

SEPTEMBER 6, 2002

Saudi Arabian-U.S. Relations in Context

By John Duke Anthony

On August 28, 2002, the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine (CPAP) hosted a public lecture by GulfWire's publisher, Dr. John Duke Anthony, on "Saudi Arabian-U.S. Relations in Crisis." GulfWire is pleased to present a summary of Dr. Anthony's remarks, provided courtesy of CPAP.

Patrick W. Ryan
Editor-in-Chief, GulfWire

CPAP / For the Record No. 128

THE UNITED STATES AND SAUDI ARABIA: A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIP?

Although there has been much discussion of the relationship between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, an overwhelming majority of Americans have little or no accurate knowledge of Saudi Arabia. In contrast, more than 200,000 Saudi Arabians have been educated in the United States and experienced U.S. culture first hand. A perception gap of such magnitude, argued John Duke Anthony, president and chief executive officer of the Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, is bound to cause problems for any relationship, and the U.S.-Saudi relationship is not immune. In recent weeks, some influential U.S. policymakers have tried to increase the friction between these two countries.

Speaking at a 27 August 2002 Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine (CPAP) briefing, Anthony explained that most Americans see Saudi Arabia as an "oil well, not a country." It is seen more as a commodity than a community. There is little appreciation in the United States of the fact that more than one-fifth of all humanity looks to Saudi Arabia as the spiritual center of their world. There is almost no acknowledgement that Saudi Arabia is one of the most generous countries in the world in terms of foreign aid disbursement, dedicating as much as 5.5 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to foreign aid, while the United States gives an average of one-tenth of 1 percent. According to Anthony, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly gone out on a limb, and even "gone out on a twig at the end of a limb," to support U.S. policy goals that were unpopular with its population or neighboring states.

Anthony argued that the American people were ignorant of the depth of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Saudi Arabia was one of the biggest Arab supporters of the Madrid, and later Oslo, peace processes. It contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to help the United States fight Cold War skirmishes all over the world, from Afghanistan to Angola to Central America. It stood as a bulwark against the Islamic revolution in Iran, helping to insure that the other Gulf States did not fall to anti-American regimes. Recently, the Saudi Kingdom has been at the forefront of

peacemaking efforts in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, introducing and securing unanimous Arab support for Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah's peace plan. Anthony maintained that the United States and Saudi Arabia have had "a partnership of mutual benefit for more than 60 years" and that relationship is now being put to the test.

Anthony believes that the recent stirrings of enmity towards Saudi Arabia are more prevalent in the private sector, think tanks and the media, than in the government. Those who would paint Saudi Arabia as an enemy put its refusal to support an American attack on Iraq at the top of the list of their complaints. However, as Anthony pointed out, Saudi Arabia's position on an attack on Iraq is no different than the position of every other country in the world other than the United States, Israel and Australia. There are many critics of the U.S.-Saudi relationship who recommend unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. military presence in the Kingdom. They point out that the U.S. soldiers "serve as a lightning rod for political disaffection," attracting criticism from all quarters in the Arab and Muslim world. But Anthony argues that there is no other country in the region that can offer the geo-strategic depth that Saudi Arabia provides. Moreover, tens of thousands of Americans live and work in the Saudi Kingdom and ultimately depend on the U.S. "protective umbrella."

Anthony sees the current anti-Saudi mood as coming at an unfortunate time. While many festering problems in the Middle East continue to defy a solution, or even a marginal improvement -- including the Palestinian Intifada and the Iraqi-U.S. confrontation -- it is unwise to stir up another potential conflict in the area, especially with a country that has been a loyal U.S. ally for generations. Declining U.S.-Saudi relations would serve the interests of very few, but Anthony placed Israel among those who would benefit the most. While Saudi Arabia offers the world's largest proven supply of the world's most important resource, Israel has no natural resources. Saudi Arabia occupies strategically vital territory, unlike Israel, which, Anthony argued, no one would ever need to go through to get to anywhere of importance.

Another significant issue which most Americans are probably unaware of is that, although Israel enjoys almost unconditional support in the U.S. Senate, Saudi Arabia is the only Arab country that has ever overcome strong objections by Israel and its American supporters to win Senate votes. Anthony pointed out two controversial arms deals that Saudi Arabia was able to secure. It is no surprise that Israel would be among the most vocal opponents of close U.S.-Saudi ties, seeing as it stands to lose so much if it falls from its position as the main U.S. ally in the Middle East.

As the calls for a re-examination of U.S. ties to Saudi Arabia continue to be heard in the mainstream media, Anthony urged Americans to increase their knowledge of the Saudi people and culture. He cautioned that severing ties with the Saudi Kingdom at the time when the United States needs allies in the Middle East more than ever would be the "height of recklessness and irresponsibility."

[Reprinted with permission of CPAP]

===== GulfWire~~Perspectives =====

Dr. John Duke Anthony is President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, Secretary of the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, and Publisher of GulfWire. All three are nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations dedicated to the education of Americans and others about the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.