

Personal Commitment and Shared Values: A New Chapter for US-Saudi Relations

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Since the historic meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Majesty King Abdulaziz Al Saud aboard the USS Quincy in 1945, the US-Saudi relationship has grown and strengthened, though we weathered a difficult period immediately post 9/11. However, we have passed through this challenge, and our relationship is now embarking on an exciting new chapter. Historic visits, first by Mrs. Laura Bush, then by President George W. Bush, gave new momentum to joint initiatives. New progress is building on the fine work we have pursued over many years. I am proud to lead our mission into a new era marked both by close, personal bonds and a shared, future-oriented vision.

Personal Contacts Cement a Common Vision

The October 2007 visit of First Lady Laura Bush to the Kingdom truly captivated the hearts and minds of Saudis. Her mission here, to launch a breast cancer awareness and research partnership, instantly earned her admiration from Saudis who appreciated the high-level support for an important humanitarian cause. Mrs. Bush's introduction to the Arab world through an Al-Arabiya interview in Riyadh, together with a highly publicized photo of her trying on a headscarf gift, won over the Saudi public. This personal, extremely well-received introduction set the stage for her husband's January 2008 visit.

President Bush's January visit with King Abdullah clearly showed the warmth and strength of the personal friendship between our leaders. The President and the King spent two unseasonably chilly days cementing their warm relationship, and pushing forward a shared vision of continued cooperation on economic issues, anti-terrorism and security initiatives, civil society reforms, and educational exchange and partnership. A steady stream of US government visitors, including the Vice President in March and several cabinet members, has continued and accelerated the pace of progress in so many areas. Key relationships have become the touchstone of our new era, and our colleagues at the working levels are ensuring the dynamism is taken to the front lines of our relations.

Legacy Energy Ties Spawn Modern Trade and Joint Venture Partnerships

Since the 1930s, with the first agreements to develop the Kingdom's energy resources, economic ties have spanned energy and infrastructure development to modern-day investment and commercial activities. Saudi Arabia is our largest trading and economic partner in the Middle East, and with hundreds of joint ventures, American companies are the largest group of foreign investors in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia's recent accession to the World Trade Organization will surely create further opportunities to broaden and deepen these ties.

The statistics behind our trade relationship are impressive. US exports to the Kingdom rose 36 percent in 2007, and Saudi Arabia is home to more than \$11.11 billion in US investments (2006). To sustain the dynamism yielding these results, we are working with our Saudi partners on several key areas of economic reform. A few examples include bilateral agreements that further open the economy, such as a Bilateral Investment Treaty, full Saudi integration into the international rules-based trade and investment system, and meaningful employment for the young Saudi population (60 percent of which are under 25 years of age) to ensure the next generation is participating in the current economic boom. Most importantly, we are working together to improve the safety and security of US citizens and US investments in Saudi Arabia.

A Shared Vision of a Peaceful, Secure Future

Saudi Arabia has assumed its leadership role in the Arab world, and is diligently working to advance both international and domestic initiatives that promote both regional and domestic security. We are working hand in hand with our Saudi partners in pursuit of this common vision.

Internationally, we are steadfast allies in pursuing peaceful solutions to regional conflicts. We may not agree on every point, and we may not achieve progress according to a US timetable, but we are closely collaborating with Saudi Arabia to improve conditions in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Iraq, and other flashpoints. Saudi Arabia is closely following security dynamics in the Gulf, and the Kingdom genuinely wants peaceful relations with their across-the-Gulf neighbor Iran. Development and humanitarian initiatives are tangible areas of shared interest, and we will continue our coordination in these areas.

Domestically, we have worked to forge partnerships with the Government of Saudi Arabia to confront the threat of terrorism. Our partners are eager, and our cooperation in key areas, such as terrorism finance and bilateral counterterrorist cooperation, together with Saudi efforts to effectively address the root causes of terrorism, are yielding tangible results. The Saudis continue to make announcements on their progress, as measured through hundreds of arrests and convictions of terrorists and their supporters, and the government has gained the confidence of the Saudi public for their efforts. As the government and key influencers, such as the religious establishment, have repeatedly and publicly condemned acts of terrorism, the population has turned against groups who previously may have enjoyed greater support. Sustained Saudi government efforts have eroded the terrorists' capabilities, but we both see the challenge of terrorism as long term. We continue to work together to isolate and combat the most committed extremists.

Citizen Participation is Moving Towards a Brighter Future for All

King Abdullah has embarked on a wide-ranging reform agenda that includes significant civil society reforms; a national dialogue program; and broad modernization of the education system ranging from curriculum reviews to the establishment of state-of-the-art education cities. Small steps forward, at pace with cultural traditions, are slowly

making way for change. The consultative council, the Majlis al-Shoura, is taking on tough issues like judiciary reform and terrorism finance, and the media now criticize the previously off-limits Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Over the past three years, young people have gathered under the auspices of the King Abdulaziz National Dialogue Center to discuss civic participation issues. Saudi Arabia has a newly-formed Human Rights Commission, and recently opened its doors to Human Rights Watch.

Public Diplomacy Activities Support These Reforms and Build Bridges

We work with government officials and grassroots activists to encourage reform and national dialogue initiatives, and to cultivate the next generation of leaders and interlocutors. We're making every effort to get out into the "hard-to-reach" areas outside of the big cities. This includes places such as the conservative Qassim region which I visited in March, and Muslim-only cities of Mecca and Medina where our officers have recently done programs. Robust paper and digital outreach through book donations to public libraries broadens our interaction with Saudis. Our first-ever participation in the popular Riyadh International Book Fair, wider use of innovative Web-based technology like web chats and pod casts, and other creative programs are ensuring we transcend gender and geographic barriers.

Education Exchange Shapes the Next Generation of Leaders

We estimate 15,000 Saudi students are now studying in the United States, a large increase from post-9/11 levels of 4,000. Many of these students are recipients of King Abdullah Scholarships, which shows the strong government support for educating its future leaders, and the value placed on a US educational experience. We continue to sponsor an active Fulbright exchange program and offer many opportunities for students and mid-level professionals to participate in educational and professional enrichment programs. Our consular section continues to streamline and facilitate visa processing, and engages in regular outreach to help ensure serious students are able to pursue an experience in the United States. Participants in these education and cultural programs return to join the tens of thousands of alumni of US universities and programs who fill the senior ranks in both the private and public sectors.

The Road Ahead: Continued Engagement, Joint Efforts and Personal Relations

After navigating a period of strained relations post 9/11, we are again moving together toward an exciting future. More Americans are coming here to participate in our programs, and are interested and eager to get to know the real Saudi Arabia. Many more Saudis are going to the United States to get to know us and our culture. Just as importantly, they share their culture with us. This personal engagement, combined with truly genuine friendship and commitment at the highest levels of our leadership, has created the conditions for better joint cooperation at all levels. I am honored to serve our country in Saudi Arabia during this critical period in our bilateral relations, and I look forward to continuing to shepherd this important relationship into the future.