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*The United States and Saudi Arabia alliance
in the 21st century.
The presidency of George W. Bush, Barack
Obama and Donald Trump*

Abstract

The alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia has been in place for over seventy years, but the paradigms on which it is based have suffered numerous tensions in recent decades. The Saudi State and the House of Saud remain important political and economic partners of the US Administration in the Middle East and the Muslim world, although the differences between the two countries seem more apparent at the present time.

Under the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, there was a marked distancing from their Arab ally, due to the deep differences of interests on issues as sensitive as security and defence. In the first years of Donald Trump's mandate, relations with the Saudi Crown seem to have improved, through joint efforts to counter potential threats in the area. This article analyses the changes in the relationship between the two allies and the areas of disagreement in the regional agenda of both.

Key words

United States, Saudi Arabia, Middle East, Muslim world, defence

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Introduction

The relationship established between the United States and Saudi Arabia since 1945 is one of the most important alliances in the Middle East and even in the international community. Two states with such disparate political regimes have been able to preserve a complicated partnership despite the constant changes in the surrounding region. Although the many differences between the two sides are considerable, there is still a minimum consensus on safeguarding the principles of bilateralism, which in general terms has brought significant benefits to the US government and the Saudi monarchy for more than seventy years. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century has brought to light deep differences between the two and has led to a gradual distancing, requiring a redefinition of their respective strategies.

The relationship between the American power and the Saudi Arabian state is the result of a convergence of specific interests, which have prevailed in spite of upheavals and tensions in the regional scenario. The Saudi princes represent one of the most reliable interlocutors that the United States has in the area, while the White House has always represented the most prominent international support for the Arab nation. Without Washington's tacit support, the Saudis' survival on the throne and their leadership position in the Muslim sphere would have been less likely. Likewise, without Saudi Arabia's assistance, the Americans would not have been able to consolidate their country's influence in that difficult enclave, either during the Cold War or in later times of great uncertainty.

The alliance is usually characterised as an exchange of oil for military security, but it conceals more complex and constantly evolving principles. The United States approaches Saudi Arabia with the aim of finding both a trading partner and a political supporter, while the latter is emerging as a privileged energy supplier to the powerful US economy, which is helping to place it high on the US international agenda. The Saudis have used the singularities of their political and religious model to set themselves up as a useful tool capable of containing revolutionary currents in the region. As a result, they have been in close harmony with the security strategies of successive Republican and Democratic administrations, which have positioned them as an essential condition in terms of their national interests.

The alliance with the United States is of vital strategic importance to the Saudi Arabian regime, which is one of the central pillars on which the power of the Saudi royal family rests. The Saudi leadership not only regards the Americans as preferential investors and buyers, but also as key to the survival of the Saudi crown. In a difficult local context where conflicts occur and traumatic changes in power have taken place, the royal family has been able to turn this relationship into a further guarantee of stability and defence of the monarchy. The Americans' need for a safe and clear reference point in the area has prompted them to provide unwavering support to the ruling family.

Relations started to become more complicated after September 11, 2001, and this trend of deterioration and mistrust intensified in the wake of the Arab spring. The rise

of jihadism and terrorist attacks on a global scale put the spotlight on Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism and the type of networks they maintain with certain groups. The issue of radicalism and security opened a deep rift between the Bush Administration and the Saudi crown. The situation became even more corrosive with the Iraq War in 2003 and the US plans for Iran. King Abdullah did not share the direct and belligerent strategy proposed by the White House, deeming the United States to no longer be an element of stability for the region. The Saudis felt delegitimised in the eyes of Arab public opinion on account of the actions of the American superpower.

Barack Obama's promises of change in foreign policy had a direct effect on regional dynamics. The Democratic president's interest in rapprochement with Iran and avoiding a nuclear escalation earned him the opposition of his main allies in the area. Saudi Arabia did not share the views of US diplomacy, believing that they would serve to strengthen the position of the Iranian regime. The Saudi kingdom began to ratify what had already happened years earlier with Bush, because the US was making decisions without taking into account its closest interlocutors. The Arab revolts of 2011 and the decision of the United States not to take an active part in the conflicts of some countries generated a tremendous climate of insecurity for most monarchies, who realised that the American force was no longer one of their most important supporters.

The standoff between the two allies appears to have been redressed somewhat under the presidency of Donald Trump, who is trying to revitalise close cooperation with Saudi Arabia. The harmony between both governments is leaving behind more than ten years of erosion and fracture in a historic bilateral relationship. The current US president and King Salman have made progress in bringing their positions closer by strengthening the cornerstones of the alliance. In economic matters, the United States continues to be one of the kingdom's most important trading partners. In the area of defence and security, Saudi Arabia's rearmament and modernisation programmes are largely supported by the American power. Although the main point of rapprochement between both sides is the congruence of political interests, above all, due to their concerns about the rise of Iran in the region.

This article starts from the premise that the first decades of the twenty-first century (2001-2020) represent a decisive period for the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, since the changes that have taken place at international and regional level, together with the transformations in the national policies of both countries, are making the interests of the two allies less and less congruent and compatible. Despite the recent efforts of Donald Trump and King Salman to improve the climate of understanding and collaboration, the priorities of the governments for the Middle East and the Muslim sphere are in many respects different. The presidencies of George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Barack Obama (2009-2017) marked a turning point in this alliance, giving rise to a series of failures and frictions that demand a redefinition of the Saudi-American relationship.

History and cornerstones of the alliance

The relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia represents an encounter between the greatest world superpower of the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and one of the most significant references in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Throughout more than seventy years, bilateralism has evolved both in the form of its development and the content of their common agenda. During this long period, there have been moments of close collaboration and harmony, but also moments of confrontation and disagreement. The peculiarity derived from the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama is that the Saudi-American alliance seems to have been consigned to a phase of limited mutual trust. Despite the efforts of Trump and King Salman, the alliance is beginning to show limitations that are proving very difficult to overcome.

The rise and maintenance of this partnership cannot be fully understood without taking into account the circumstances of each country, the region and international society. In 1932, after ten years of incessant tribal strife, Saudi Arabia's Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud achieved the reunification of the kingdom under a single crown. From that moment, the House of Saud took full control of the central territories of the Arabian Peninsula surrounding Mecca and Medina. The modern Saudi state emerged under the political authority of the royal family and according to the religious precepts of Wahhabism¹, which is a minority current of Islam that was established as official in the country². The monarch's efforts were focused on consolidating his internal power and gaining the trust of foreign powers. In this sense, already at the end of the thirties, the monarchy had begun to authorise the first oil explorations to be undertaken by British and American companies.

Until the end of the Second World War, the Saudi kingdom's contact with the outside world were to a large extent limited to mainland Britain, whose protectorates extended over the Gulf, and some American investors who were beginning to explore for oil in the eastern region of the country. Saudi Arabia's international policy began to change dramatically after the meeting between King Abdulaziz and President Roosevelt in February 1945 in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake. The Americans had approached the House of Saud with the purpose of gaining access to the area³. The Saudis viewed the US as an emerging hegemonic hub, whose support could well be essential to the interests of the crown, which at the time were centred on internal stability and avoiding external aggression. Initial meetings focused on commercial exchange based on oil and gas, foreign investment and technology transfer, as well as agreed political strategies for the region.

1 On the subject of Saudi state building and Wahhabism, see: HOUSE, K.E. (2012): *On Saudi Arabia. Its people, past, religion, fault lines and future*; VALENTINE, S.R. (2015): *Force and fanaticism. Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and beyond*; COMMINS, D. (2006): *The Wahhabi mission and Saudi Arabia*; MOULINE, N. (2014): *The clerics of Islam religious authority and political power in Saudi Arabia*.

2 BASKAN, Birol; WRIGHT, Steven. «Seeds of change: comparing state-religion relations in Qatar and Saudi Arabia». *Arab Studies Quarterly*. Vol 33, N.º 2. Spring 2011, pp. 96-111.

3 BOWMAN, Bradley L. «Realism and idealism: US policy toward Saudi Arabia, from the Cold War to today». *Parameters* 35, 4. Winter 2005/2006: pp. 91-105.

The origin of the alliance stems from the security needs of the Saudi princes to have strong allies to ensure the survival of the regime and the demands of a growing U.S. economy to expand markets and diversify sources of supply. But the onset of the Cold War soon shifted the relationship into a more political one, accelerating the conformity of objectives between the two countries. During the 1950s, the Middle East efforts of Presidents Truman (1945-1953) and Eisenhower (1953-1961) focused on stemming the expansion of Soviet influence in the region. The pan-Arabist movements and the current led by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt⁴ posed a threat to both the US and Saudi Arabia. Both governments were working together to prevent revolutionary aspirations from undermining their aims. The emergence of new socialist republics in the region represented a direct threat to the Saudi Arabian crown's political and social model. For Washington it meant a serious danger of losing its influence in a key geostrategic area.

In 1953, the King and founder of the modern state, Abdulaziz bin Saud, died, and his son Saud bin Abdulaziz succeeded him, whose reign was marked by serious economic problems and socialist revolts in the surrounding area. He was accused within his own family and among Saudi power circles of being somewhat ineffectual and lacking in leadership⁵. In 1964, the monarch was forced to resign under pressure from the political and religious establishment. His brother Faisal took over and introduced major reforms in the kingdom's security and foreign policy. The struggle between the Saudi princes affected relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia, since Washington refused to interfere in such matters. The Americans were only demanding stability and internal security from the Saudis, regardless of who was in power.

King Faisal was to rule the country until his death in 1975. He is considered the mastermind of Saudi Arabia's ambitious regional policy, setting out the principles and objectives that were later developed by his brothers Khalid and Fahd during the 1980s and 1990s. Under his reign, the first major note of dissension between the US and Saudi Arabia was struck due to the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the oil crisis in the following month⁶. The Saudis looked upon oil and gas not as mere sources of wealth but as levers of political power. Faced with the vacuum created by Nasser's disappearance, the Saudis took up the cause against Israel as their own, and added a strong religious component to it.

Saudi Arabia still recognised its significant political, economic and defensive dependence on the United States, but used the problematic situation generated by the 1973 crisis to try to restore balance to the relationship with Washington. The Palestinian-Is-

4 BRONSON, Rachel. «Understanding US-Saudi relations» in Aarts, Paul. y Nonneman, Gerd. (eds.). *Saudi Arabia in the balance. Political economy, society, foreign affairs*. London: Hurst Publishers. C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd. 2006. Second impression, pp. 378-380.

5 AL-RASHEED, Madawi. «Mystique of monarchy: the magic of royal succession in Saudi Arabia» in Al-Rasheed, Madawi. (ed.). *Salman's legacy. The dilemmas of a new era in Saudi Arabia*. London: Hurst & Company 2018, pp. 52-54.

6 MIRZADEGAN, Amin. «Nixon's folly. The White house and the 1970s oil price crisis». *The Yale Historical Review*. An undergraduate publication. Spring 2016, pp. 40-57.

raeli conflict was to become, from that date onwards, the main point of contention between the two allies. At the end of his mandate, President Nixon (1969-1974) sought to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia, which he considered a priority partner, as expressed in the “twin pillars” strategy⁷. The regime of the Shah of Persia and the Crown of the Saud became the two fundamental allies on which Washington could rely to secure its economic and political interests. The White House intended to constitute a cross-cutting axis of countries that would isolate the Middle East from currents of change.

The Iranian revolution in 1979 was a traumatic event for the whole region. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the fall of the Shah represented a direct threat to Saudi Arabia and the USA. The Saudi kingdom was faced with a new political and religious regime whose ideas were in competition with the ideology of Riyadh. The American power lost one of its closest allies and had to face a government with a strong anti-imperialist stance. These circumstances led to a strengthening of ties between Casa Saud and its counterparts in Washington. The leaders of the White House focused greater attention on the needs of the Arab monarchies, in order to prevent another potential partner from succumbing to unrest and losing influence.

Two events occurred in the 1980s that would strengthen ties between Saudis and Americans, taking the alliance to a greater level of cooperation. On the one hand, President Jimmy Carter established a new doctrine in 1980 stating that the US would use all necessary means, including military force, to protect its interests. This proclamation served to reaffirm the commitment of the Western power in the defence of Arab monarchies such as Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the war in Afghanistan between Soviet troops and Mujahideen rebels was projecting a different international dimension from Saudi Arabia. The kingdom changed from being a mere ideological retaining wall in the region to become a promoter and protector of Islamist views, which initially were also backed by the White House and the Pentagon.

US tolerance of the Saudi policy of using religion to gain ground among Islamic communities resulted in Saudi Arabia's leadership not being limited to the Middle East. The Americans were faced with a regional ally but also with a self-proclaimed leader in the Arab and Muslim sphere. The war between Iraq and Iran during much of the 1980s identified the regimes of Saddam Hussein and that of the Ayatollahs as the greatest threats. The creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981, formed by Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait, represented an area of direct influence for Saudi Arabia, where it could exercise a predominant status, while for the White House it meant a security area with dynasties favourable to its presence in the area⁸. The creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council

7 FÜRTIG, Henner. «Conflict and cooperation in the Persian Gulf: the interregional order and US policy». *Middle East Journal* Vol 61, N.º 4. Autumn, 2007, pp. 627-640.

8 ALLISON, Marissa. «U.S. and Iranian strategic competition: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states» in Center for Strategic & International Studies. CSIS. Burke Chair in Strategy. December 6, 2010. Available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition-3>.

(GCC) in 1981, formed by Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait, represented a sphere of direct influence for Saudi Arabia, where it could exercise a leading role, while for the White House it was a security area with dynasties that favoured its presence in the area.

The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 by Saddam Hussein's army and the Gulf War in 1991 almost coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The victory of the international coalition represented the consecration at that time of the United States as the greatest world power and protector of its allies in the Middle East. However, in Saudi Arabia the most conservative and rigorous sectors called into question the relationship with Washington⁹. Strong opposition to the installation of Western troops in the country emerged in Saudi society, despite the fact that their presence there was to defend against possible aggression from Iran or Iraq. The Saudi princes were forced to reformulate their alliance with the American hegemon. Since then, the Wahhabi kingdom has become the only Arab monarchy in the Gulf that does not officially allow the establishment of foreign troops and military bases in its territory.

At the end of the 20th century, Saudi Arabia began a progressive modernisation of its military capabilities. After the crisis with the Iraqi regime, the Saud crown realised that it was necessary to advance its autonomy in the field of defence and to reduce its high dependency on the United States in this area. In this sense, the Saudi Arabian crown had practically consigned such issues to US military protection since the end of World War II, focusing almost exclusively on internal security mechanisms. However, this trend began to change in the 1990s and is also reflected in Riyadh's interest in diversifying its international relations. A process of expanding trade and political partnerships commenced both in Europe and among the emerging Asia-Pacific economies. The American power remained among the preferential circles on the foreign agenda¹⁰, but it would no longer be the only actor seeking to support the regime in order to consolidate its power. The twenty-first century ushered in the beginning of a period marked by the rapid deterioration of the alliance.

Mistrust with George W. Bush

The presidency of George W. Bush had a decisive effect on the regional status quo and on bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia. Its consequences conditioned Barack Obama's political vision and also the relationship that the countries of the region would have with the US in the subsequent period. The measures adopted during those eight years were conditioned by the White House's urgent need to respond to the

9 POLLACK, Kenneth M. «Securing the Gulf». *Foreign Affairs* Vol, 82. Number 4. Jul- Aug 2003, pp. 2-16.

10 HERNÁNDEZ, David. *La política exterior de Arabia Saudí tras la Primavera Árabe en Oriente Medio. Objetivos y estrategias regionales (2011-2016)*. Tesis doctoral. Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid 2019. Available at: <https://eprints.ucm.es/51661/>.

emerging challenges of the new century. A secondary effect of the US strategy for the Middle East was the erosion of its alliance with the Saudi kingdom, which no longer trusted its historical partner to preserve some of its interests in the area. The American power began to emerge as a proactive and transforming factor in the region, attempting to promote certain changes in the Arab and Muslim sphere in accordance with its interests, although this was to generate growing unease among its allies.

9/11 marked a turning point in US foreign policy and priorities in its relations with most Arab countries¹¹. Security cooperation became a cornerstone of the multilateralism implemented by Washington. A reductionist operational framework was presented in which there was no room for ambivalence, and two types of fronts were set up: allies and members of the US bloc and those considered to be propellers of the axis of evil. Nuances and possible discrepancies were subjugated to a policy driven by US criteria and the defence of principles that should be globalised. Monarchies such as Saudi Arabia were left in a complicated situation since the main US initiatives for the area contravened some of their regional objectives, weakening their status as Arab and Muslim leaders.

The Bush Administration recognised that the causes of the rise of international jihadism stemmed from the socio-political situation in the Middle East¹². The region became a priority for the United States' own security. The rationale was that only direct involvement in local problems could solve growing radicalism and the terrorist threat. The approach taken was based on a Global War on Terror (GWOT), the concept of which was reflected in President Bush's "Freedom at War with Fear" speech in the House of Representatives on September 20, 2001, where he stated that the strategy would not be limited exclusively to combating Al Qaeda, but would be extended to all organisations and institutions that supported this kind of player and that all available resources would be used to that end. The degree of involvement of each government in these proposals would condition how their American counterparts would engage with them. Saudi Arabia had certain reservations about the great ideas presented by Washington, since they could lead to a generalised criminalisation of the different currents of Islam, just as the military presence of the United States would have destabilising effects on the region.

George W. Bush's ultimate goals were to put an end to those regimes that could sponsor terrorists and extremists and those that posed a threat to US and allied interests. Iraq and Iran fell directly into this category, which placed them at the centre of pressure from the international community. The Americans also introduced a democratic and economic axiom into their regional security strategy. Stability does not only

11 AL-QAHTANI, Fawz. «Continuity and change in United States' foreign policy towards Gulf region after the events of September 11th, 2001. A comparative vision between the Bush and Obama administrations». REPS, Review of Economics and Political Science Vol 4, N.º 1. 2019, pp. 2-19.

12 MARKAKIS, Dionysius. US democracy promotion in the Middle East. The pursuit of hegemony. Routledge. London: Taylor & Francis Group 2016, pp. 64-68.

mean putting an end to terrorism and the most conflictive regimes, it also requires improving local governance and facilitating political and social models where democratic syntheses similar to the American one prevail¹³. The premises employed by the United States directly attacked systems based on totally different ideological theses, such as that of Saudi Arabia.

The United States and Saudi Arabia had had their differences in previous times, but these were disagreements that were overcome and did not weaken the alliance. Under the Bush presidency, divergences on central issues were not channelled and gave rise to a climate of estrangement. Jihadism, Palestine, military action in Iraq and measures against Iran became apparently insurmountable issues for both sides. In this sense, the presence of many Saudi Arabian nationals in terrorist cells, such as those that attacked on 9/11, damaged the crown's external image and confidence vis-à-vis its Western partners. First, the country itself and the royal family were threatened by such groups, which considered the monarchy to be an enemy of the Jihadist cause. Second, the policy of funding Muslim communities, mosques and madrassas was called into question by the US and other governments that directly accused Saudi Wahhabism.

The image of the Saudi state was seriously damaged by the persistence of jihadism. The US administration began putting pressure on them to improve cooperation in the fight against terrorism and not to encourage factions of dubious reputation. The problem was that the Wahhabi current was singled out, since its rigorous and conservative discourse was accused of serving as a moral inducement for many radicalised groups¹⁴. The Saudi Arabian government was faced with the troubling reality that the pillars on which its power rested were colliding. On the one hand, the princes were unable to break away from Wahhabism, which represented the essential tool for legitimising their authority. On the other hand, they had to ensure alignment with the US, their historical ally and the main international supporter of the royal family.

A profound debate arose among the most prominent figures in the clan in relation to their links to the most radical elements of Wahhabism and their American association. A bloc of Saudi princes emerged, led by Abdullah and his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef, that advocated strengthening a foreign policy more closely linked to the United States, promoting a series of reforms in the system that would gradually facilitate the disengagement of official bodies from these currents. Moreover, jihadism itself was to hit Saudi territory at a distance¹⁵, such as the series of attacks on residential areas in Riyadh and the headquarters of Western companies in May and November 2003.

13 FLORIG, Dennis. «Hegemonic overreach vs imperial overstretch». *Review of International Studies* Volume 36, N.º 4. Oct 2010, pp. 1103-1119.

14 CHOKSY, Carol E.B.; Choksy, Jamsheed K. «The Saudi connection: Wahhabism and global jihad». *World Affairs Journal*. May/June 2015. Available at: <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/saudi-connection-wahhabism-and-global-jihad>.

15 HEGGHAMMER, Thomas. «Islamist violence and regime stability in Saudi Arabia». *International Affairs* 84: 4. 2008, pp. 701-715.

The monarchy's efforts to combat terrorism brought it closer to the Bush Administration's theses in the fight against terrorism, presenting it not only as a contest between civilisations, but also between Muslims.

However, the White House no longer saw its Arab partner as a bulwark of security and stability, being inevitably linked to jihadist terrorism. During his reign, King Abdullah persevered in improving collaboration and cooperation in this regard, but his efforts were hampered by disagreements over the Palestinian question, Iraq and the Ayatollah regime. The same Saudi monarch was unable to advance the 2002 peace plan or Arab Initiative promoted by Saudi Arabia and supported mostly by the Arab League¹⁶, which proposed the recognition of two states and the normalisation of relations with Israel. Riyadh was particularly opposed to such a US proposal, which linked its perspective on the problem to the premises defended by the executives Ariel Sharon (2001-2006) and Ehud Ólmert (2006-2009).

Discontent over Saudi Arabia's unproductive efforts to place the Palestinian issue on George W. Bush's agenda grew with the strategy followed by Iraq¹⁷. The crown did not support the action against Hussein because it appreciated that the risks of a power vacuum in that state would be detrimental to the region. Besides, there was the possibility that Iran could take advantage of the circumstances to expand its influence in the region. Moreover, the Saudis could not put up with such interference in the face of Arab public opinion, which was mostly against what was branded an imperialist action. The Saudi leaders were again faced with the challenge of balancing the objectives of their Arabist and Sunni discourse with the continued existence of the American alliance, highlighting the contradictions of their political and religious programme.

The Iranian energy programme was regarded with mistrust. Both governments shared the concern that Iran would provoke a nuclear race, but there was no desire from Riyadh for violence to spread further afield, as had happened in Iraq after the disastrous post-war period. These circumstances led the monarchy to disassociate itself from the aggressive policy of the Bush presidency, promoting a détente with its Persian counterparts, simply to reduce tensions in the local scenario¹⁸. The credibility that the Saudis had afforded the US for so long was called into question. With its discretionary and overbearing behaviour, in the eyes of the crown the United States had ceased to be a source of certainty and stability.

16 Blanchard, Christopher.M. «Saudi Arabia: background and U.S. relations» in *CRS Report for Congress*. Congressional Research Service. The library of Congress. April 22, 2016. Available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1017814.pdf>.

17 BAXTER, Kylie; AKBARZADEH, Shahram. *U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The roots of anti-americanism*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2008, pp. 170-172.

18 OTTAWAY, Marina. «Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: the elusive regional policy» in *Carnegie Papers. Middle East Program*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Number 105. November 2009. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/iran_us_gulfi.pdf.

Alienation with Barack Obama

The relationship was at a very low point when the Democratic president succeeded Bush. Saudi Arabia had stopped trusting its American allies because of its aggressive and unilateral stance in Iraq and on Iran. In Washington's circles of power, there remained a deteriorating image of the Saudi crown, which was associated with jihadist radicalism and political authoritarianism. King Abdullah thought that bilateralism could return to positive channels with the new leader, but reality soon revealed that the US and the Saudi kingdom were still on completely different political planes. The disagreements revolved around two fundamental issues in the region: Iran and the Arab Spring, which marked a course of numerous disagreements and growing tensions between the two.

Barack Obama proposed a doctrine far removed in ideology from the decisions made by George W. Bush, but with respect to Saudi Arabia he came up with some points of agreement. The American leader differed from his predecessor in the way he tackled the problem of terrorism, the relevance he gave to the Middle East in his foreign policy and the type of leadership he sought to develop. GWOT was excluded, and the White House was considering a withdrawal of its military forces to enclaves such as Afghanistan and Iraq. American diplomacy was beginning to focus on the Asian-Pacific region¹⁹, which was regarded as the key area for the main economic, political and security objectives of the United States on the international stage. The hegemonic and dominant attitude of the previous Administration made way for foreign action that sought spaces for dialogue, allowing for the lowering of tensions and the reduction of wear and tear on US leadership.

Obama's speech at Cairo University in 2009 reflected the kind of commitments the U.S. executive was willing to make in the region²⁰. The president wanted to put aside the belligerent approach of the Bush strategy in order to focus on new ways of working. The hegemonic multilateralism of his predecessor had only led to worsening levels of insecurity and instability in the Middle East. It was necessary to reduce pressure on Iran in order to improve confidence margins. This approach received the approval of a large part of his Arab allies, although the possibility of dialogue with the Ayatollah regime raised suspicions in governments, including the Saudi leadership, which above all wanted to prevent Iran from re-emerging as a relevant actor in the region.

The Arab Spring forced Barack Obama to review the principles of his doctrine. The United States was not going to interfere in the internal affairs of the countries in the

19 KITCHEN, Nicholas. «The contradictions of hegemony: the United States and the Arab Spring». Kitchen, Nicholas. (ed.). *After the Arab Spring. Power shift in the Middle East?* LSE Ideas special report. SRO11, May 2012. Available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-After-the-Arab-Spring.pdf>.

20 TOVAR, Juan. «¿Una estrategia coherente para una región en cambio? La política exterior de la Administración Obama y la Primavera Árabe». *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, N.º 36. October 2014, pp. 29-50.

area, nor was it going to promote political transformations as it did in the past. But the massive movements in countries such as Egypt, Syria and Libya put the Americans in the position of having to redefine their role in the new context²¹. American concerns focused on deciding how much responsibility they should take. In the case of Egypt, whether it should continue to support the allied regime or meet democratic demands. In the Syrian or Libyan territory, it was a question of what kind of support would it give to the opponents and to what extent would it be willing to participate in these conflicts. The response on each of these fronts was bound to be disappointing for Saudi Arabia and most Arab allies.

US confidence in Saudi Arabia was already damaged by suspicions of jihadism and compounded by the Obama Administration's misgivings over reviving the alliance with Riyadh²², as they no longer perceived it as an element of certainty and security for the region. The work of the kingdom for decades as a retaining wall had ceased to have any meaning. The usefulness of sustaining such a monarchy became questionable. The Saudi Arabian princes acted in general terms as counter-revolutionary elements in 2011, but they did not manage to completely stabilise the region, and therefore were no longer so indispensable. Their support for certain factions in Libyan and Syrian territory placed their American allies in an awkward position. The White House did not want to link its regional policy to Saudi premises or to support certain actors whose aims were totally distant from the objectives of the US, which in the wake of the Arab Spring focused on trying to reduce the levels of conflict in the area and prevent the rise of the most radical religious and political currents.

Obama ended up taking the same line as Bush on the Saudi Arabian issue. In view of the tenor of events, the president tried to limit the relationship with the monarchy as much as possible, avoiding an absolute rupture but without conditioning his foreign policy on Saudi actions. King Abdullah II also promoted a certain distancing from the Americans because he found the US strategy inadequate. There are three moments that reinforce the Saudi prince's belief in the urgency of taking independent action. The fall of Mubarak in Egypt in February 2011, the intensification of the conflict in Syria from 2012 and the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme in 2015 are the central issues that separated Saudi Arabia from Washington's decisions and interests. There was a fracture in bilateral relations because both parties no longer considered the other as an indispensable piece of regional stability and a preferential ally in the most relevant issues.

Mubarak's dismissal set an extraordinary and traumatic precedent for Arab monarchies. The United States decided not to act on behalf of a historic ally, leading other

21 GERGES, Fawaz A. *The end of America's momento? Obama and the Middle East*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, pp. 108-109.

22 GOLDBERG, Jeffrey. «The Obama doctrine. The U.S. president talks through his hardest decisions about America's role in the world». *The Atlantic*. April 2016 ISSUE. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

regimes to fear a similar political end²³. Saudi Arabia discovered that its alliance with the American power was no longer a guarantee of protection for the Saud family. This meant that one of the original principles of the alliance between the two countries was not being adhered to, as Washington seemed unwilling to ensure the security of its partner. The Saudi monarchy could definitely no longer expect the full backing of the White House, so it accelerated its plans to improve its resources and capabilities in security areas. The ultimate goal of the Saudi strategy was to minimise the political and defensive dependence it continued to have on the American power, presenting the kingdom as an increasingly autonomous power.

The diverging stances on the crises arising from the Arab Spring also translated into conflicts in Libya and Syria. At first, both governments had a common interest in favouring the fall of the Gaddafi and Al Asad regimes, which for decades had been two powerful forces critical of Western presence and Saudi hegemony. However, contradictions emerged regarding how to deal with the opposition groups. The attack on the US consulate in Benghazi in 2012 by Libyan Salafist factions increased Washington's restraint in its engagement with the revolts²⁴ while Saudi Arabia showed strong support for rebel factions, aligned with the Wahhabi discourse. The dissimilarity in priorities between the two allies meant that action plans were developed separately and with little collaboration.

The core issue that fractured the US-Saudi alliance was the nuclear deal with Iran in July 2015. The Saudis had initially rejected violent action against the Iranian state as Bush had intended, since that could mean more instability in the environment. However, neither did the Arab monarchy want dialogue between the foreign powers and the Iranian regime to serve Tehran as a way of bolstering its status as a major player in the region²⁵, thus directly weakening the Saudi leadership. The pact finally signed tacitly granted special recognition to the Iranians, excluding the rest of the neighbouring countries from the solution of the conflict. The Saudi leaders changed their perspective on the matter and began to press for a shift in the US position, establishing a surprising connection with Netanyahu's Israeli executive, who was very critical of the rapprochement with Tehran.

The rift between the two sides was evident in the first months of Salman's reign and Obama's last year in office. The new monarch and the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman were trying to be more decisive in their foreign policy, contravening the de-

23 QUANDT, William B. «U.S. Policy and the Arab revolutions of 2011». Gerges, Fawaz A. (ed.). *The New Middle East. Protest and revolution in the Arab World*. New York: Cambridge University Press 2014, pp. 422-424.

24 HUBER, Daniela. «A pragmatic actor- The US response to the Arab Uprisings». *Journal of European Integration*, 37 (1). 2014, pp. 57-75.

25 WEHREY, Frederic. «Saudi-US discord in a changing Middle East». *Research Paper*. Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, July 2015. Available at https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/SaudiUS_Discord_in_a_Changing_Middle_East.pdf.

cisions made by their American counterparts in the region. The absence of the Saudi leadership from the meeting between the Gulf monarchies and their US ally at Camp David in 2015²⁶, revealed the stark gap that separated the two countries. In September 2016, the US Congress ratified the law approved in the Senate in May of the same year, which allowed the victims of the 9/11 attacks to denounce in court any organisation or state accused of covering up terrorism. The White House opposed this measure, aware that it would further damage relations with the Saudi House. However, the political panorama in both countries confirmed that the alliance between the Saudi state and the American power was much weakened.

Reconciliation with Donald Trump

During the 2008 election campaign, Barack Obama claimed that he would introduce major changes in US foreign policy, leaving behind the more controversial approaches of George W. Bush. Upon arriving in the White House, the Democratic president attempted to change the strategy inherited from his predecessor in office, although the Arab Spring marked out some of his expectations for the region. In the run-up to the 2016 elections, Donald Trump was very critical of the international action of former leaders, placing special emphasis on the issue of Iran and the fight against terrorism. The US had been unable to maintain a coherent and lasting programme for the Middle East, as it had been subject to the varied ideological conditioning and perceptions of threat of each administration.

The profound differences in the way the three presidents have acted have resulted in the national image being branded as unpredictable and volatile. The Arab allies and Saudi Arabia have been forced to formulate new strategies that are not so dependent on the US variable, restricting issues of cooperation between the two parties²⁷, as there has been no way of knowing what kind of commitment and involvement the American power would adopt. The ambivalence emanating from Washington regarding its involvement in regional dynamics has given rise to greater independence of action for the regimes. The actors most opposed to American hegemony and their main partners are finding fewer obstacles to undertaking their own initiatives without having to consider the American response.

For Bush, the priorities in the Middle East were the fight against terrorism and overthrowing those regimes that posed a threat to regional security. He focused on Al Qaeda networks and religious radicalism, the fall of Saddam Hussein and the ex-

26 LEGRANZI, Matteo. «Shaking things up: Gulf security after the Iran deal». *INSSSL Defence Review 2017*. Published by: Institute of National Security Studies Sri Lanka 2017. Available at <http://www.nesa-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Defencereview.pdf#page=51>.

27 MASON, Robert. «Back to realism for an enduring U.S.-Saudi relationship». *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XXI, N.º 4. Winter 2014, pp. 32-44.

clusion of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For Barack Obama, stability meant reaching minimum agreements with the Iranians, curbing sectarian tensions in Iraqi territory and formulating a type of political cooperation that would make all states participants in possible solutions. The dichotomy between the two doctrines lay in the role that the US should assume. The United States acted as the predominant instigator of the local agenda until 2008. With the change of government it tried to claim a more consensual and flexible figure, which would help to reduce tensions, restricting their incidence and points of action.

Donald Trump seeks to amend the most elementary aspects of policies carried out in the past, but certain components of his perspective are influenced by the work done by the other two presidents. The current leader has taken the Bush administration's approach to tackling major regional problems, inferring the need for the US to play a proactive and energetic role on issues such as Iran, in order to assert its position of strength over the rest. Despite his misgivings regarding Barack Obama, he is also taking a more limited view of the issues facing the US government, leaving greater autonomy to his main allies in Middle Eastern affairs which he does not consider to be paramount.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States have returned to a climate of rapport during the Trump presidency, leaving behind the contradictions that arose with Bush and Obama²⁸. King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman had begun their reign strongly opposed to U.S. regional policy, but their criticisms were overshadowed by the fact that under the new administration the agenda was similar. The Saudis' goal will now be to maintain a close alliance with the White House on very concrete issues, while not demanding a higher level of involvement on other issues. Washington's aim is to stabilise a new regional axis with Israel, Egypt and Arab monarchies in order to face challenges that affect everyone equally, thus fuelling the polarisation of the area into a like-minded segment and the pro-Iranian current.

The alliance is being revived on two transcendental fronts: political status and security. One of Donald Trump's first official visits abroad was to the Saudi Kingdom in May 2017, which led to the signing of several defence contracts between the two countries. In this sense, the new US Administration reaffirmed the Saud House as one of its preferential interlocutors in the Arab world, while Riyadh regained Washington's support for its regional strategy. King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman have managed to keep the US as the most important international supporter of the crown and its foreign policy. The reforms undertaken by the young prince have clear support in the White House, despite recent controversies²⁹. The American superpower not only

28 AL-RASHEED, Madawi. «King Salman and his son: winning the USE, losing the rest». Al-Rasheed, Madawi (ed.). *Salman's legacy. The dilemmas of a new era in Saudi Arabia*. London: Hurst & Company 2018, pp. 236-238.

29 LIPPMAN, Thomas W.; COLE, Juan. «U.S.-Saudi relations in the Era of Trump and Mohammed bin Salman» in *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. January/February 2019. Available at <https://www.wrmea.org/2019-january-february/what-now-for-u.s.-foreign-policy-and-the-crown-prince.html>.

supports the institution of the entire royal family, but also specifically endorses the rise of the king's son and his most important initiatives, such as reform plans set out in the Saudi Vision 2030 Plan and his actions at local level, whether it be the war in Yemen or belligerence towards the Iranian hub.

Conformity of interests in the field of security is again demonstrated by the Iranian threat. Donald Trump has reiterated the belief that stability in the Middle East will not be fully guaranteed if a regime with Iranian characteristics persists in its plans. This type of proposal leads him to align himself with the requirements of Netanyahu's executive and the pressures of his Saudi partners³⁰. The White House and the Saudi Arabian crown are back working together on a regular basis because they believe they share the same enemy, sharing a common view of how to deal with the vicissitudes of this complex reality. Increased pressure on Iran is a way for the United States to reaffirm its authority and weaken a critical government. In the case of the Saudis, they want to reduce the margins of Shiite influence and once again establish themselves as the sole point of reference.

The connivance between Trump's plans and those of King Salman is limited exclusively to the erosion of Iranian power, while other notable aspects of regional dynamics are set aside. Saudi princes and American diplomats are trying to avoid issues that could generate friction between the two parties, such as the war in Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the intervention in Yemen. The alliance is gradually transforming itself into a sort of *ad hoc* coalition that only operates on specific issues. The intention of the two states is to recover a favourable climate of cooperation, but the evolution of local and international circumstances means that the Saudi kingdom and the Anglo-Saxon power are less and less dependent on each other.

Conclusion

The alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia was anchored in a common framework of interests and perceptions, which in some areas was broken under the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The American outreach to the nascent Saudi kingdom after World War II came in response to a need. The American power needed to establish allies in the area, which would serve to guarantee supplies to its economy and also contain communist expansion. The House of Saud then saw an opportunity to strengthen its international presence and safeguard the regime through foreign assistance. Bilateralism was developed in an effort to respond to the objectives of each party and under the principle of maximum trust and mutual assistance.

30 COOK, Steven A. «The Middle East is now split between red states and blue states» en *Foreign Policy*. July 8, 2019. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/08/the-middle-east-is-now-split-between-red-states-and-blue-states/>.

For more than fifty years, international and regional circumstances favoured close ties in the Saudi-American alliance, based on economic, political and defence cooperation. The conflicts, revolutions and transformations that occurred in the Middle East were viewed in a similar light by both countries. But the most significant events of the beginning of the twenty-first century have highlighted divergences on essential points. The Saudi Arabian kingdom and the United States no longer perceive the risks, threats and opportunities in the region in the same way, which means that their needs no longer have as much similarity and this has led to a distancing of priorities. For the White House, the Saudi partners are no longer a preferential ally, while the House of Saud is seeking to diversify its relations and reduce its dependence on the outside world.

The boost now being given to the relationship under Donald Trump's presidency will not succeed in reversing the previous years of mistrust and suspicion. The current US Administration shares the same political approach as the Saudi kingdom on certain regional issues. The two counterparts have their sights set on Iran and share the same perception of concern about it. However, the trajectory of US foreign policy is to focus increasingly on other parts of the world, reducing its presence in the Middle East. In fact, the isolationist vision of the current American leadership confirms the inclination in Washington not to become so intensely involved in local problems. The only elements driving renewed cooperation are the Iranian issue and the desire to amend the previous Obama doctrine.

King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman enjoy significant support for their foreign policy in the US Government, although this is nuanced and always linked to the concentration of forces against the common threat that is the Ayatollah regime. The Americans have not put obstacles in the way of Saudi military action in Yemen, the blockade established in Qatar or their interference in the internal politics of Lebanon or Iraq, but neither have they made Saudi Arabia's regional agenda their own. The current US administration is not so much concerned with pockets of instability or the kind of local order that might be established, but rather with reducing Iran's influence in the region. The Saudi princes continue to consolidate the independence of their foreign policy in light of this tolerance demonstrated by the US, which prefers not to undermine the recently recovered climate of goodwill.

The differences between the three US presidents with regard to Saudi Arabia relate to both content and form. For Bush, the alliance with the Arab monarchies and the Saudi crown was based on the principle of subsidiarity, by which the US undertook a series of actions in the region that the other countries were to join. Consensus and the search for common positions were relegated to a secondary plane, since what was intended to be applied was a hegemonic multilateralism where the other players had to adapt their premises to Washington's interests. Moreover, the former president's strategy included reinforcing pressure on the Saudis and the rest of the partners on such sensitive issues as security, the fight against terrorism and democratic principles. The White House believed that only with direct intervention would it be able to put an end to threats.

Barack Obama posed a totally different doctrine for the countries of the Middle East and the Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia. The Democratic president was seeking to abandon the hegemonic approach of his predecessor in favour of a more conciliatory approach based on dialogue. The purpose was none other than to regain the trust of his Arab allies and foster security margins in the area. The Saudi problem arose because during those years the American administration did not feel entirely comfortable under Abdullah and the early years of King Salman's rule. The very inflexible and authoritarian approach proposed by the Saudi princes did not fit in with the US programme objectives, which advocated a more cooperative and adaptive perspective to the new circumstances. The American power conceived the Saudi monarchy as a point of instability.

Donald Trump appeared at a time when the Saudi-American alliance was in a very delicate situation. The actions of the Bush administration meant that most Arab regimes no longer saw the US as a regional security enforcer. Differences between Obama and his Saudi counterparts led Washington to increasingly perceive the Wahhabi kingdom as an element of distortion and imbalance. The new President decided to leave behind these preconceptions and restore the trust of both parties by cooperating on common points, such as the strategy to be followed with respect to Iran and in the main local conflicts. In short, Trump's attitude towards Saudi Arabia consists in paying full attention to those areas in which both sides obtain high returns through cooperation, leaving aside any issues in which differences may arise. This marks the beginning of a new phase in which the alliance's framework is demarcated in order to ensure that it survives

The most obvious result of the problems that have arisen between the two countries is that Saudi Arabia has become more independent in its foreign policy, while the United States has lost its influence within Saudi circles of power. Bilateralism remains in place because both states still need each other to face challenges that affect them, but the nature of the relationship has been totally altered. On the one hand, the Middle East and the Saudi kingdom are no longer a major concern of US diplomacy. On the other hand, the American power no longer plays a special role in Saudi strategies, which is less mindful of its traditional ally. The Saud family is now seeking to safeguard its status as a regional leader without US protection.

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