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Continuity and Change in US-Saudi Relations

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Saudi Arabia's refusal to become a temporary member of the UN Security Council is the latest in an exchange of diplomatic blows, most behind the scenes, intended to signal to the United States that the kingdom is dissatisfied with US policy in the Middle East. The unwritten alliance that connects these two very different countries, one a liberal democracy and one an absolutist monarchy, has been based on the principle that the United States receives access to the Gulf's economy (while ignoring the lack of political freedom and human rights in the kingdom), and in exchange provides the kingdom with a defense umbrella against external threats. However, the events of the Arab Spring continue to test the relationship between the two.

Saudi confidence in the partnership was punctured when the US administration turned its back on the House of Khalifa in Bahrain, and in the Saudi view, abandoned its long time allies, Egyptian president Husni Mubarak and Tunisian president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, preferring to support "processes of democratization" in these countries – although ironically it was the Muslim Brotherhood that emerged victorious in this process. While the United States attempted to maintain good relations with Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood government, Saudi Arabia, which sees the movement as an ideological rival and an element that undermines stability, cooled its relations with Egypt while the Brotherhood was in power.

The Saudis found it difficult to hide their satisfaction when President Morsi was ousted in a military coup. King Abdullah hastened to congratulate acting president Adly Mansour for the army's having "removed Egypt from the dark tunnel," and the Saudis even announced that they would stand behind the military government if the West did not transfer aid to Egypt. The kingdom, together with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, put together a generous aid package in order to help the new Egyptian regime stand on its feet. For its part, the United States expressed its reservations about the coup, which it

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viewed as contrary to its interests, and decided on a partial freeze of military aid to Egypt in response to the violent suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood protests.

The US-Russian agreement to disarm Syria of its chemical weapons – which for now, has removed from the agenda the option of military action against the Assad regime – also angered the Saudis. Dismantling the chemical weapons was not a top priority for Saudi Arabia, which saw the conflict as an opportunity to land a blow against the Assad regime that could tip the scales in the fighting in the rebels' favor, remove Syria from the Iranian sphere of influence, and further weaken Hizbollah's standing in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia sees the US-Russian agreement as a cop-out that will prolong the survival of the regime, or at the very least delay a decision in the battle for Syria. Prince Turki al-Faisal, former Saudi ambassador to the United States, expressed the frustration in Riyadh with his comment that “the current charade of international control over Bashar's chemical arsenal would be funny if it were not so blatantly perfidious, and designed not only to give Mr. Obama an opportunity to back down but also to help Assad to butcher his people.” Saudi anger is not limited to rhetoric, and the Saudis have reportedly announced a reduction in cooperation with the United States in arming the Syrian opposition. In other words, it is possible that Riyadh will provide weaponry that until now it has not provided, or that it will hold contacts with rebels they had hitherto shunned.

Saudi Arabia also fears a US-Iranian rapprochement. The Iranian charm offensive is seen in the Gulf states as an exercise in deception. The Saudis fear the possibility of an Iranian-Western deal that would allow Iran to escape its isolation, and at the same time advance toward military nuclear capability. Above all, Saudi Arabia fears reconciliation between Iran and the West that would be at Saudi expense, restore Iranian legitimacy in the eyes of the world, and allow it to increase its influence in the region. A deal with Iran, and certainly a possible détente in US-Iranian relations, would deal a huge blow to US-Saudi relations. Thus it is precisely regarding negotiations that the United States can work to keep the Saudis in the picture.

According to reports, Bandar bin Sultan, head of Saudi intelligence and former Saudi ambassador to the United States, stated in response to recent developments that a “major shift” could be expected in relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States. The dispute between the two is not only about US policy in the context of the turmoil in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia fears a change of US strategic direction, which has already removed its troops from Iraq and is expected to withdraw most of its forces from Afghanistan during 2014. The US administration has announced that in the future, East Asia will be the top priority for the United States. Furthermore, in recent years the United States has stepped up the pace of oil and gas production in US territory, and according to forecasts will become energy independent by the end of the current decade. The Saudis

fear that if and when the United States achieves full energy independence, it will no longer need its Arab allies and will largely reduce its involvement in the Middle East.

The next few years are thus expected to be a test period for US-Saudi relations, but it is too early to eulogize the historic alliance between the two. Relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia are based on deep common interests and have survived previous crises, from the 1973 oil embargo to the serious crisis in the wake of September 11, 2001. Even when the United States achieves energy independence, Gulf stability will continue to be a clear American interest, and even if most of the oil and gas are already designated for sale to Asia, the price of oil will continue to be set in the Gulf. The lack of security stability in the Gulf has dramatic implications for global oil prices and for the world economic situation, which is critical for the United States.

Moreover, the regional turmoil has also strengthened US-Saudi cooperation. The United States and Saudi Arabia together achieved an agreement allowing Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down. The Saudis cooperated with the sanctions regime against Iran and even stepped up the pace of oil production in order to make up for shortages caused by the removal of Iranian oil from the markets. The two countries are also continuing to cooperate in the war against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has taken control over areas of southern Yemen and which both countries view as a security threat. In addition, the United States continues to supply Saudi Arabia with large quantities of advanced weapon systems, which constitute an important contribution to the US economy (in mid October 2013, the Pentagon announced another weapons deal with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates worth over 10 billion dollars).

Overall, Saudi Arabia's options are limited. In spite of its great wealth, the kingdom is not able to confront significant threats in its strategic environment alone: its long borders can be breached, its strategic facilities are vulnerable, and its army is small and untrained. Furthermore, no other major power is currently interested in or capable of filling the role played by the United States in maintaining stability and security in the Gulf, or in other words, deterrence and protection of the Gulf states from Iran. However, because of the erosion in Saudi confidence in the United States, the kingdom might seek to diversify risks and formulate a parallel web of relations, which even if not perfect will improve its security situation, including an attempt to obtain an independent, off-the-shelf nuclear deterrent in the future.

Perhaps a seat on the Security Council is not that important to Riyadh, both because the Russian and Chinese veto makes it difficult to pass resolutions, and because the Saudis prefer to operate far from the spotlight. Even without the Security Council, the Saudis have significant influence in the international community, including in the Muslim world. This latest step, intended as pressure on the United States, is unusual because it gives public expression to the Saudis' dissatisfaction and growing frustration with what they

perceive as mistaken American policy. The current US administration is seen by Riyadh as weak, naive, and willing to shun the use of military power at almost any price. However, this step, atypical as it may be, does not necessarily bespeak a change in the world order and a severing of strategic relations between the two countries, which have taken shape over the course of seventy years. The Saudis would be the first to be hurt by this.

