On his first trip to the Middle East as president of the United States, Barack Obama appeared before an academic audience at Cairo University to proclaim a new approach to relations with the entire Muslim world. To all Muslims, he sent a message of respect and goodwill, abandoning the “with us or against us” position adopted by his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Obama’s speech touched on many issues, but from the perspective of Saudi Arabia, one of the most important passages was this: “Let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other.” The president stressed his commitment to “governments that reflect the will of the people,” but he added,

Each nation gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people. America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election.¹

With that, Obama put an end to a policy proclaimed by Bush that had conditioned U.S. support for any foreign regime or state upon its commitment to, and progress toward, a democratic government—a policy that Bush’s secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, had pronounced “nonnegotiable.”

Coupled with his announced intention to end the U.S. military’s role in Iraq, Obama’s fresh approach to relations with Muslim countries and peoples was broadly welcomed in Saudi Arabia, where Bush’s espousal of participatory government had not been well received.
Saudi Arabia is a monarchy that has been run by a single family since its creation as a unified country in 1932. All political power, and most economic power, is wielded by the king and princes of the House of Saud. But it would be unfair to characterize it as a dictatorship, if that word means that the ruler’s word is absolute and that all citizens must unquestioningly do his bidding. The king has the final word, but he receives input from his brothers and other family members, the cabinet, a consultative assembly, and the religious leadership—and, through those channels, from the public. Debate and media coverage are vigorous on many topics.

In short, Saudi Arabia is not North Korea. The Saudi regime, which with some justification views itself as legitimate and is accepted as such by most Saudis, saw Bush’s democracy-first policy as unfair and insulting, if not a threat to its reign. Moreover, many Saudis believe that in their part of the world, establishment of an American-style political system would be a prescription for chaos.

It was hard to find fault with a declaration from a president of the United States that he would look more favorably upon countries that embraced democratic ideals than upon those that did not, but Bush clearly misplayed his hand with regard to Saudi Arabia. For decades, the Washington-Riyadh alliance had served both countries well, despite their vast differences, because they set those differences aside to pursue their mutual strategic and economic interests: development of the oil industry, regional stability and containment of Soviet influence in the Middle East, and more recently the struggle against Islamic extremism.

Bush and his advisers chose not to know, or chose to ignore, the fact that throughout the decades of the alliance, the Saudis had always been extremely sensitive about their independence and their prerogatives. They accepted foreigners who provided the help they needed to develop their country but only on their terms; they never welcomed American input into their internal affairs.

**The Evolving Alliance**

By the middle of Bush’s first term, the unwritten terms of the alliance had evolved, and Saudi priorities had evolved with them. In the common struggle against terrorism, the Saudis reluctantly accepted American counsel on their banking system, their police practices, and their school curricula; but in global affairs, the terms of reference were not what they had been in the past, and the Saudis had new room to distance themselves from their American mentors. The cold war was over, Saudi Arabia’s nationalized oil industry was fully