



Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia

Author: Rachel Bronson

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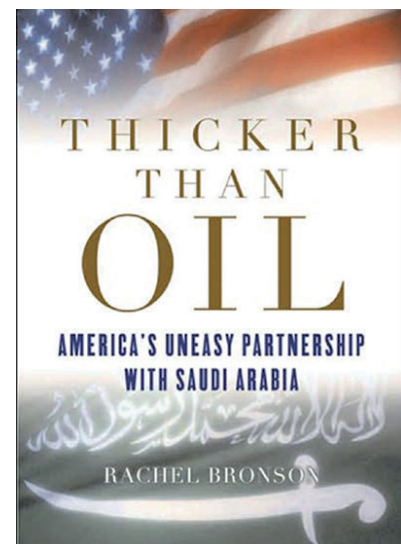
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A widely held view in the United States of the US-Saudi Arabian relationship goes something like this: For six decades, one of the few constants in American foreign policy has been the special relationship with Saudi Arabia forged by President Roosevelt shortly after the cessation of conflict in Europe. Since that time, the United States has offered military protection to the Saudi royal family in return for the free flow of relatively cheap oil. Every president since Franklin Roosevelt has stuck by this deal, and the Saudis have kept their part of the bargain by building excess oil capacity and being a swing producer to moderate any oil price spikes. For its part, the United States has also championed Saudi causes in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization. While in the OPEC oil cartel, the Saudis have been the voice of moderation.

All this appeared to change with the onslaught of 9/11 – the Saudis, it was felt, had let down the US in a time of dire need. With oil prices reaching \$100 a barrel in late 2007, the Saudis seemed to have clearly reneged on their oil deal. Worse yet,

it was said, the jihadists that the Saudis unleashed on the Soviets in Afghanistan are currently killing US soldiers in Iraq. By not standing up to the Saudis, the Bush Administration was seen as weak or even complicit.

Perhaps this sentiment prompted President Bush to declare in his 2006 State of the Union address that the US is dangerously “addicted to oil” from unstable countries. Conspiracy theories abound. In post-9/11 America there has been a flood of books on Saudi Arabia, many of them sensational and dire in their predictions. In large part, *Thicker than Oil* is an attempt to dispel many of the unfounded perceptions currently in vogue. It is a serious book on the US-Saudi relationship that avoids both the idealization of Saudi Arabia that was once the norm in the US and the now-fashionable demonization of that country.



Specifically, Bronson wants her book to be read as a sober, balanced counterweight to “recent books [that] seem more intent on feeding public outrage than on seriously probing” the US-Saudi relationship. She lists as offenders such provocative recent bestsellers as Robert Baer’s *Sleeping with the Devil* and Craig Unger’s *House of Bush, House of Saud*, which accused Washington of selling its soul for crude. Both of these authors often rant about the individual greed and shady deals they argue shaped US-Saudi relations at the highest levels before 9/11.

As the title suggests, the US-Saudi relationship has been much more than just oil for defense. Early on, Branson clearly defines the thrust of her examination: “Few relationships are as vital, under as much pressure, and as poorly understood as that between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

The first thing that may surprise readers new to the topic is that much of the early US-Saudi relationship was based not so much on oil per se, but instead was shaped by the congruence of interests between the two countries during the Cold War. Saudi Arabia was adamantly anti-communist, and successive US administrations built on that fact to develop joint projects that wed Saudi financial resources and, at times, religious influence to a series of US targeted covert operations. The Saudis were generally not eager to draw attention to their role in these undertakings, and as a consequence, the US public was often not aware of their vital contribution to US security.

The second widely held myth dispelled by Branson centers on the widely held view that US-Saudi relations were never under much stress until 9/11. Even during the Cold War era, numerous frictions existed between the US and Saudi Arabia. There were serious differences over Palestine and other inter-Arab issues. Bronson describes quite well the mounting frustration felt by the Saudis on the eve of the October 1973 war and the calculus that let King Faisal impose an oil embargo

on the United States as a way of pressuring President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger into playing an active role in the post-war diplomacy. Kissinger resented what he called blackmail, but his resort to shuttle diplomacy was, in part, a response to that pressure.

Finally, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and disappearance of the international Communist threat, the main rationale underlying the US-Saudi relationship ceased to exist. “With the end of the Cold War, economic, political and geographical circumstances have changed so dramatically that neither the US nor the Saudi leadership should expect the continuation of the same kind of relationship that existed for more than half a century” (p. 7).

Depending on circumstances, the result has been a series of ups and downs in the post Cold War era. Even the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, which served as a sharp reminder to the Saudis that they were in need of an external protector, was clouded by Saudi concern about the presence of US troops on their soil and about the rise of Islamic radicalism and the inability of the United States to deal effectively with Saddam Hussein during the 1990s. Bronson notes that the Saudis did not have much use for the administration of Bill Clinton and describes the relationship as “in tatters” by 2000 (p.231).

As Bronson ably documents, since 9/11 cooperation has resumed although not to everyone’s liking. The slow Saudi response to American demands for cooperation and information has frustrated many in Washington, as has the US involvement in Iraq caused great consternation in Riyadh. Many Saudis, as well as Americans, now question whether the two countries have enough in common to maintain an effective working relationship. Saudi Arabia’s religious credentials, once seen as a strategic asset in the joint effort to defeat “godless Communism,” are viewed by a great many Americans as having contributed to the dangerous growth of radical Islamic movements and to

the events of 9/11. The Saudi monarchy, formerly considered a force for stability in the Gulf region, is now regarded by many US politicians and commentators as under serious threat from radical Islamic dissidents and as an obstacle to US hopes to spread democratic values and institutions in the Middle East.

Bronson contends this new emphasis on Saudi religious policies ignores the role that American foreign policy played in creating the problems that confront the post-9/11 world, in particular the encouragement of jihadists to take up the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. "In many ways September 11 was the price we paid for winning the Cold War and the strategies we chose. And so are our complicated ties with Saudi Arabia" (p. 9).

While Bronson is optimistic that the US-Saudi relationship can be resurrected in a manner enabling both countries to counter the many forces propelling the region to greater instability, she is somewhat vague about the means to bring this about. Specifically, she seems to think it is just a matter of working out a few kinks in the relationship. "Today Saudi leaders must work to address issues surrounding the financing of extremist thought." In return "Washington must find ways to help the pragmatists [in Riyadh] prevail in their domestic battle." (p. 249).

Bronson ends on a fairly hopeful note that the two countries are back on track. How successful this restoration has been in the two years since *Thicker than Oil* was published is problematic. Writing when the price of oil was about \$35 per barrel, Bronson warns that if prices were to increase dramatically, say to \$100 per barrel, both the international economy and Saudi Arabia's own economic interests would be devastated (p.250). With oil having crossed the \$100 line, it is not so clear that she is right about Saudi self-interest in keeping oil prices in a more moderate range.

However, on the major regional questions she

seems a better forecaster – the United States and Saudi Arabia are in agreement to a greater extent than at almost any time in their relationship. They both:

1. Worry about increasing Iranian influence and the Iranian nuclear program;
2. See the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a wound that needs to be healed;
3. Worry about the spill-over effect of Iraqi violence; and
4. Vigorously oppose Al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates.

One thing Bronson may not have anticipated is that the main frictions between the US and Saudi Arabia will not be so much over objectives as over tactics. And here there is reason to believe the relationship will not be nearly as effective in countering regional threats as it was the Soviets.

For example, with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Bush administration seeks to isolate Hamas diplomatically and choke off the economy in Gaza. In contrast Saudi thinking revolves in part around the desire to limit Iranian influence among Palestinians – the Saudi authorities see an isolated Hamas turning more toward Tehran and wants to use its influence to bring Hamas back into an Arab supported, unified Palestinian front. Similar differences between the two countries exist for the other objectives noted above.

As Bronson documents throughout her study, such tensions are a normal feature of the Saudi-US relationship and, therefore, do not herald a crisis in the making. Still, how these tensions will play out is hard to assess. Despite Bronson's objectivity, *Thicker Than Oil* is written from largely an American perspective and this is its main weakness. It will be the minor shifts in Saudi tactics that largely determine the effectiveness of the relationship in attaining the goals noted above – and these may be so subtle as to be beyond the grasp of US policymakers even after reading Bronson's valuable contribution.