

Strategic Insight

Deconstructing the U.S.-Saudi Partnership?

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As a lynchpin of U.S. security strategy and policy in the Persian Gulf for over 50 years, Washington's relationship with Riyadh and the House of Al Saud has been a foundation of stability amidst the region's currents of instability. However bad things may have been in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, southern Lebanon or any number of other situations, the U.S.-Saudi relationship provided all concerned with a degree of assurance that events would not spin completely out of control. But this relationship is now under more pressure than at any time in recent memory. Various commentators have suggested that the partnership should be restructured to reflect what is described as a fundamentally adversarial relationship.^[1] The inference from such arguments is that a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship no longer serves U.S. strategic interests.

Much of the commentary on the U.S.-Saudi relationship focuses on supposed broad policy incongruence between the two countries. The two countries are said to differ in their approach to terrorism, religion, pluralism, human rights, the Arab-Israeli conflict, possible military action against Iraq, and Saudi Arabia's role and importance in world oil markets. Often left out from this commentary are the ongoing activities between the two countries that helped preserve regional security and stability over the decades, which stemmed in part from a shared strategic vision. While the term has become de rigueur of late, the United States could not have pursued its policy of "dual containment" during the 1990s without Saudi support. While many critics have emphasized that the policy had negligible impact on Iran, the policy of containment helped prevent Saddam Hussein from seriously disrupting regional peace and security during the 1990s. The Iraqi military remains hamstrung by a decade of sanctions, and WMD breakout was certainly made more difficult during the UNSCOM era.

Suggestions that the U.S.-Saudi relationship needs to be altered often ignore the organizations that have been created to manage this partnership - organizations that reflect a depth and complexity in Saudi-American relations that is generally unappreciated. In and of themselves, these entities and their activities do not justify preserving the status quo, but they do suggest that the U.S.-Saudi security partnership could be deconstructed only with great difficulty and with dramatic and unforeseen consequences for regional security.

Main Organizational Elements of the Security Partnership



These three seals symbolize the U.S. military's presence in Saudi Arabia. The formal U.S.

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Military Training Mission (USMTM, seal on left) presence dates to the early 1950s. The USMTM mission has evolved from one of working directly with Saudi military units to assisting in the management of Saudi Arabia's \$65 billion foreign military sales (FMS) program. The Chief USMTM routinely meets with the Saudi Chief of Staff, General Saleh Al-Muhayya, and the Minister of Defense and Aviation, Prince Sultan. The advisory relationship with the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG, seal in center) dates to a memorandum of agreement signed in 1973. The U.S. head of the Office of the Program Manager for SANG typically reports to Crown Prince Abdullah on a weekly basis - the best access of any Westerner to the defacto Saudi regent. The Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia (right) was created in August 1992 to enforce the no-fly zone over southern Iraq. USAF units rotate in and out of Prince Sultan Air Base every 120 days to carry out the mission. The French flag, which appears in this version of the seal, stopped flying Southern Watch missions in 1996 after the U.S. extended the no-fly zone coverage to 33 degrees north in response to the Iraqi attack on Irbil.

Several organizations illustrate the depth and breadth of the U.S.-Saudi security relationship:

- **USMTM.** A cornerstone of the U.S.-Saudi security partnership is the U.S. Military Training Mission, which is headquartered in Eskan Village, about 30 miles south of Riyadh. Headed by Major General Michael Farage (USAF) and consisting of approximately 350 military and civilian personnel funded under a foreign military sales (FMS) case, USMTM works directly with the Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) on a daily basis to help manage Saudi Arabia's \$65 billion FMS program administered under approximately 375 FMS cases. USMTM personnel work directly with Saudi counterparts in various bases around the country, including MODA headquarters in Riyadh. Smaller training teams work directly with Saudi military units in Khamis Mushayt, Tabuk, Jeddah, Jubail, King Khalid Military City, Taif and Dhahran.
- **OPM SANG.** Established in 1973, the Office of the Program Manager for the Saudi Arabian National Guard assists in training the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) and helps to manage the SANG's equipment modernization and sustainment programs as administered under the FMS program. Headed by BG Martin Dempsey (USA), OPM SANG consists of approximately 350 military and civilian personnel and numerous contractors who are stationed near Riyadh with SANG units. While the ostensible SANG mission is regime security, it also is a military force that could be used to defend the Kingdom—which it did in 1990.
- **CJTF-SWA.** Saudi Arabia also hosts the Commander, Joint Task Force Southwest Asia, who serves as the Air Force's forward headquarters element in the theater and provides the day-to-day command of Operation Southern Watch. The CJTF-SWA operates out of the combined air operations center at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB). The air base hosts between 3000 and 5000 USAF personnel and their 50-70 aircraft that perform the near-daily Operation Southern Watch missions over southern Iraq. American military personnel are housed in the Friendly Forces Housing Complex, built by the Saudis at a cost of approximately \$120 million after U.S. operational forces were consolidated at PSAB as part of OPERATION DESERT FOCUS after the Khobar Towers bombing in July 1996. The Saudis continue to provide assistance-in-kind support to these forces valued at between \$70-90 million annually.
- **ARCENT-SA.** In 1990, the Army's Central Command component, known as ARCENT, established an organizational element in Saudi Arabia to provide missile and air defense in the Kingdom. These forces today operate and maintain a number of Patriot missile batteries in Saudi Arabia, providing missile and air defense to both U.S. and Saudi installations.

While this list is not comprehensive, it conveys the main advisory and operational elements in the Kingdom that manage the day-to-day aspects of the U.S.-Saudi security partnership.

The Advisory Elements: An Integrated Security Partnership

Saudi Arabia is the largest purchaser of U.S. defense equipment in the world, with sales totaling over \$65 billion since the beginning of the relationship in the early 1950s. Most major platforms in the Saudi

inventory are of U.S. origin: F-15S fighters, AWACS aircraft, Patriot missiles, M1A2 tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, AH-64 Apache helicopters and numerous other systems. U.S. advisory elements have spent the last 50 years helping to build the Kingdom's self defense capabilities and, concurrently, fostering interoperability between U.S. and Saudi forces. An unstated assumption in Saudi defense strategy for years has been that the job of the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces (SAAF) was to check an invading force long enough until help arrived—from the United States.

The SAAF depend upon U.S. equipment to defend them and would depend more broadly on U.S. assistance in any major contingency that threatened the Kingdom. Altering the U.S.-Saudi relationship in such a way that would disrupt the foreign military sales and advisory relationship through USMTM and OPM-SANG would make most of Saudi Arabia's U.S. equipment useless in a matter of months, leaving the Kingdom virtually defenseless against an armed attack. And, if this scenario included American movement away from its commitment to the Kingdom's security, the vulnerability of the Kingdom would only be further compounded. It is difficult to see how such a situation would contribute to regional security.

The Operational Elements: A Promise of Regional Military Integration

Excepting the U.S. Patriot units (which are there at the express invitation of the Saudis), the relationship between U.S. and Saudi operational forces has always been more problematic than the relationship with the advisory elements. The near constant turnover of U.S. forces in and out of the Kingdom, the need for repairs to facilities used by U.S. forces, and other housekeeping issues have made it difficult to build an integrated relationship at the operational level.

But the relationship at this level holds enormous potential for the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship and the region as a whole. Saudi Arabia is the dominant country politically on the peninsula, and all the Gulf States cast a watchful eye on Riyadh. Saudi Arabia's role in the region and its well-developed security relationship with the United States make it possible to one day foresee an integrated regional defense architecture including all the Gulf States under U.S. and Saudi leadership.

U.S. and Saudi air forces might in the future operate together using a coalition operations space within the combined air operations center at Prince Sultan Air Base. Perhaps officers from other Gulf Cooperation Council militaries could join together with Saudi and U.S. counterparts in this facility to coordinate joint and combined air defense efforts across the theater. If U.S.-Saudi operational cooperation can be established at PSAB, it could provide a model that could be replicated in other Gulf States, leading to activities that would promote mutual confidence and collective security. While regional military integration among friendly coalition partners may today seem a remote scenario, the scenario is at least plausible if Saudi Arabia and the United States lead the way. Regional security integration will surely never flourish without positive U.S.-Saudi bilateral relations.

Conclusion

Fundamentally altering the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship would have serious consequences for Saudi security and peace in the Middle East. It could potentially render the U.S.-trained and equipped Saudi military unable to defend the Kingdom and would deny the United States the opportunity to continue working with the dominant regional power to achieve collective defense and regional military integration. Any serious suggestions that the 50-year partnership needs to be fundamentally altered should carefully consider these costs.

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For related links, see our [Middle East Resources](#).

References

1. A variety of articles have appeared in recent months making these arguments. See Victor Davis Hanson, "[Our Enemies, the Saudis](#)," *Commentary Magazine*, July/August 2002; Simon Henderson, "[The Saudi Way](#)," *Wall Street Journal* Opinion Page, August 12, 2002; Henderson, "The Coming Saudi Showdown," *Weekly Standard*, July 15, 2002; and Claudia Rosett, "[Free Arabia](#)," *Wall Street Journal* Opinion Page, August 14, 2002. The details of a controversial briefing on Saudi Arabia by a Rand analyst to the Defense Policy Board are detailed in Jack Shafer's article, "[The Power Point Briefing that Rocked the Pentagon](#)," August 7, 2002.