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## **Resuscitating US-Saudi Relations**

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President Obama's recent visit to Saudi Arabia was aimed at restoring Riyadh's confidence that the United States would come to the monarchy's defense in times of need. The bilateral bargain of oil for security has been the underpinning of US-Saudi relations since the meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud aboard the destroyer USS *Quincy* in the Suez Canal in February 1945. In the decades that followed, Saudi Arabia upheld its part of the bargain by regulating its oil exports, partly on the basis of US strategic considerations. However, US conduct on certain regional issues, particularly the Iranian nuclear project and the situation in Syria, has led to a growing sense of disenchantment and the perception that the US is a superpower in retreat. There is growing suspicion in Riyadh that the US will not maintain its part of the equation and deliver security.

Obama's first visit to Saudi Arabia in 2009 was intended to emphasize the significance of the kingdom in Washington's eyes and its leading role in the Arab world. The President sought to consult with the Saudi king on Iran and obtain his support for jumpstarting Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations. In a symbolic vein, he went to Riyadh to turn over a new leaf in US relations with the Muslim world by visiting the birthplace of Islam.

The US and Saudi Arabia share several interests. For well over 70 years, US presidents, Republican and Democrat alike, have expressed their commitment to the kingdom's security. The strong relationship has withstood serious crises, such as the 1973 oil embargo and the post-9/11 era. The US continues to need Saudi Arabia for assistance in the war against terror and access to Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and its immediate Gulf neighbors. At the same time, Saudi Arabia depends on the US to maintain stability in the region through military deployment and involvement in regional matters, from leading the negotiations with Iran to mediating the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

These mutual interests, though, have not been sufficient to disguise the divides between the countries' respective views and analyses of some key Middle East issues. Riyadh was bewildered by what it perceived as the US abandonment of President Mubarak. It is concerned by the possibility of rapprochement between Tehran and Washington. This

rapprochement is viewed in Saudi Arabia, as in some other capitals in the region, as based on Iranian subterfuge and American wishful thinking. Riyadh is less concerned by the technical details of the Iranian nuclear program than by the specter of strong US-Iran relations resulting from a permanent agreement, which would strengthen Iran's posture in the Gulf region. Such an agreement would facilitate Washington's intended disengagement from the region. Riyadh also believes that improved relations with Iran will extend Assad's stay in power in Syria. Saudi Arabia suspects that Washington's decision not to use force in Syria in 2013 was linked to what was then a potential interim agreement with Iran. President Obama certainly tried to reassure his hosts that "the US will not accept a bad deal," but these assurances fell short of assuaging the Saudis.

But Riyadh's alternatives are limited. No other power, whether Russia, China or India, is either capable or willing to assume the US role. Riyadh could instead opt for a more limited security arrangement, and Crown Prince Salman's recent visit to Pakistan, Japan, India, and China may be an indicator that the monarchy is considering all its options.

On Syria, King Abdullah likely urged President Obama to act more forcefully to bring Assad down. Before their meeting, leaks appeared in the press about US intentions to increase military support for the Syrian opposition. Given the multitude of rebel groups and the shifting control of the area they occupy, it is not clear how feasible this idea is. Washington and Riyadh may have narrowed their differences on this issue, but disagreements, especially Riyadh's desire to have "moderate" rebels provided with shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles (MANPADs), still remain, as the US fears these weapons may fall into the wrong hands. If Washington continues to reject the Saudi assessment on the need to act more forcefully to support the rebels, Saudi Arabia could itself decide to supply rebel groups with certain categories of equipment not approved by Washington.

The Saudis have most probably clarified again to the US President that Bahrain is a "red line," and that the Sunni royal house there should not be pressured to carry out reforms that will further weaken it vis-à-vis the Iranian-backed Shiite majority. It stands to reason that the file on human rights in Saudi Arabia was also not opened during Obama's visit. During this short visit, President Obama granted an International Women of Courage Award to a Saudi woman for her activities in children's and women's health in the Kingdom. Apparently, criticizing the deficiencies in political and human rights in Saudi Arabia is not consistent with rebuilding confidence in the US.

The issue of energy was also present in the background of the visit, as indeed was the whole bilateral relationship. The Saudi regime is aware of the declining importance of Middle East energy resources to the US, which will be energy independent by 2020. In Riyadh's view, this has diminished Washington's readiness to stand by its unwritten

commitment to “oil for security” and given the US greater maneuverability in its policy in the region.

Expectations that the visit would herald a shift in US-Saudi relations were premature. As the cliché goes, the significance of the meeting was in its occurrence. Neither side can run away from its interests and guiding principles. Various commentators have also alluded to an informal, invisible “alliance” between Israel and Saudi Arabia based on their mutual concern regarding the Iranian nuclear threat and Tehran’s support of non-state actors in the Middle East. The two states are also concerned by the perceived American withdrawal from the region. Thus to a large extent, there are seeming similarities between the interests of the two states. However, the challenges faced by Israel and Saudi Arabia are different in origin, and their relationships with the US are of different natures. Even if press reports of meetings between Israeli and Saudi officials are correct, this “alliance” does not necessarily further Israel’s cause in Washington or elsewhere.

