



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

## Report

### **No Roosevelt Moment:**

Trump's Saudi Visit and the End of a 'Bitter' American Era

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**Trump arrives in Saudi Arabia in first foreign trip [AP]**

### Abstract

For nearly 25 years, several US presidents tried to redefine American relations with the Middle East, but they rarely managed to stave off the palpable decline of the US role in shaping that strategic region. Now, Donald Trump believes he has a chance. History, however, teaches us that he is wrong.

### Introduction

When it comes to the Middle East, every American president vied to have their Roosevelt moment, which had defined the US legacy in the region for over seven decades.

George Bush sought to revitalize his country's dominance through a massive war coalition against Iraq in 1990-91; his son, W. Bush fought, after much urging by the neoconservatives to stave off dwindling US influence; Barack Obama had his moment in June 2009, when he offered reconciliatory language during his speech at Cairo University; and now, President Donald Trump is coveting his own movement in his first visit to the Middle East.

But history is rarely shaped by wishful thinking. The Roosevelt moment cannot be repeated.

### The Roosevelt Moment

It is widely believed that an historic meeting between US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud aboard the U.S.S Quincy in the Suez Canal in 1945<sup>(1)</sup> has determined the terms of US influence, if not hegemony in the Middle East.

Then, Saudi Arabia was emerging as an economic power hub in the region, while the United States was emerging as the future global power as it was set to inherit the remnants of the British Empire worldwide.

Roosevelt had two major agendas: one was the establishing of a Jewish State in Palestine and the second was controlling Middle East oil.

Ibn Saud wanted to secure his reign in Saudi Arabia and to assure his country's regional influence. While he would not concede on Palestine, he agreed to a deal that remained in affect till this day: US military support for Saudi oil.

Roosevelt spoke from a power position, and reached a deal that would implant US interests as a staple of Middle East reality. One of the factors that gave the US President that much leverage was his previous stop in Yalta, Crimea where he had just met with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin.(2)

The outcome of their meeting was no less significant than the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed between Britain and France, with the consent of Russia in 1916. The agreement divided the territories of the crumbling Ottoman Empire between the two main European powers. That agreement had shaped the very geography and borders of the Middle East to this day.(3)

The meeting of Yalta in February 1945 too produced a new reality. It demanded an unconditional German surrender, which was obtained in May of the same year. The meeting also set in motion plans that would shape the post-war world and rearrange global order.

The Roosevelt-Ibn Saud agreement atop U.S.S. Quincy was a major component in those plans. It designated the US as the caretaker of the Middle East, it relegated the rule of Britain, it elevated Saudi Arabia and made the oil a strategic weapon of immense geopolitical value.

### **The American Middle East**

Things didn't necessarily go as planned. The US and its European allies clashed with the Soviets and their allies soon after Yalta, setting the stage for a destabilizing, and at times destructive Cold War.

Then, the world began moving in opposition directions. Allies and enemies were quickly determined by new competing forces. Israel was established atop the ruins of historic Palestine and became the US strongest ally in the region. The Middle East went into a

massive political influx, revolts, coups, plots, and havoc was wreaked in most Arab countries, which were, more or less, forced to choose sides in the grinding Cold War.

The US-Saudi alliance, however, remained strong. In some way, while the US was a major destabilizing force in the Middle East region, it also bestowed stability whenever it saw fit. Saudi Arabia remained stable; US allies too, enjoyed a share of the US-guided stability.

The abrupt end of the Cold War offered the US new opportunities in the Middle East, but forced it to abandon, or at best, alter its interpretation of the Roosevelt-Ibn Saud understanding.

The Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, was the boldest challenge yet, not only to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, but also to the post-WWII US-led consensus, and to the US-Saudi decades-long understanding.

Arguably, George Bush could have dislodged Iraq from Kuwait without massive war fanfare and armies from over 30 countries. But the Americans wanted to make several points: assure the Saudis and their Gulf allies, declare beyond any possible doubt that the new era in the Middle East (and elsewhere) is entirely, wholly and unconditionally American and to restate the Roosevelt-Ibn Saud understanding.

Strangely, that triumphant moment was also the beginning of the slow downfall of US hegemony.

## **The Rise of Iran**

"It's very hard for Americans to accept that we are not the root cause of all the world's good or evil," wrote George Packer in the New Yorker in October 2014. He described that belief as a "a kind of nationalistic narcissism (which) joins the left and the right in a common delusion."<sup>(4)</sup>

Packer is correct in the sense that such an understanding positions the US as the one and only mover and shaker of modern history. It is a self-centered, glorified understanding of American power that denies such thing as human agency and a whole host of circumstances that might be, at times, even greater than the US ability to manage.

However, to use such an argument as a way to absolve the US from the major role it played in setting the stage for the current upheaval in the Middle East is dishonest at best. The US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 started the freefall that the region has experienced ever since.

While then the US wanted, in fact succeeded in creating a new, albeit temporary power paradigm in the Middle East, it also set in motion an avalanche effect. By fundamentally changing the power dynamics of Iraq on the basis of rearranging the sectarian political equation(5) in one of the largest and most influential Arab countries, the US imposed many variables to a region that had for decades teetered at the edge of the political abyss.

The US destroyed Iraq but could not put it back together in any shape or form that is consistent with any familiar US policy. Unable to fill the political gap created by George W. Bush and his neoconservative advisers, the US, unwittingly allowed Iran to capitalize on Iraq's US-engendered quagmire.

The Iranians didn't necessarily do so as a result of a pre-calculated expansionist plot. Considering the neocons insistence on achieving regime change in Tehran, the Iranians labored to complicate the American mission in Iraq, and by doing so, defeating US designs against Iran itself – Iran being the last standing major Middle Eastern power that operated outside the US sphere of influence.(6)

The outcome was devastating. While the sectarian factor had always existed in Middle East society and political life, it has never been so pronounced as it became in the post-US Iraq invasion. (Lebanon has been the main exception because of its very complex sectarian makeup).

While George Bush 'succeeded' in his military adventure in Iraq in 1990-91, he failed to translate his military success into a new sustainable reality. And while his son, W. Bush attempted to regain initiative by invading Iraq in 2003, he failed to control the numerous, intended and unintended circumstances that resulted from the war.

By the end of both military adventures, the US found itself at an historical crossroad unparalleled since Roosevelt-Ibn Saud agreement.

These wars rashly ended the US henceforth dominant style of 'containment' policy, coupled with the kind of political 'stability' that is based on massive military advantage. The US was then engaged in unwinnable wars that compromised its own standing among its allies, and ignited a powder keg that empowered its enemies and threatened the long-standing stability of its allies.

War fatigued and economically weakened by its own recession (of which the unhinged military spending surely played a big part)(7), the US had no other option but to seek

alternatives. A few months after his inauguration, President Barack Obama seemed like the best possible answer to the chaos created by his predecessor.

A Black President, with far more articulate understanding of the world, with an Arabic middle name, President Barack Hussein Obama attempted to re-orient his country's Middle East foreign policy back in an old, familiar paradigm, where the US managed its business using mostly soft-power and reconciliatory-language.

But it was too late.

### **'The Arab Spring'**

Aside from the fact that Obama's doctrine seemed keener on style than substance, the Middle East's own dynamics at the start of his presidency were far more self-propelled to be influenced by mere words. His famous Cairo speech made no difference.<sup>(8)</sup> The genie was out of the bottle, and it was impossible to put him back. But equally important, there was little evidence that the US was indeed willing to make the effort in the first place

In fact, when the so-called Arab Spring broke out, the US was in the process of redefining its entire global strategy, by 'pivoting to Asia' to challenge rising Chinese power in the Pacific and in the South China Sea.<sup>(9)</sup>

Popular uprisings, revolts-turned civil wars and proxy regional wars made it impossible for the US to play its old role of arranging and rearranging the Middle East in a way that suits its economic and strategic interests.<sup>(10)</sup>

Throughout his two-terms presidency Obama labored to sustain his country's influence, but it was increasingly difficult. Russia proved more influential in Syria and Iran made calculated moves in both Iraq and Syria.

US traditional allies were losing patience with the US palpable weakness. Turkey was most frustrated, as it moved from a US-Saudi-Gulf consensus on Syria to a whole separate agenda of its own. Wary of strong Kurdish military power at its southern borders that are eager to secede, Turkey moved seemingly erratically between Russia, the US and its own fear-induced policies.<sup>(11)</sup>

This time there was no serious American leadership; no major war coalitions that are able to influence outcomes and no decipherable American doctrine.

## Enter Donald Trump

When Air Force One landed in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 20, President Donald Trump appeared as if among friends. He escaped Washington, leaving behind a raging battle over his firing of F.B.I director James Comey.

Washington D.C has not been so politically polarized for many years as it is these days. For the first time in many years, the US has become politically unstable. Coupled with weak economy and mounting of pressures from Democrats, Trump, a divisive president with no clear plan needed a respite.

The Saudis too needed a chance to rope in Washington in their own regional challenges and intrigues. Their experiences with the previous president were quite disappointing.(12)

President Obama caused much frustration in Riyadh due to the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, and also because of his clear lack of commitment to the old regional order. When he visited Saudi Arabia last year, King Salman did not meet him personally at the airport. This was seen as a snub. In fact, it was.(13)

This time around the King was there, and the fanfare was observably unfamiliar.

"Trump's planned trip had been greeted with public enthusiasm that is rare for this usually restrained country," reported the New York Times. "Huge billboards around the city featured Mr. Trump and King Salman, while the city's roads were lined with alternating American and Saudi flags."(14)

And something particularly telling also took place: Some of the billboards displayed the old photo of Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud when they met on the boat in the Suez Canal all of these years ago.

What the Saudis were trying to communicate is that they wish to reset the relationship with the United States that has been in constant decline for years.

Trump seems to understand this point well, and his choice of visiting Saudi Arabia on his first foreign trip was his way of reaffirming that old commitment. In fact, Trump is expected to sign a \$100 billion arms deal with the Kingdom.(15)

But history is not shaped by the desire of a few men, however, powerful. Roosevelt's America (arguably the sole winner of WWII, which, at the time controlled nearly half the world's economy) is a whole different country from the one presided over by Trump

(political unstable, economically weakened and had learned many costly lessons in the Middle East).

Moreover, Trump is, at best, an embattled president, whose mandate is greatly jeopardizing by political upheaval in his country. His personal commitment to redefine the country's role in the Middle East doesn't necessarily reflect a new status quo among Washington's political elite.

Trump's precarious position, challenged authority and talks of impeachment aside, the Middle East, with or without Trump is a political minefield, of which Washington is greatly (although not exclusively) responsible.

Moreover, Trump's insistence that politics and business has the same logic(16), and his readiness to strike the 'ultimate deal' that is purportedly to involve normalization between Israel and the Arabs(17) (who need the US to confront Iran) is likely to create more problems than fix old ones.

Trump's obvious limitations and his incredulous style of politics in mind, he is unlikely to achieve another Roosevelt moment. Strange as it may sound, the problem is not entirely with Trump, but the fact that historical variables that lead to that moment in February 1945 are no longer there. And they won't be repeated.

Hardly a student of history, however, Trump is likely to make things far worse. Eager to escape his woes at home, Trump wants to score some political points in the Middle East, to succeed where his predecessors bitterly failed.

Speaking of bitterness, the Roosevelt-Ibn Saud meeting place was not the Suez Canal itself, but an offshoot waterbody known as the Great Bitter Lake. The agreement of 72 years ago manufactured fractious stability but also wrought much bitterness as well, and ultimately proved unsustainable.

If Trump's visit is of any historical value, it could be seen as an end of an era as opposed to the start of a new one.

As for the bitterness and the many raging conflicts, they are likely to continue until a new political paradigm arises to replace the old one. And it is highly unlikely that it would be Trump that will bring the bitterness to a sweet end.

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