

BOOK REVIEW

Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents. Saudi-Arabia and the United States Since FDR (Geopolitics in the 21st Century)*, Brookings Institution Press, 2018, ISBN: 978-0815731375

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There is a growing tendency to view the Middle East through four overarching nexuses: the terrorism-repression, the tribal-modern, the geopolitical-geo-economic and the money-buys-everything-social alienation. Each of these, at times all of them, have been taken to explain the unfolding trends in this expansive, ill-defined region, called the Middle East. Such broad strokes also forms the bedrock decision-makers in Europe, and beyond, utilise to make sense of, and design policies for, dealing with the complexities of the Middle East. But what if international relations scholarship and decision-makers are wrong? What if the public policy networks have misunderstood and, as a result, misrepresented the Middle East and its many cross-cutting cleavages? This would imply that the very foundations of Euro-Atlantic policies towards the region are eschew. There have been some notable attempts at correcting such policy misdirection. Bruce Riedel's book titled *Saudi-Arabia and the United States Since FDR* is one such attempt.

First, it provides a snapshot of the main thematics addressed in the work. Second, it delves deeper and critically evaluates the strengths and shortcomings of the book. Finally, it applies a textual evaluation of US-Saudi relations in a way that makes sense for modern European decision-makers. In other words, this review will also act as a policy prescription for Europeans seeking to better understand Saudi Arabia through the Kingdom's relationship to the United States. This final section should also be read as an introduction to the future of Euro-Saudi relations.

On a technical level, Riedel's work comprehensively presents the seventy-five year old relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States. Crafting this work around a cocoon of personal experience, first hand narration and a deep reading into US foreign policy history Riedel's knowledge about this particular subject shines through. It walks readers through Saudi Arabia's six Kings - Ibn Saud, Faisal, Khalid, Fahd, Abdullah, Salman - and the US's thirteen Presidents - FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush Sr, Clinton, Bush Jr, Obama and Trump - and captures the main, defining peaks and valleys in that relationship. The book's seven chapters and its appendix generally

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read as a history of this particular bilateral relationship however, there is more than meets the eye. Riedel offers a solid conceptualisation of the relationship by looking deeper into Saudi Arabia's unique history and particularly the dynamics between the Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh families-in other words, between the temporal rulers (Al-Saud) and the country's religious authorities (Al-Sheikh). This paints a vivid background to the US engagement in the Middle East, starting with FDR in 1945 in that, from the very beginning, Riedel exposes early misunderstandings and a lack of American sensitivities to cultural and political norms at play in Saudi Arabia. Of course, there are an equal number of misunderstandings about American culture and sensitivities in Saudi Arabia, though it should be reminded that, at the beginning, the US was considerably more interested in Saudi Arabia than Saudi Arabia was in the United States.

More than anything else this interest has been defined by three mutually reinforcing elements, namely, 1. access to oil (energy security), 2. geopolitical control over the sea lines of communication and 3. post-colonial (re: post-1945) trans-regional stabilisation, which included finding a homeland for Europe's dispossessed Jewish population. Riedel reminds us, in each successive chapter, that most of the turbulent episodes in US-Saudi relations can be reduced to Washington's inability of forging a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel. The only three chapters that do not deal with Palestine as a root cause of tension between Washington and the wider Arab world are those that deal with the most recent quartet of Obama/Trump in the US and Kings Abdullah/Salman in Saudi Arabia. These chapters (six, seven and the appendix) focused more on September 11, Iran and, crucially, Riedel's personal pessimism about domestic change in Saudi Arabia. It is on this last point that this work now turns to evaluating the added value as well as areas of omission in Riedel's work. The following section also provides a critical reading of the book.

It is clear that this book's added value can be summarised according to the age old idiom that the devil is in the detail. To depict an enduring alliance by a psychoanalytical reflection on the key actors involved in developing such relations is a Herculean task. Riedel's ability to capture the essence of what Riyadh and Washington sought through alliance with one another was professionally presented in a way that makes sense, is clear, and interesting. The door is opened into the decision-making mechanisms that gave way to this alliance of convenience and Riedel does not shy away from answering particular questions about US aims in Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab world and how Saudi Arabia viewed the world around it.

Riedel does, however, lose direction towards the end of the book. While he reinforced the fact that Saudi Arabia as a country was not responsible for September 11, his chapter titled *Whither Saudi Arabia* reads as a haphazard criticism of internal Saudi affairs. This, therefore, runs counter to the main arguments presented throughout the work. Whereas the preceding chapters looked at structural

international relations interests of the United States and Saudi Arabia and only looked at both countries leadership as the representation of those interests, the concluding chapter departed from a third level of analysis and *only* viewed Saudi Arabia as the sum of its domestic parts. The same process of evaluation does not take place in relation to the United States. So while Riedel was comfortable critiquing Saudi Arabia's domestic political scene, he spent nearly no time discussing the changes to America's domestic politics and how those may have altered the US perceptions of Saudi Arabia. The final chapter reads as an emotional non-detached and generally unfounded criticism of Saudi Arabia's internal politics—which detracted from the excellent work carried out in the preceding chapters. It is also noteworthy that Riedel does not account for non-events in the Saudi-US relationship, which tell us as much as events do in understanding their bilateral relations. Why for example did Saudi Arabia use the oil weapon in 1973/4 but not in 1982 as Israel invaded Lebanon? Or why has the United States not enforced its red lines in Syria despite Saudi pressure to do so? While these questions may veer slightly away from the main arguments presented by Riedel, they remain important because they help shed light on the drivers of foreign policy change in both the US and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi-American relations do not take place in a vacuum and third parties watch and learn from their experiences. It is therefore important to reflect on what Europe has and has not learned of seventy-five years of US-Saudi ties.

There are four areas of note: First, oil matters. Despite the intention of European states to reduce their reliance on external energy supplies, oil is not going out of vogue any time soon. Washington—and to a lesser extent Paris and London—learned early on that to be a global actor a state needed access to oil supplies and the geopolitical weight to protect the sea lines of communication so that those supplies could reach the market place. The European Union has not invested in deepening its relationship to Saudi Arabia in the misguided hope that oil and energy politics would become irrelevant. This has not materialised. Hence, enhancing relations with Saudi Arabia to encourage a stronger energy relationship is a European interest.

Second, Riedel rightly explains Saudi Arabia's approach to Palestine and European decision-makers must always be reminded that the Israel-Palestine conundrum is reducible to European wars and misguided policy choices after World War II. Riedel's anecdote about Ibn Saud's first encounter with FDR should form the basis of a European understanding of Saudi sensitivities towards normalisation with the Jewish state. To paraphrase, Ibn Saud reminded FDR that not a single Palestinian killed a single Jew in Germany during the Second World War, so why should Palestinians suffer because of German crimes? The answer is not simple but the question should be continuously asked. Europeans have become too detached from their own errors and crimes in the Middle East.

Third, for too long Europeans and Americans have followed a divide and conquer strategy in the Middle East. This worked as long as populations were impoverished and relatively uneducated. However, as Riedel's work testifies, that is

no longer the regional reality. Oil wealth has also generated new social impetuses and transformed many Arab states into knowledge communities. In Saudi Arabia, and the other countries of the Gulf, investment in education, healthcare and society at large have begun to pay off. It is time that Europe and the United States start treating Saudi Arabia and the Arab world with the same type of sovereign equality that they wish to be treated.

Finally, Europe and Saudi Arabia have much more in common than a superficial glance would reveal. Readers of Middle Eastern affairs point to an increasing number of shared strategic interests ranging from curtailing and overcoming terrorist organisations, such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah etc, to embarking on a green transition. It is not constructive to paint Saudi Arabia as occupying a parallel space to Europe but rather to intellectually integrate the Kingdom into the European super-story just as Riedel does in his depiction of US-Saudi relations. Riedel's work may have been about US-Saudi relations but Europeans can learn from it as well.

From policy-makers to scholars and the interested public, Riedel's work is a must read. The historical context, the prism of bilateral US-Saudi relations, the crises, challenges and solutions are all captured in this dense and easy to read volume. This work comes highly recommended.