The Report of the 9/11 Commission of the U.S. Senate, however, found that Saudi Arabia did not directly finance the 9/11 attacks. Yet, it stated, al Qaeda found “fertile fundraising ground in the Kingdom,” where religious extremism flourishes and charitable giving is considered an obligation.

**THE POST-9/11 RELATIONSHIP UNDER FIRE**

Where has the U.S.–Saudi relationship been headed after 9/11? A look at the evidence—books, news releases, scholarly journal essays, congressional testimonies, documentary films (*Fahrenheit 9/11*), positions taken by NGOs and foreign news media—indicates extraordinary attention and heated debate over this key question. What emerges is a complex economic and political relationship shaped by multiple actors pursuing multiple interests. U.S.–Saudi relations have become the subject of partisan political battles over their legitimacy and impact on the destinies of each side.

One interpretation is that the U.S.–Saudi relationship is basically a family affair for profit making. (This is the view of Craig Unger, author of *House of Bush, House of Saud,* and Michael Moore, producer of the documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11.*) Others believe it is a classic bilateral relationship between two countries. Each side rationally seeks to pursue its security, economic development, and political stability by maximizing what unites it with the other side and minimizing what divides them. In either case, multiple actors have influenced foreign-policy decision making in both the United States and Saudi Arabia, as have external actors and forces at work in world politics.

To understand U.S.–Saudi relations, it helps to apply this chapter’s concepts. Where do different levels of analysis (international system, regional, state, substate, and individual) come into play? How do distinct perspectives on decision making (rational, organizational, political, and individual)—help us understand its operating features?

**A Rational-actor Perspective**

The complexity of U.S.–Saudi relations, with its combustible mix of politics, terror, and oil, was summarized by Joseph M. Myers in his testimony before the U.S. Senate in May 2004. Myers, a lawyer who specializes in money-laundering issues and international trade, stated:

The Saudis are regularly portrayed as either our worst enemies or our best, most loyal and steadfast allies. The
realities in my limited experience is that our relationship with the Saudis has much in common with other bilateral relationships: it is strategically important, and complex, and we seek to maximize areas where our interests overlap, while we minimize conflict in order to achieve as many of our common goals as possible.  

Here we see Saudi Arabia as a moderate friend in the volatile Middle East at a time when anti-U.S. feeling is high, owing not only to the war in Iraq but also to perceived one-sided U.S. backing of Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians. From this rational state-to-state perspective, it would not make sense to stand by as al Qaeda pursues its key objective of overthrowing the Saudi monarchy by removing American support for that monarchy. As the 9/11 Commission pointed out, cooperating with Saudi Arabia in counterterrorism is in the interest of both the Saudis and the United States.

**An Organizational Perspective: A Positive View**

Let’s look at an organizational view from a journalist who knows Saudi Arabia in depth. Thomas Lippman, the author of *Inside the Mirage: America’s Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia*, a former correspondent with *The Washington Post*, and an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute, offers the following insight:

> Everyone should understand that the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia has been and is much broader and deeper and involves many more spheres of human activity than people are commonly aware of. Oil was the start; oil is not the finish. It certainly goes beyond oil and defense.

Lippman highlights the various organizations that have shaped the U.S.–Saudi relationship. They include U.S. and Saudi business groups (oil groups among the more prominent) and government organizations, such as national airlines, agriculture, and armed services. In his overall perspective, the various groups engaged in shaping U.S.–Saudi relations have produced a mutually beneficial connection that still matters tremendously from an economic, strategic, and political perspective.

On the other hand, Lippman does not delve into Senate hearings since 9/11 that have explored Saudi financing of terrorism, focusing on several Muslim charities closely linked to members of the Saudi royal family. Nor does he address Saudi funding of mosques and research centers; nor its support for Islamist organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations that have introduced Wahhabism to the university campuses via the Muslim Student Association.

**A Negative Organizational Perspective**

A less benign perspective is found in Craig Unger’s *House of Bush, House of Saud*. Among other U.S.–Saudi ties examined by Unger are those forged by the Bush family–controlled Carlyle Group, the largest privately held defense contractor in the United States, a company with links that extend directly into the Oval Office with the presidency of George W. Bush. The many companies owned by Carlyle in the defense sector and other industries include some of the most powerful people in the world as partners, directors, advisers, counselors, and so on—such as former President George H. W. Bush, former Secretary of State James Baker, former British Prime Minister John Major, former Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci, and others.

One of the Saudi investors with Carlyle was the bin Laden Group, the construction conglomerate owned by the family of Osama bin Laden. From this organizational perspective, it would seem that Carlyle and its network of investors are well positioned to financially benefit from expansion of defense and homeland security in the United States and in the defense and reconstruction of Iraq. The bin Laden family, it should be noted, extricated itself from Carlyle not long after 9/11. Yet members of the Saudi royal family continued to invest in Carlyle projects.

The Saudis have also invested, Unger shows, in Halliburton, the huge company of which Vice President Dick Cheney is a former CEO; even as vice president, Cheney continued to hold 433,333 company shares in a charitable trust. Halliburton has won numerous defense-related contracts in Iraq without competitive bidding.

**An Individual Level Perspective**

At the individual/political level, a number of key figures jump out. Take note of the role played by the first President Bush in his close personal ties with the Saudi royal family. After he left the White House, George H. W. Bush made a number of visits to Saudi Arabia. Kevin Phillips, author of *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*, reports that his relationships with the Saudis remained so close that the former Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Bandar, and his wife considered the Bushes “almost family.”

What were some of the key consequences of these close personal ties? First, they may have become a reason for making the United States a target for Islamic al Qaeda radicals, led by Osama bin Laden, in 2001. U.S. military troops were still stationed in Saudi Arabia following the first Gulf War. Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, the Saudi ambassador, was a high-flying, flamboyant, pro-West multibillionaire Saudi royal-family member. He entertained lavishly at his estates all over the world. He was close to the Bush family and an ardent admirer of Western civilization. He quite naturally could be perceived only with hatred by militant Islamic fundamentalists, who loathed the pro-West Saudi royal-family members. Consider, too, that the Bush Family’s Carlyle Group owned the company that trained and supported the Saudi National Guard, the
royal family’s internal security force. These and other well-known Bush-Saudi ties, according to Kevin Phillips, could have motivated al Qaeda fundamentalists.

Second, Bob Woodward’s book Plan of Attack charges that Prince Bandar was informed of the war plan on Iraq even before the president told Secretary of State Colin Powell. Additionally, immediately following the 9/11 attacks, Bandar received maximum cooperation from the White House to arrange for members of the Saudi royal family and the bin Laden family to leave the country while all other commercial and private flights were grounded. Finally, numerous sources have pointed to a lack of cooperation from the Saudis following 9/11 in seeking information about al Qaeda members in the kingdom—and about funding the global spread of evangelical Wahhabist Islam, jihad, and anti-Israeli activities.

Bob Woodward, in his book, State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III, points out a religious tie between Bush and Prince Bandar: their shared belief in God. According to Woodward, Bush’s religious convictions came up repeatedly in his conversations with Prince Bandar. “I get guidance from God in prayer,” Bush said, mentioning to Bandar the number of times he asked for guidance, and received it, from God. Bush’s conversations with Prince Bandar, Woodward writes, would include reference to what they do with their shared, deep, belief in God.

As to the individual-level perspective, we end the case study with a quote from Phillips’s American Dynasty: “No other political family in the United States has had anything remotely resembling the Bushes’ four-decade relationship with the Saudi royal family and the oil sheikhs of the Persian Gulf.”

**CONCLUSION**

This case study has many levels of analysis—international system, regional, state, substate, and individual. It illustrates how foreign policies and relations between two countries can be viewed in the context of these dimensions. At the same time, understanding the complexity of the multiple forces at work and actors involved is helped by looking at the two countries’ foreign policies from the four perspectives discussed in this chapter. The rational, organizational, political, and individual perspectives shed light on what has been happening, why, and with what consequences for both the United States and Saudi Arabia.

At this point in the story, the relationship remains one of oil, politics, and violence—and it could go in a number of directions, but probably not one of breaking apart. This is because each side still needs the other to serve its national interests. A big remaining question is whether or not members of the Saudi royal family will continue to fund the teaching of Wahhabi fundamentalist Islam, including the schools (madrassas) in Pakistan.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
3. Joseph M. Myers, testimony on combating terror financing and U.S. cooperation with Saudi Arabia, U.S. Senate Committee on Finance Hearing on the Treasury Department, July 15, 2004. Myers is a lawyer with the firm of Katzen Muchin Zavis Rosenman, as counsel, focusing on anti-money laundering regulatory and compliance issues.
6. Unger, op. cit.
7. Ibid., p. 315.
10. Ibid., p. 335.

**Questions**

**Check Your Understanding**

1. Identify the driving forces at work at the global, state, and individual level in this case study.
2. Explain the four perspectives on foreign-policy decision making discussed in this chapter as they apply to the case study.

**Analyze the Issues**

1. According to the four views on foreign-policy decision making, do you think today is a good time to reflect on the nature of the U.S.–Saudi relationship? What are you assuming in reaching this judgment?
2. Use what you have learned about the nature of this relationship to explain where you see it headed over the next five years.
3. Of the four perspectives on foreign-policy decision making at work in the case study, which do you find most helpful in your understanding of U.S.–Saudi relations? Why?

**Further Information**

Jason Burke, “Al Qaeda,” Foreign Policy (May/June 2004); 18–26.

Videos and Media Sources
For a history of Saudi Arabia, check out http://www.countryreports.org/history/sauhist.htm.
An informative video may be found at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/.