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The American Threat to Saudi Arabia

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IT IS ONE OF THE MANY IRONIES of the Carter Administration's foreign policy that while the US is deeply enmeshed in planning measures to protect Saudi Arabia, and is almost obsessed with concern that Saudi Arabia may follow Iran, the Saudis now view the United States as the most serious threat to their own security, and Saudi Arabia's ability to provide the US with a stable oil supply. This American "threat" to Saudi Arabia is the result of the seven major problems and trends in Saudi-US relations:

- The depth of Saudi Arabia's alignment with what the world perceives as a weak and ineffective US Administration inevitably ties world perceptions of Saudi vulnerability to the growing feeling that the US is not capable of effective and well planned action. The Saudis feel that almost inevitably, the image of US weakness increases the willingness of other nations to test Saudi vulnerability.

- The US focus on military intervention capabilities in the Persian Gulf has been so awkwardly handled that many Saudis are becoming convinced that the US is doing more to prepare to seize the Gulf oilfields in Saudi Arabia than to defend the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia.

- Saudi reliance on US military assistance creates such a serious risk that the Saudi military and much of Saudi society may become convinced that the Saudi regime is tied to an ally which will neither provide objective advice, nor the military equipment Saudi Arabia needs. These problems are reinforced by the lack of discipline shown by former and current members of the US advisory team in publicizing their criticisms of both the Saudi government and the Saudi military effort.

- The constant discussion of every indicator of internal instability in Saudi Arabia within the US national security community, now has the end result of publicizing every real or rumored problem in Saudi society throughout the Washington diplomatic community, and is acting to persuade more and more nations that the Saudi's are both in trouble and vulnerable.

- The continuing problem of the Camp David agreement: although the Saudi government has conspicuously opposed both the agreement and the lack of US support for self-determination in Palestine since the agreement, it remains identified with the US; thus, every further incident on the West Bank tends to increase the risk that opposition to the Saudi government will grow because of its continued ties to the United States.

per day: a substantial portion of the royal family and most leading Saudi technocrats feel their government is wasting the national patrimony by producing more oil than Saudi Arabia conceivably needs to sell, and by underselling other exporting nations to keep world oil prices down. There is growing internal opposition to such sales, and in this case educated Saudis are joined by conservatives who see Saudi Arabia's high oil revenues as leading to uncontrollable change as Saudi society tries to cope with more income than it can effectively utilize.

The Saudis now view the United States as the most serious threat to their own security, and Saudi Arabia's ability to provide the US with a stable supply of oil.

- Changes in US law and tax structure have created a situation where the former partnership between the US private sector and Saudi Arabia in major construction and development projects is being eroded to the point of destruction. While major increases in South Korean and other foreign corporate activity in Saudi Arabia were inevitable, US policy is breaking the commercial links between the US and Saudi Arabia that were of major aid in providing a secure source of assistance in development and economic growth.

US Military Sales to Saudi Arabia

(\$ in Billions)

	Construction	Training & Equipment	Totals
FY1979	\$2.106	\$4.314	\$6.420
FY1980	3.000	2.800	5.800
FY1981	3.300	2.200	5.500

Source: US Defense Department

These seven problems do not yet directly threaten Saudi stability or alignment with the United States. They are, however, steadily creating a climate which will virtually force the Saudi government to create a more visible distance between itself and the US. At best, they are probably forcing Saudi Arabia in the direction of a split with the US over the military assistance effort, and another oil embargo in response to the Palestinian problem. At worst, a truly major crisis on the West Bank, or a badly handled US military action in the Persian Gulf, could lead to a major internal political crisis and possibly trigger the overthrow of at least the pro-

America as An Inadequate and Untrusted Ally

During the last four years, most Americans have become steadily more concerned with the image of US weakness and indecisiveness that has increased with virtually every crisis in foreign affairs. Yet many Americans have not perceived the practical implications of the decline in US power for our allies. The fall of the Shah, the failure of US efforts to rescue the hostages, and American inability to do more than protest Soviet action in Afghanistan have had a powerful impact in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.

From a Saudi point of view, this image of American weakness has created the following problems:

- Enough of the aftermath of Vietnam still lingers to cast into serious doubt US willingness to intervene in any major conflict. This has been reinforced by American indecisiveness over the fall of the Shah and the Administration's near total silence on the once-dominant issue of hostages in Iran since the attempt to rescue them failed last April. For all the rhetoric about US rapid deployment capabilities in the Persian Gulf, the real signal seems to be that the US may not react to any threat to Saudi Arabia of any kind, and almost certainly will not react to anything less than the most overt attack.

- This is compounded by a broad perception that the US lacks the intelligence and special operations capabilities to deal with lesser threats. There is a broad perception in the Middle East and Persian Gulf area that the CIA and US military intelligence is effectively hamstrung by the various legal and administrative constraints now placed on any US covert action, and that the new generation of CIA employees lacks the background, training, and support to be effective.

- President Carter is broadly perceived as well meaning, but weak and indecisive. There is the feeling that he will not act if even moderate care is exercised in any attempt to undermine the Saudi regime, or would temporize and vacillate if such action is slow and steady enough.

This already has led to a steady increase in the attempts of various liberation groups to undermine the governments of the other Gulf states. It has also led nations like Iraq and Kuwait to back as far away from the United States as they can in an attempt to avoid becoming targets for either Soviet or radical action against them. The result is that Saudi Arabia tends to become the key target for virtually every anti-US interest in the