

# U.S. Foreign Policy towards Saudi Arabia

How the Islamic Revolution has changed U.S.-  
Saudi Arabian relations.



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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the political relationship between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whose ‘special friendship’ has arguably been crucial in the shaping of the cultural and political landscape of the Middle East. We will look into how the increasingly strained relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has continued to develop until the present day by arguing that this may be due to notions of global and regional exceptionality on the parts of Washington and Riyadh respectively. This thesis serves as a guide that examines how U.S.-Saudi political relations changed after the Islamic revolution in Iran by comparing the state of U.S.-Saudi relations before and after 1979. Ultimately, this comparison will lead to a conclusion that explains to what extent the relationship between the two states has been altered. Such a comparison may also provide explanations for the underlying reasons for the continuance of the lasting relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia despite it being such a strained relationship, mainly due to the Arab-Israeli conflict and shifting national interests as a result of changes in rulers.

Keywords: the United States of America, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Middle East, American foreign policy, the Islamic revolution, American exceptionalism, Arab nationalism, hegemony

11.223 words

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## Introduction

In 1979 Iran served as the stage for a revolution that would permanently alter the major power dynamics in the Middle East. The Islamic, or Iranian, revolution would come to represent the ultimate rejection of 'westernization' in the forms of Americanization and western materialism (Elwell-Sutton 391). Religion, mainly Shia Islam, became the most powerful and influential factor in Iranian society and this was extended to politics as well, as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had declared: "Islam is political or nothing else" (Hamid and Grewal). As a result of the revolution in Iran, Islam (Shia, Sunni or other) became an increasingly important societal factor in other parts of the Middle East as well for decades afterwards. Yet, regardless of its impact on the region the revolution has also sparked a tremendous amount of debate. In later years, questions have been raised about why a nation, such as Iran, that was seemingly on its way to democracy would suddenly stray from that path (Elwell-Sutton 391). In addition, not only has the Iranian Revolution affected Iran but it also influenced the systems of other states in the Middle Eastern region, and as a result it has affected their own relationship with the United States. In Iran, as well as in the Middle East as a whole, the Islamic Revolution and the values that accompanied its cause created a significant decrease in American influence in the Middle East while, ironically, at the same time strengthening U.S.-Middle Eastern ties (Buchan 418).

At the time of the Iranian Revolution, one of the most crucial allies to the United States was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In the present, the United States and Saudi Arabia are still 'friends' but it can be argued that their relationship is one full of tensions and silent disagreements over their respective roles in the Middle East. Given that the current Islamic Republic of Iran is also still a significant player and has complicated relationships with both the United States and Saudi Arabia, it is useful to look at the nature of their relations before and after the Iranian Revolution, and how it may have affected the present foreign policies in the Middle East under the Trump administration.

## Background

The relationship between the United States and the Middle East seems to have become central to how America has been shaping its modern foreign policies, especially since the attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001. Much of the political turmoil in the Middle East has been, in some ways, tied to American interventions that are a result of American suspicions of radical Islamic terrorism. Interventions such as those that the United States carried out in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, have been heavily criticized by major players in the current

international sphere of influence, and so has the American relationship with Saudi Arabia itself been continuously criticized due to its ambiguous nature.

Nevertheless, despite the large amounts of critique targeted against American policies in the Middle East as well as its lasting political bond with Riyadh, the current Trump administration continues to foster relations with the Saudis regardless of their increasing unpopularity among the American public. The unpopularity of the Saudis is largely due to the frequent charges of human rights violations both within the Saudi borders and outside of them by non-profit organizations such as Amnesty International, and is a result of 9/11 and other Saudi involvements in global terrorism, be it funding or harboring terrorist groups or perpetrating the act itself (Benjamin 128). Some examples of the kinds of human rights violations that Saudi Arabia has been charged with are the current Saudi Arabian interventions in their neighboring country of Yemen, which Bruce Riedel has called “the worst humanitarian disaster in the world today”, as well as their involvement in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In addition, the Saudi involvement in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as well as their alleged active funding of terrorist organizations in the broader Middle Eastern region has made them an ambiguous and dubious partner for the United States, but one that Washington is continuing to be on friendly terms with because of shared interests in the oil trade and the control and division of regional power (Miller and Nowrouzzadeh).

American foreign relations with Saudi Arabia have existed for a very long time. In 1932, King Saud permitted American oil companies to drill for oil on Saudi Arabian soil (Benjamin 122). It is clear that the aim of U.S.-Saudi relations have always been primarily rooted in the continuance of the oil business but that for the United States relations in Saudi Arabia may also establish some American influence in those countries that Saudi Arabia itself is an important ally to (Al-Rasheed 153). In return, the Saudis may have benefitted from American relations in the sense that they have been granted more power in the Middle East. However, they also tend to be used by the Americans as a stabilizing state in the Middle East, whose government is able to contrast the increase of Islamic radicalism in other Middle Eastern nations (Conge and Okruhlik 367). In addition to power interests and material supplies, the United States has also supported the Saudis in their interventions in other nations by supplying them with arms that have thereafter enabled the Saudis to increase the severity of the war in Yemen (Shavit and Heistein). Such American support of arms has also inspired a lot of critical debate.

It can be argued that the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia appears to be of great importance for the state of the Middle East. Therefore, the focus of this

thesis will be specifically on the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. I will examine the changes in their political relationship by measuring the differences and similarities between various presidencies and their policies toward Riyadh before and after the influence that the Iranian revolution of 1979 had on the Middle East.

Iran has been another great power to both the Americans and the Saudis, but both states have different reasons for their enmity with the Iranians. The radical shift from a relatively westernized monarchy to a radicalized Islamic republic has caused tremendous changes to their own relationship with the Middle Eastern region as well as the international sphere, and continues to do so until the present day.

As such, the main research question of this thesis is how the Islamic revolution of 1979 has changed and affected the political relationship between the United States and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia up until the current Trump administration.

## Method

The ideological struggles and cultural tensions that keep arising between the United States and their political allies in the Middle East call for a historical approach in which I will outline the differences between the U.S.-Saudi relationship before and after the Islamic revolution by zooming into specific administrations, as well as describe how changes to the Iranian political structure in the immediate aftermath of the revolution were perceived by the Washington and Riyadh at the time.

The main research question of this thesis will be answered through a comparative approach to historical research. Essentially, the focus of this thesis is to make a comparison between two periods and how the changes in the period after the Islamic revolution have influenced American foreign policy in the Middle East up until to the present day. In order to be able to draw the conclusion that significant changes have, in fact, taken place, I believe it is critical to return to the origins of U.S.-Saudi relations to explain the complexity and importance of their political alliance in the broader international sphere.

Due to the cultural differences between the United States and Saudi Arabia, as well as the Middle East as a whole, it is also important to describe parts of the social contexts of their Middle Eastern allies. These social contexts may explain some of the differences and similarities between the United States, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Improving our cultural understanding of the Middle Eastern region is beneficial to any political alliance there, especially since it is a region that has often been a hot spot for political and cultural conflicts between indigenous populations and the many religious ideologies the region harbors. I



believe that the way to better diplomatic relations is through a better understanding of the cultural contexts of others. As the Middle East is still an important player in international affairs, and Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular, this thesis might also shed a new light on how to handle certain aspects of diplomacy with these nations, especially since the current Trump administration has breathed renewed life into traditional ideals of American foreign policy in the Middle East.

This thesis will be structured as follows: I will discuss the issues mentioned above throughout three chapters that each focus on a set of sub questions and subjects that accompany the main research question.

Chapter one will discuss the origins of the political relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. This means the relationship between the two countries before the Islamic revolution of 1979. In this chapter we will also examine how the special friendship between the United States and Saudi Arabia may have been the result of mutual notions of exceptionalism. For the Americans, this implies an exceptionalist role as savior of less fortunate nations in the world, and for the Saudis it means a similar role for themselves in the Middle East.

Chapter two offers insight into the U.S.-Saudi relationship immediately after the Islamic revolution. We will also explore the implications that the revolution had for U.S.-Saudi relations in its immediate aftermath. This will be thoroughly examined through the Carter administration as this is closest to the event. Here, I will also discuss the long-term implications the revolution had for American foreign policy in the Middle East, with a focus on their relationship with the Saudis, as well as show how future presidents have dealt with the results of long-time Republican policies in the Middle East under Reagan and Bush senior. How this has affected later policies will be examined through the Clinton administration.

Finally, in chapter three I will examine the state of U.S.-Saudi relations under the Trump administration today and how his policies have affected their political relationship. In this part I will also take into consideration the implications that 9/11 has had on American foreign policy, focusing on the Saudi Arabia and the current role of Iran in the Middle East. Ultimately, what is most important is to consider what this means for the future of diplomatic U.S.-Saudi relations, particularly the effects their special friendship might have on the broader Middle Eastern region and America at home.

## Chapter 1: The beginnings of a special friendship between two exceptionalist states

First and foremost, before we can assume that the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is indeed special, it is necessary to explain the origins of the U.S.-Saudi political relationship. In addition to the aforementioned, this chapter will also provide a short overview of the historical origins of Saudi Arabia as a nation, as well as explain the notion of 'exceptionalism' as seen through an American viewpoint and a Saudi (or Arab) one and how this could explain the relationship between Washington and Riyadh.

### The 'special' U.S.-Saudi relationship

In their publication *The Power of Narrative: Saudi Arabia, the United States and the Search for Security* Patrick Conge and Gwenn Okruhlik hold that the United States and Saudi Arabia have a special relationship that has been continuously built around shared notions of exceptionality and that is rooted in goals of regional security, but also harbors a lack of transparency and dishonesty (359). Conge and Okruhlik also argue that it should be noted that the way in which these two states have crafted their relationship throughout the decades has often been built on false narratives that attempt to make the true underlying reasons for the U.S.-Saudi bond more reasonable to the American public (359). One could say that for the United States, gaining access to oil in the Middle East and serving as an important westernizing aspect is important, while to the Saudis it is crucial to remain the most influential state in the Middle East and therefore exert more influence on the (Arab) nations surrounding them (362). Yet, while both the United States and Saudi Arabia may have had very different reasons to continue fostering their friendship, the apparent mismatch between their ideologies has never prevented American presidents, both Democrat and Republican, from "heralding their friendship" (Benjamin 121) with the Saudis, a friendship that is deeply embedded in personal and financial ties to the royal Saudi family.

In order to explain why the U.S.-Saudi relationship is this strong and has managed to last for such a long period of time, we should return to the very origins of both Saudi Arabia as a state as well as the first encounter between the United States and the Saudis.

### The origins of Saudi Arabia

Human occupation of the Arabian Peninsula dates back to at least 3.000 B.C. and has been shaped by indigenous elements and neighboring tribes, but also by outsiders such as the Romans and the Assyrians (Bowen 15-16). Saudi Arabia is considered to be the birthplace of

Islam, as around 400 A.D. Mecca was founded and the Prophet Muhammad was born there in the year 570. These events have transformed the Arabian Peninsula into becoming the pinnacle of Islamic spirituality (16).

For centuries after the founding of Islam, Arab culture and language, as well as the new Islamic faith, remained a significant colonizing influence in the Middle East and North Africa due to the many colonial ventures by Arab conquerors in those regions. For centuries, the Arabian Peninsula has been ruled by a variety of leaders and families and the current Saudi dynasty was only established in 1744. Saudi rule across the Arabian Peninsula was officially established in 1906, when the deaths of the opposing rulers of the Rashidi family ended decades lasting local threats to Saudi authority (Bowen 18).

In the following decades, most of the Arabian Peninsula became occupied by Saudi rule, and the Arabian Peninsula with its large number of tribes and different caliphates became the Saudi Arabia as we know it today (17-18). In 1927, the United Kingdom was the first western state to recognize Saudi Arabia as an actual state but further official recognition only arrived when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was officially founded in 1932 (2014: 18). America came onto the scene much later, as beginnings of the special friendship between the United States and Saudi Arabia only began in 1945 (18).

### **1945: the beginnings of a special friendship**

Oil plays a major role in the continuation of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and has done so since the beginning of their alliance. Saudi oil became increasingly important to keep the American economy running during World War II. Despite the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's neutrality status during the war, the Saudis allowed the Americans to use their airspace (Benjamin 122). After the war had ended, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman al Saud cemented their new friendship during a secret meeting that offered the United States significant oil benefits and promised regional security to the Saudis (Riedel 1). It was held on the Egyptian Suez Canal aboard a U.S. destroyer and would heavily shape the future course of the Middle East (Benjamin 122-123). However, this event seemed to place American national interests, as Roosevelt was predominantly occupied with Saudi oil to improve the American economy, above the global interests that dominated the political sphere at the time, as he viewed America as more important than any other nations while at the same time believing in its exceptionalist mission to spread freedom and democracy in the world (Riedel 2-4).

## American exceptionalism

American exceptionalism combines three related ideas, the first being that the United States and its history are unique and different from that of other nations in the world. After the American Revolution between 1765 and 178, a specifically American ideology that included the issues of liberty, equality (before the law), republicanism and having a representative democracy, arose as a second idea. This ideology has arguably led to the third notion that the United States has a unique mission to fulfil in the world as a result of their unique culture and history, and that this mission therefore allows them to sometimes act as superiors over other countries which they believe is their inherent right.

The American notion of this self-perceived exceptionalism goes all the way back to A *Model of Christian Charity* in which John Winthrop allegedly addressed a group of colonists who were heading towards the New World aboard the ship the 'Arbella'. While Winthrop specifically geared his message towards the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, his famous words "we shall be as a city upon a hill", which implies similarities between the American cause and the survival of the sacred city of Jerusalem throughout history, has resonated with many Americans and provided them with a sense of self-determination that has set America apart from other nations and proposed its ideal place in the world. The image of America as 'a city upon a hill' has also undergirded the presidential rhetoric for centuries, from George Washington's *Farewell Address* to Barack Obama's inaugural speech in 2014 (Pease). Yet, the United States was not considered to truly be this exceptional until French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville described it as such, saying that "the position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one" (de Tocqueville). The phrase itself, American exceptionalism, was not used much before the 1980s as it was first coined in this manner by Joseph Stalin who used the term to put the United States in a negative light and to actually undermine American liberal notions of democracy (McCoy). Nevertheless, the term gained popularity in a renewed Republican political climate under Ronald Reagan in the 1980s to describe America's uniqueness, both culturally and politically. The notion of American exceptionalism has shaped the majority of U.S. policies, both foreign and domestic, ever since and it is exactly this notion of American exceptionalism that could be one of the most important factors for the durability of U.S. -Saudi relations, as it has been suggested that the Saudi perception of having an important and exceptionalist role in the Middle East and America's belief that they have a mission to spread and protect freedom and democracy in the

world has been crucial to their relationship with the United States and that it may be the reason why their friendship has lasted for such a long time (Conge and Okruhlik 359).

### **Saudi exceptionalism and mutual Arabism**

While the argument that Saudi Arabia also has an exceptionalist role to play in the Middle East is not comparable with the notion of American exceptionalism in every aspect, it may explain the tensions between the Saudi Arabian state, especially after its founding, and other Middle Eastern nations.

Providing a definition of Saudi exceptionalism is sometimes difficult. One could argue that there is no Saudi exceptionalism, but that there only exists a notion of Arab exceptionalism and exceptionalism within the Saudi royal family (Binder 33). If there is Saudi exceptionalism, it is inherently tied to the self-perceived uniqueness of the Saudi royal family who view themselves as saviors and defenders of the Middle East. What can be argued, however, is that the Saudi family uses ideas of Arab nationalism to spread their own influence in the Middle East. In his book *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Roger Owen argues about the debate surrounding the existence of Arab exceptionalism and how it links Arab (majority) nations to the United States. He suggests the following:

“There is indeed a case to be made for a type of Arab exceptionalism between 1970 and 2010, and, further, that this is best explained by what I call an “Arab demonstration effect” stemming from developments in the especially close ties that have united the Arab world since at least the end of World War II” (153).

Owen calls the post-WWII bond between Arab states one of “mutual Arabism” and it can be argued that this perspective is underscored by at least two major factors. One being the support for a Palestinian state, and two being the role Saudi Arabia plays in shaping what Owen calls “its own concept of an Arab political order” (154). This may be explained by a difference in worldviews and a romanticized view of one’s own ethnicity and culture.

In *Contending with Middle East Exceptionalism* Peter Gran sheds light on the different attitudes that describe ‘positivist’ and ‘romanticist’ ideologies. ‘Positivists’ view progress as something that is not linked to the past and that inspires a communal global society of different, but also similar, nations, while ‘romanticists’ link modernity to showing respect for one’s genetic ancestry as well as possessing a clear distinctive cultural and social character from other nations (Gran 7). Gran further suggests that romanticism could therefore be tied to

Arab exceptionalism because of its inherently religious aspects and focus on ethnic unity which also likens it to American exceptionalism because of its belief that they are distinctive from other nations.

Arab exceptionalism can also be compared to Islamic exceptionalism. However, Owen says that they are not interchangeable (154). Arab exceptionalism is different from Islamic exceptionalism in the sense that Islamic exceptionalism cannot, nor should, be defined by its ethnic or religious demography, but it is still common to relate to two to having a common cause: to unite the geopolitical region of the Middle East. Yet, being an Arab does not always equate being a Muslim which makes it difficult to claim that Arab exceptionalism is inherently the same as Saudi exceptionalism.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that Saudi Arabia views itself as the perfect example because of their historical link to Islam and has, in fact, made this connection themselves. In the present, it is still unclear whether Arab exceptionalism truly exists but it can be suggested that there is at least a sliver of Saudi exceptionalism with regards to the royal family at play in the Middle East.

## **The Islamic revolution in Iran**

Referring back to Owen, it is noteworthy to mention that he draws specific attention to the period between 1970 and 2010, as this is also the period in which various institutions that promoted Islamic fundamentalist thinking were officially established in the Middle East. For example, the Iranian revolution of 1979 (or Islamic Revolution) that replaced the ‘westernized’ Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, with the much more strict and religious Khomeini. The Iranian revolution had caused a tremendous shift in the cultural, religious and political landscape of Iran, and had as well affected their relationships with other nations.

U.S.-Iranian diplomatic relations had already been established in 1856, but formal contact between the states was minimal until the Second World War broke out when the United States sent soldiers to Iran in order to secure the border with the Soviet Union under the Perimeter Defense strategy (Gasirowski 146-147). After the war, the main reason for the United States to stay involved with one another was to prevent a potential Soviet occupation in Iran. The geographic location of Iran, as well as its oil reserves, made that they could become a very important potential ally to the United States. However, fears of communism and a wish to secure American and Saudi influences in the Middle East were the primary causes that led to the coup of 1953, in which the democratically elected Mohammad

Mossadeq was replaced with a western-oriented Shah, which significantly decreased American popularity in Iran (148).

After the coup, U.S.-Iranian relations remained stable for at least two more decades but on January 16, 1979 the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his wife, fled Iran amidst heavy protesting against their overtly 'western' and 'immoral' rule. The previously exiled Ayatollah Khomeini would soon become the leader of a new Iran that was to be built on Islamic principles and that rejected western influences (Kamrava 141). This event, the Islamic, or Iranian revolution, has changed the Middle East profoundly, including Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia, the United States, and therefore also the relationship between those two nations for decades to come. By rejecting the west as a significant influencer, the U.S.-Iranian relationship became increasingly strained which also affected other relations in the Middle East, such as the U.S.-Saudi friendship.

### **Mutual understanding through exceptionalism**

So far, we have established that American exceptionalism is arguably at the roots of the relationship with Saudi Arabia. Oil is the most important factor, as well as the provision of security for the Saudis in the Middle East, who feel threatened by unrest within the other great power: Iran. It can also be suggested that while there is probably no true Saudi exceptionalism, something similar could exist in relation to exceptionalism from the Saudi royal family and their use of Arab nationalism to further their goals of containing nations (such as Iran) that they view as threats to their hegemony. Therefore, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is special in the sense that they both entertain different ideas of exceptionalism that provide them with a somewhat mutual understanding of one another.

## Chapter 2: The U.S.-Saudi relationship during and after the Islamic revolution

In this chapter we will look into the U.S.-Saudi relationship after the Iranian revolution of 1979. An assessment will be made of the implications that the revolution in Iran had on American foreign policy under Carter in the Middle East. We will be focusing on American relations with Saudi Arabia during these years. Near the end, we continue further into the future and examine how a Democratic view, as opposed to little more than a decade of Republican leadership under Reagan and Bush, of the U.S.-Saudi relationship was shaped by the Clinton administration.

### Carter in the Middle East

President Jimmy Carter had travelled to Saudi Arabia a year prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran. The main goal of his visit to Saudi king Khalid was to promote and conduct peace talks in the Middle East. For the Saudis, the most prominent reason to engage in talks with Washington was the call for a Palestinian state in which King Khalid believed the United States could play a significant role, arguing that “the U.S. is the key to a solution of the Arab Israeli problem because of its influence over Israel” (Riedel 58). A newspaper article from 1978 mentions the Saudi wish for Palestinian sovereignty and Carter’s unwillingness to provide such a settlement, saying that he preferred “a Palestinian entity linked to Jordan” instead (Pace). Yet, while they differed on the issues surrounding Palestine, Washington and Riyadh found common ground in their dismay about Soviet influences in or near the Middle East.

Eric Pace mentions that “Saudi Arabia has been providing aid to Somalia and has looked with dismay upon an increase of Soviet influence in Ethiopia.” The main reason for their fear would have been that Soviet occupation near the Persian Gulf region would have threatened the status quo of Saudi Arabia, and thereafter may have affected the influence of the United States in the Middle East (Yergin). Fears of outside forces attacking the Persian Gulf were further strengthened by the fall of the Pahlavi regime in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that both occurred in 1979. Mohammed Turki-Al-Sudairi argues that exactly those aforementioned events led to stronger ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia at the end of the 1970s and that continued throughout the 1980s. He calls these, the continuance of the oil trade, and the protection of the Persian Gulf, the “basic formula underlying the U.S-Saudi relationship” (Al-Sudairi 71).



## **A time of compromises**

Despite their common ground with regards to communism, many concessions for the Saudis were made in the final years of the 1970s. Such compromises eventually led to the impression that there had been a shift in power between Washington and Riyadh which angered officials in Washington. Daniel Pipes suggests that the shifting of powers in the Middle East has been a long-standing issue in American foreign policy towards the Middle East in general, of which the Islamic revolution in Iran was one of the most important, and worrisome, shifts. Pipes also argues that Washington's apparent tolerance of human rights breaches against, for example, women and Christian and Jewish minorities in the Middle East is the most heavily debated compromise that Washington was willing to make in order to continue their friendship with the Saudi royal family (Pipes 67). As President Carter was not particularly intent on changing the existing relationship with Riyadh, he allowed the enforcement of concessions (such as not being allowed to celebrate Thanksgiving) to be imposed on American officials visiting the Kingdom in order to 'keep the peace'. The fact that they were willing to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses and the allegedly unfair treatment of American officials, illustrates how important the relationship with Riyadh was to Washington, and therefore how important the oil trade and security matters were to the United States.

Bledar Prifti calls Carter's approach to foreign policy "a reinstatement of the Eisenhower doctrine" (Prifti 75), which instigates that Carter mainly focused on American oil interests and the containment of Arab nationalism, as well as the prevention of Soviet expansions in the Middle East. Despite Carter's liberal views towards foreign policy and his willingness to focus on the improvement of human lives, the Carter administration was ultimately characterized by a continuation of previous policies of communist containment in the Middle East rather than going into a new direction that would possibly have benefited both nations and significantly improved the Saudi's public image (22). However, regardless of these shortcomings, while Roosevelt and Truman began American support for Saudi Arabia, Carter actually reinforced its status as being one of the most important alliances to the United States.

## **The decline of U.S.-Iran relations**

As the Islamic revolution in Iran was progressing, President Carter saw one of America's most important allies in the Middle East collapse. Previously, Iran had served as a stabilizing nation to prevent a Soviet occupation near the Persian Gulf, but from 1977 throughout 1979 the country saw a rise in religious activity that opposed the Iranian Shah's secular politics and that continued to drift away from western influences,.

While internal shifts in modes of thinking were reliably at the roots of the causes of the revolution, the Shah Pahlavi also distrusted President Carter who he viewed as an unknown and unpredictable force, unlike Ford, Nixon and Kissinger who Pahlavi had been on friendly and less formal terms with (Bill 227). Pahlavi's distrust of Carter arguably further increased the decline of U.S.-Iran relations. As was mentioned in chapter one, Pahlavi fled Iran as a result of the revolution and was replaced by an Ayatollah, which is a title of honor given to high-ranking Shia clergy in Iran (Algar). This religious leader was Ruhollah Khomeini. He despised both the United States and the Soviet Union, calling the first the "Great Satan" and the latter the "Lesser Satan" and often angered officials and representatives in both of these countries (Katz). This put Iran in a new position in the bipolar system and the United States increasingly faced difficulties in the upholding of their relationship with Iran, particularly during and after the Iranian Hostage Crisis from 1979 to 1981 which Khomeini fiercely supported (Time) and when Iranian pilgrims started to demonstrate violently at the sacred *Hajj* in Mecca in 1987, which damaged both Iran's relationships with the United States and Saudi Arabia. As a result the relationship between Iran and the United States worsened and American and, arguably, Saudi goals of containing Iranian hegemony became more important.

### **Domestic changes in Saudi Arabia**

Meanwhile in Saudi Arabia, while Iran was undergoing revolutionary changes and an altered relationship with the world, Saudi King Khalid stood at the forefront of immense changes to his own nation as well. In *King and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR*, Bruce Riedel mentions the American ambassador to Saudi Arabia, John West, who described these domestic changes as an experience that would guide the Saudi Kingdom to a rightful place among the global powers of the twentieth century and that indefinitely cemented the U.S.-Saudi friendship (Riedel 58). The most impactful of these changes took place in November 1979 when the Grand Mosque seizure took place in Mecca. Radical Islamic insurgents challenged King Khalid's leadership and called on all Muslims to obey the new *Mahdi* (redeemer of Islam) who they considered to be among their own leadership rather than favoring a member of the Saudi dynasty. The Mecca insurgency was considered one of the most important aspects of Khalid's reign and could be considered a result of the Islamic uprising in Iran, but ultimately the insurgency was mostly due to the issue of corruption in Riyadh under King Khalid. As a result of these charges, Khalid's brother, Crown Prince Fahd, attempted to issue more anticorruption decrees but they failed to work effectively (Stork 27).

As Fahd had been the unofficial Saudi ruler under King Khalid he was therefore able to exercise this much power as Crown Prince. Therefore, after the death of King Khalid in 1982, his brother Fahd ascended to the throne and he ushered in a new era of the special friendship between Washington and Riyadh in the 1980s under Reagan.

### **The Iran-Contra affair**

The Reagan administration's meddling in the Middle East is perhaps best characterized by its involvement in the Iran-Contra affair (1986), in which the United States used the proceeds from their sale of arms to Iran in order to fund the Contra rebels of Nicaragua. However, Reagan also secretly provided weaponry supplies to Iran, which angered the Saudis when they found out about this secret American-Iranian arms deal. For Saudi Arabia, the deal caused a tremendous waning of confidence in the Reagan administration and further damaged their relationship which prevented the United States from achieving their Soviet (and Iranian) containment goals (Rafique 96).

At that time, Iran was at war with neighboring Iraq which is why they needed the arms and Reagan wished to form a new and improved relationship with Iran, as well as simultaneously gain leverage for the freedom of American hostages in Lebanon (Skinner 101). His attempts at an improved relationship with Iran proved futile however, as there was another part of American foreign policy aims in the Middle East that both Iran and Saudi Arabia did not agree with: a final settlement between Palestinians and Israelis. This issue proved to be more important to both Iran and Saudi Arabia and would shape the way in which the United States was to shape its policies towards both states.

### **The Palestine question and the Soviet threat**

Another important part of U.S.-Saudi relations under Reagan was the relationship of both states towards Israel. Despite their lack of support for an Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza and wishes to restrain Israeli influence in the Middle East, the Saudis did aid the United States in their interference with the Egyptian military presence in Israel and vice versa, so as to prevent a full-blown Israeli-Egyptian war which would have destabilized the Middle East and resulted in a loss of power for both Iran and Saudi Arabia (Riedel 87).

However, even after the Egyptian-Israeli conflict had waned as a result of American and Saudi involvement, the Palestinian question remained of great importance to King Fahd and the Saudis expected the United States to increasingly limit, or neutralize, the power of the American lobby for Israel, as well as to contain communism in Afghanistan, without conducting war and therefore destabilize the Middle East (Marshall 12). In return Saudi

Arabia would prove itself to be a loyal ally to Washington. In 1984, when Reagan was re-elected, Fahd visited Washington in order to discuss their new strategy. Fahd believed that the occupation of Palestine was at the root of the issues and turmoil in the Levantine region (Riedel 90). While Fahd Arabians preferred a just option that would inspire reconciliation between Israel and Palestine as respectively equal states, their diplomatic efforts did not bear any fruits because not all Saudi officials agreed to the existence of an Israeli state. It can also be argued that because Reagan was more involved with communist containment in Afghanistan, he failed to see the importance of focusing on the existing issues in the Levant partly because those problems were not necessarily part of what he perceived as the prevailing 'Soviet threat'. Thus the Reagan administration failed to issue a decent peace agreement and instead focused on other issues in the region.

During the presidency of Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, U.S.-Saudi relations underwent more tensions due to the escalation of the situation in Iran, but these were somewhat improved by their eventual cooperation in ending the Gulf War that reestablished Saudi hegemony in the Middle East and weakened the political position of Iran (105). Bush's administration was arguably a continuation of the Reagan presidency and did not alter much to the relationship and greater changes occurred under a new Democratic President: William (Bill) Clinton.

### **A new age under Clinton**

When Bill Clinton became President in 1993, the American economy was faring well and communism had been defeated which caused a shift in political modes of thinking. Clinton tended to describe his administration as an inherently Democratic and a moderate one and preached about a 'new age' that would differ from the Republican ideologies of Reagan and Bush, and therefore not be a continuation of previous policies of containment as this was no longer necessary because the Soviet Union did not exist anymore.

Clinton's 'doctrine of enlargement' inspired an activist role for America in the world and the creation of a free trade network. However, in foreign affairs he had little experience and therefore undertook some significant missteps during his presidency which angered some Saudi officials (Riley). The Clinton administration and its relationship with Riyadh has been characterized by American allegations towards the Saudis of harboring terrorist networks within Saudi Arabia as well as its closer geographical region, and the dismissal of Saudi denials of these allegations (Riedel 114). In Saudi Arabia, Abdallah Abd al Aziz al Saud had ascended to the throne. King Abdallah became Clinton's primary political partner and the two

states wanted to continue to foster a strong ‘working relationship’ in order to tackle issues surrounding the Israel-Palestine debate and the containment of Iranian hegemony and of Iraq that had gained power under Saddam Hussein (116). But particularly on the issue of a Palestinian state, did they not always agree. King Abdallah was focused only on the Palestinians, as they were seen as Arabs, and tried to make Washington see that the United States had a ‘moral obligation’ to end the Palestinian suffering. (133). Clinton, instead, attempted to focus on the Middle Eastern region as a whole and was particularly worried by the situation in the Persian Gulf due to increasing tensions between Iran and the Arab states, and the situation in Iraq (Ahrari 210). During the Clinton administration the U.S.-Saudi Arabian relationship was based on a bond rooted in transactions as much it had been in previous decades (Gause 23). Having a transactional bond implies that the friendship was based on both giving and receiving certain favors that would keep both powers in control of their own national interests while fostering a positive relationship as well.

### **Fears of terrorism**

Clinton’s new approach to the friendship with Saudi Arabia is a result of the issues that arose in the years prior to his presidency under Reagan and Bush. His new approach was largely due to the collapse of the Soviet Union after which Washington could not simply assume that Riyadh would always be on their side anymore. This strengthens the notions that there has been a continuation of American policies towards Saudi Arabia, but the fact that Clinton had to deal with the results of the insurgencies throughout Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq that characterized the 1980s and early 1990s, also proves that there has been a change: Riyadh would not always be on their side anymore and their loyalty to the United States would also largely depend on the manner in which Washington were to approach Iran in the future.

In general, the 1990s under Clinton, and early 2000s under Bush Junior, were characterized by increasing fears of terrorism (the Taliban) and the containment of terrorism. The notion of containment was one that Clinton had previously wanted to abandon, but was unable to do because of new threats of terrorism. Terrorism eventually shaped the way in which American policymakers would respond to issues in the Middle East and it also affected the manner in which they would view Saudi Arabia in the future.

### **A continuation of containment policies**

In the years after the 1979 Islamic revolution some shifts occurred in U.S.-Saudi Arabian relations. As was discussed in chapter one, prior to the revolution, U.S. policies in Saudi Arabia had been mostly rooted in the continuance of the oil trade and the provision of security

for the Saudis. After the revolution in Iran, religious fanaticism swept through the Middle East which caused insurgences to pop up everywhere. For Saudi Arabia it was important that such uprisings would be suppressed quickly because otherwise it would have threatened the power of the Saudi royal family. In Washington, Carter worried about the protection of the Persian Gulf and the containment of communism. In these years, containing potential Iranian hegemony was most important to both Washington and Riyadh. Under Reagan, attentions shifted to Afghanistan and relations with Saudi Arabia deteriorated due to a lack of interest in some of the issues that Saudi Arabia wanted the United States to look into, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. These issues continued to agitate both Saudi Arabia and Iran throughout both of the Reagan and Bush administrations and only changed when Clinton became President. Clinton took a new approach to the Saudis but whose policies of improving the relationship were tainted by new containment goals of preventing terrorism.

## Chapter 3: U.S-Saudi relations under Trump and the future of a special friendship

In the final chapter, we will examine the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia as it exists under the current Trump administration. Leading up to the Trump era, it is necessary to mention and assess the impact of some of the most crucial events that preceded his presidency, such as the 9/11 attacks during the Bush Junior administration and the capture of Osama bin Laden.

### **Bush: 9/11 and the war on terror**

George W. Bush arguably had to face one of the most important and horrifying events in recent American history during his presidency. In the morning of 11 September 2001, the Islamic terrorist group al Qaeda (the Base) carried out four terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and on the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. In the months leading up to the 9/11 attacks, tensions between Washington and Riyadh had continued to rise and they reached their near boiling point in August of 2001 when Crown Prince Abdallah sent a furious letter to Washington which, according to the Jordanian ambassador in Washington, said that “it had become clear to Saudi Arabia that the U.S. administration was working against Arab interests....[Abdallah] wrote that Saudi Arabia would reciprocate by pursuing its own interests without consideration for American interests” (Riedel 134). A month later, a largely Saudi-led terrorist attack occurred on American soil. While Riyadh was shocked and expressed their disapproval of 9/11, they simultaneously failed to put in their own effort to mend the old friendship with the United States (Subhan 3886). In addition, because fifteen of the nineteen terrorists who committed the act were Saudis, many Americans found it easy to believe that Saudi Arabia had influenced the attack (Riedel 205). According to a report that was issued in 2002, it became clear that at least three of the Saudi individuals that were involved, may have possibly been connected to the Saudi government in Riyadh. Further FBI research has claimed that two of these people were, in fact, intelligence officers (206). Therefore, the increasing tolerance that the United States had been trying to rebuild throughout the years prior to 9/11 under Clinton was starting to crack once more. Their alliance that had lasted for more than half a century was growing apart and distrust tainted their future diplomatic encounters (Zuhur 7).

## **The war on terror**

It is interesting to note that during the Clinton years, Saudi Arabia and the United States cooperated on a variety of matters, among which was the containment of terrorism: meaning Washington's goal to reduce terrorist activities in the world (Riedel 129). With this, as well as Bush senior's policies towards the Middle East (e.g. their cooperation during the Gulf War) in mind, the Saudis expected George W. Bush to be similar to them. However, Bush showed little interest in promoting, for example, peace talks about the Arab-Israeli conflict which he believed was of little importance to the stability of the Middle East, even jesting about the idea that the Saudis thought he would be stupid enough to go against Israel, in a meeting with Israeli president Moshe Katsav, saying that: "The Saudis thought this Texas oil guy was going to go against Israel, and I've told them you have the wrong guy" (131). However, the Bush administration did wish to establish a decent relationship with the Saudis based on the strategic nature of their friendship as it had existed since the 1970s which was rooted in the continuance of the oil trade and the provision of security for the Saudis, which ultimately meant preventing Iran from becoming too powerful. Regardless, inexperience and a lack of knowledge about the Middle East on Bush's part made the latter policy goal of providing security a difficult one to achieve (Subhan 3885).

What ensued after 9/11 and the war in Iraq, because the Bush administration was convinced that Saddam Hussein, rather than the Saudis, harbored terrorists and WMDs within its nation's borders, was a war on terror that would shape American foreign policy in the Middle East throughout Bush's presidency as well as the succeeding Obama administration, and determine the way in which the United States and Saudi Arabia would continue their political bond.

## **Barack Obama and King Abdallah**

When Barack Obama became President in 2008, he inherited a nation that was economically downtrodden. The war in Iraq was over but terrorism had not been defeated as al Qaeda was still considered an enemy and concerns about the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan arose again (Riedel 152). As such, Obama saw great importance in the reestablishment of the American political relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world in general.

While traveling to Cairo in Egypt to make a speech, Obama made a stop in Riyadh to meet the Saudi King Abdallah. This indicates that Obama was eager to improve ties to Saudi Arabia but unfortunately the meeting did not go as well as he had anticipated. Apart from significant amounts of miscommunication on both sides, Obama and King Abdallah could not agree on all issues. The United States had started to gain less oil from Saudi Arabia as they



had been increasingly able to produce it themselves or get it from elsewhere (Blackwill). Security issues surrounding the power of Iran still threatened the central power in Riyadh, but Obama appeared to put less emphasis on the long-lasting enmity with Iran and therefore the containment of Iran almost faded into the background. They did agree on the issues surrounding terrorism and both expressed a wish to prevent potential terrorist attacks in the future. Contrary to Bush however, Obama opposed the use of force and wanted to prevent war.

### **Nuclear arms in Iran and the capture of bin Laden**

While al Qaeda was rising secretly, Obama was more concerned about nuclear arms in Iran and the increasing hegemony that Iran was starting to regain over the region (Riedel 155). Regardless of the close relationship the two nations had tried to form for years, Washington still distrusted Tehran and vice versa, and Washington still wanted to provide security in the Middle East by protecting the Saudi royal family as its major power. According to Marcin Zaborowski, Iran and the United States would have almost become allies in the war on terror due to their common interest in Afghanistan (67). However, Tehran was critical of the presence of American forces in the Middle East and their support for Riyadh. While their words aimed at Washington did not always reflect reality, as they were helpful in, for example, America's Operation Enduring Freedom, their critical rhetoric did impact U.S.-Iranian relations significantly, especially the discovery of the Iranian nuclear program in 2002 under Bush which further increased tensions (67).

One of the United States' main goals in the Middle East in general has been to counter the rise of terrorist activities. Washington needs help from the Saudi Arabians to do so and the fact that Riyadh's own national interests include the issue of counterterrorism as well, despite having been accused of harboring and funding (potential) terrorists, was incredibly useful. At the time of his capture Osama bin Laden was considered the symbolic leader and the individual ultimately responsible for the 9/11 attacks. By capturing and killing him during Operation Neptune Spear (the bin Laden raid) on 2 May 2011, Barack Obama both reinforced the notion of American exceptionalism as well as allegedly won the global war on terror which ended goals of countering terrorism and promised more security from outside and inside threats to Saudi Arabia in the Middle East (Hasian Jr 1803). However, according to Richard Jackson it can be suggested that the notion that counterterrorism is dead, in fact, untrue and that it seems more likely that counterterrorism will become more important in the future for the safekeeping of both American and Saudi interests. He also argues that as long as

Iran is the 'other' major power, that terrorism will remain crucial to Washington's Saudi policies, as Saudi Arabia would regard any attempt at power-grabbing by Iran as an act funded and supported by terrorist groups.

### **Back to a Republican view: Trump on the Middle East**

With Donald Trump in the white house, the Saudis may have begun to feel that the United States is on their side once more as Trump has often denounced Iran as an evil nation and views the Saudis as good friends to Washington. American policies towards Saudi Arabia under Trump are still characterized by the continuance of the oil trade and the containment of Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. In addition, Trump's tendency to stay away from sensitive issues such as religion, gender equality and freedom of the press, has also been one of the main reasons for the improved relationship between Washington and Riyadh in recent years. Therefore, it seems as if Trump's new approach to Saudi Arabia is bearing fruits but this may also only be visible on the surface. Meetings between Trump and Saudi officials often lack substance and largely ignore the issues that Obama had been trying to mend, which is also something that Trump is actively trying to remove from the narrative with Saudi Arabia (Riedel 178-179). It is sometimes argued that most of his domestic and foreign policies are rooted in distorting Obama's policies. Therefore, while the U.S.-Saudi relationship appears to gain more stability, it is, in fact, only stable on paper and not in practice. Riedel even argues that "the Saudis play Trump like a fiddle" and that the first meeting between Donald Trump and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman was more symbolic than anything else. The Saudis seem happy to work with what they consider to be an unqualified individual in their long-lasting campaign to undermine Iran, and Trump is most likely content to be allowed to show his opponents that he has been able to 'fix' the relationship with Riyadh whereas Obama could not (Shavit and Guzansky 1). Yet, according to F. Gregory Gause it would be wrong to assume that Trump's policies in the Middle East are substantially different from that of the Obama administration, implying that there is another continuation of policies towards Saudi Arabia at play. Trump and Obama are the same on many issues, such as counterterrorism, which underscores Richard Jackson's prediction in 2015, and both are reluctant to get involved in large-scale military operations. However, they differ on the issues surrounding Iran, Israel and Palestine.

### **Trump on Iran**

Iran remains a sensitive issue for both Washington and Riyadh and even though Iran has regularly expressed a wish to improve the strained atmosphere between themselves and other

countries, such attempts at peace have so far been unsuccessful (Guzansky and Shine 2). Yoel Guzansky and Sima Shine have further argued that even if such a peace agreement between Iran, the United States and Saudi Arabia would occur, it would not be genuine due to immense clashes of national interests and the fact that the underlying causes for the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran are still relevant today. Trump views Iran as a major threat to the United States and even cut them off from the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) in 2017. Obama, on the other hand, tried to engage Iran into discussing peace agreements and may have hoped that his administration's policies would have eventually led to a moderation surge in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Gause 274).

As was mentioned earlier, since the U.S.-Saudi alliance is not merely rooted in the oil trade anymore ever since the United States has significantly reduced its dependence on Saudi oil in recent years (Blackwill, 2019), the bond has become a source of cooperation on a variety of issues, among which the Iranian nuclear threat. In order to make sure that Iran's attempts at establishing hegemony will not go unchecked, the United States needs support from Saudi Arabia in order to contain Iranian hegemony. According to Robert D. Blackwill, the relationship has become one rooted in discussing and solving security issues that threaten Saudi hegemony in the Middle East. Blackwill also suggests that the need for a friendship is mutual, arguing that if the United States were to abandon Saudi Arabia as an ally, China and Russia will take up its place. This would profoundly impact the role of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and alter its strong position among the global powers. Such a shift will also enable Iran to gain more influence over the Middle East. Therefore, both Trump and Salman understand how crucial it is to maintain their 'special friendship' in the future.

## **The future of the U.S.-Saudi relationship and its effects on the Middle East**

Despite Trump's support for the King's heir, Muhammad bin Salman, and the Kingdom itself, events such as the murder on journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the selling of arms to Saudi Arabia, who are likely using these to continue the occupation of war-torn Yemen even further, have decreased the former 'popularity' of the Saudi Arabian state. As much as Trump has tried to depict Saudi Arabia as a moderate Islamic nation that wants to fight terrorism as much as Washington, their involvement in the aforementioned issues have sparked heated debates about whether the United States should continue its 'special friendship' with Riyadh. Joseph A. Kéchichian has accused Salman of being a dangerous man who according to former CIA analysts abuses his position to punish critics and enemies and warns the Trump administration to be wary of his policies (181). Kéchichian takes this even further by apparently suggesting

that Riyadh's positive treatment of Trump has ultimately influenced Trump's negative stance towards Iran (181) as he has regularly deemed Iran to be 'a bad actor' that should be contained (AP Archive). Trump himself has said that he simply has no wish to break with Saudi Arabia for fear of lowered oil prices. In a series of press interview he has claimed that it would be 'foolish' to break with Riyadh and that if the United States were to do so it would destroy the domestic economy and give more power to Russia and China, and because Trump's most important policy is 'America First' he therefore refuses to end the relationship with Muhammad bin Salman and the Kingdom.

In 2018, a meeting between Trump and Muhammad bin Salman took place in which they both supported the idea of a lasting relationship and sharing financial gains. During the meeting, Salman deemed the historical connection between the two states as being too important for the global world order for their friendship to end. Trump, on the other hand, continues to blame the Obama administration for these issues and vouches to improve the relationship under his leadership. (PBS Newshour). Their meeting could underscore the notion that despite having some similar interests, Riyadh and Washington still differ on the causes for their past problems. Trump blames Obama, while Salman effectively sweeps their issues under the rug. Yet, Saudi Arabia also wishes to make significant regional developments and in order to do that they need support from Washington as Iran still needs to be contained in their eyes. Salman has claimed that it is in the best interest of the Middle East that they will be at the forefront of the world in the future, which could ultimately undermine Trump's policy of 'America First'. During an interview on Al Arabiya English he has said that "I think that the new Europe will be the Middle East" and calls this a Middle Eastern renaissance that will change the world. Salman also swears that this is his 'war' and that he will not die before he sees the Middle East at the forefront of the world (Al Arabiya English). These passionate words, which Eman Alhussein calls 'hyper-nationalism', words were directed at the Middle East as a whole, but it could also be said that such developments are mostly in their own interests of supporting Arab nationalism. Salman omits mentioning any country that is not a part of what could be considered to be a part of the 'Arab' sphere of influence, despite being a part of the Middle East. He ignores the plights of people that want to become autonomous states, such as the Palestinians and the Kurds, as well as omits the entire country of Israel. It also interesting that Salman has not mentioned Iran either in his televised speech. Because Iran is often considered to be the 'other' major power in the Middle East, this suggests that Saudi Arabia still wishes to remain at the top of that hierarchy as well as to form a national

narrative and continue to keep Saudi Arabia together as a state and reduce Iran's influence (Alhussein 3).

### **Returning to pre-1979 policies**

Under Bush, the attacks of 9/11 would ultimately shape the way in which Washington would continue to communicate with the Saudis. Due to the involvement of Saudi individuals in the attack, the political bond's popularity waned among the American public and as distrust started to affect their diplomatic encounters, terrorism was on the rise. The war on terror would be the focus of American foreign policy in the Middle East in later years, as well as the prevention of Iranian hegemony. While Obama tried to make amends with both Saudi Arabia and Iran alike, Trump has decided to stray from that path and deems Iran an evil nation in possession of nuclear arms that needs to be contained in order to protect the existing Saudi hegemony. Nevertheless, it has also become clear that Saudi Arabia has national interests that differ from those communicated with Washington. Trump's Saudi policies involve their protection from Iran, as it had been in earlier administrations. Yet, he often tends to focus on the financial aspects of their relationship which goes back to the years before the 1979 revolution in Iran when the U.S.-Saudi friendship was predominantly rooted in the protection of the oil trade, rather than making Saudi security issues a top priority as it has seemed to be in later years.

## Conclusion

The main question this thesis set out to answer is how the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia was changed by the Islamic revolution that took place in Iran in 1979.

In the first chapter we have looked at the history of U.S.-Saudi relations and how their friendship has become 'special'. While the relationship was primarily rooted in oil, just like the American relationship with Iran was, it achieved its special nature because of their respective goals of security, and arguably, a shared notion of 'exceptionalism'. For the United States, this means being unique and serving as an example for other nations. In Saudi Arabia, exceptionalism implies the exceptionalism of the Saudi family combined with notions of Arab nationalism that are being used to justify their actions towards other states in the Middle East. Chapter one also discussed the effects that the Iranian revolution has had on the Middle East, One of the aspects of the revolution being a complete rejection of western values, which significantly worsened the Iranian relationship with the United States. It is interesting to observe that before the Islamic revolution took place, the United States had a relatively stable relationship with Iran. Due the rise of religious activity and the abandonment of secular politics by Ayatollah Khomeini, handling diplomacy between the two nations became increasingly difficult, especially during and after the Iranian Hostage Crisis. In Saudi Arabia, there was an increase in more extreme Islamic modes of thinking as well, but the royal family in Riyadh was largely able to suppress any insurgency linked to them. Their relationship with the Saudis was also worsened due to the hegemony that Iran tried to impose on its neighboring countries which endangered regional Saudi influence. This changed the way in which Washington would have to approach Saudi Arabia and its regional endeavors in the future.

The second chapter has looked at the aftermath of the revolution. During the presidency of Jimmy Carter the American relationship with the Saudis changed significantly: firstly, due to Carter's own approach to the Saudi state, and secondly, due to the Islamic revolution in Iran. As a result, the U.S.-Saudi relationship became both more intense and distant. While they shared the same opinions on Soviet influence in the Middle East, meaning that both believed that the Soviet Union had no right to be in or near the Persian Gulf region, they differed on the issue of Israel and Palestine. In the future, the Arab-Israeli conflict would prove to cause many more issues for the friendship between Washington and Riyadh, yet it never occurred that they fell out of favor with each other completely. While the Islamic revolution was an important factor in the changing relationship as it changed the situation in

the Middle East and affected long-term bonds between nations, it can be argued that it was further damaged by the Arab-Israeli conflict in which the United States believed it was important to conduct a balanced settlement between Palestinians and Israelis.

The final chapter examines the Bush junior, Obama and Trump administrations and takes a look at the potential future for U.S.-Saudi relations. The attacks of 9/11 shaped the way the United States would deal with the Middle East for decades to come and because fifteen terrorists involved in the attack were Saudi Arabian, an increase in distrust started to emerge between Washington and Riyadh. Before 9/11, building a renewed tolerance shaped the way in which Clinton viewed diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, but the attacks destroyed these goals and the Saudis, in turn, became increasingly dissatisfied with Washington's behavior as well. Obama tried to make amends, but he failed to win Israel because of his refusal to visit Jerusalem and instead travel to Riyadh. In general, Obama was mostly concerned about Iranian hegemony, as is similar to policies towards Saudi Arabia by previous Presidents, and Tehran's potential obtainment of nuclear arms which made counterterrorism a top priority. Under Donald Trump, most of these issues were discarded as he believed that Obama had failed at improving the relationship, but he did want to contain Iran.

As a response to the main research question of this thesis, it could be argued that the Islamic revolution has indeed sparked a change in diplomatic relations between Washington and Riyadh, but that it was not the only cause for these changes as their policies of continuing the oil trade and providing security for the Saudis, as well as containing Iranian hegemony in the Middle East, were also influenced by the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as the long-lasting Saudi-Iranian enmity itself. Currently, President Donald Trump believes that he is the right person to mend the special friendship and has met up with Saudi officials more than once to prove this. This also shows how he uses traditional notions of American exceptionalism, in which the United States have a unique mission to bring freedom and democracy to other nations, which may be why they choose to remain on friendly terms with the Saudis, so Washington might be able to democratize the Middle East by supporting Saudi hegemony.

In order to achieve this, it can be argued that Trump has also discarded any attempt at friendly relations with 'evil' Iran for the sake of his friendship with Saudi Arabia. Yet, it could be possible that due to his focus on the economic ties between Washington and Riyadh, Trump ultimately fails to see the true national interests of Saudi Arabia. As Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has clarified, it is Riyadh's wish to see the Middle East at the forefront of the world as a new Europe. Could this imply that Saudi Arabia could be likened to 'a new America' as well? Scholars are still unsure about how to define Saudi or Arab

nationalism and exceptionalism, as they believe it is still in the process of formation and that it has therefore not been established yet how Saudi Arabia would like to see itself as within the Middle East, as well as in the world. What is clear is that Iran is considered to be the 'other' major power that needs to be eradicated with American support which could imply that in the eyes of the Saudis they are not a part of this notion of Arab nationalism in the Middle East. Therefore, whether Arab nationalism and exceptionalism are real or constructed ideals to continue certain politics, calls for further research on the issue of enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and perhaps also on the disparity that exists between how Saudi Arabia views itself and how they view the (Arab) Middle East as, arguably, an extension of themselves.

In conclusion, the U.S.-Saudi relationship is still developing and has undergone a lot of damage. It can be argued that most of these issues stem from the Islamic revolution which increased extremist Islamic thinking in the Middle East. Therefore, it became more difficult for the United States to gain approval on the majority of debatable issues, such as the situation in Israel and Palestine and the nuclear arms conflict surrounding the current politics of Iran. Further research might look into how Iran has, and is still trying to gain more influence over the Persian Gulf and might therefore be challenging Riyadh to share its power in the region. What America's role in this might be, also remains to be debated as this depends on what 'side' they will pick in the future. For now, this seems to be Saudi Arabia but it might very well be possible that a future President will opt for reconciliation with Iran. What this would mean for the Middle East, if Washington chooses to drop Saudi Arabia, is interesting to look into. For now, however, the United States and Saudi Arabia are forming a united front to counter Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. Likely, this will make mending the American-Iranian relationship difficult as Washington and Tehran have been on opposing sides of one another ever since the revolution and probably will remain so for some time to come.



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