

Saudi-U.S. Relations

Information Service

Item of Interest

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Saudi-American Relations Solid Despite Shock Waves of 9/11

By *Arab News*, Staff Writer

JEDDAH, 4 July 2003 — It's a testament to their rock-hard stability that Saudi-American relations have withstood the firestorm of the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Although 15 of the 19 hijackers were suspected to be Saudis, the US government and much of the US public have been able to separate the actions of these few misguided men from official Saudi government policy and the love of most things American that Saudis have.

The Saudi-US relationship has been solid ever since its inception in 1932 when American oil explorers discovered oil in the Kingdom. The historic meeting between King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, aboard a US warship in the Suez Canal in 1945, served to firmly cement the strategic relationship.

Saudi Arabia has remained a bulwark of stability and moderation over decades of instability in the Middle East region, from the radicalization of some Arab states in the 1950s, the attempted expansion into the region by the Soviet Union and its client states in the 1960s and 1970s, the threats from a revolutionary Iran in the 1980s, to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Although oil remains a large factor in the relationship, with Saudi Arabia providing the US with 17 percent of its crude oil imports in 2002 alone, both sides have realized that the relationship must be expanded to remain mutually beneficial to both sides.

The recent withdrawal of US troops from the Kingdom, originally deployed here in 1991 to protect the country from the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein following the first Gulf War, is testament to the new and mature road embarked on by both sides.

The United States continues to be the single largest foreign investor in the Kingdom, with billions of dollars invested in joint ventures. Thousands of Saudis have studied and worked in the US, and many more still hope to one day study there.

The Saudi government and society face many challenges in the future, from the fight against terror and radicalism, to the high rate of unemployment among Saudi youth. The 9/11 attacks on

the US have helped to serve as a wake-up call for many Saudis, helping them re-examine the direction their country is going in.

Many Americans, post-9/11, probably have the misguided belief that most Saudis hate America and its citizens. But this is definitely not the case. American popular culture is alive and well in Saudi Arabia, from the fastfood eating habits of McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, to the wearing of blue jeans and baseball caps by young Saudis. The latest Hollywood blockbusters are all available here, and Western music is widely available in record stores.

While Saudi Arabia may appear to the American eye to be deeply religious and conservative in a way that is hostile to Western values, there are many shared values between the two countries such as religiosity, a love of family and a belief that capitalism is the best way to run an economy and generate wealth.

The 60,000-strong American community in the Kingdom will testify to the friendly and warm relations they have with many Saudis in their everyday lives. Despite the May 12, 2003, bombings of Western compounds in Riyadh, most Americans still feel relatively safe and very much welcome in the Kingdom.

Indeed, the majority of Saudis condemned the attacks and were horrified that Americans and other foreigners invited into the Kingdom to develop the country had been targeted by terrorists.

Since 9/11, the Saudi government has been untiring in its efforts to track down terrorists and the funding they have been receiving from some misguided people in the country. Several high-profile arrests of Al-Qaeda members have taken place in the Kingdom in recent weeks, and a new anti-money laundering law puts into place stiff penalties for those found to be funneling money to terrorist organizations.

The main obstacle in US-Saudi relations on the political front remains the plight of the Palestinian people, who are still fighting the Israelis for a homeland in the Occupied Territories. The solid support that successive American administrations have consistently given the government of Israel has been resented not only by Saudis, but by all Arabs.

As the United States celebrates 227 years of independence from Great Britain today, the Saudi people hope that the 71-year-old relationship between the Kingdom and the US continues to progress and grow.

Both sides have realized that the relationship must move forward and beyond the scope of just oil. Both nations have a vital interest in keeping the world stable and free from strife and extremism.

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