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Empty Words: Saudi Blustering and US-Saudi Realities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Saudis are truly angry at the Obama Administration, and are threatening to turn away from their alliance with Washington. But the Saudis are all bark and no bite. Despite occasional public “outrage” from Saudi officials about US policy regarding the Arab unrest, Israel, Iraq, Iran, or Afghanistan, Riyadh and Washington are still very distant from the parting of the ways threatened by some Saudi officials.

As the British might say, Prince Turki al-Faisal, former Saudi Ambassador to Washington, has got his knickers in a twist.

In June he published an [op-ed in the Washington Post](#) excoriating President Obama for his support of Israel and abandonment of the Palestinians in his [May 19 speech](#) (which many pro-Israel forces believed was anything but pro-Israel). But the Arabs also have a word for what Prince Turki and some other Saudi talking heads have been saying lately: *kalam fadi* -- empty words.

With Saudi Arabia challenged by the “Arab Spring” and [accused of leading the counter-revolutionary forces](#), Turki sought to boost the legitimacy of the Saudi ruling family by taking up the Palestinian cudgel and waving it at the US. In doing so he was following a time-honored practice of Arab leaders: divert attention from domestic shortcomings by talking up the Palestinian issue.

According to Turki, Saudi Arabia was a “bulwark of the Middle East”; if Americans thought that Israel was an indispensable ally, “[t]hey will soon learn that there are other players in the region.... The game of favoritism toward Israel has not proven wise for Washington, and soon it will be shown to be an even greater folly.”

"There will be disastrous consequences for U.S.-Saudi relations if the United States vetoes U.N. recognition of a Palestinian state," huffed Turki.

Turki's op-ed came about a month after Saudi security consultant Nawaf Obaid [ominously declared](#) that Saudi Arabia, angered over American's "ill-conceived response" to the Arab protests and support for Israel, had brought the "oil for security arrangement" between the countries to an end. Obaid works for Turki at the King Faisal Center for Research & Islamic Studies in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia, he concluded, would "recalibrate the partnership."

So what's going on here? Basically, the Saudis are upset about the U.S. handling of the Arab unrest, and the lack of support for the Saudi move into Bahrain to hold down majority Shiite protests against the ruling minority Sunni Al Khalifa family. They view the U.S. as ungrateful when the chips are down for its main Arab ally.

Turki has often taken an abrasive approach to the US, as has his employee Obaid. In answer to a question about religious persecution of Christians in Saudi Arabia at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2006, Turki parried, choosing instead to [suggest that Christians accept Muhammad as a prophet and the Koran as divine](#). Which means, if you know something about Islam, that they would become Muslims. According to Turki then, Christians should either convert to Islam or shut up.

When the US was discussing drawing down in Iraq, Turki and Obaid struck again, warning the US against a withdrawal: "[Since America came into Iraq uninvited, it should not leave Iraq uninvited](#)," Turki told a conference in 2006. Obaid threatened that [Saudi Arabia would intervene on the side of the Sunnis](#) should a US withdrawal leave the Shiites on top.

Turki also had no compunction about attacking US policy in Afghanistan as [inept](#)."

The problem is the Saudis are all bark and no bite. They have been complaining openly about US policy in the Middle East since before the establishment of Israel, but [did not hesitate to reassure US officials privately](#) that these policies would not jeopardize the relationship with Washington.

The reason? Defense and energy relations are simply so deep that petulant Saudi princes and their minions cannot take them apart.

First, Washington is far and away the main arms supplier to Saudi Arabia, and continues to train its troops. In addition to [an arms deal worth over \\$60 billion](#) announced to Congress in October 2010, from November 2010 to June 2011 an additional \$3.7 billion in weapons sales were announced, ranging from Patriot air and missile defense systems to cluster bombs. As of March 2011, there are [over 250 active duty military personnel in the kingdom](#), and countless other civilian personnel under military contract.

As oil prices climbed to over \$120 a barrel in May-June, Saudi and US fundamental interests intersected once again. The Saudis were worried that consumers would cut use or move to alternative energy, while Washington was concerned that high prices would impede economic recovery. [In secret meetings between US and Saudi officials in May](#), the Saudis initially refused to increase production. Ahead of the June OPEC meeting, the US also proposed putting urgently needed high quality crude from its Strategic Petroleum Reserve on the market, to be replaced by low-quality Saudi crude. The Saudis initially refused both. But in the end, Riyadh did increase production, and the US opened the SPR. Oil prices dropped.

To be sure, the Saudis are particularly exasperated this time around. But although Saudi Arabia and the US are neither friends nor allies, they have shared interests with regard to oil and security for many decades, leading to economic and military relations that are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Therefore, despite occasional public “outrage” from Saudi officials about US policy regarding the Arab unrest, Israel, Iraq, Iran, or Afghanistan, Riyadh and Washington are still very distant from the parting of the ways threatened by some Saudi officials.

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