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Bruce O. Riedel. *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017. xv + 251 pp. \$25.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8157-3137-5.

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In his latest work, *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR*, the Brookings Institute's (and longtime government analyst and policymaker) Bruce Riedel focuses on the US-Saudi relationship since 1945. Riedel's book comes at a rather precarious time in the relationship's history. Congressional and public outcry over Riyadh's ongoing war in Yemen and the October 2018 killing of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khoshoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul—which Saudi crown prince Muhammed bin Salman probably sanctioned according to the Central Intelligence Agency—have put the partnership on notice. On the other hand, relations between the White House and the royal family seem to be on solid footing, highlighting how much the relationship depends upon presidents and kings at any given moment. That dichotomy is exactly what Riedel focuses on. This book will almost certainly become a starting point for anyone who plans to study the unique American-Saudi relationship.

Riedel's main theme is straightforward, but no less difficult to manage for policymakers, and becomes apparent as the author traces the US-Saudi relationship over seventy years. Riedel states that "there is a basic conundrum at the core of the American relationship with Saudi Arabia. It has always been an uneasy alliance between two very different countries. America is a superpower democracy that aspires to be a tolerant home to a diverse multiethnic and multireligious population, all of whom are equal in the eyes of the law. Saudi Arabia is the world's last absolute monarchy and also is a theocracy with a fundamentalist religious faith, dominated by a Wahhabi clergy that is intolerant and suspicious of out-

siders" (p. xiii). The contradictions in the relationship have been ever-present. Riedel points out that this book is "not a diplomatic history of the relationship or a comprehensive study of all their interactions," but instead uses specific "case studies of interaction between American presidents and Saudi kings to illustrate the nature of the uneasy alliance," which the author succeeds in doing splendidly well (p. xiv). Those students or scholars looking for a more comprehensive picture of the relationship, a more detailed diplomatic history, or a closer snapshot of specific episodes, though, will ultimately need to turn to other works.[1]

Diving deeper into the contradictions inherent in the US-Saudi relationship, Riedel believes that "three fundamental issues hamper the relationship." And, "on these issues kings and presidents have basic disagreements about core goals and objectives. Interest and mutual accommodation can overlap, but it is difficult to find them. The three issues—the Israel-Palestine conflict; the role of Wahhabi Islam in Saudi policy at home and abroad; and the pursuit of political reform in the Arab world—are likely to be disruptive factors in the relationship in the years ahead and will require creative diplomacy to manage" (p. 190). The author pinpoints numerous occasions in which one, or a combination of these factors, has threatened the relationship. As Riedel points out, though, this also highlights the relationship's resiliency. No matter how bitter disagreements over the Palestinian issue or Iran, for instance, became, there has always been a larger issue—the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, or counterterrorism coordination—that has kept the nations together.

The Palestinian issue is the best example of a divergence between the two nations, but one that can also be set aside when seemingly more urgent matters arise. And, it was “present at the creation,” to borrow a book title from former secretary of state Dean Acheson. While the meeting between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al Saud created the partnership that would be based upon American security and Saudi flows of oil (and grew to include fighting communism and terrorism), it also contained a disagreement that has continued since—the issue of Israel and Palestine. FDR and Ibn Saud disagreed on the topic, and Truman’s quick recognition of Israel in 1948 might have doomed the relationship had the Kingdom not been so dependent upon the United States.

The issue flared again most vividly in 1973 with Washington’s backing of Tel Aviv in the October War. As Riedel points out, the Palestine issue and its salience also depends upon who holds the throne in Riyadh and how passionate they are on the issue. In 1973, with King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz and his intense passion for the Palestine issue ruling in the Kingdom, it led to an oil embargo that did “more damage to the American economy than the Soviet Union was able to do during the entire Cold War,” and also meant that the “Saudis had finally gotten the attention of the White House” (p. 186). While not a detailed account such as that found in Andrew Scott Cooper’s 2011 *The Oil Kings: How the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East*, Riedel captures the tensions in the relationship during the Nixon administration, the October War, and afterwards well. Camp David and its separate peace between Egypt and Israel again threatened the relationship in 1978 (along with what the Saudis saw as inept US handling of the Iran situation and an unwillingness to aid an ally), which the Soviet Union eventually saved when it invaded Afghanistan, giving Washington and Riyadh the chance to work together to hurt a common enemy.[2]

Riedel notes that “the 1990s were an era of strong relations between Riyadh and Washington, perhaps the strongest ever” due to victory over Saddam, and George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton’s determined efforts at an Israel-Palestine peace settlement (p. 130). But, by the end of the Clinton administration the relationship was on the rocks due to his epic peace failures in 2000. The Saudis then almost fundamentally changed the relationship in 2001 due to George W. Bush’s lack of interest in promoting a peace initiative. It took Bush’s shift in US policy to an overt backing of the two-state solution to calm the situation just as planes flew into the World Trade Center in

September 2001. Bush’s shift, new wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Saudi Arabia’s own internal reckoning with extremism shifted both nations’ focus.

The other major stumbling block in the relationship centers around Saudi Arabia’s decades long push for the Kingdom’s specific brand of Islam. Beginning with Faisal, Saudi kings have often actively worked to spread Wahhabi Islam both at home and abroad. In many instances this has been done in response to conservative unrest at home or in answer to regional issues such as the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. One important aspect of Riedel’s study is his early explanation of the Saudi kingdom’s origins and its influential ties with Wahhabism, which set the tone for much of the rest of the book. Riedel correctly points out that “the challenges posed by Saudi Arabia’s unique vision of Islam for the American partnership with the Kingdom are complex and have changed over time” (p. 195). While counterterrorism issues have, in more recent times, in many ways been the bright spot of cooperation between Riyadh and Washington, this cooperation also exists in a world in which the Saudis themselves have played a major role in the “development of the extreme views of Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi” (p. 195).

The final major issue that Riedel highlights has newer origins, but has been no less threatening for the partnership’s longevity. Political reform in the Arab world was an issue begun under George W. Bush, and then picked up during the Arab Spring by Barack Obama. To the Saudis, this is an existential threat to their hold on power. Bush’s calls for a campaign to bring democracy and freedom to the Middle East in his 2004 State of the Union address “was never turned into a serious policy initiative toward the region as a whole,” but it exacerbated an already tense relationship between Riyadh and Washington (pp. 147-148). Riedel intimately highlights how the Obama administration’s push for reform in the region with the advent of the Arab Spring, especially in Egypt and Bahrain, caused serious friction with the Saudis.

President Donald J. Trump’s zealous courting of Saudi Arabia has stemmed many of these underlying tensions for the moment, though, according to Riedel. Trump’s May 2017 visit to the Kingdom contained “no mention of human rights, democracy, or political reform,” with the president leaving any troubling issues undiscussed as the two sides focused on “forging a new strategic partnership for the twenty-first century.” In Riedel’s view, “the Saudis played Trump like a fiddle” (pp. 178-79).

There is no doubt that the US-Saudi partnership formed in 1945 around American security and the continued free flow of Saudi oil was important over the course of the past seventy years, remains so today, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. But, history and current issues, which Riedel deftly highlights, also describe a relationship fraught with deep inconsistencies and difficult periods, which will also continue for the foreseeable future. Riedel notes that these difficulties in the relationship, and the fact that American presidents and Saudi kings have been able to work through them, “underscore[] its fundamental importance and resiliency” (p. 188). Ultimately, though, even through successes such as the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan and the defeat of Saddam in Kuwait, Riedel believes Saudi itself perpetuates a conundrum: “Superficially, then, it appears Saudi Arabia is a force for order in the region, one that is trying to prevent chaos and disorder. But in the long run, by trying to maintain an unsustainable order enforced by a police state, the Kingdom may, in fact, be a force for chaos” (pp. 197-98). Riedel was speaking about Saudi policy toward the Arab Spring in this context, but one could also in many ways extend it back in time to encompass the entirety of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Having been a student of Saudi Arabia and a player in many of these events over the past few decades, Riedel is uniquely qualified to write this history. His insider accounts of more recent issues are invaluable in a landscape where historians will have to wait years or even decades for the declassification of records. The author was also given access to George H. W. Bush’s personal diary, adding new material to important issues during the forty-first president’s tenure. It is arguably here, in the chapters on the more recent history of the relationship, that Riedel offers the most to scholars. While the themes and arguments running throughout the book are strong and bring a coherence to the work, many of the early chapters cover well-trodden terrain. That being said, a bit more in-depth look at the Dwight Eisenhower administration’s handling of Saudi and its attempts to build up the Saudis as a counterweight to Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, as Salim Yaqub and Nathan J. Citino, in particular, highlight, would have been useful, especially in light of the author’s point regarding the Saudi monarchy’s intimate ties with Islam.[3]

The chapters on the Jimmy Carter presidency and beyond stand out for the use of new materials and the “insider” anecdotes and information that Riedel brings to bear. Using the newly published *Foreign Relations of the*

United States volume covering Carter’s regional policy in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula, Riedel is able to offer up new insights into American policymaking in Saudi Arabia and the region. Likewise, later chapters, in which the author was a participant in many instances, provide solid evidence, especially in light of materials that are still classified on the American side. While documentary evidence on the Saudi side is nonexistent, Riedel uses a combination of public records, published secondary sources, memoirs, and his own experience to paint as full a picture of the Saudi view of events as possible, and does a commendable job in the process.[4]

Ultimately, Riedel offers readers a well-written, concise, and analytically rigorous picture of the US-Saudi relationship since its inception. While it does not break much new ground regarding the origins of the relationship or why it has remained important over the years, the author has brought us newly released documents and an insider’s view that help to paint a fuller picture of the partnership since the Carter years. Riedel’s methodology is what stands out, with its focus on the “presidents and kings who have been the managers of the relationship—and how they managed the tensions in the alliance” (p. xiv). Focusing on these tensions, and how they were managed, allows readers to see just what mattered to both sides, and how and why they were able to keep the partnership intact, even in its darkest moments. This is sure to be, along with Rachel Bronson’s work, a fundamental book for those seeking to understand the full, seven-decade relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Notes

[1]. For example, on US-Saudi relations specifically, see Rachel Bronson, *Thicker than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Thomas W. Lippman, *Inside the Mirage: America’s Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004); and Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). On the origins of the relationship, see Christopher D. O’Sullivan, *FDR and the End of Empire: The Origins of American Power in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). On US-Middle East relations in general, including Saudi Arabia, among others, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *America’s War for the Greater Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016) (this work has more of a military focus); Peter Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books,

2005); Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

[2]. The 1970s were an intense and important period in US-Saudi relations and in US-Arab relations in general. For a more specific look at this period, see Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[3]. For more details on the Eisenhower administration and Saudi Arabia, see Nathan J. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa'ud, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations* (Bloomington, IN: Indi-

ana University Press, 2002); and Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[4]. For more specific studies on Saudi Arabia itself, see, among others, Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Karen Elliott House, *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines—and Future* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012); and Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

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