

U.S. – Saudi Relations:

The George W. Bush Era

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A detailed analytical perspective into the foreign policy relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia during the post 9/11 George W. Bush Era has revealed that these two global powerhouses has remained steady and clandestine. The Saudi attackers on 9/11 caused conservative foreign policy such as the Patriot Act to be passed while the Saudi Monarchy simultaneously made great efforts to appear independent from U.S. influence. Domestic constituencies supported increasingly conservative policies and the rise of global conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict forced these two countries to have private interactions that continued to fortify the status-quo relationship of oil for security. Saudi Arabia continued to supply the United States with foreign oil, while the United States aided Saudi Arabia in its continuous quest for firearms. The literature suggests that states are inherently self-interested and despite global events, are still governed by state interest. The relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is not an aberration from the norm and will continue to prosper, even if hidden from public eyes.

The attacks on September 11th, 2001 were a complete shock to the United States and to the rest of the world (Bahgat, 2004). The United States citizenry would have never been able to fathom an attack that was successfully completed on American soil. There is no doubt that the United States citizenry lost their sense of security due to these atrocious attacks. As time evolved, a substantial amount of information and intelligence was gathered, this information led to a growing divide in the political alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Bremmer, 2004; Chanin et. al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Hoveyda 2002; Long 2004). The consensus of the intelligence concluded that 15 of the 19 attackers that orchestrated the terrorist attacks on September 11th were in fact Saudi Arabian citizens (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Bremmer, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Hoveyda, 2002). Given the

facts of the case, why did the United States continue to be allies with Saudi Arabia during the George W. Bush era?

After September 11th, The United States has established domestic policies that benefits and appeases their own constituencies, while Saudi Arabia continues to comply with U.S. demands (Al Faisal, 2013; Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002). The United States has been synonymous with the Patriot Act, and Saudi Arabia has been making great efforts to concede to the demands of the United States in an effort to continue the relationship between the nations (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002; McCarthy, 2002). There are many areas of contention between Saudi Arabia and the United States, some of them being the policies created and enacted, the philosophy of people, and the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; McCarthy, 2002). The harsh reality is that the United States and Saudi Arabia remain important allies based on mutual interests, and the status quo relationship of trading oil for security remains the cornerstone of a fruitful and bountiful closed door relationship (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002).

United States Policy Towards Saudi Arabia Following September 11th

When the United States government was enlightened by the wealth of intelligence regarding the September 11th attacks, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States began to grow distant (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Bremmer, 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Chanin et al., 2004; Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2004). Many pieces of monumental legislation began to be passed; much of this legislation caused Saudi Arabian citizens much hardship (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004). The most prominent uniform legislation that is synonymous with the gaping divide between these two global super powers was the enactment of the United States Patriot Act (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; McCarthy, 2002).

In an effort to understand how the Patriot Act affected the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, some scholars suggest that the historical relationship between the two countries has to be examined. Since the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the United States and Saudi Arabia had a very economically sound relationship (Bahgat, 2004). Forty subsequent years since Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration, it was clear that the United States established a very simple agreement between them, trading oil for protection (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Gause, 2002; Long, 2004). This relationship has historically glued these two countries together, and some scholars argue that this historical relationship is now over because of the attacks on September 11th (Chanin et al., 2004; Long, 2004). Yet the grand majority of scholars and the literature suggest that the United States and Saudi Arabia will uphold the status quo relationship of oil for security (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Gause, 2002).

When the Patriot Act was passed, Saudi Arabian citizens were greatly affected (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004). The stipulations placed by the Patriot Act and other legislation such as the Bank Secretary Act began to financially constrain the

Saudi Kingdom and it increased scrutiny in a variety of levels such as foreign financial transactions, visas, and foreign exchange students (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; McCarthy, 2002). The major concern of the United States was foreign financial transactions as well as the state funding of non-profits along with the state funding of schools; many of the United States populace (including a large majority of legislators and political officials) accused Saudi Arabia for funding terrorist organizations through blanket non-profits and promoting terrorism through schools or mosques (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002). Although no apparent links could ever be found directly linking Saudi Arabian citizens to funding terrorist organizations, the United States had to enact policy that it felt appeased the American citizenry and secured its position as not taking any role or relationship with a sponsor of terrorism (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002).

Saudi Arabian Policy Towards the United States Following September 11th

After the attacks on September 11th, it was clear that Saudi Arabia had to take a defensive policy to the allegations and policies passed by the United States. Saudi Arabia was blamed and criticized for many of the details of the attacks on September 11th, but it was also blamed for being instrumental in the formation and promotion of terrorism through state funded schools, the lack of political dissent in the kingdom, and the role of the *zakat* (Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002).

The attacks on September 11th caused the status quo relationship of trading oil for security between the United States and Saudi Arabia to appear to be over; in an effort to re-establish that relationship, Saudi Arabia began to adhere and cooperate with the demands of the United States (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002). Following the gripes and complaints of the United States, Saudi Arabia demonstrated a large effort to re-build trust and confidence between the two states (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002). According to Gawdat Baghat (2004) in an article titled "Saudi Arabia and the War on Terrorism," Bahgat explains that Saudi officials tried to prove that the Saudi citizenry did not partake in the funding of terrorist organizations. Bahgat (2004) continues the article by discussing the measures and argument taken by the Saudi regime stating

that there were 4 main arguments presented by the Saudi officials; firstly, Saudi Arabia has a large foreign labor community, and most of the transactions that deposit their money into foreign accounts are first ran through American or European banks. Secondly, the role of the Zakat as a pillar of Islam proscribes a mandatory offering that each Muslim gives to those in need of financial help (Bahgat, 2004). Thirdly, the regime froze every single asset and blacklisted every account flagged by the United States Treasury (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004). Lastly, the Saudi kingdom implemented a series of investigations that helped prove Saudi Arabia was not funding terrorist organizations (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004).

One of the greatest policies that exemplify the willingness for Saudi Arabia to continue to be allies with the United States, which naturally reinforces the status quo relationship of oil for security, is the effort Saudi Arabia has taken to combat terrorism. Before the attacks on September 11th, the Saudi Arabian government was known to financially support the Taliban; this was in most part due to the role of religion within the Saudi state (Bahgat, 2004; Hoveyda, 2002). After September 11th, the Saudi Arabian Monarchy began to distance itself as much as possible from organizations like the Taliban (Bahgat, 2004; Hoveyda, 2002). Saudi Arabia was also generous during the invasion of Iraq, the regime allowed the United States to establish a military base in the country, even with extreme discontent among the populace (Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Al Faisal, 2013; Long, 2004). Neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia benefit from the spread of terrorism, and President George W. Bush's Global War on Terror has allowed the United States and Saudi Arabia to cooperate and collaborate to end terrorist threats (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Gause, 2002; Halter, 2002; Long 2002). In a public statement offered by George W. Bush, the President announces the important role that Saudi Arabia plays in the Middle Eastern Region, and he acclaims the relationship between the two countries of being allied (Bahgat, 2003).

Areas of Contention

Trading oil for security may be one of the cornerstones of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, but there are large contentious policies, philosophies, and current events that affect the relationship between these two countries. In a broad sense, the main areas of contention between these two nations are the Patriot Act, the influential role of constituencies, and the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; McCarthy, 2002).

As discussed earlier, the Patriot Act was one of the greatest measures taken by the United States that essentially became the model for both domestic and foreign policy in the United States, especially in its role in the U.S.-Saudi relationship (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Jervis, 2003). The Patriot Act was passed six weeks after the attacks on September 11th, and it unfastened the regulatory role of the United States government in areas of security (McCarthy, 2002). Some of the stipulations within the Patriot Act that adversely affected Saudi Arabian citizens were the denial of visas to students, the extended wait periods to receive visas, the creation of the TSA and their role in discriminatory check points in airports and other means of transportation, financial tracking, and the expansion of intelligence programs within the United States government (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; McCarthy, 2002).

Associated with the policies passed by the United States were the philosophies of the government in both the United States and Saudi Arabia. The attacks on September 11th were extremely influential in the introduction to the Bush Doctrine (Jentleson, 2007; Jervis 2003). Both Bruce Jentleson (2007) and Robert Jervis (2003) agree that the United States, under the George W. Bush administration, took a very doctrinal approach to the issues introduced by the attacks on September 11th. Jentleson (2007) argues that George W. Bush emphasized the global role of the United States as the first country to intervene or meddle in every occasion that happens on the global stage. He argues furthermore that the United States has to recede from its hegemonic or uni-polar role in the international system to one of inclusion of the global powers (Jentleson, 2007). With Jentleson (2007) arguing that the role of the United States has always been one of intervention and force, Robert Jervis (2003) argues that the very role of the United States in other affairs has only been increased and re-enforced by the Bush Doctrine. Jervis (2003) argues that there are pillars within the Bush Doctrine; first, the doctrine calls for the spread of democracy. Secondly, the United States is continually threatened by terrorism and it must implement a preventive role in the international system (Jervis, 2003). The Bush Doctrine has introduced a greater effort to prevent terrorism with greater force and that is exactly what Jentleson (2007) argues should be avoided because of the exclusionary nature of the policies the Bush Doctrine adopts.

In the country of Saudi Arabia, the philosophy has been one of victimization, but also one of spreading ideals within the region (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Hoveyda, 2002). The victimization comes in the form of the predatory policies passed by the United States, such as the expansion of the Global War on Terror and most especially the Patriot Act (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Gause, 2004; McCarthy, 2002). The predatory policies adopted by Saudi Arabia are actually fundamental catalysts in spreading inflammatory ideals within the region. Saudi Arabia is synonymous with the Sunni religion, more emphatically; they are synonymous with the spread of the Wahhabi tradition, a state religion that aims to abide to the original nature of the Quran (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Gause, 2004; Grasiowski, 2014; Lee, 2013). Saudi Arabia has a vested interest in the spread of their Sunni religion, which is exemplified by the backing of Palestine but also the financial support it provides to the Taliban (Bahgat, 2004; Gause, 2004). This has caused countries like the United States to increase scrutiny on the country in areas such as the financial sector, which has led the country to concede to U.S. demands at the price of receiving large discontent with their domestic constituency (Al Faisal, 2013; Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002).

As the most influential area of contention, the role of constituencies within each country has greatly affected the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia (Al Faisal, 2013; Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002). Each individual has a distinct idea of what the policy of their country should follow, the United States and Saudi Arabia are no exception to this. Clifford Chanin and Gregory Gause (2004) document a summit in which dignitaries from both the United States and Saudi Arabia discuss the current state of U.S.-Saudi relations, and how they could be improved. One of the largest recurring themes in the summit is the role constituencies play in forming policy (Chanin et al., 2004). Scholars across the field agree that the citizenry in both countries significantly shape the relationship between the two countries, this being exemplified by the passage of the Patriot Act, but also exemplified by the increasing contempt amongst the Saudi citizenry that pushed the Saudi Monarchy to reduce their relations with the United States (Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002). With the increased anti-western sentiment of the public in Saudi Arabia and the increased anti-Saudi sentiment in the United States that

consistently grew from the September 11th attacks, there has been an increased area of contention for the relations between the two countries (Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002).

By extension, the role of the constituencies has even affected large complex global political issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2006; Cordesman, 2006). The summit between the United States and Saudi Arabia documents the heated debate over the issue of Palestine, each of these two countries taking opposite sides; the United States strongly supports Israel, while Saudi Arabia strongly supports a sovereign Palestinian state (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2006; Cordesman, 2006). Although each country supports opposite regimes in the conflict, Saudi Arabia recognizes that the United States can be very influential in the solution to the conflict, but if it were to help Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian people, the American citizenry would be extremely unhappy and Israel would be infuriated, so the issue remains a tempestuous area of the relationship (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2006; Cordesman, 2006).

Reality

U.S.-Saudi relations during the George W. Bush era has been very much surrounded by the global issue of terrorism and the announcement of the Global War on Terror (Hoveyda, 2002; Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Jentleson, 2007; Robert, 2003). The scholars emphasize that September 11th placed a strain on the relationship between the two countries, however there is not much evidence to support this claim. When looking at the imports of oil from Saudi Arabia, it is clear that the United States has not in any form changed its imports of Saudi oil (Energy Information Administration, 2015). Saudi Arabia continues to be one of the largest consumers of weaponry in the world, and the United States has continually provided a steady and consistent supply (Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2002; Harjani, 2015). It is clear that the status quo has been very well sustained even during the turbulent years during and after September 11th (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002).

For decades, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States has been synonymous with the trade of oil for security (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004). According to the Energy Information Administration (2015), the United States consistently imports thousands of barrels per

day from Saudi Arabia, a number that has not gone down at all since the attacks on September 11th. This signifies quite strongly that the United States and Saudi continue the status quo relationship and base their relationship on mutual benefit rather than on public opinion (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Cordesman, 2006; Gause, 2002; Hoveyda, 2002).

The Saudi military is tiny, it cannot protect itself from countries like Iran or Iraq (Gasirowski, 2014), and the proliferation of terrorist organizations in the region has become a greater threat to the stability of the monarchy and the country itself, thereby forcing Saudi Arabia to continue relations with the United States. The status quo is met based on necessity with Saudi Arabia facing extremists in the region, and the United States having an insatiable appetite for oil, these countries trade freely in an effort to progress domestically and internationally.

Fereydoun Hoveyda (2002) states it best when he argues that there are never friends in politics, but rather just partners with a common interest. These two countries need each other, they are mutual partners in the war on terror and are substantially influential in the stability of the region. Saudi Arabia is the key to oil, after all, they are the largest exporter and have the largest reserves than any country in the world (Gasirowski, 2014). The monarchy holds the key to the black gold of the Middle East and North African countries, especially with its esteemed role in the GCC (Gasirowski, 2014). The principle in international relations is that countries are naturally self-interested and do not base their relationships on the basis of friendship, but rather that they make policies that aid them in staying in power, help them exert that power, and pursue the best policies that will serve their people (Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002).

Scholars like Lee (2014) argue that religion, ideology, institutions, and identity are key to understanding the politics of countries, but the in depth analysis of the literature empirically shows that the relationship between nations comes down to common sense, with common sense being the creation of policy that positively benefits the government in power (Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002). Wahhabism is manipulated through the establishments of *madrasas* and each *Imam* has his own philosophy or interpretation (*tafseer*) of how religion should be exercised (Gasirowski, 2014; Hoveyda, 2002; Lee, 2014; Long, 2002). Saudi and other countries throughout the world manipulate and interpret religion to legitimize the political decisions they make (Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002; Lee, 2014). They use these schools or *madrasas* to indoctrinate the polity into a certain

ideological perspective that aids the government in pursuing the policy it sees as most prosperous for the nation (Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002; Lee, 2014). This is best exemplified when the United States and Saudi Arabian dignitaries discuss the increased need for “track-two diplomacy” in an effort to forego public opinion and do what is best for the country (Chanin et al., 2004).

Conclusion

U.S. – Saudi relations remain strong and the status quo is being met. September 11th sent a shock wave in the international system and is seen as a great strain on the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, but the truth is, the relationship has always been stable and has remained so during the post 9/11 Bush Era. Oil for security remains the cornerstone of U.S. – Saudi relations (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004). Policy in the United States took a conservative stride after the attacks on September 11th, the American citizenry were very suspicious and resentful towards Saudi Arabia because of the large amount of hijackers that were Saudi citizens (Bahgat, 2003; Hoveyda, 2002). Saudi was scrutinized by the United States, but their response was not one of defense, but rather one of compliance and cooperation (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004). The Patriot Act placed a strain on the relationship, but it was met with a Saudi Arabian response of tracking financial transfers as well as allowing the United States to establish a base in the country during the invasion of Iraq (Bahgat, 2003; Bahgat, 2004; Gause, 2002; Long, 2004).

There are continued strains on the relationship of the country, which were only heightened after September 11th; however, the two countries never seemed to stop the original trade of oil for security which is exemplified by the imports of Saudi oil and the purchases of weaponry by Saudi from the United States (Energy Information Administration, 2015). Many areas of development (the Bush Doctrine, increased anti-western sentiment, and the growing debate over the Israeli-Palestine conflict) have been opportunities for these two countries to cut relations, but Hoveyda (2002) is a reminder that politics is about self-interest, it is about power, politics is about getting what is best for the country, it is not about ideals or appeasing the masses. The increased role of “track-two” policies exemplifies that government does not care about public opinion, but is rather aware that the public has no idea of what the country needs, therefore hiding relationships and agreements is the safer and less troublesome alternative (Chanin et al., 2004).

Saudi Arabia is a strong ally to the United States, the Global War on Terror has increased the relationship between the two countries in the form of increased cooperation. Sharing intelligence, targeting terrorist cells, and continuing to trade oil for security has strengthened and solidified the relationship, even if it upsets the domestic constituencies (Bahgat, 2004; Chanin et al., 2004; Gause, 2004; Hoveyda, 2002; Long, 2002). In conclusion, Saudi Arabia and

the United States have built a façade of non-cooperation in an effort to appease their domestic constituencies, but the fact is that the two countries have increased their track-two politics and are increasingly influential in the continuation of the Global War on Terror. George W. Bush and King Abdullah do not benefit from terrorism, they do however benefit from oil and security.

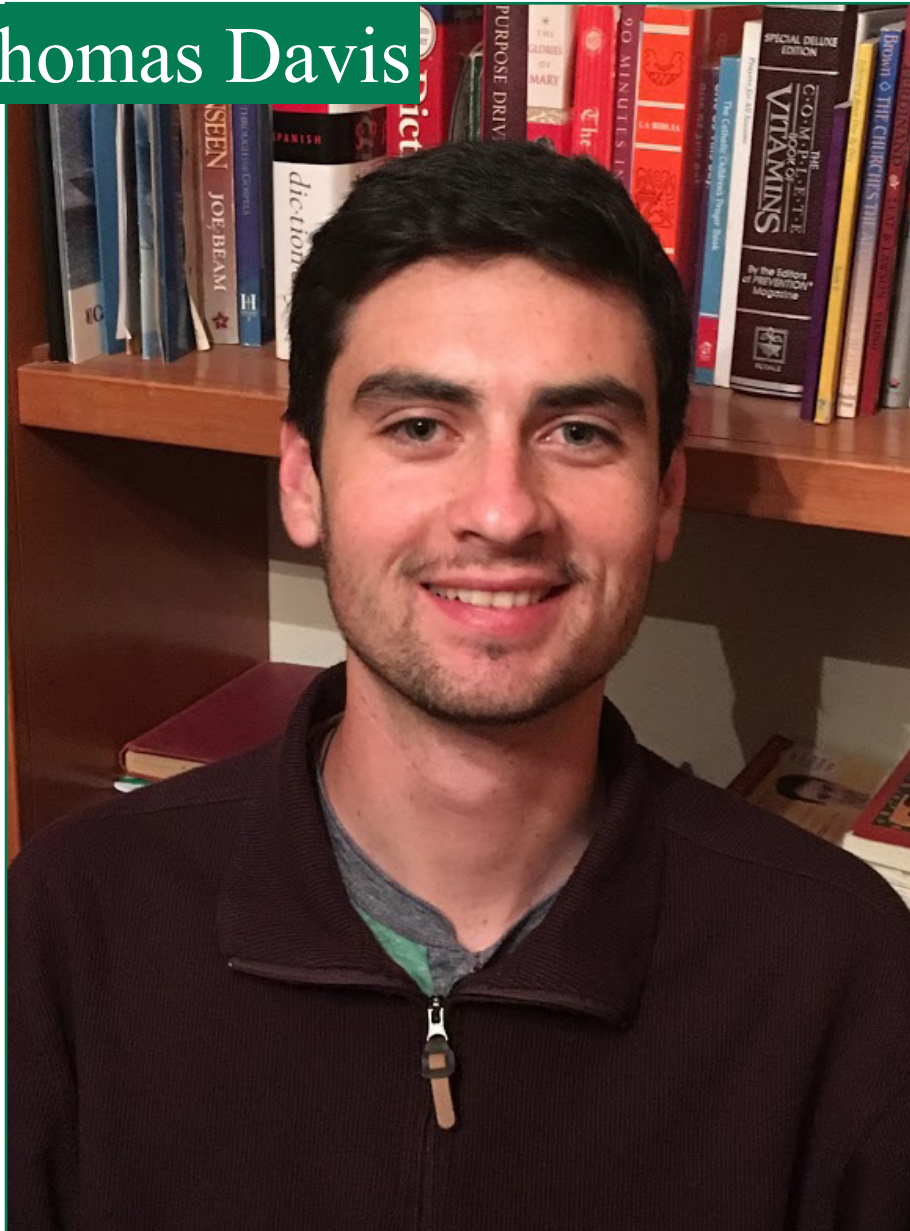
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Former President George W. Bush and Saudi Arabian King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud enjoyed a close relationship. Some might consider this a conflict of interest, but others consider it essential for national security.



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Thomas Davis is a fourth year Political Science major who is highly invested in academia and plans to obtain a graduate degree in the near future.
