. After Senate confirmation, he served as ambassador from October 2001 through October 2003.

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