



---

# The Constant And Variable Factors In The Relationship Between The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia And The United States Of America From The Second World War To The Events Of 11 September 2001

Sadek Abdel Malek University Of Biskra (Algeria). [Sadek.Abdelmalek@Univ-Biskra.Dz](mailto:Sadek.Abdelmalek@Univ-Biskra.Dz)

Nabil Khmouli University Of Biskra (Algeria). [Nabilkhmouli11@Gmail.Com](mailto:Nabilkhmouli11@Gmail.Com)

Received: 10/2023

Published: 05/2024

---

## Abstract:

It is evident that the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America has had a unique character over the past centuries due to the common interests between the two countries. Various factors related to the political backgrounds of US presidents have played a role in providing the appropriate framework for building alliances to address regional and international challenges, as well as managing tensions between the two parties in a flexible manner. The bilateral relationship has witnessed instances of rapprochement and divergence, driven by each country's vision of its national interests in ensuring regional stability, which is a fundamental pillar of the relationship between the two countries.

**Keywords:** Stability, Resilience, Dominance, National Security, Confrontation, Oil.

## Introduction:

The United States of America has established a relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia based on shared interests between the two countries. Despite occasional tensions due to certain variables, the relationship has been largely positive due to Saudi Arabia's importance and strategic location. In addition, its substantial and vital oil reserves have positioned it as a key player in the Arabian Gulf region and the wider Middle East, making it strategically important to the United States. Through its relations with Saudi Arabia, the United States has sought to ensure so-called energy security in the region, both by meeting and securing its oil needs and by ensuring the presence of a strategic ally with the political and economic clout to influence the course of events. This guarantees the achievement of mutual interests between the two countries. In this brief study, we will explore the impact of these relationships and answer the following question: What are

the constant and variable factors in the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America from the 1930s to the events of 11 September 2001?

### **1- US-Saudi Arabia Relations: Origins and Development:**

Due to the strategic importance and location of the Arabian Gulf region, it has gained significant global prominence as a result of its abundant energy resources, particularly oil. This has made it a focal point for major world powers since the discovery of oil, leading to competition between these powers to secure agreements and treaties with the Gulf countries in order to gain privileges in the region. Saudi Arabia therefore became the main focus of interest for these countries, including the United States, which obtained oil monopolies and significant privileges in the Kingdom since the 1930s<sup>1</sup>.

The United States established strong diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia before the outbreak of the Second World War, and granted American oil companies the right to explore and exploit Saudi oil, which experienced a prosperous increase in production. It was relied upon to supply the war effort in the Far East at a time of growing American concern about British competition and attempts to pressure Saudi Arabia into joining the sterling area<sup>2</sup>.

During the Second World War, the United States recognised the importance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for a number of reasons. Among these was the fact that the Arabian Gulf became the safest route for the delivery of American military supplies to the Soviet Union via sea lanes and straits. This was a time when oil was being transformed from a commodity into a strategic asset of great importance in wartime conditions. The American administration involved Saudi Arabia through the Lend-Lease Act<sup>3</sup>.

Following President Roosevelt's declaration in February 1943 that the defence of Saudi Arabia was vital to the United States and as a means of countering British policies aimed at containing Saudi Arabia, aid began to flow into Saudi Arabia and the level of diplomatic representation in the Kingdom was raised from charge d'affaires to resident minister on 14 April 1943<sup>4</sup>. With the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, Saudi and American oil companies joined forces to create a solid framework for the development of the Saudi oil industry and to contribute to the reconstruction of war-torn Western Europe and Japan. This laid the groundwork for Saudi-US relations, which from the outset surpassed those with the Soviet Union<sup>5</sup>.

In the 1950s, the American administration focused its foreign policy on protecting its strategic interests, such as the overthrow of the Mossadegh government and the installation of the Shah in Iran in 1953, and President Eisenhower's refusal to participate in the aggression against Egypt in 1956. But all these attempts failed to secure a regional Gulf alliance, unlike in the 1970s when oil became a priority and the global balance of power shifted. Joseph Sisco, Assistant Secretary of State, affirmed its vital and necessary

role in building the economies of the NATO alliance and America's allies in Egypt and the Arabian Gulf region. Its role was confirmed during the October 1973 war, and its international importance increased after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and the Soviet-Afghan war in the same year. These developments heightened American concerns, which focused on ensuring its strategic security and the stability of its interests in the region, with five main objectives:

1. Enhancing regional security.
2. Ensuring the uninterrupted protection of energy resources and markets in the Gulf.
3. Ensuring freedom of international navigation.
4. To protect the American people and their property.
5. To support regional allies of the United States<sup>6</sup>.

## **2- Development of relations after the Iranian revolution:**

After the Iranian Revolution, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's status as the world's largest oil producer increased, with an output of approximately one million barrels per day. As a result, the United States of America sought to strengthen its relationship with Saudi Arabia. This was due to assessments by the Congressional Budget Office, which confirmed that the loss of Saudi oil would have serious consequences, potentially leading to a reduction in US gross domestic product of an estimated \$272 billion. This would also have an impact on the US unemployment rate, pushing it above 2%<sup>7</sup>. As a result, strategic issues for cooperation between the two countries emerged that went beyond the direct defence of Gulf security and included containing Soviet influence in Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia played a significant role in this regard, while the United States further strengthened its commitment to Gulf security during this period, particularly the security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This was done through the "Carter Doctrine"<sup>8</sup>, in which the United States took direct responsibility for defending the security of the Gulf and its oil interests. This entailed a muscular response based on its direct military presence in the region, including the establishment of the Tampa joint defence unit, the deployment of aircraft carriers and supply ships in the Arabian Gulf, and the reinforcement of its combat forces through military facilities in the Gulf states, primarily in the Kingdom.

Despite its direct involvement in the region, the United States continued to build up its military capabilities through the ITEM military assistance programme. It also facilitated significant arms deals with Saudi Arabia, especially after Saudi Arabia's decision to establish the King Saud Air Base and select the United States as the sole provider of all its military needs<sup>9</sup>. As part of the effort to strengthen Saudi Arabia's military, the US administration approved \$5.8 billion worth of arms deals in 1981. These deals included

various advanced weapons such as early warning systems, reconnaissance aircraft, missiles and ground radars. The administration also expanded its efforts to provide experts to train the armed forces on these advanced weapons<sup>10</sup>.

### **3- The collapse of the Soviet Union and its impact on US-Saudi relations::**

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union after its defeat in Afghanistan, American interests in Iraq began to grow, especially after the two countries came closer together during the Iran-Iraq war. Foremost among these interests were the oil interests of American companies. But this convergence did not last long. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, the United States saw Iraq as a centre of evil and a new threat to its interests in the region. Consequently, the security and sovereignty of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its oil resources became crucial to the United States, which expressed its concern about them immediately after the invasion.

During a meeting of the National Security Council on the day of the invasion, President George H.W. Bush expressed America's deep concern for the security of Saudi Arabia and its oil supplies, particularly the Eastern Province and Al-Ahsa, as they would be directly threatened if Iraqi forces moved from Kuwait towards Saudi Arabia. These areas would be the first to be threatened. If the Iraqi forces were able to control them, Iraq would have gained control over 25% of the world's oil reserves, which would give Iraq leverage over the global oil market if it also gained control over the oil resources of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This would allow Iraq to dictate its priorities in the global oil market<sup>11</sup>.

On 8 August 1990, the US President justified his administration's decision to use military force against Iraq by stating that "the defense of the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a vital interest of the United States"<sup>12</sup>. The US administration had decided to deploy military forces in the Kingdom as the most effective means of defending it against any attempted aggression by Iraqi forces. However, King Fahd was reluctant to agree to the American request because of his country's stance against the presence of direct foreign troops, fearing public opinion and conservative forces. To persuade King Fahd to accept the American request, US Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney was sent to the Kingdom on 6 August to stress the urgent need for military action against Iraq and the deployment of combat forces in the Kingdom to ensure its security in the face of any Iraqi aggression. In the end, the King agreed on condition that the US forces would withdraw once the Iraqi threat had been eliminated.

To compensate for the loss of Kuwaiti and Iraqi oil supplies, and to prevent a potential threat to the US and world economies, the US administration called on oil-producing countries to increase production to make up for the losses. In September 1990, following the imposition of international sanctions on the Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil sectors after the invasion, the Kingdom responded to the US administration's call and increased its

production by about 50% to mitigate the significant price increase. The price per barrel reached around \$40, but subsequently fell to \$20 per barrel<sup>13</sup>.

#### **4- Bill Clinton's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia from 1993 to 2001:**

was characterised by a certain coolness in US-Saudi relations. From the beginning of his presidency, Clinton focused on the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, domestic policy and the promotion of democracy. He also pursued a policy of "dual containment" of both Iraq and Iran. Global changes, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and its absence as a threat to the interests and security of both countries, played a major role in the cooling of relations<sup>14</sup>.

During Clinton's presidency, the relationship between the two countries oscillated between alliance and divergence. Clinton prioritised the rescue of the US economy and the prevention of external threats that could affect it. His strategic orientations aimed to rebuild America for a new era, supported by his campaign slogan "It's the economy, stupid". He entered the White House with the aim of preparing the American people to face all the challenges of the era of globalisation and the new world economy, which had previously experienced a recession with rising unemployment and falling wages<sup>15</sup>.

Although Clinton's policies differed from those of President George H.W. Bush, there were important milestones in US-Saudi relations that should not be ignored. These milestones focused on supporting cooperation in various fields, especially after President Clinton's visit to the Kingdom in 1994 and his meeting with King Fahd bin Abdulaziz. In addition, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's visit to the United States in 1998 further developed the relationship. When George W. Bush assumed the presidency on 20 January 2001, Saudi Arabia expressed its hope that the relationship would be strengthened and restored to its previous state, following the same approach as President George H.W. Bush, through the U.S. commitment to defend Saudi Arabia's security. However, regional changes and international events paved the way for unprecedented tensions in the relationship. The outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2001 and the escalation of events in the Palestinian territories strained US-Saudi relations and led to a cooling of relations as Saudi Arabia accused the US administration of supporting and aligning itself with Israel<sup>16</sup>.

#### **5- The events of 11 September 2001: a decisive turning point in US-Saudi relations:**

The events of 11 September 2001 marked a major turning point in the security strategy of the United States. The destructive acts that targeted the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre deeply affected American interests and undermined national security, necessitating the development of a global security strategy. President George W. Bush described the attacks as endangering the lives of Americans forever, leading him and his Republican administration to debate the post-9/11 era<sup>17</sup>.

These events provided the United States with an opportune moment to achieve several strategic goals it had been pursuing in Asia. It established a foothold in Central Asia and positioned itself in Afghanistan, close to Russia and China, thereby shaping the contours of the new international order. It sought to maintain control over Russia, dismantle the Commonwealth of Independent States and threaten China's western flank.

US-Saudi relations were adversely affected by these events. Some called for increased pressure on the Saudi government, accusing it of supporting the Islamic extremism that led to the attacks. Former CIA director Jim Woolsey, a prominent right-wing voice in Washington, even raised the possibility of Americans driving more fuel-efficient cars to reduce dependence on Saudi oil<sup>18</sup>.

American security investigations confirmed that the events of 11 September were carried out by a trained and supported terrorist group led by Osama bin Laden, an extremist Islamist who had made Afghanistan his base since the Soviet-Afghan war. Consequently, these events allowed the United States to redraw the map of the world in accordance with its political philosophy. The statement made by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to an international news agency just two days after the events is a clear example of this, when he said: "The American blood shed in these events will achieve great goals for the United States over the course of a century<sup>19</sup>.

#### **6- Hypothesis of Saudi Arabia's responsibility for the events of 11 September 2001:**

Some elements within the American administration, media personalities and politicians believed that Saudi Arabia had some connection with the events that took place on its soil and that it was somehow responsible for the growing phenomenon of Islamic extremism and the increasing wave of hostility towards the West and the United States of America. Despite the Kingdom's condemnation of the attacks and its significant contribution to the international campaign led by the United States against terrorism, being the country most affected and having its international relations adversely affected, relations between the two countries experienced a real crisis and an unprecedented challenge. America felt that its security was threatened and believed that it was engaged in a long-term confrontation, in terms of both time and space, in its war against terrorism, covering every corner of the world. As a result, there were calls at various levels that, after the destruction of Osama bin Laden's capabilities, the United States had a rare opportunity to extend its victory and dry up the swamp of Islamic extremism, which meant moving the battle to its true source, which they believed was not in Afghanistan but in the Arab countries<sup>20</sup>.

The impact of the events on Saudi Arabia's foreign relations, both regionally and internationally, has become clear. The state of deterioration in Saudi Arabia's relations with the United States pushed it to activate and revive its relations with many countries around the world, including Russia, China and the European Union, in various political, economic and even military fields. This was confirmed by Saudi Arabia's call to speed up

202 | **Sadek Abdel Malek      The Constant And Variable Factors In The Relationship Between The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia And The United States Of America From The Second World War To The Events Of 11 September 2001**

the implementation of the steps towards a free trade zone between the GCC countries and the European Union<sup>21</sup>.

The shift in Saudi Arabia's new policy came after a massive anti-Saudi propaganda campaign following the events of 11 September. According to the American writer Francis Fukuyama, the conflict the United States is engaged in is no longer with a small group of terrorists, or even with Islamic radicals, but rather "a conflict with Islamic fascism". He believes that this fascism represents an ideological challenge that is in some ways more fundamental than the threat posed by communism.

Political analyst Laurent Mucchielli also argues that if the Saudis realise that they will eventually hit a wall and fall, this would convince them of the importance of immediately changing their evil ways. They would have to do a lot to convince others that they have really changed for the better.

There was a major crisis in Saudi-American relations in the wake of the March 2001 report by the RAND Corporation's advisory board to the Pentagon, which classified the kingdom as an enemy state and described Saudis as activists at all levels of the terrorist chain. It called for Saudi oil wells and investments abroad to be targeted if they did not comply with American wishes. Thus, the renewed American campaign against Saudi Arabia following the leak of the RAND report through major newspapers seems aimed at forcing Saudi opposition to the plan to attack Iraq. America saw an opportunity to pressure Saudi Arabia into complying with its various demands, which went as far as demanding changes in the school curriculum on the grounds that it breeds extremism and terrorism<sup>22</sup>.

### **7- Saudi Arabia in the face of media campaigns:**

After the events of 11 September and their aftermath, which damaged Saudi interests and its relations with the United States, the official Saudi response came in the form of a statement by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. During a meeting with senior dignitaries and religious figures in Saudi Arabia, he said: "You know that the foreign media campaigns launched against this nation are due to your rule of Islamic law. We do not care who speaks or criticises, because we are committed to our faith and our religion, and we and our children will be in the service of this religion and this country"<sup>23</sup>.

It is worth noting that the US administration, led by President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell, emphasised the need to maintain strong relations with Saudi Arabia and to reduce the impact of the American media campaign against it. Concerns remained, however, as the same campaign fiercely criticised the US administration for its perceived reluctance to exert more pressure on the kingdom, citing the preservation of American interests and the vital strategic partnership between the two countries. Laurent Mucchielli says: "The justifications for the Saudi-American

partnership have lost their meaning and necessity and their continuation. Some have argued that even oil, which some see as a risky venture to protect against the mischief of others, serves as an economic outlet and a means for the countries that produce and store it to meet their needs.

Based on the above, it can be said that the American campaign has its justifications and was not just the personal opinions of some thinkers or journalistic writings. It was issued by important institutions, which increased Saudi Arabia's concerns, especially as these institutions have links with some decision-making bodies in the United States. Despite a series of meetings and repeated communications between officials from both countries to emphasise the strength of their relations and their commitment to maintaining them, the impact of the events and the continuation of media campaigns against the Kingdom have clearly affected the level of relations in various fields<sup>24</sup>.

## **8- The manifestations of US-Saudi cooperation after the events of 11 September 2001:**

The events of 11 September 2001 revealed the true image of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Despite being a long-standing strategic ally of the United States, this was not enough to change the perception of Arabs and Muslims in American society. In some cases, criticism of the Saudi regime went so far as to describe Saudi Arabia as an enemy of the United States<sup>25</sup>.

In reality, it can be said that the official American position did not directly blame Saudi Arabia for the attacks, although there were official and unofficial references that indirectly implicated the Kingdom. Officially, however, the US administration took a measured approach, distancing itself from reports that directly blamed Saudi Arabia for supporting terrorism. The US State Department issued a statement denying accusations against Saudi Arabia of complicity in drying up the sources of funding for extremist groups and expressing appreciation for the steps taken by the Kingdom in this direction<sup>26</sup>.

Apart from the issue of cooperation in the war on terrorism, there have been no significant developments in US foreign policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, except for discussions about reforms within the Kingdom and some regional issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and support for the so-called "road map". The repeated verbal support for settlement activities without any tangible steps has been mentioned. With King Abdullah's acceptance of the Arab Peace Initiative, which included Israel's acceptance of withdrawal to pre-1967 borders in exchange for recognition by all members of the Arab League, the initiative was welcomed by the Bush administration as supporting its settlement policy and the two-state solution<sup>27</sup>.

After the fall of the Iraqi regime in the spring of 2003, US-Saudi relations became strained and reached a point of crisis. The withdrawal of US forces was one indicator of this



tension, as was the emergence of the Saudi Accountability Act. In response to the bill, the director of the US State Department's Bureau of Middle Eastern Affairs stated that his country was fully satisfied with Saudi Arabia's cooperation in the war on terrorism and that the relationship between the two countries was "intimate". The bill's sponsor commented: "Our view is that such actions ... have counterproductive effects on the administration's goals and therefore may be at odds with them"<sup>28</sup>.

In conclusion, US-Saudi relations took a sharp turn after the September 11 attacks, revealing a crisis of confidence and deep-seated differences between the two parties. These indicators have increased under the influence of the US vision for fighting terrorism and securing strategic interests in the region.

### **Conclusion:**

Despite previous crises in the history of relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia due to political differences, such as the 1973 oil embargo and disagreements over the Camp David Accords as a framework for settlement from 1978 until the late 1980s, both parties were keen to manage the relationship crises discreetly, unlike what happened from 2001 until the spring of 2005. During this period, the differences between the two countries became public and Saudi Arabia, with its system and ideology, faced one of the biggest media and political attacks, leading to calls for changes in educational curricula and the implementation of some political reforms.

The regional changes that the Middle East has undergone since the Second World War until the events of 11 September 2001 have led to an escalation of tensions in US-Saudi relations in the post-9/11 period, reaching a point of crisis due to the differing priorities and strategic interests of both countries towards various regional variables. Despite this, the relationship between the two countries over the decades has been governed by several key constants and shared interests, with an arrangement based on Saudi oil in exchange for American protection to help the Kingdom against any external threat or aggression.

### **Footnotes:**

---

1- Star Jabbar Alawi, "US-Saudi Relations after 2001", *International Studies Journal*, Issue 93, Iraq, 2023, p. 05.

2- Walid Hamdi Al-Azami, "Saudi-American Relations and Gulf Security in Unpublished Documents 1965-1991", 1st edition, Dar Al-Hikma, Baghdad, Iraq, 1992, p. 09.

3- Nazir Jabbar Hussein Al-Hindawi, "Saudi-American Relations (1953, 1964)", Doctoral Thesis, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, Iraq, 1980, p. 75.

4- Neeson Lee Grison, "Saudi-American Relations", translated by Samira Ibrahim Abdul Rahman, Cairo: Sina Publishing House, Egypt, 1991, p. 10.

- 
- 5- Gregory Gause, "The Future of US-Saudi Relations: Kingdom and Power," *International Studies Journal*, Issue 67, University of Baghdad, Iraq, 2017, p. 306.
  - 6- Star Jabbar Alawi, previous reference, pp. 7, 8.
  - 7- Walid Hamdi Al-Azami, *supra*, p. 43.
  - 8- The Carter Doctrine linked the security of the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, to that of the United States, paving the way for further Saudi military and air cooperation throughout the 1980s.
  - 9- Ahmed Youssef Ahmed, "The Power Approach in Confronting Arab Oil Weapon", *International Politics Journal*, Issue 41, July 1975, Al-Ahrar Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Egypt, p. 103.
  - 10- Maisa Mohammed Mahmoud Marzouq, "US-Saudi Relations Amid Regional Changes (2011-2016)", 1st edition, Arab Democratic Centre for Strategic, Political and Economic Studies, Berlin, 2020, p. 39.
  - 11- Taghreed Anwar Al-Sayed Al-Jouili, "Oil as a Determinant of Foreign Policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1990-2006)", Master's thesis, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, Egypt, 2012, p. 140.
  - 12- Maisa Mohammed Mahmoud Marzouq, previous reference, p. 14.
  - 13- Fath El-Afifi, "The Arabian Gulf: Political Trends and Wars of Strategic Change", Cairo: Ahramat Centre for Translation and Publishing, Egypt, 2003, pp. 196-204.
  - 14- Wathiq Mohammed Barak Al-Saadoun, "US Military Strategy during President Bill Clinton's Era (1993-2001)", *Adab Al-Rafidain Journal*, Issue 78, Mosul, Iraq, 2019, p. 320.
  - 15- Khaled Rajab Saeed Al-Zahrani, "Implications of the September 2001 Crisis on Saudi-American Relations: A Study of Crisis Management in Saudi Arabia", Master's thesis, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, Egypt, 2001, p. 98.
  - 16- Nour El-Din Hashoud, "US Security Strategy after the Cold War: From Unipolarity to Hegemony 1990-2012", *Dafater Al-Siyasa wa Al-Qanun Journal*, Issue 09, Ghardaia University, Ouargla, Algeria, 2013, p. 388.
  - 17- Falah Awad Al-Sharari, "Saudi-American Relations and the Impact of Oil during the Period (1974-2011)", Master's Thesis in International Relations, Department of Political Science, Mu'tah University, Iraq, p. 69.
  - 18- *Ibid*, p. 70.
  - 19- Nour El-Din Hashoud, cited above, pp. 389-391.
  - 20- Falah Awad Al-Sharari, *supra*, p. 70.
  - 21- Star Jabbar Alawi, previous reference, p. 14.
  - 22- Falah Awad Al-Sharari, previous reference, pp. 71-72.
  - 23- *Ibid*, p. 73.
  - 24- *Ibid*, p. 74.
  - 25- Essam Abdel-Shafi, "US Policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: A Study of the Religious Dimension," PhD dissertation, Cairo University, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Egypt, 2014, p. 225.
  - 26- Taghreed Anwar Al-Sayed Al-Jouili, 26\_previous reference, p. 157.
  - 27- *Ibid*, p. 173.
  - 28- Maisa Mohammed Mahmoud Marzouq, previous reference, pp. 46, 47