

## Saudi Foreign Policy Towards Central Asia

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**ABSTRACT.** The independence of Central Asian States in 1991 has encouraged neighboring countries in the Middle Eastern to gain access to the regions' newly discovered wealth and to have a share in the geo-strategic vacuum following the collapse of the USSR. Saudi Arabia was in the forefront of countries becoming active in Central Asia. Its policy has evolved from limited concern with promotion of Islam among the local peoples to expanding political, economic and financial relations. Today, a number of Saudi companies are operating in the region in different fields ranging from construction, petrochemicals to food processing. This growing expansion of Saudi commercial presence is expected to further enhance Saudi relations with the Muslim republics.

The paper discusses this policy and follows its development since 1991. It examines the different aspects of Saudi relations with the new states and points to issues that need careful handling in order for these relations to grow to a level desired by both Saudis and Central Asians. The paper concludes that Saudi Policy towards Central Asia is more complicated than has been characterized by many observers of the Kingdom.

### **I. Introduction**

Relations between Saudi Arabia and the Central Asian countries have received very little attention, except for general comments based on personal impressions and broad preconceptions of Saudi foreign policy. This paper aims at surveying and analyzing the current state of Saudi relations with the Central Asian countries since their independence in late 1991. Among other things, the paper intends to illustrate the complexity of these relations that many observers seem to overlook by focusing on just one aspect of Saudi policy towards the region, i.e., religion. The paper will discuss this uni-dimensional view of Saudi policy towards Central Asia. It will then argue that the utility of Islam to enhance Saudi presence in the region depends on how sensitive the government deals with the emerging Islamic scene. After that, the paper discusses the economic dimension of the relations and explore the chances for large Saudi investments in the region. In the conclusion, we will try to present an objective evaluation of the future development of Saudi-Central Asian relations.

### The Importance of the Study

Saudi foreign policy towards the Central Asian states. It points out the positive elements of the relations between Saudi Arabia and the newly independent states, and identifies some challenges that the relations may encounter.

### The Question of Misperception

The collapse of the USSR in late 1991 and subsequent emergence of the Central Asian states have caused a number of challenges to leaders of these countries.<sup>(1)</sup> Domestically, they were faced with the task of creating a free market economy along with a democratic political system in place of the centralized Soviet institutions. Externally, the governments of the five Central Asian states had to face the challenge of dealing with a large number of countries seeking to have a share in the new geo-strategic vacuum created by the downfall of the USSR.<sup>(2)</sup> These governments had no prior experience of determining national interests and forming a foreign policy suitable to achieve them. Thus, for a short time they had to rely on Russian diplomatic apparatus to conduct their relations with the outside world.

In order to overcome their economic troubles and uphold their newly gained independence, Central Asian countries had to look West and South. The West was seen as the unmatched source of vast material and technical assistance, the Muslim South was believed to be the venue for reestablishing lost identity as well as a key for financial help. The political leadership in Central Asia approached the world with an exaggerated view that beyond the borders of their countries lay vast treasures waiting to be claimed by long-deprived people like them. They believed that the Muslim Umma, to which they belong, would rush to bail them out of their misery caused by the disintegration. For them, it was just a matter of reestablishing diplomatic relations for the help to flow into their countries. It is this type of misconception about international politics that complicates the effort of the Central Asians countries to establish mature multi-dimensional relations with the outside world. Saudis and Arabs in general, on the other hand, faced a situation that was not conducive for strong relations with Central Asian countries. They lacked adequate knowledge about Central Asia and held simplistic views of its current socio-economic and political conditions. It is not only Americans and Europeans who have a problem pronouncing the names of the different republics of the region,

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(1) For more on the challenges facing central Asia see: **Boris Z. Rumer**, (ed). *Central Asia in transition: Dilemmas of political and economic development*, (London: M. E. Sharpe. 1996), **Shireen T. Hunter**, **Marie Bennigsen Broxup**, *Central Asia since Independence* (Washington, D.C: *The Washington Papers*, vol. 168).

(2) See **Martha Brill Olcott**. *Central Asia's New States : Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security*, (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace. 1996, **Jed C. Snyder**, (ed.), 1995), *After empire: The Emerging Geopolitics of Central Asia*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense Univ. Press.(1995), **Hafeez Malik** (Editor). *Central Asia : Its Strategic Importance and Future Prospects*, (New York: St Martins Press1996), **Ali Banuazizi** and **Myron Weiner**, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and its Borderlands*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), **John Anderson**, *The International Politics of Central Asia*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

but Arabs too suffer from such difficulty<sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition, in the minds of most Saudis Central Asia is always equated with Muslims struggling against atheism. Hence, during the early post-independence period Saudi citizens had portrayed a high level of enthusiasm for the newly emerging “Islamic” countries. For many years, they had prayed for the “liberation” of their Central Asian brethren from the communist yoke. During the last years of the Soviet regime, Saudi newspapers had published numerous articles recalling and celebrating the great contributions of the Central Asian Muslims to Islamic civilization. In those writings, Islam was presented as the only principle that should guide the Kingdom’s relations with the region.

A Muslim was obliged to help his/her brothers and sisters in “Deen,” regardless of any other “secular” or national considerations. Countless calls had been issued to provide immediate assistance to the descendants of *Imam Albukhari*, *Ibn Sina*, *Alkhuarismi* and the many great scholars of Central Asia. The emphasis was placed on helping them to learn the “true” Islam after seventy years of communist distortion and persecution. The fact that in contemporary Central Asia Islam is not just limited to performing rituals, but rather has become an important component of the region’s political context was not quite apparent to most Saudis.

Finally, Saudi relations with the Central Asian countries suffer from simplistic views held by the majority of the Kingdom’s foreign observers regarding its foreign policy. As mentioned above, to many of those observers, Saudi policy is completely driven by religious considerations. Saudi Arabia was viewed as the championship of the reemergence of Islam in Central Asian societies. This view was in fact reinforced by the nature of Saudi help during the early years following the collapse of the USSR. It was largely limited to giving copies of the holy Koran and renovation of old mosques and building of new ones. This concern with religious aid reflected the widespread belief among Saudis that Central Asians were in desperate need to strengthen their knowledge of Islam.

Notwithstanding the fact that Islam is a major determinant of Saudi foreign policy, it is not the sole factor. Just like any other nation-state Saudi Arabia has diverse national interests, which requires a sophisticated foreign policy that does not fit well with the naive picture formed by many observers of the Kingdom. Therefore, it is important for any balanced evaluation of Saudi relations with Central Asia to take these cognitive problems into consideration.

Furthermore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, have no clear well-defined policy towards Central Asia. The importance of the region whether strategic, economic or cultural is not yet clear to the majority of policy makers in the Arab world. In fact, that region, to many of them, seems too far away to carry any significant weight.

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(3) Before the collapse of the USSR there were few Arabic sources on Central Asia. Although normative and historical Dr. M. Al-Bar’s (١٩٨١) (دار جدة)، *المسلمون في الاتحاد السوفيتي*, is one of the few most read books in Arabic on the region.

This may explain the low level of interest shown by many Arab countries towards Central Asia. If we exclude Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Kuwait, we will find a striking Arab absence as compared to other regional and non-regional actors. In addition to the skepticism about the expected importance of the region, we may explain this absence by the worsening economic and political conditions in the Middle East that have kept many Arab states largely focused on their own affairs and prevented them from engaging in regions bordering the Arab world. There is also what could be described as an intellectual factor contributing to the low-level interest in Central Asia. It is the negative feelings held by many Arab intellectuals regarding the collapse of the USSR, which was once considered as a true friend and a champion of Arab causes. These feelings were also directed towards almost everything resulting from that collapse. For example, Boris Yeltsin, who is accused of orchestrating the collapse, is quite hated by Arab Intellectuals of all political perspectives. To many Arab intellectuals, the downfall of the USSR meant that there was nothing left on its lands that deserve attention<sup>(4)</sup>.

#### **The Current State of Saudi Relations with Central Asian Countries**

Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to recognize the Central Asian states. Before the collapse of the USSR, the Saudi Council of Ministers welcomed the declarations of independence made by these states in the fall of 1991. Prince Saud Al-Faisal's visit to Central Asia in February 1992 could be considered as the founding act for Saudi policy towards the region. The foreign minister visited Uzbekistan, Turkmanistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. During those visits prince Saud stressed the importance of Central Asia to Saudi Arabia and pointed to the several areas of potential cooperation with its countries. He also referred to the historical relations between Central Asia and Arabia and affirmed that Islam provided the legitimate foundation for Saudi relations with the region. The outcome of the visit was the establishment of diplomatic relations with a number of the countries of the region.

Today, Saudi Arabia has two embassies in Central Asia and there are plans to open two more embassies in Baku and Ashgabad in the near future. Saudi Embassy in Almaata was opened in 1996, and in 1997 another embassy was opened in Tashkent. The Saudi focus on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is quite understood for these are the most important states in the region. Uzbekistan lies in the heart of Central Asia and has the region's largest population and its land contains most of the Islamic historical cities and sites. Under the leadership of Islam Karimov it aspires for a leading role in the area's affairs and is considered by many as the gate to the region<sup>(5)</sup>. The importance of Uzbekistan is evident in the recent changes in US policy which considers Tashkent as the best deterrent to Russian domination and as a result the issue of the Uzbek government's human rights violations has

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(4) It is interesting when one reads articles about the former USSR in Arab newspapers feels a sense of nostalgia for the old days when Moscow was able to vehemently confront the U.S on Middle East issues.

(5) For more information on Uzbekistan foreign policy see Annette Bohr, *Uzbekistan: Politics and Foreign Policy*, (London: The Royal Institute of International Relations, 1998).

become less important for Washington<sup>(6)</sup>. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is the wealthiest nation of the region and has gained a respectable standing in the world community. The lack of diplomatic relations with the rest of the countries is not so difficult to explain. Tajikistan has been undergoing a civil war since 1992 that has discouraged other countries from developing relations with its government<sup>(7)</sup>. Although Dushanbi signed a peace accord with the United Opposition in August 1997, the political situation there is still inhospitable for foreign diplomatic community. Due to its remote location, Kirgizia has taken an eastward policy and if compared with its neighbors, has quite few resources that limit its attractiveness for the outside world. As we mentioned above, there are plans to open two Saudi embassies in Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

In Riyadh today there are only two embassies one for Uzbekistan and the other for Kazakhstan. The Uzbek embassy opened in 1995, while the Kazakh opened in 1996. Both ambassadors are non-residents ambassadors for their countries to a number of Gulf States. It is worth mentioning that in the whole Arab world, these countries have diplomatic representations in only Saudi Arabia and Egypt at ambassadorial level and they both have consulates in the UAE.

The Kazakh ambassador Amir Baghdadaev could be considered as one of the most active in the diplomatic community in Saudi Arabia. He holds periodic meetings with Saudi officials. Notwithstanding the ambassador's quite energetic work, the Saudi-Kazakh relations have not yet achieved what officials in both countries consider as the desired "natural" level. Nevertheless, Saudi-Kazakh relations have witnessed three unfortunate incidents that have left negative impressions among Saudi public towards Kazakhstan. First and foremost was the terrible crash in 1996 of a Saudi plane with a Kazakh commercial jet over India, which resulted in the death of 245 passengers. According to Saudi civil aviation officials, the cause of the crash was miscommunication between the captain of the Kazakh plane and the Indian air controllers. The Saudi newspapers have written extensively on the many problems the airliners of the newly independent states have and the danger they presented to air travelers worldwide. The second incident involves the murder of a Saudi diplomat in Almaata in December 1997. According to Kazakh officials the murder of the first secretary was theft related. While conveying his government condolence, the Kazakh ambassador stressed that tragic incident would not undermine Kazakhstan's growing relations with the Kingdom<sup>(8)</sup>. Finally, we may mention the story of a Saudi soccer team, which traveled to Almaata in November of 1995 to play against a Kazakh team in the Asian Soccer Tournament. According to Saudi newspapers, during their stay in Kazakhstan, the Saudi team (Alnasser) was ill-treated and the administrators of the team had to call on the President of the Saudi Youth Welfare to ask the Kazakh

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(6) Recently Uzbekistan has announced its intention to pull out of the collective security pact which includes Russia and six other CIS countries. President Islam Karimov has questioned the utility of the pact. See *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, No. 7382, 13-Feb.1999, p.9.

(7) For a comprehensive analysis of the Tajik conflict see, **Shirin Akiner**, *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation*, London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998.

(8) See *Okaz*, 14-December 1997, p.32

government to intervene. The incident received extensive coverage in Saudi newspapers and was described as a sad journey<sup>(9)</sup>.

Though those incidents might have influenced Saudi public opinion of Kazakhstan, the fact that Saudi foreign policy is insulated from public pressure limits their overall affect on Saudi relations with Kazakhstan. In fact, Almaata is making a speedy progress in its contacts with Saudi Arabia. Recently a delegation from the Saudi Shura Council visited Almaata. The delegation headed by the chairman of the Council sheik Mohammad Al-Jubair was well received and held meetings with the president, the prime minister and a number of government officials. President Nur sultan Nezarbaev expressed his appreciation of Saudi Arabia and stated his country's interest in strengthening its ties with the Kingdom<sup>(10)</sup>. The visit was in response to an invitation from the chairman of the Kazakh Senate who visited Saudi Arabia earlier.<sup>(11)</sup> During the visit, the chairman of the Shura Council was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Almaata for his "valuable contribution in strengthening relations between the two countries."<sup>(12)</sup> In a press release the Saudi ambassador to Kazakhstan Ibrahim Mousli commended relations between Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan and affirmed that the visit would help strengthen the relationship and serve the interests of the two countries. According to the Kazakh ambassador, a number of Saudi ministers will visit Kazakhstan before the end of this year, including Ministers of Justice, Industry, and Higher Education. The Kazakh President is set to visit Saudi Arabia in 1999. His first visit in 1994 furnished the way for strong relations with the Kingdom. We may also mention that just before the visit the Saudi Council of Ministers has approved an agreement with Kazakhstan covering cooperation in many areas. The agreement is expected to further enhance the relations between the two countries

Except for Askar Akaiev, the President of Kirgizia, Saudi Arabia had received all the leaders of the regions who had meetings with King Fahad and a number of high-ranking Saudi officials. They all have stressed the importance of their countries' relations with Saudi Arabia for its leading role in the Islamic world. Furthermore, a quite large number of officials from the region have visited Saudi Arabia, which they consider, as a potential source of much needed capital. The frequent calls by those officials for expanding their relations with Saudi Arabia might be interpreted as a veiled criticism of too much focusing on religious aid. As a result of these visits Saudi Arabia has signed agreements of multifaceted cooperation with Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and finally with Kazakhstan. Those agreements cover economic, commercial, cultural and sport cooperation.

Compared with other regional powers seeking a foothold in Central Asia, Saudi Arabia has a number of advantages that, if used properly, may facilitate its entry. First, it enjoys a leading position in the Islamic world that enables it to have

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(9) *Al-Riyadh*, 19/11/95, p. 1.

(10) *Al-jazirah* 21/9/98, p. 4.

(11) *Al-jazirah* 17/9/89, p. 1.

(12) *Al-jazirah* 20/9/89, p. 3.

an influential voice in its institutions, such as the Islamic Development Bank and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Second, despite the recent decline in the oil prices, which has left its mark on the Saudi economy, Saudi Arabia continues to be among the wealthiest countries in the region. The Kingdom still enjoys its financial and economic attractiveness among Muslims nations.

Third and most important, Saudi Arabia has a large community of Central Asian descendents who migrated to the Kingdom during different historical periods, particularly in the twenties and thirties escaping the anti-Islam campaigns and Stalin's repressive policies. The exact size of the community is not known, but according to Uzbek diplomats it is believed to be around 500,000. Most of them are from Uzbekistan and are concentrated in the Western Region in Makkah, Jeddah and AlMadina and are called Bukharis by Saudis. A large number of them hold high-ranking positions in the Saudi government and many are influential businessmen. Since the independence of Central Asian states they have become interested in rediscovering the homeland they were forced to leave. Many have visited the region, contributed to renovating old mosques, building new ones, establishing centers to study Islam, and they have shown interest to invest in the local economies. It may be interesting to mention that many of those Central Asian Saudis attend the annual celebration held in Riyadh by the Uzbek embassy to commemorate the Uzbek national day. The fact that they live around the holy places in Saudi Arabia gives them a respectable and somewhat sacred position among Central Asians. Even the region's officials have shown a high respect towards them. For example, during the recent celebration of the 1200 anniversary of Al-Imam AlBukhari held in Uzbekistan one of those Saudi Uzbeks gave a speech on the occasion following president Islam Karimov, who helped him personally to reach the podium. Thus, if it wishes, Saudi Arabia can benefit a lot from this community by using it as a human bridge to Central Asia.

#### **The Religious Dimension of Saudi Relations with Central Asia**

Since it was established as a state in 1932, Islam has been a major source as well as instrument of Saudi foreign policy. The fact that Saudi Arabia is the site of the two holy mosques grants it a leading role in the Muslim world and puts on its government a religious duty towards Muslims wherever they live. Saudi Arabia's first act towards the Muslims of Central Asia was King Fahad's gift of one million copies of the Holy Quran. It has left a tremendous positive impact on them even though many of the copies were sold to locals for quite high prices. The Saudi government has also hosted large numbers of pilgrims from the region. Last year, 1800 pilgrims from Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia were invited to perform this sacred duty at the expense of King Fahad.<sup>(13)</sup> Saudi Arabia has offered a number of scholarships for students to study Arabic and Islamic studies at several Saudi universities.

Thus, it is quite clear that endorsing Islamic causes has become a permanent feature of Saudi foreign policy. In fact, Islam is considered by many observers of

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(13) *Okaz*, March-30-1998, p. 5.

Saudi Arabia as the chief determinant of Saudi foreign relations. Reality, however, shows that in a chaotic international environment a state's foremost priority is its security and national interests that may not always coincide with the religious or ideological principles shaping its foreign policy. The rise of political Islam during the eighties and nineties and the resulting conflict between active Islamic groups and the regimes in the Middle East have complicated the role of Islam in Saudi foreign policy. It has become quite difficult to provide financial and moral help to spread and strengthen the message of Islam, which Saudi Arabia sees as a duty, and to ensure, on the other hand, that such assistance would not be used by so-called Islamists in their effort to enhance their position vis-a-vis the secular governments.

This is becoming more visible in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Since Gorbachov's policy of tolerance towards religion in the former USSR, groups calling for the intensification of the role of Islam in society have become salient in many regions of Central Asia, especially the Fergana Valley.<sup>(14)</sup> The Central Asian governments that are still under the control of more or less soviet-raised elites have entered into confrontations with such groups and have accused them of seeking to destabilize the region and establish radical regimes.<sup>(15)</sup>

The Central Asian governments have accused Arab preachers of radicalizing the local groups, who were basically more interested in spreading knowledge, and teaching the local population the basics of Islam. According to Central Asian officials, preachers from a number of Arab countries have installed radical ideas in the minds of the local youth. They point to books and literature brought into Central Asia by those preachers, which have radical interpretations of Islam. Such literature, which is a product of the Middle East cultural environment, is hardly suitable to Central Asia, particularly during the current difficult socio-economic conditions. The preachers who advise against un-Islamic rituals, i.e., veneration of tomb, are all labeled by the governments as Wahabis seeking to impose their own conservative version of Islam on the region. This is done in spite of the fact that many of them are non-Saudis. Such inaccurate description is not in the interest of Saudi Arabia. The fact is that those young preachers are simple Muslims who care much about their brethren and are full of enthusiasm to help them know their religion after more than seventy years of deprivation. They, however, lack knowledge of the objective socio-economic and political conditions of the region and are not aware of the local governments' fear of religious challenge to their legitimacy. In such situation the Saudi focus on religious help may become counterproductive.

However, we must mention that in the last few years Central Asia has witnessed a major decline of preaching activity by Arab Muslims. The reason for such decline is the weakness of the religious groups at home due to restrictions imposed on them by Middle Eastern governments. Today, the Saudi government

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(14) For more on the religious situation in Central Asia see, **Mehrdad Haghighyehi**, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

(15) The Uzbek Government has blamed local Islamic groups for the recent bombing incidents in Tashkent which resulted in the death of 13 citizens. See **RFE/RI Newswire**, vol. 13, No. 37, Feb-23-1999.



has become more sensitive to the religious situation in the region and has started supervising preaching activity. Aware of potential backlash preachers may cause, the Ministry of Endowment and religious Affairs has started programs to prepare them to conduct their religious help in Islamic societies that differ from Saudi cultural environment.

The conflict in Afghanistan is another complicating factor of Saudi relations with Central Asia. It is a well-known fact that Saudi Arabia was a major supporter of the Mujahideen against Soviet troops. Saudi interest in Afghanistan has continued after Soviet withdrawal. Saudi Arabia's concern for stability in that country led it in 1997 to recognize Taliban as the leading force and gave it diplomatic support. Taliban was then thought to crush the other groups and to end the conflict. It was also expected that Taliban would curtail the activity of Usama Ibn Ladin. Taliban's radical interpretation of Islam, however, was seen as a new threat to the stability of Central Asia. The governments of the region were critical of outside support given to Taliban. The recent Saudi decision to withdraw the Saudi ambassador from Kabul and to declare the Afghani ambassador in Riyadh a persona non grata was due to Taliban's insistence to give Ibn Ladin refugee even after he declared responsibility to the Khubar tower bombing.

The decision could also be explained as a response to criticism from Central Asia, Russia, and Iran to external support to Taliban. Thus, It is clear that religion may not always facilitate Saudi efforts to establish solid presence in the region. In fact, Central Asians officials who acknowledge their countries' cultural ties with the Arab world, use every occasion to stress that their interest lies more in economic and commercial relations rather than in religious aid.

### **The Economic and Commercial Relations**

Since their independence in 1991 the "Islamic" states of Central Asia and the Caucasus have become a "shrine" for international capital. Multi-national corporations have been rushing into the region to benefit from the newly discovered wealth expected to start a development drive that would involve spending billions of petrodollars earned from exporting huge quantities of natural gas and oil resources in a fashion similar to what the Gulf states have experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>(16)</sup>

Development of economic and financial ties between Saudi Arabia and the Central Asian states is still, however, quite slow and at a low level. We may take the visit of a delegation of Saudi businessmen to Central Asia in the summer of 1996 as the first serious initiative to activate trade and finance in Saudi relations with the region. The delegation headed by the chairman of the Saudi Chamber of Commerce (SCC) and comprising 40 businessmen, visited Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. The visit lasted ten days and was described by "Altijarh", the organ of the SCC, as an exploratory tour of investment opportunities in the

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(16) For more on the new natural wealth in the region see, **Geoffrey Kemp**, *Energy Superbowl: Strategic Politics and the Persian and Caspian Basin*, Washington, DC: Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom, 1997.

region.<sup>(17)</sup> The delegation was well received and was informed by high officials of numerous projects awaiting foreign investors. The Saudi businessmen were offered incentives, such as land, tax exemption.

Although trade between Saudi Arabia and the Central Asian countries has continued to increase, it is still insignificant as percentage of total trade of either side. In 1996 Saudi Arabia imported from the Central Asian countries including Azerbaijan, goods valued at 21 million USD, most of which came from Uzbekistan. In the same year it exported to the region goods worth 2 million US\$.<sup>(18)</sup> Compared with the early years of independence these numbers are somewhat high but do not reflect the trade potential of both sides. The governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have provided the Saudi Chamber of Commerce with long lists of proposed joint venture projects ranging from natural gas and oil exploration to textiles and food processing. Currently Saudi Arabia has three commercial agreements with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. These agreements envision cooperation in industrial, petrochemical, agricultural and health areas. They also called for exchange of information and expertise, facilitation of investment and joint projects.

According to officials from the region, the Central Asian governments prefer long-term investment in industry rather than trade of consumer goods. A number of Saudi companies are now working in different parts of the region, especially in Kazakhstan. *Delta* is involved in oil production scheme with Texaco, *Alnimir* in the natural Gas field and is working jointly with Unocal on a project to transfer natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan. The projected 1000-mile pipeline goes via Afghanistan and costs around 2 billion USD. These two companies are also active in the Aziri oil market and a few weeks ago it was announced that Texaco bought *Alnimir* share in the field of Ibaaziri on the Caspian shore. *Ibn Ladin* Company is one of the main developers of the infrastructures of the new Kazakh capital Iстана. This is a huge project that involves billions of USD. Last September *Alswakit*, another Saudi Company, signed a deal with Kazakh government to build oil storage and pipeline network. The deal is worth 60 millions US\$.<sup>(19)</sup> In Uzbekistan the *Saudi Plastic Company* (Sapco) is working in a joint venture with an Uzbek company, and *Almabani*, another Saudi Company, is taking part in the construction of a new diplomatic quarter in Tashkent.

As mentioned above, the region possess enormous opportunities for foreign investors and Saudi businessmen have the advantage of being representative of a country that wields a high level of affection among Central Asians. Despite the fact that ARAMCO, the giant Saudi Oil Company, has all the qualifications to be a major participator in the exploration and the production of the oil and gas of the region, it continues its absence from Central Asia. This absence maybe due to the argument that the Caspian oil and gas could become a major competitor to the Gulf. Whether this is true or not, it is a fact that the region's resources will

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(17) See *Al-tijara*, September, 1996.

(18) See Riyadh Chamber of Commerce & Industry, *Import and Export of Saudi Arabia, 1998*.

(19) *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 27-9-1998, p.11.

eventually reach the world market with or without us. Hence, it is better for Saudi Arabia to have its share in this new wealth and ARAMCO is the best tool for such involvement.

There are a number of obstacles in the way of large Saudi and Gulf commercial involvement in Central Asia. Among such obstacles is political uncertainty, lack of modern infrastructure, legal guarantees of foreign investment, absence of developed banking and communication facility. We may also point to the conservative nature of the investment behavior of Gulf businessmen. Mostly, they prefer to invest in stable long-established markets, such as Americans and Europeans that offer quick and guaranteed profit.

### **Conclusion**

Saudi Arabia has welcomed the independence of the Central Asian states and has continued to express its sympathy with the peoples of the region as they undergo the difficult period of transformation. Its relations with the Central Asian countries, however, have not become highly developed as was originally expected. In fact, notwithstanding the high level of vocal support declared by many Arab countries to the Central Asian states, Arab actual presence in the region, particularly economic and financial is disproportionately low. The fact that the independence of the Central Asian countries has occurred at a time when the Arab world was facing immense challenges in the aftermath of the Gulf war is a cause of this low level of Arab interest in that region. Furthermore, the low level of Saudi presence maybe also due to the fact that Saudi Arabia has not yet determined the nature of its interests in the region, which is the first step for a successful foreign policy.

Contrary to the expectations of the leadership and citizens of the region, Arab sympathy has not been translated into actions that would help them overcome the multi-faceted crisis they are facing. If compared with Russia, we can find a quite little attention being paid by Arab media to Central Asian countries. Today, Central Asian states seem to have realized that Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, are not the golden doors to salvation, as they once thought. These countries lack the interest as well as the resources to spare and are quite busy with accumulating Middle Eastern problems that seem to be infinite. Central Asian governments have turned west and east and away from the south that instead of bringing them fortune is offering them the resources for a "radical" Islam.

The current quarrels between Russia and the West over Central Asia, that some have described, as the "second" great game, should underscore the strategic importance of the region. The Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia, must not lose interest in Central Asia, regardless of how busy we may be with recurring problems of the Middle East. There is a lot that we share with Central Asia, whether culturally, economically, or strategically. Saudi Arabia needs to incorporate the Central Asian countries, including Azerbaijan, in its bid for leadership in the Islamic world. We may also have interest in coordinating energy policy with these countries that are becoming major oil and gas producers in the first quarter of the

next century. The first step towards active involvement is to get rid of misunderstanding that has characterized our knowledge of the region. Such misunderstanding is partially traced back to the almost total isolation of Central Asia due to the breaking of Saudi relations with the Soviet Union in the middle 1930s. Since then Saudis lost all access to the region, except for the few pilgrims who were carefully picked by the Soviet authority and were allowed to travel to Makkah for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, Saudi government needs to determine what interests it has in Central Asia and to weigh the region's importance for Saudi leadership role in the Islamic world.

Finally, time has come for scholars and observers to reconsider their traditional view of Saudi foreign policy in general, and its policy towards Central Asia in particular. Reality proves that it is inappropriate to claim that Saudi policy is exclusively determined by religion. The assumption that all Saudi external activities are intended solely to promote Islamic causes is hardly valid. We do not question that Islam plays a major role in shaping and directing Saudi internal and external policies, but it is totally wrong to assume that it is the only variable driving those policies. State as well as regime traditional concerns have never been absent from Saudi policymakers' calculations whenever initiating a new policy. There is a need for a balanced and objective perspective of Saudi foreign policy that takes into account all the different factors and concerns shaping it.

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## السياسة الخارجية السعودية تجاه آسيا الوسطى

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المستخلص . استغلال جمهوريات آسيا الوسطى في أواخر ١٩٩١ دفع الكثير من الدول إلى محاولة استغلال الفراغ الاستراتيجي الناتج عن انهيار الاتحاد السوفيتي وكذلك المشاركة في استغلال ثروات المنطقة من النفط والغاز. ولقد كانت المملكة العربية السعودية في مقدمة الدول التي اعترفت بالدول الجديدة وسعت إلى إقامة علاقات معها. وفي السنوات الأولى اقتصر الاهتمام السعودي على الجوانب الدينية حيث قدمت المملكة مساعدات ساهمت في تعزيز الحياة الدينية في مجتمعات آسيا الوسطى التي حرمت من ممارسة شعائرها الدينية في ظل النظام السوفيتي. ومنذ منتصف التسعينيات أخذت العلاقات السعودية بدول آسيا الوسطى أبعاداً جديدة حيث برزت المسائل الاقتصادية بشكل واضح وتمثل في مشاركة العديد من الشركات السعودية في الكثير من المشاريع في دول المنطقة. واليوم نجد أن علاقات المملكة بدول آسيا الوسطى قد تطورت لتغطي جوانب سياسية واقتصادية وتجارية متنوعة. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مناقشة السياسة السعودية تجاه آسيا الوسطى منذ ١٩٩١ حيث تناقش الأبعاد المختلفة للعلاقات السعودية بالجمهوريات الإسلامية. كما أشارت الدراسة إلى عدد من المسائل التي تستوجب حرصاً وعناية أكبر بهدف تعزيز العلاقات والوصول بها إلى مستوى يرضي توقعات الطرفين. ومن بين الاستنتاجات التي تصل إليها الدراسة أن السياسة السعودية أكثر تعقيداً في شموليتها من الصورة التي يحملها الكثير من المراقبين.