

## **America and Saudi Arabia; Relationship between Global Hegemon and Regional Hegemon**

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### **Introduction**

Middle East had been the point of attraction for all the super powers from time immemorial. As a source energy and other strategic needs, these powers had tried to directly control as well as maintain a partnership with the states. This is more pertinent after the discovery of oil. While analysing the United States – Saudi Arabia relations this point of reference to be kept in mind. From Oil to the sales of arms and ammunition the relations has grown. There is a complex liaison of economic and political as well as private and state point of interests in maintaining the relations (Pustelnik& Ante 2009). The four traditional pillars of U.S Saudi relations are trade, military cooperation, energy and education (Al-Faisal 2006). Now the world is witnessing or being interpreted as one of the most turbulent relationship between the desert hegemon Saudi Arabia and World hegemon United States. How the relationship strengthened and diversified through the ages is subject for analysis in this context.

### **Geopolitical Context**

For understanding a country's relative leverage, it is better to analyse its strength first. In this direction the geographical factors is of great importance. Saudi Arabia has most important geopolitical location in Middle East. It has border with 8 nations- United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Qatar in the East, Yemen and Oman in the South, Jordan, Kuwait and Iraq in the North. It is impressive that it is the largest country in the Middle East and larger than any European nations except Russia. But in case of population it is different. The large parts of Saudi Arabia has been called as "Empty Quarter" because of inadequate population in the regions (Harper 2007).It has about 32.55 million population in 2017, which is low as compared to other neighbouring states such as Iran which has about 79 million ("Saudi Arabia - Total Population From 2012 To 2022 | Statistic" 2019).Another importance is that it is located between Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia has cleared up a number of issues

regarding its borders with the neighbours(Singh 2011). Some of it can be even traced to the recent issue, the Yemen crisis.

The most important geo political factor is the presence of oil. Though it was discovered in 1908, the large scale production has been started in 1930s. In 1933, the agreement with the Standard oil of California marked the genesis for the dynamic relations between United States and Saudi Arabia at a limited level. It was a great boon for the Americans to get access to the oil outside the control of Britain (Bronson 2008).

### **From 1930s to Second World War**

America recognised Saudi Arabia in 1931 when the state was formed. But U.S was not ready to send resident diplomats there. The California Arabian Standard Oil Company-Casoc(renamed as ARAMCO- Arabian-American Oil Company in 1944) was established and they found oil in Dammam in 1938. Around 1500 barrels of oil was produced per day. By a secret amendment to 1933 agreement, more than half of his territory was left for concessions in oil production (Pustelnik& Ante 2009). But until 1940 there was no formal diplomatic exchanges between the two states. It was in 1940 that the government allowed Bert Gish, the envoy at Egypt to represent the U.S in the Kingdom. The Saudi adopted neutrality officially during Second World War. But it allowed allies to use its airspace (Alyas 2018). Franklin Roosevelt, then American president announced that Saudi Arabia is vital for American defence. It is also qualified for American Lendlease assistance and for foreign aid loans and grants. In 1944 Saud, the crown prince paid an official visit. It was followed by Prince Faisal and his brother Khalid in the same year. The Saudi-U.S relations was reached much height during the meeting between Ibn Saud and President Roosevelt on February 14, 1945. It reiterated for a mutually beneficial relationship. For the kingdom it offered the security on the other hand for the U.S it provided for oil and military reach. Saudi inked the agreement for constructing U.S. Air Force base at Dhahran which will be in operation for five years, later to be transferred to the Saudi. But the contenting issue was the home land for the Jews. Saudi protested against the offering the Palestine as Jewish home land (Wynbrandt, 2010).

## **Cold War Era**

The period of cold war was an important aspect in the relations between United States and the Saudi Arabia. The relations between both moved forward at an advanced rate at this period. For Saudi, United States was a dominant power in defending Soviet aligned states such as Syria, Egypt and South Yemen. For the U.S Saudi Arabia was a bulwark against communism (Derks 2017)

The same notion against the Jewish activities reflected in the relationship with the United States by the Saudi was intensified during the Arab –Israeli war of 1973. The Saudi was against the support of U.S for the Israel. As a retaliation they increased oil prices and resorted to oil cut and oil embargo. This oil shock produced inflation in the America. This made the U.S to rethink the policies and work for a more cordial and stimulating relationship. This must be based on enhanced military cooperation, opposition to communism, and through economic transactions that would promote the recycling of petro dollars from Saudi to the United States through the investments in infrastructure, American securities and industrial expansion (Blanchard 2010). The relationship with the United States was so harmonious and sincere. It can be actively perceived when Saudi Arabia threatened to withdraw from OPEC in March of 1974 because of the organization's anti-Western position. This stimulated the organisation to keep the oil prices low. After the period of oil embargo Saudi Arabia increased its production in order to cover the fall in oil supply for these states. The year 1974 was important in the history of U.S Saudi relations. President Nixon made visit to Saudi Arabia. It was a first visit by U.S President. In the same year Saudi Arabia got 60% of ownership of assets and concessions of the Aramco Company (Wynbrandt, 2010).). In the 1980 Saudi got the full ownership of ARAMCO from the U.S (Al-Faisal 2006).

60 F-15 aircraft and armaments was decided to be supplied to the Kingdom in 1976, though it was opposed by the Jewish community and supporters of Israel. King Khalid came into an agreement with the United States that oil prices will not be increased more than 5 percent until 1984. The income from oil will be invested in the U.S economy also. As a favour Gerald Ford, then U. S president agreed to defend the kingdom from threats regardless of its source. It is reported that Saudi Arabia had purchased about more than \$34 billion worth military equipment from U.S in 1970s. Owing to the conditions in late 1970s such as Iranian revolution, followed by Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and later followed Iran –Iraq war etc. intensified the military purchases between U.S and Saudi Arabia(Wynbrandt, 2010).Iran

was an important ally of U.S for a long time especially under the reign of shah. This was part of a “twin pillar policy” followed by the U.S to stabilise the region. But after the Islamic revolution of 1979 Saudi Arabia became the prime ally in the region. This follows through the last four decades (*Alyas 2018*). Again in alliance against the communist regimes, the case of Saudi funding in Nicaragua civil war as per the request of Regan administration is a best example (Wynbrandt, 2010).

In 1990, the year was important in the history of Middle East, the first Gulf war occurred. Iraq has invaded the Kuwait. In this context some border portions of Saudi also faced threat from the Iraq. Hence the Saudi government allowed the foreign troops, especially the U.S troops was allowed to stay in the Saudi Arabia (Al-Faisal 2006). As a counter to Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan provided support to resistance through the jihad. Cash and weapons flowed to Afghanistan (*Alyas 2018*).

### **Post-Cold War Era**

In the post-cold war era, the uniting ground between U.S and Saudi Arabia, countering communism disappeared. The relations on traditional areas of mutual interest was remained at stable while reducing strength in other areas. The issues such as human rights, political system and resurgence of attacks between Palestine and Israel from late 2000 was impediment in their strengthening relations. Though the relative strengthening of Iran in Middle East provided a new ground for the shared interests (Blanchard 2010). There are different opinions which severe the relationship between U.S and Saudi Arabia, such as war in Iraq, the Palestine-Israel conflict, and the crisis in Lebanon (Al-Faisal 2006).

An important incident that strained the relationship between United States and Saudi Arabia in the post-cold war era was the 9/11 incident. The important fact that contributed to the uneasy relationship was that the 15 of 19 hijackers participated in the incident was Saudi nationals (Derks 2017). The congressional committee found that there is no other forces which supported the Al Qaeda attacks on U.S. But the controversy still exist. America was anonymous to the hijackers. They do not know English. So it is suspicious that they executed the plot their own. At the same time a 28 page chapter which describes the source of foreign support for some of the September 11 hijackers while they were in the United States is not in the purview of the public and denied to the people of America (Graham & Sharon 2012).

But according to the Saudi they are not actually funding the terrorism. It is them who are actually trying to control it. They were the targets of terrorist group rather than breeding ground for these groups. Osama Bin Laden and AlQaeda are actually targeting them. In this regard the attack on National Guard Training Mission in 1994 is cited. They also recalls the 9/11 commission report as evidence which proves their innocence in the incident. The commission has found that none of the Saudi officials or institutions were actually involved in the incident (Al-Faisal 2006).

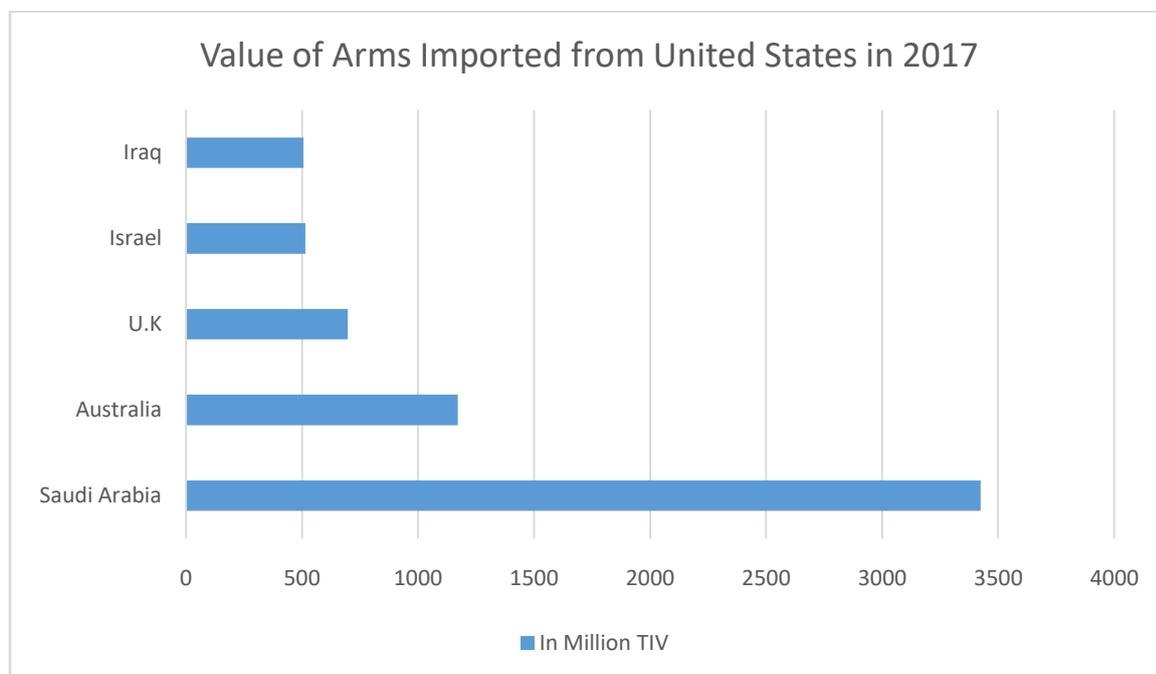
The Palestine issue is not a dominant one as in the past. It was out of question when King Fahd officially abandoned in 1984 'rejecting Israel's right to exist policy'. For them the rather than Palestine –Arab problem in the Middle East which creates the problem, it is the presence of Iran which actually disturbs Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Israel share interests on curbing the influence of Iran and the illegitimacy of Assad regime. They also supports the military leadership at Egypt. At the same time against regional groups such as Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas (Guzansky and Neubauer 2014).

### **Defence Relations**

Defence relations between U.S and Saudi Arabia dates back to 1950s. The first formal cooperation in defence sector was through the establishment of agreement of United States Military Training Mission (USMTM) in 1953. It was a framework which actually stipulates the way through which U.S assistance to Saudi Arabia must be given. In 1973, the responsibility of training Saudi National Guard(SANG) which is an important military branch of Saudi monarchy was shifted from UK to U.S.A. This is carried out through a subsidiary defence contractor Northern Grunman known as Vinnell Arabia. Unlike other defence assistance by America to other countries, the public-private defence ties of Saudi-America is based on Saudi's unique capacity to pay(Omar 2017). In 1990-91 the weapon deals between U.S and Saudi Arabia got impetuous. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 lead to several contracts. \$7 billion worth contract for 72 F15s was inked between the two states. But due to the gulf war, the Saudi had to renegotiate with the U.S . In 1993-97 the total agreements fell into \$4 billion. It further fell to \$600 million in 1998-2001. It shows a growth from 2002 onwards (Pollack 2002).

The following chart (fig 1) shows arms supply to various countries by the United States. In this Saudi remains top destination of U.S exports of defence equipment according to

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute(Armstrong 2018). The Trump administration in May 2017 during his Riyadh visits announced a \$ 110 billion worth defence deal with the Saudi Arabia. This is considered to improve the relations between U.S and Saudi Arabia as both the countries is being influenced by leadership changes. It provides for larger commitment in their relations (Blanchard 2018).



Fig;1 Source : Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (available at Statista-Armstrong 2018)

(TIV (trend indicator Value) is based on the known unit production costs of weapons and represents transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of transfer.)

### Why Saudi Interested in America

There are many factors which contributes to the active interest of Saudi in United States. From the analysis of the history it can be easily understood. America's anticolonial attitude and the policy of non-interference was attractive to the Saudi. Before the Second World War, American politics took little interested in the Saudi Arabian affairs. The relation was between the financially strong non state actor and financially weak state (Pustelnik& Ante 2009). The Americans coming to Saudi was interested in commerce, not in restructuring the domestic politics. Another factor is regarding the religiosity of Saudi Arabia. From the establishment of state in 1932 they are the ardent follower of Islam religion. They adhere to strict religious principles. They belong to Wahhabis, a part of Sunni Islamic sect. This factor became

important in the eyes of America for countering the Soviet Union in the post second world war era and at the time of cold war. Soviets attached to communism represented non religiosity. The anti-communist sentiment was a uniting ground for two parties (Bronson 2008: 33-35). The Saudi perceived U.S as a counter balance to Britain (Wynbrandt, 2010).

Another thing is regarding the arms supply. In the 2009, the U.S government has authorized the sale of \$115 billion worth weapons to the Saudi Arabia which includes tanks, munitions and fighter Jets. The U.S weapons are more effective systems. Since the beginning of weapon purchases, Saudi relied on the American system and not experienced in other system. The American systems also does not have a provision for interoperability (Stohl and Dick 2016).

Saudi Arabia is an important power in Middle East which wields its power through adequately applying its soft power. It is mainly through the holiest places of Islam and its custodianship. It coordinates different positions at the same time. It has to assert its power in the entire region, to be recognised as an independent global actor not subservient to the west and the intangible advocate for Sunni Islamism (Laipson 2013).

Saudi Arabia is also striving to obtain nuclear capability. But from the view point of United States they are only required to play a passive role in this regard. U.S proposes a nuclear umbrella that will protect all of them from the rogue state, Iran who has nuclear capability. But for Saudi, it is unacceptable. They are capable to develop it (Obaid 2015). The emerging role of private sector is an important aspect of Saudi's current economic state. In American universities more than 70,000 students are enrolled. There are active collaborations between Saudi and U.S polytechnic institutions which can generate a large number of blue collar jobs. Through public private collaborations it is possible to build a knowledge economy based on new economic cities and science and technology. The development is possible though funding from Saudi and technology from America (Kalicki 2016).

The contenting relations between Saudi and U.S can be perceived in the view of dealing with Iran. Saudi believes that U.S is like to have a détente with the Iran and is not involved in dealing with the troubles that Iran pose in the region. America's inactive role in Syria especially when there are accusations of use of chemical weapons also has made Saudi uneasy with the U.S views (Ross 2014).

## **Obama Administration**

During the Obama administration the relations between United States and Saudi Arabia underwent some backwardness. On core issues, they differed. Saudi Arabia was bewildered at the lack of support by the United States for ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Again when the war in Yemen started, U.S provided the Saudi with arms, intelligence, and aerial refuelling in order to control the Houthi rebels who are supported by the Iran. But towards the end of Obama administration, amid high casualties the U.S did not provide the precision-guided missiles to Saudi Arabia (Alyas 2018). On the Iranian issue Obama took a stand to have a good deal with Iranian nuclear policy and urged the Saudi to coexist with the Iran peacefully in the region. This may have infuriated the Saudis (Kalicki 2016).

## **Recent Development**

When Donald Trump assumed the position of President of United states, Saudi Arabia became the corner stone of policy towards the Middle East. Pressuring Iran for change of its policies in the Middle East, promoting Israel Palestine peace plan, and eliminating the threats posed by extremism especially the ISIS and Al Qaeda. But how far the Saudi and crown prince Muhammed Bin Salman is capable to deal with this is remains as a question (Wright 2018). According to the New York Times American intelligence agencies has found out the involvement of Muhammed Bin Salman(MBS), the crown prince in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. But whether the involvement of MBS in this incident is direct or indirect is yet to be proven (E. Barnes, Rosenberg and Harris 2018).

When America follows a policy called the ‘America first’, there may not be any radical changes in the relations between United States and Saudi Arabia. This can be understood in the recent incident of murder of Khashoggi. All around the world criticized the Saudi government for its involvement in the murder. The Trump administration in the U.S also at initial stages criticised the Saudi government for its involvement in this incident. But later, changed its position. According to Trump Saudi Arabia is an important buyer of American weapons and exporter of oil. It is also an important ally in their fight against the rogue state Iran. For Trump, to remain as a partner implies the serving of U.S interests, the America first (Wright 2018). America has moved from its previously stated principles and support for democracy, justice and rights of minority through the incident. It was once the America which made interventions to establish the democracy and topple the dictatorship. But now it remains silent (Louis 2018).

## Conclusion

The relations between United States and Saudi Arabia is an important part of present day international relations. It is a dynamic and strange relationship between the regional hegemon and global hegemon. The relationship was not a sudden. But it evolved through a great process and ages. It survived in the oil boycott which triggered the global recession and 9/11 attacks. This shows that relationship will not be crumbled in small skirmishes. This is relationship that brings mutual benefits (Partrick 2016). The smooth and effective relationship is a necessity to establish peaceful atmosphere in the chaos driven Middle East. When Shah Reza Pahlavi was in reign, Iran went for rapid modernisation along with the large scale funding and other assistance from the America for the establishment of stability in the state. But it had triggered disturbances from the part of traditional, Iranian religious sects. It culminated in the overthrow of the regime(Dickens 2017). The same thing must be kept in the mind of American as well as Saudi rulers as the country is moving through a series of modernisation under Mohammed Bin Salman, the crown prince. The recent reactions on the murder of Jamal Khashoggi must be read in these premises. The transactions between U.S and Saudi Arabia on military and economic fields are also increasing at a large scale. Also shows trends to escalate the transactions between them in future.

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