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MUTUAL LEVERAGING: WASHINGTON AND RIYADH FROM SEPTEMBER 11 TO CRAWFORD, TEXAS

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Ever since assuming the reins of effective power in 1995, Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah has sought to put his stamp on Saudi foreign policy. Under King Fahd, the Kingdom had drifted entirely into the American orbit, a process which culminated in the US-Saudi alliance that removed Iraq's Saddam Husayn from Kuwait and implanted US bases on Saudi territory. But the alliance angered radical Islamists in the Kingdom and hindered the Royal Family's relations with Wahhabi clerics whom the government needs to give Islamic legitimacy to its policies. Abdallah moved to correct this, starting with a public rapprochement with Washington's enemy, Iran, which involved the hushing up of Iranian responsibility for the 1996 bombing of the US Air Force barracks in Dhahran. Discouraged by the US failure to eliminate Saddam, Abdallah refused the use of Saudi air bases for American attacks on Iraq within the framework of Operation Southern Watch. And the Saudi view that the US had failed to pressure Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza was another reason to put some distance between Riyadh and Washington.

By August 2001, relations with Washington had been further strained by Abdallah's frustration with America's reluctance under the new Bush administration to become engaged in the Middle

East peace process. In response to Abdallah's threat to reassess relations, the US prepared to announce its support of a Palestinian state.

Then came September 11, and the revelations of involvement of Saudis in the hijackings and in al-Qa'eda networks. Reports of financial support for radical Islamist movements by Saudis (including members of the Royal Family) put the Kingdom on the defensive, as did media exposure of internal schisms within the Kingdom and the degree of popular support for radical, anti-US forces. These same forces were equally incensed by US support for Israel amidst growing violence in the West Bank and Gaza. As the situation grew increasingly uncomfortable, Abdallah sought to shift the agenda.

His interview with journalist Thomas Friedman in February 2002, in which he proposed "full normalization of relations" with Israel, accomplished just that. Though apparently caught by surprise and cautiously skeptical of a plan that had little detail, the US began to see the Saudi initiative as a possible way out of the Middle East imbroglio.

Abdallah's revelation to Friedman was made without consultation with important Royal Family members, and took many Arab leaders by

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surprise as well. But in his speech at the Arab Summit in March, Abdallah appealed directly to the people of Israel to accept “normal relations” with the Arabs – a slight backtracking from his “full normalization of relations” in the Friedman interview – in exchange for withdrawal from all the territories occupied in 1967 and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and lands.

In its “Beirut Declaration,” the Summit endorsed Abdallah’s speech and added that the Arab peace plan would include a “just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194,” which Palestinians view as the basis for the “right of return” to Israel in the pre-1967 borders. Much to Washington’s chagrin, the summit also witnessed a public embrace by Saudi and Iraqi leaders.

Abdallah had pulled off something of a coup. To the satisfaction of both Washington and Riyadh, the world was now focusing on the Saudi-engineered peace initiative rather than on Saudi involvement in Islamic terrorism. And Washington decided that, despite Saudi support for global Islamic radicalism, praise for suicide bombings, and evidence of government support for the families of Palestinian suicide bombers, the relationship was simply too important to discard.

The convergence of interests was clear following the suicide bombing on Passover Eve and Israel’s “Defensive Shield” operation in the West Bank. Growing violence pushed the Middle East to a boiling point that threatened both sides. Washington wanted a clear playing field for any move against Iraq, and Riyadh wished to show that its relationship with Washington would pay off for the Arabs and the Palestinians. As a result, a tacit division of labor emerged. Saudi Arabia would lead the other Arab countries in pressuring Palestinian

Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat to crack down on terrorism, and the US would reiterate its support for a Palestinian state and bring pressure on Israel to stop its incursions and freeze settlements. The way would then be clear, Washington reasoned, for some sort of Middle East peace conference in the summer to jump-start the peace process in the post-Oslo era.

The Crawford summit in late April signaled the sealing of the Saudi-US rapprochement. During the visit, the Saudis attempted to soften the American public with a media advertising offensive consisting of paid television spots showing President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell praising Saudi Arabia. The Saudis also displayed their usefulness on an immediate issue by helping to end the siege of Arafat’s Ramallah headquarters. The bottom line of the summit was that the Saudis had succeeded in shifting the spotlight away from Riyadh’s failure to act against terrorism and onto the Arab-Israeli conflict.

But despite the smiles, hand waving, and mutual assurances of cooperation, Riyadh and Washington have not stopped reassessing their relationship. The US still expects greater Saudi cooperation against terrorism. At the same time, it is planning to move important bases to Qatar, a move that is sure to please the Saudis, who prefer a US presence “over the horizon” but still close enough to help.

September 11 was a setback to the US-Saudi alliance, but both sides have been sobered by the experience and realize that there is little to be gained from a rupture. The US needs at least an understanding with Saudi Arabia regarding Iraq and the funding of terrorism, and the Saudis are not eager to give up years of US guarantees to keep the Royal Family in power. All the same, it remains to be seen if the Saudis can “deliver” Arafat, and there are still no indications that Riyadh is planning to support a US move against Saddam.