

THE IMPACT OF REGIONAL ISSUES AND DIPLOMATIC ENDEAVORS ON THE SINO-SAUDI RAPPROCHEMENT 1978-1990

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represented of particular importance in China's foreign policy due to the Kingdom's political and religious weight in the region and in the Islamic world, in light of this, China has sought rapprochement with China as a first step towards establishing diplomatic relations. Regional issues represented an opportune opportunity for China to achieve this.

KEYWORDS: China, Saudi Arabia, Middle East, Foreign Relations

INTRODUCTION

Since the Eleventh Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1978, there have been significant changes in China's foreign policy, China has moved away from the influence of ideology in shaping its foreign policy, prioritizing economic development and adopting a policy of reform and opening-up, so that ideological convergence is no longer a criterion for shaping its relations with other Statesⁱ, China needed a sound and stable international environment that contributes to the success and development of economic development, and in this context China has modified its foreign policy towards the Middle East, it declared its refusal to support revolutionary movements, as well as adopting an independent policy, it has sought to encourage exchange visits with Middle Eastern presidents, particularly the Arabian Gulf, to attract investment to China in various fields of industryⁱⁱ.

On this basis, China has continued to express its desire to achieve rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and even establish diplomatic relations with it, especially with its awareness of its regional importance and political and economic weight in the region, and its role in activating the oil weapon to serve Arab causes, Saudi Arabia has become playing a fundamental role in resolving regional and international crises and issues, this is due to its ability to influence at various levels, whether at the Gulf, Arab, Islamic or even international levelsⁱⁱⁱ.

During the period under study, the Middle East witnessed a number of political developments that represented a turning point in the history of the region, it represented common threats that affected the course of Saudi-Chinese relations and the progress they made later in the eighties.

In this context, several questions arise; how have regional issues affected the Sino-Saudi rapprochement? How did Iran's Islamic Revolution promote rapprochement? Is the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan one of the factors in the rapprochement between China and Saudi Arabia? To what extent has the Iran-Iraq war affected rapprochement between China and Saudi Arabia? How did the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council affect China and Saudi Arabia? What is China's position on the Fahd Peace Initiative?

FIRST: THE IMPACT OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAN

The outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on January 7, 1978, the overthrow of the Shah's regime anti-Soviet influence in the Arabian Gulf, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran on April 1, 1979. China lost a regime hostile to the Soviet Union, so it began looking for another regime that shared the same hostility, Riyadh has gained increasing importance in China's policy in the Persian Gulf, emphasizing the importance of Saudi Arabia's contribution to stability and security in the Middle East as the most capable of standing up to the Soviet threat^{iv}. This has become a catalyst for Sino-Saudi rapprochement, on the other hand, the overthrow of the Shah's regime has made Riyadh uncomfortable with the course of events in Iran and unhappy with the cold reaction of the United States and the neglect of the Shah, a longtime U.S. ally in the region. Riyadh used to believe that the United States was a reliable ally^v.

Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was another significant regional development that contributed to the apparent escalation of the communist regional threat in the Middle East, this intervention allowed Moscow to gain a foothold in the region and approach the world's largest oil reserves in the Persian Gulf, and fulfill its old dream of reaching a southern port with warm waters. This has raised concerns from both China and Saudi Arabia, the Chinese had their own concerns about recent Soviet gains in the region, which stemmed mainly from the following considerations: In Chinese strategic thinking, the Middle East is the key to economic domination of what was known as the Third World and then the world, due to its huge oil wealth and strategic location, from a strategic point of view, Soviet advances and “southward orientation” contributed to highlighting the traditional fears and scenarios of “encirclement” in their worst form senior Chinese leaders believed that Soviet action in Afghanistan, its “southern momentum,” and its activities in southern Yemen, their previous warnings and fears of Soviet expansion attempts confirmed, they interpreted this move as a “pincer movement” in an attempt to stifle and encircle Western traditional control over the world's energy sources and supply routes, they therefore asked the United States to take practical action to control such a threat^{vi}.

On the other hand, the Chinese seem to have been aware of Saudi fears of a Soviet invasion, such concerns found their way into Chinese state media in mid-1979, the Saudis have direct concerns about Soviet activities on Saudi Arabia's southern border, in Aden in southern Yemen, Massawa in Ethiopia, and Perim Island in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, according to Chinese media, senior Saudi officials have shown awareness of the seriousness of such a Soviet move as “a step

in a long-term plan to control the Arabian Peninsula and its oil.” Prince Fahd, the Crown Prince at the time, was quoted as saying during the Third Islamic Summit Conference held in Taif on 25-29 January 1981 that **“Islamic countries face a new threat posed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan”**^{vii}.

In light of the above, Beijing supported the Afghan mujahideen, as China was the first country to try to send mujahideen to fight the Soviet army in Afghanistan to avenge its citizens who were killed by the Soviet bombing of Chinese territory, who numbered about 800 Chinese citizens, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a leader in the ensuing conflict, the trilateral rapprochement of Riyadh, Beijing and Washington soon emerged, as Riyadh and Washington funded the mujahideen and provided weapons, training and political support, Beijing also provided fighters and weapons, which caused great damage to the Soviet Union and was a factor in its collapse^{viii}.

It should be noted that the cooperation between Riyadh and Beijing against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was indirect, some press reports talked about the role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China in arming and supplying the warriors who were fighting Moscow's forces in Afghan territory with weapons, and the reports indicated that due to the lack of Direct contacts with Beijing, the Kingdom bought Chinese weapons through a third party (the Pakistanis) who acted as mediators between China and Riyadh^{ix}.

SECOND: THE IMPACT OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR (1980-1988)

The Iran-Iraq war is one of the most prominent crises that the Middle East region intensified in the early eighties, and cast a shadow on Saudi-Chinese relations, when war broke out in September 1980, China declared in its official speeches that it had adopted a neutral stance on the war and did not specify the aggressor country, the war was seen as an extension of the great powers' ambition for hegemony in the Middle East and urged both sides to resolve their differences through negotiations^x, Saudi Arabia has taken a strong stance in support of Iraq, the formulation of Beijing and Riyadh's policy objectives regarding this war was based on different points of view, as China set its policy goal on the basis of a global perspective. Saudi policy emerged from its regional perspective. The Kingdom supported Iraq on the basis of “Arab, Islamic and Neighborhood Ties”. And try to prevent it from invading the Gulf. The Chinese government, through its representative to the United Nations, Ling Qing, stressed that there should be no fundamental and sharp differences between Iraq and Iran because the two countries are part of the Third World. He added that these countries must start “peaceful negotiations” in order to end the war, and it should be noted that the promotion of Third World unity was one of the crucial elements of Chinese foreign policy. In December 1982, Premier Zhao Xiang put forward the concept of Third World unity and two other basic principles of China's foreign policy: “opposing hegemony and defending world peace.” To strengthen solidarity and cooperation with other Third World States; and the development of relations with various countries, including the United States and

the Soviet Union, on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the Prime Minister urged Iran and Iraq to end their war quickly^{xi}.

Maritime navigation in the Persian Gulf has been a concern for both China and Saudi Arabia, the two countries noted that the security threat in the Persian Gulf has directly affected their trade, the Sino-Saudi special concern about the Gulf's maritime security began with the tanker war that began in April 1984, in addition, Saudi Arabia had absorbed all the lessons and results of the missile war, both tactical and strategic, and extracted all its transformations and major military developments, therefore, it decided to knock on all the doors of the major industrialized countries with the aim of acquiring advanced types of medium-range surface-to-surface strategic missiles in order to enhance and develop their emerging defense capabilities, the efforts of the Saudi government in this regard coincided with the entry of the People's Republic of China into the arms market through its wide door, and its emergence as a third power with advanced weapons for sale in the Third World in the wake of China's opening-up policy, which benefited from Western technology, especially the United States, all this resulted in the success of the Saudi government in agreeing with the Chinese government in 1988 on the issue of supplying the Saudi armed forces with a number of strategic surface-to-surface medium-range missiles (CSS2) with a range of 2600 km^{xii}, this deal represented a major step towards establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries and provoked regional and international reactions.

On April 18, 1987, 40 American ships carrying 20,000 troops entered the Gulf waters, ambassador Mei, Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations, expressed China's concern over the attacks on "oil tankers and ships" sailing through the Gulf region and stressed the need to respect China's equal rights to use the high seas in the Persian Gulf and facilitate trade, Beijing has demanded an end to the war to stop the growing interference of great powers in the region, it stressed that only countries along the Gulf coast should be involved in solving the Gulf problem. Hence, it can be said that the Chinese and Saudi political positions to end the war at that stage were somewhat similar, and the two countries pursued diplomatic avenues to achieve peace, through international and regional organizations. Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian reiterated China's neutral position in the war and its serious commitment to peace in the region and said the Chinese government consistently supports the UN's efforts to settle this dispute, the Chinese foreign minister also expressed grave concern about the war and worked to prevent both sides from any actions that could lead to an escalation of the raging conflict, China voted in favor of a U.N. Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire and peaceful negotiations from the warring parties, China worked as a permanent member of the United Nations to end the war and on October 1, 1988, during a meeting with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Muhammad Hussein Lavasani, Chinese Premier Li Ping expressed the satisfaction of the Chinese government when Iran and Iraq accepted UN Resolution 598 and the ceasefire agreement^{xiii}.

THIRD: ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

To counter the threats of the Iran-Iraq war, the Arab Gulf states established the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua then sent a congratulatory cable to the GCC's secretary-general and called for official relations with the GCC countries, in particular, those that until then still recognize the Government of Taiwan as the legitimate representative of China (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain)^{xiv}. Taiwan should not be given the opportunity to continue diplomatic representation with the countries of the world, or to establish new diplomatic relations with other countries, therefore, the People's Republic of China worked to enter strongly to compete with Taiwan in diplomatic representation in the Persian Gulf region, especially in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, it worked to achieve rapprochement with them by focusing on issues of Arab Gulf security and economic cooperation. In particular, the issue of repelling the Soviet incursion into the Persian Gulf was a matter of concern for both sides, the Chinese media welcomed and praised the decision of the Arab Gulf states on the sixth of February 1981, to establish the Gulf Cooperation Council to address security concerns related to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iran-Iraq war, the intervention of the great powers and differences in the region, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Chinese news magazine Beijing Review described the decision to give birth to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a “step towards unity” in the face of foreign interference, in another move, the Xinhua News Agency praised the efforts of Saudi diplomacy to reach a ceasefire in Lebanon^{xv}.

FOURTH: CHINA'S POSITION ON THE FAHD PEACE INITIATIVE

China continued its interest in Saudi foreign policy, supporting the initiative of Saudi Crown Prince Fahd, launched in 1981, in which he called for Israel's withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories, including Jerusalem, in exchange for peace and comprehensive normalization between Arab countries and Israel and an end to the state of war between them. In an article published in Beijing Review, the Chinese government praised the Saudi initiative, known as Prince Fahd's eight-point peace plan, to resolve the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict and establish regional security and stability. The Chinese Government considered the plan as “a positive step to coordinate the position of the Arab States in the process of finding a peaceful solution to the situation in the Middle East”^{xvi}. When Israel was intransigent from the initiative and demanded other concessions, the Chinese Foreign Ministry criticized the negative position of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, it called on the international community to pressure Israel to win this historic initiative, as the Chinese People's Daily called it at that time^{xvii}.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia closely monitored the Chinese moves in the Arab region in general and in the Gulf region in particular, especially after the positive change in Chinese foreign policy from a radical, revolutionary policy to a peaceful policy that seeks to develop and consolidate its relations with the countries of the whole world, as well as its positive political role on Arab issues and its external positions, especially towards the Palestinian cause, although it praised through Arab diplomatic channels the importance of the Chinese position and its support for the Palestinian cause^{xviii}.

However, it maintained a policy of distancing itself from China officially, on the one hand, to preserve its alliance with the United States, on the other hand, to prevent opening the way for China to enter the Arab Gulf region through the Saudi gate^{xix}.

However, this did not prevent it from sending Prince Saud Al-Faisal to China in late 1982 as a member of the Arab League delegation to explain Prince Fahd's initiative for peace in the Middle East to the member States of the Security Council, and to rally support^{xx}.

FIFTH: DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

The Chinese government has made urgent political and diplomatic efforts to gain recognition and establish official relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in mid-1978, Beijing resumed its attempts to obtain Riyadh's recognition, during the negotiations that took place in London in June of the same year between the People's Republic of China and the Sultanate of Oman on the establishment of diplomatic relations, which resulted in the Sultanate of Oman recognizing the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate government of China, the People's Republic of China allowed Oman to maintain a Taiwanese trade mission in the capital, it was believed that this formula would be adopted in the Saudi case as well. But Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, refuted the reports, calling them “**completely untrue**”. In a front-page statement in Al-Riyadh newspaper, he strongly denied any negotiations with the People's Republic of China or the Soviet Union to establish diplomatic relations^{xxi}.

However, China did not give up and tried unsuccessfully to use Kuwait's good offices to mediate between it and Saudi Arabia, it also tried to flirt with Saudi Arabia through Kuwaiti newspapers, the Chinese ambassador to Kuwait, Ting Hao, stated in the Kuwaiti Al-Seyassah Newspaper on May 2, 1979, that his country wants to establish official relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. China and Saudi Arabia have identical views on various international issues, he added^{xxii}.

Despite the lack of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the two sides exchanged official and informal visits and meetings, on November 17, 1981, the Chinese premier met with the Saudi crown prince at the Cancun summit, although the meeting was not official, it was the first meeting at the highest level between the two countries, and this meeting became a source of concern for the government of Taiwan, which has political and economic relations with Saudi Arabia^{xxiii}. In the same month, Xu Yunsheng, deputy director of the Chinese National Sports Commission, met with Saudi Arabia's minister of social affairs and the vice president of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation in Malaysia, both of whom expressed hope for improved relations between the two countries^{xxiv}. In the same year, China seized the occasion of the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on February 6 and sent its Foreign Minister Andak Huang Hua. He also received a congratulatory telegram from the Government of the People's Republic of China, and called for the establishment of official relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially those that still recognize the Government of Taiwan as the legitimate representative of China (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain)^{xxv}.

The year 1982 also witnessed the visit of the Saudi Minister of Oil, Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, to China, also discussed with Chinese officials issues related to the oil market and prices, as well as the possibility of developing relations between the two countries. Prince Saud Al-Faisal also visited China late that same year as a member of a delegation sent by the Arab League to explain Prince Fahd's Middle East peace initiative to the States members of the Security Council and to rally support for it^{xxvi}. On the ninth of August 1984 on the sidelines of a press conference held between Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz.

As the special representative of UNICEF (the United Nations International Emergency Fund for Children) and China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Prince Talal noted that Saudi Arabia considers China a friend, on the other hand, the Chinese representative to the United Nations pointed out that the Chinese government is willing to normalize or establish diplomatic relations with any country in accordance with the principles of peaceful coexistence, this certainly includes Saudi Arabia. As a very important country in the Arab world, he expressed China's great respect for the Kingdom's foreign policy of independence and non-alignment, and we seek to normalize relations with it^{xxvii}. China continued to emphasize its desire to establish diplomatic relations with the Kingdom during the Arab-Chinese meetings, during his visit to the UAE in 1985, Chinese Vice Premier Yao Yilin stressed while speaking at the airport that it is China's consistent policy to develop friendly relations with the Gulf and he states: **“We are also ready to develop relations with Saudi Arabia.”** During his visit to Oman in November of the same year, to attend the Sultanate's celebrations, Yao Yelin met with Saudi Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud at Al Bustan Palace and the Chinese official took advantage of the Palestinian issue to start a dialogue with Saudi Arabia, during the meeting, Yao affirmed China's support for the Palestinian cause and the unity of the Arab world, and expressed his country's appreciation for the Kingdom's support for the Palestinian cause and regional affairs^{xxviii}. Some researchers have promised that this is the first forward move in Sino-Saudi relations, the meeting discussed ways to develop relations between the two countries, specifically in the trade and other economic fields^{xxix}. However, over the years 1986-1987, neither side publicly launched a major initiative, but in late 1987 relations resumed following the Mecca incident on July 31 of the same year, which left 402 dead (two-thirds of them Iranian pilgrims) after a clash with Saudi police, while the Chinese adopted an official neutral stance, they supported Saudi Arabia along with most Arab countries^{xxx}.

For the first time in the history of Saudi-Chinese relations, a delegation of thirteen Chinese businessmen arrived in Riyadh on November 17, 1987 for a ten-day friendly visit, the Chinese economic delegation headed by Jia Xi, Director of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, toured several Saudi cities including Riyadh, Jeddah, Jubail and Yanbu, on November 24 of the same year, he was received by Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense and Aviation, during the meeting, Prince Sultan stressed the free movement of goods between the two countries, and expressed his happiness with the recent progress in economic and trade relations, he hoped for greater cooperation in the fields of trade,

investment, industry and labour services, for its part, the Chinese side expressed the hope that Chinese companies will qualify for project loans and assistance provided by the Saudi Development Fund every year to developing countries, the thirteen-member Chinese delegation included some officials, bankers and experts in the petrochemical industry and held several meetings with Saudi officials and businessmen^{xxxix}.

In an exceptional political breakthrough in relations between the two countries, King Fahd sent on October 12, 1988, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington, as a special envoy to Beijing, as his special envoy, the next day he met with the general secretary of the Communist Party of China, Zhao Xiang, who told him that: **“There is no conflict of interest between China and Saudi Arabia moreover, the two countries share identical views on many key international issues, they also have many aspects in common in their economic construction, expanding bilateral relations not only conforms to the fundamental interests of the two peoples but also conducive to peace and stability in the world.”** He continued: **“China is ready to further strengthen and strengthen friendship and cooperation with Saudi Arabia in all fields on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”^{xxxix}**. Bandar, who handed Zhao a message from King Fahd, responded that **“Saudi Arabia's leaders admire China's foreign policy, reform policy and opening-up, praise the cooperation between the two countries and are willing to further strengthen friendship and cooperation with China.”** During the visit, the Saudi envoy met with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, Vice Foreign Minister Xi Huayuan, and Assistant Foreign Minister Yang Fuchang, meanwhile, Asian diplomats in Beijing said they expected Saudi Arabia to cut ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan) before the end of the year and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China instead, but later, sources in the Gulf suggested that establishing diplomatic ties could take several years because Riyadh was reluctant to cut ties with Taiwan. But diplomatic relations were the main theme of King Fahd's letter to Beijing, meanwhile, Prince Bandar informed the Kingdom's approval of the exchange of official commercial offices between the two countries^{xxxix}, a month later, on November 11, 1988, Prince Bandar and the Chinese ambassador to the United States, Han Xu, signed a memorandum of understanding at the Royal Saudi Embassy in Washington stating that Saudi Arabia and the People's Republic of China would exchange commercial representation offices, this memorandum also provides for granting these offices and representatives quasi-diplomatic privileges and immunities granted to embassies and diplomats, including the use of diplomatic plates in their vehicles, in an interview with the Saudi daily Al-Riyadh, China's ambassador considered this agreement a clear indication of progress in Saudi-Chinese relations^{xxxix}.

The Saudi-Chinese agreement entered into force in March 1989, when the Chinese side delegated Dong Shauqin to head the office of the Trade Representative of the People's Republic of China in Riyadh, five months later, the Saudis appointed retired general Tawfiq Alamdar, a soldier turned Saudi diplomat and ambassador, he handed over his credentials as Riyadh's trade representative in Beijing on 28 August 1989^{xxxix}.

In a related context, the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram published about the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia, when Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington, returned to the US capital from Beijing, where he held talks on announcing the start of diplomatic representation between the two countries, China wanted to announce the start of diplomatic representation within the next two months, while Saudi Arabia proposes that this should be done in late 1989, several developments took place, including when a delegation of Saudi businessmen headed to Beijing, the purpose of this delegation was to open commercial offices for Saudi Arabia in Beijing in order to win new markets in the field of petrochemicals.

King Fahd sent Prince Bandar as a special envoy to the People's Republic of China and on October 13, 1988, he was received by the then General Secretary of the Communist Party, Zhao Ziyang, Zhao told his guest that: "There is no conflict of interest between China and Saudi Arabia moreover, the two countries share identical views on many major international issues and have many aspects in common in their economic construction, expanding bilateral relations not only conforms to the fundamental interests of the two peoples but also conducive to peace and stability in the world." He continued: "China is willing to further strengthen and strengthen friendship and cooperation with Saudi Arabia in all fields on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". In response, Prince Bandar noted that Saudi leaders admire China's positions on regional and international Arab issues^{xxxvi}.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of China have pursued in their foreign policy the principle of peace, which are paths that perpetuate international cooperation on the basis of absolute trust and common interest, their regional and international responsibility requires them to play significant positive roles outside the borders of the region in order to participate in resolving the issues of peace, coexistence and stability in the world.

CONCLUSION

We conclude from this study that regional issues had a side in accelerating the rapprochement between China and Saudi Arabia, China has continued its policy of improving relations with Saudi Arabia, especially after the implementation of China's policy of opening up to the outside world and focusing on economic development away from ideological considerations, in fact, China entered the Middle East to counter Soviet influence and achieve rapprochement with countries with different political and social systems, especially Saudi Arabia, because of its political and religious weight in the region and in the Islamic world. And try to gain recognition of the People's Republic of China, recognition of the one-China policy, and establish diplomatic relations. In this context, China has sought rapprochement with Saudi Arabia by coordinating positions and policies on regional issues of common concern, the outbreak of Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the loss of China, an anti-Soviet ally, forced it to seek another ally to share its hostility and that the kingdom was the best partner, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia saw the United States abandoning the Shah quickly, the kingdom used to see the United States as a reliable

ally, its abandonment of the Shah made her turn her gaze to China. Therefore, it can be said that the compatibility of the positions of Saudi Arabia and China towards the Iran-Iraq war and the arms deals concluded between the two sides was one of the most important forms of rapprochement between the two countries, on the other hand, China was looking forward to aligning with Saudi foreign policy, it supported the Fahd Peace Initiative, which stipulated the exit of “Israelis” from the occupied territories in exchange for normalization and peace, China also called on the international community to pressure Israel to accept this historic initiative, meanwhile, China has attached importance to diplomatic efforts in achieving rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.

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