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Has the Shiite Crescent Disappeared? Saudi Arabia and the US Alliance against Iran

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No one loves a lame duck president. George W. Bush's mid-January visit to Saudi Arabia was a case in point, and it failed to return the US-Saudi relationship to the status it enjoyed before September 11, 2001.

Flush with oil selling for around \$100 a barrel and confidently using that financial influx for massive investment in infrastructure and a preparations for an eventual post-oil economy, the Saudis have little patience for a president weakened by failure in Iraq and subverted by his own National Intelligence Estimate on Iran that seems to call the Bush administration's judgment into question.

Losing Riyadh? Not Yet.

Washington and Riyadh have a long and sometimes tortuous relationship that began sixty years ago in the post-World War II era as British influence in the region waned and American influence grew. US backing was crucial to Saudi Arabian oil development and the security of the Saudi royal family, and America even provided the Saudis with loans at an early stage. At bottom, the countries had an equal stake in fighting communism and the development of oil resources.

The February 1979 Iranian Revolution and the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted President Jimmy Carter to issue the Carter Doctrine, putting the Soviet Union on notice that any attempt to gain control of the Persian Gulf region would be seen as an assault on vital American interests, to be repelled by any means. The Carter Doctrine was given a specifically Saudi twist in October 1981, when President Ronald Reagan issued what has become known as the "Reagan Corollary": "We cannot permit Saudi Arabia to become Iran," Reagan declared. Years of military aid, training and cooperation came into play in 1990-91, when the US mobilized an international coalition to liberate Kuwait and prevent a threatened Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia. In the years that

ensued, massive arms deals with the US and an increased US military presence cemented the relationship even further. The Saudis were grateful.

But geopolitical changes unleashed by America's overthrow of Saddam Husayn's regime in Iraq have resulted in a significant measure of mistrust creeping into the Saudi-American relationship. As a result, a mutual lack of confidence intrudes on what should otherwise be an air-tight alliance.

One of the main beneficiaries of the removal of Saddam has been Iran. Without Iraq to balance it, Iran has made a move to assert its power in the Gulf. The success of Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Gaza and the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran have further altered the balance of power, and reinforced Riyadh's traditional caution towards its Persian-Shiite neighbor.

The root of the administration's current attempt to isolate Iran is to be found in Hizballah's well-publicized bloodying of Israel during the Lebanon war of 2006. Saudi Arabia led Sunni Arab states in condemning Hizballah. The internal Lebanese imbroglio has also caused Saudi relations with Hizballah's other patron and ally of Iran—Syria—to deteriorate sharply. Taken together with previous worries expressed by Jordan's King Abdallah II in December 2004 about an emerging Shiite crescent in the region, Washington viewed the time as being ripe to confront Iran with Gulf Arab support. Progress on Israeli-Palestinian issues, it was believed, would make participation in an anti-Iranian coalition more palatable in the Gulf: this was one of the reasons that lay behind the convening of the Arab-Israeli Annapolis conference in late November 2007. The participation of Saudi Arabia's foreign minister Sa'ud Al Faysal, achieved after much American urging, was deemed by Washington as proof that its revised approach to regional issues was bearing fruit.

But Washington's concerns do not always dovetail with regional ones. The Khobar Towers bombing in eastern Saudi Arabia by Iranian-backed Saudi Shiite terrorists in June 1996 scared the Saudis, pushing them into a process of reconciliation with Tehran that has been growing stronger ever since, involving numerous reciprocal visits of civilian and even military officials. The Saudis did not object publicly to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's attendance at the December 2007 Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Doha (he was invited to attend by host Qatar, which purposely avoided consulting the Saudis), nor did they refrain from hosting Ahmadinejad during his pilgrimage to Mecca later that month. The Iranian president and the Saudi King, Abdallah, also spoke on the telephone the week after the Bush visit.

Viewed from Riyadh, Washington is no longer the strong, confident leader it had been during the Reagan and Bush *père* administrations. Weakened in Iraq, and burdened by a National Intelligence Estimate that appeared to contradict much of the current administration's rhetoric, Bush arrived in Riyadh on January 15th with the deck stacked squarely against him. Sa'ud Al Faysal had stated a week earlier that his country would hear Bush out, but that "Saudi Arabia is a neighbor of Iran in the Gulf, which is a small lake. We are keen that harmony and peace should prevail among states of the region."

Asked later to respond to some of Bush's comments on Iran, Sa'ud referred to them as "provocative."

In private, the Saudis are deeply fearful of Iran. But to them, US policy seems confused. They want a policy of containment, not confrontation. More than anything, they want to be on the winning side. And the US appears incapable of influencing events. While Bush was still in the Gulf, a US Government Accounting Office report challenged the efficacy of twenty years of US economic sanction against Iran.

Although Bush's attempt to put meat on the Carter Doctrine and its Reagan Corollary seems to be a case of "too little, too late," the time has not yet come to eulogize the Saudi-American relationship. Strategic cooperation continues under the US-Gulf Security Dialogue, and the US has just signaled its commitment to the Saudis by announcing a new arms package, which is also a signal to Iran.

After the Elections: Repairing the Relationship

This is a time of American weakness in world politics. "Major allies and collaborators like Japan, Germany, Israel, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and others are already placing different global bets and thinking through scenarios for the future that count on America being an important voice at the table—but not the pivotal nation it has been for decades," writes Steve Clemons (thewashingtonnote.com, January 20, 2008). Indeed, during his visit to the region, which coincided with that of Bush, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that Paris would establish a new military base in the United Arab Emirates.

Riyadh will manage the Iranian challenge as it sees fit, confident that Washington's own underlying interests insure continuing US protection of the Saudi kingdom. But the two countries are still out of sync. Bush's January 13 keynote Gulf address in Abu Dhabi, in which he attacked Iran, concluded with a paean to the late Lebanese-American author Ameen Rihani who, Bush remarked, gazed at the Statue of Liberty and asked, "When will you turn your face toward the East, oh Liberty?" Viewed from a Saudi Arabia heavy with oil revenues that it can use to buy off domestic demands for representation, and harboring grave doubts about American ability to affect change with respect to Iran, the musings of a Lebanese-American Maronite and an American born-again Methodist seemed rather out of touch with the situation on the ground.

Many in Riyadh—and in Washington—await a new president who will put the relationship back on an even keel.