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UNITED STATES AND SAUDI ARABIAN RELATIONS

By Elizabeth Ogolo

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia, officially known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), is the largest country in the Middle East and home to the religion of **Islam**. For centuries, Saudi Arabia has remained an important place for many Muslims and a collaborator in several global organizations. After its establishment, the KSA also remained a strong partner of the United States of America (hereafter referred to as the US, USA, or America) for several interconnected reasons which will be later discussed.

However, over the past few decades, relations between Saudi Arabia and the US have become strained. From **geopolitical** disputes to near ruinous media portrayals following the 9/11 attacks, the most infamous terrorist attack on American soil, Saudi Arabia has suffered serious damage within the American public and political perception. The reputation of a country has significant effects on its ability to maintain positive international authority, perception, relations, and diplomacy. Throughout this conference, you will be exploring how the actions of the KSA and the US have affected each other as both countries have grown in influence and power on a global scale.

*Islam – an
Abrahamic
monotheistic religion
centered on the Quran
and the teaching of
Muhammad;
adherents are called
Muslims.*

EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

Historical Development

Following recognition by the United States, King Abdulaziz Al-Saud (Ibn Saud) established the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on September 23, 1932. The newly formed nation would continue to expand diplomatic relationships with the US with the exchange of



46th US President
Joe Biden
walking beside
Saudi Crown
Prince
Mohammed bin
Salman during
his visit to Saudi
on July 16, 2022,
at the Jeddah
Security and
Development
Summit.

Mandel Ngan / Pool /
AFP via Getty Images

Energy security –
the association
between a country’s
national security and
the continuous
availability of varied
forms of energy.

credentials, concession for California Standard Oil’s exploration of oil in the country, and the appointment of Bert Fish, the first resident United States Ambassador for the KSA under the Roosevelt Administration. These were important strides for diplomatic ties among the two countries. For example, the California Standard Oil and Texas Oil Company (now Texaco) would soon form the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) in 1944. Aramco, which became completely government-owned in 1988, is now called Saudi Aramco and is the world’s largest and richest oil producer, worth over \$7 trillion. Nonetheless, while the two countries have coexisted with mutual respect and shared common interests in security, oil, and counterterrorism, their relationship has not persisted without intense periods of scrutiny and conflict.

Saudi Arabia and the US maintain relations mainly with the understanding that Saudi Arabia aids the US in its quest for “**energy security**” by providing a consistent supply of oil, pricing oil in US dollars, and supporting other international policies around the world (Colgan, 2021). In return, the US supports cultural and educational exchange, cooperates with Saudi Arabia for resolving regional conflicts in Sudan and Iran, and is Saudi Arabia’s top defense supplier. In fact, Saudi Arabia remains the US foreign military sales’ largest customer with current cases valued at more than \$100 billion. Bilateral efforts have also included diversification away from oil (for instance, the Partnership Framework for Advancing Clean Energy), creating opportunities for American and Saudi companies, programs, and students on each other’s soil, and the completion of US diplomatic facilities in Jeddah, Dhahran and soon-to-be **Riyadh** (US Department of State, 2023). Through the Trade Investment Framework Agreement and others, the United States is Saudi Arabia’s second largest trading partner, and Saudi Arabia has become one of the United States’ largest trading partners in the Middle East (US Department of State, 2022).

This long standing relationship has persevered despite friction between the two countries. Overwhelming challenges to harmony reached near insurmountable heights when the KSA government denied any responsibility for the **9/11 attacks**, where near 2,977 victims and 19 Al-Qaeda hijackers died, 15 of whom were Saudi citizens. Several other historic conflicts have risked the near century-long relationship. **The 1973 Oil Embargo**, which significantly raised oil prices in the US, along with divisions on American support for Israel remain a point of contention. Additionally, scrutiny towards the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemeni War, alleged state-sponsored terrorism, differences in political representation (specifically, Saudi’s lack of democratic representation and civil liberties), and the recent assassination of American journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which US intelligence agencies determined to be under the order of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Office

of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021) also continue to strain US-Saudi relations.

Riyadh – the capital and largest city of Saudi Arabia.

Scope of the Problem

Conflicts in the Middle East continue to severely complicate US-Saudi relations. Involvements in regional wars, multilateral relations, and commercial deals have long shaped the geopolitical landscape of Western and Middle Eastern powers. This has generally occurred in complex, sometimes violent, and often controversial ways. Differences along political, ideological, religious, and financial lines have plagued the Middle East leading to the scrutinized deaths and displacements of millions. The tragedies and concerns also have consequences on American soil and involve a slew of other peripheral countries. Understanding the intricate relations and problems between the US and Saudi Arabia will unearth the interconnectedness of several events that have fundamentally shaped the world we know today.

Human Rights

Many individuals in Congress and around the world believe that all humans deserve to have universal, inalienable rights regardless of sex, race, age, nationality, religion, language, finances, or any other status. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, was the first legal document to set out the fundamental human rights to be universally protected. While limitations to universal human rights vary from country to country, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, exist globally to combat abuses, violations, and crimes against people often marginalized in different societies.

The US and Saudi Arabia often disagree on several human rights issues, largely founded on that the US is a secular democracy while Saudi Arabia is an Islamic monarchy that abides by **Shariah** law, which includes serious punishments for nonviolent crimes like adultery, blasphemy, drunkenness, and sorcery. Although Saudi Arabia has made provisions to address some humanitarian issues, such as ratifying the **Convention Against Torture** in 1997, the kingdom also actively violates others. For instance, Saudi blogger Raif Badawi in 2012 was sentenced to 1,000 lashes and 10 years of imprisonment for **apostasy** in response to his human rights activism (BBC News, 2022). Saudi Arabia was also one of eight countries to abstain from the vote on the UDHR due to objections to Article 18 based on the right to change one's religion (OHCHR, 2018). Recently, the 2022 US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Saudi Arabia revealed "significant human rights issues including credible reports of unlawful or

1973 Oil Embargo – temporary cessation of oil shipments from members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, led by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, targeted at nations such as the US that supported Israel during the Yom Kippur War

Shariah – Islamic religious law of governing principles for spiritual, mental, and physical behavior followed by Muslims.

9/11 attacks – series of airline hijackings and suicide attacks committed by 19 Al-Qaeda militants against targets in the US on September 11, 2001; it is the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil in US history.

Convention Against Torture – an international human rights treaty of the United Nations that defines and aims to prevent torture and other acts of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Hydraulic fracturing – also known as shale fracturing or fracking, is the process of injecting water, sand, and/or chemicals into a well to break up underground shale bedrock to free up oil or gas reserves.

Petrodollar – US dollars accepted as payment by an oil exporter; buying oil with US dollars keeps US influence and use of currency high.

arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government agents” among several other concerning violations. Civil liberty violations of freedom of press and assembly, religion, movement, protection of displaced persons and refugees, and political participation were also investigated. Despite several serious findings, the KSA government did not investigate, prosecute, or punish officials accused of committing human rights abuses. Of cases where officials were prosecuted, corrupt practices came into question due to a “significant lack of respect for fair trial guarantees and other human rights abuses or violations, including allegations of torture” (US Department of State, 2023).

Bilateral Economic Relations in Energy

Saudi Arabia is one of the largest producers of oil in the world and therefore holds considerable power in the global dispersion of fossil fuels. In fact, the country has been providing the US with oil since its inception in the 1930s. The Standard Oil of California, now known as Chevron Corporation, was one of the first collaborative efforts between the US and Saudi Arabia. Since then, ties between the US and Saudi Arabia have become increasingly interdependent on the assurance of oil provided by the Middle Eastern giant. Although the US still enjoys multi-billion-dollar partnerships with Saudi Aramco and SABIC (US Department of State, 2023), another of Saudi’s largest **petrodollar** pumpers, this does not mean diplomatic relations have always been smooth.

Since the mid-1950s, several events have strained the relationship between the two countries when surrounding the valuable fossil fuel. As a founding member and one of the largest producers in the Organization of **Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)**, Saudi Arabia holds major stakes in controlling global oil markets and has great geopolitical leverage as a result. Thus, it is of great US interest to protect Saudi Arabia because adjustments in oil production and exportation can positively or negatively affect oil prices around the world, often having a direct impact on the US economy (CFR.org Editors, 2017). Following the 1973 Oil Crisis, OPEC has continued to try to manipulate oil markets. Under the Reagan Administration, non-OPEC producers like the US caused Saudi-led OPEC to decrease production and increase the price of oil in hopes of stifling competition, but the plan failed. Between 1993 and 2005, “inexpensive oil and a booming economy” under the Clinton Administration led to continued rifts when a transition to American independence for oil production and exportation occurred as vehicle consumption drastically increased oil demand (Sergie, 2017).

US-Saudi relations regarding oil remain tumultuous as various US Presidents move towards energy independence, such as the

***Apostasy** – the abandonment or renunciation of a religious belief; includes speaking out against Islam in Saudi Arabia.*

Trump administration’s efforts for **hydraulic fracturing**), or Obama’s support for biofuels and reactive oil policies following offshore oil spills and civil war in Libya, and increased imports from Venezuela and Iran to curb oil instability and price fluctuations. However, the US still ultimately needs Saudi oil. For instance, the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil fields by Iran and changes to global oil markets due to subsequent interregional **sanctions** were a great concern to the US. Despite declaring an intent to make the Kingdom a “pariah,” President Joe Biden traveled to Saudi Arabia to ask its leaders to increase oil production in the wake of pandemic demand booms. In 2020, OPEC decided to cut oil production by 2 million barrels a day (Colgan, 2020) and has continued to cut production more, forcing President Biden to release millions of barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to keep US oil prices down for American consumers as global prices reach record highs (Hernandez, 2023).

Military Aid and Arms

***Sanction** – a threatened punishment for disobeying a law.*

At the height of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt deepened ties with Saudi Arabia by pledging to support the protection of the country, which had become increasingly important due to its oil producing capacity. By 1943, the US began providing military aid to Saudi Arabia, in turn being granted the ability to build airfields in the nation. In 1951, the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement was signed, becoming the foundation for US arms sales with the kingdom, with these sales having remained ever since (Khalel, 2019). Today, Saudi Arabia only supplies about 7% of US oil imports (US Energy Information Administration, n.d.), but weapons like combat helicopters and ships, missiles, frigates, guided bombs, tanks, missile defense systems, as well as radar, communications and cybersecurity technology continue to be exported to the Middle Eastern country.

Furthermore, to understand the importance behind US-Saudi relations is to understand the importance of Saudi-Iranian relations. The longstanding military ties between the US and Saudi Arabia were intended to help protect Saudi Arabia from Iranian attacks and the growth of extremist presence, but with war in Yemen, the death of Jamal Khashoggi, and the recent OPEC+ oil dispute, public and government scrutiny about the role of American weapons in the Kingdom has increased.

This is a very complex issue, but first, some context regarding Yemen. The Yemeni Civil War began in 2014 when Houthi forces took over the capital city Sanaa, and shortly thereafter, the Yemeni Government. With Yemen’s civil war, Saudi Arabia backed then-President and **Sunni** allegiant Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi by using offensive weaponry to restore the former Yemeni government. Meanwhile, Iran backed the **Shia** Houthi rebels loyal to the country’s

Shia – one of the two main branches of Islam, followed especially in Iran.

Sunni – the larger of the two main branches of Islam.

Arab Spring – a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 (Tunisia) and 2011 (Egypt), challenging some of the region's authoritarian regime. Not every rebellion was successful, and protestors were often met with violent suppressions from their governments' security.

former President Ali Abdulla Saleh. The US backed Saudi Arabia in the war until 2022, when President Biden revoked support and pledged to halt relevant arm sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The president, however, added that US forces would continue operations against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and continue to defend Saudi Arabia from missile and drone attacks from Iranian-backed forces (Borger and Wintour, 2021). The US's withdrawal was due to reports of Saudi human rights violations, including war crimes in Yemen from civilian airstrikes and humanitarian blockades. This pledge has yet to fully take action. Amid recent escalations, US intelligence and logistical support for the Saudi-backed coalition has continued (Far, 2022). Tensions continue to build as Saudi Arabia demands a US security guarantee, such as major non-NATO ally status, more arms sales, or US support for a civilian nuclear energy program in exchange for normalizing relations with Israel (Parsi and Sheline, 2023).

The Syrian conflict is also a multidimensional ongoing issue with thousands dead and millions in need of humanitarian aid or in displaced status. Beginning on March 15, 2011, as a part of the wider **Arab Spring**, unrest erupted when the standing President Bashar Al-Assad led the Syrian Arab Republic (represented by the Syrian Armed Forces and its allies) to violently suppress rebel groups calling for his removal. The war continues to be fought by competing rebel groups representing different religions and interests but is currently framed on overthrowing the current Syrian government. Iran, Russia, and **Hezbollah** support the Syrian Arab Republic and the Syrian Armed Forces militarily. Opposed to Assad's government is the Syrian Interim Government, including the Syrian National Army and the Free Syrian Army; the Syrian Salvation Government, a coalition of Sunni rebels; and Jihadists organizations like the **Al-Qaeda**-affiliated Al-Nusra, and the **Islamic State** (ISIS/ISIL). Since 2015, following internationally condemned chemical attacks by Assad and the proliferation of ISIS, the US has advised and assisted (including airstrikes in 2017) the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and its armed wing, the Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), primarily against ISIS, while also providing humanitarian aid. The US has also imposed financial and petroleum sanctions on Syria. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates have also backed and supplied armed factions opposed to Assad. Currently, much of the fighting has subsided with Assad forces occupying much of the land, but the country is in turbulent conditions and in dire need of reconstruction and funding. In years since US withdrawal, Saudi Arabia has begun discussing bilateral relations with Syria in hopes of asserting their larger geopolitical agenda (which may include lobbying the US to lift Syrian sanctions), re-admitting Syria to the Arab League, and counteracting Iranian prominence in the region (Qaed, 2023).

Islamic State – also known as the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*, or the *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*, is a Sunni transnational militant group founded in April 2013.

Hezbollah – a Shia militant and political group formed in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in 1982.

Iranian Revolution – or the *Islamic Revolution*, was a popular uprising in 1978–79 that resulted in the fall of the UK, US, and Russia-backed authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic republic.

So why do Saudi Arabia and Iran often back opposite sides of international conflicts? The short answer is that while they have not directly fought each other, they engage in a ‘Cold War’-like proxy struggle for power in the Middle East. Mass weapon deals typically existed in Saudi Arabia to maintain authority over its people and counter military challenges in the region, particularly from the Shia-dominant Iran which historically has had less affection from and control over its people. Various geopolitical issues, including aspirations for leadership in the Middle East, oil export policy, and relations with the United States and other Western nations, have strained bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Several attacks and divisive ideological discords have included the **Iranian Revolution** (and subsequent anti-monarchy sentiments which terrified Saudis), the Saudi financial backing of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, the Iran nuclear program, Iranian support of Israel, the 2011 alleged Iran assassination plot of Saudi ambassador to the US Adel al-Jubeir, ongoing proxy wars drawn down politico-religious lines (in Iraq, Syria and Yemen), the execution of Nimr al-Nimr and 2016 ransacking of the of Saudi embassy in **Tehran** and consulate in Mashhad (which caused a seven year relations suspension until China intervened).

During an interview with CBS news, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman remarked that Iran “is far from being equal to Saudi Arabia” because of its limited army in the Muslim world and smaller economy compared to the kingdom. However, in the same interview, he also likened the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei to Adolf Hitler and asserted that “Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible” (CBS News, 2018). If demands for increased arms and nuclear development are realized, this may further lock the US into relations with an “unreliable partner” (Parsi and Sheline, 2023) and into a position of complicity in violent Indo-Pacific affairs. US relations are further complicated by the Crown Prince’s disdain for President Biden’s weak response to attacks by Iranian and Iran-backed Houthi rebels on critical Saudi and Emirati oil plants and other infrastructure. Saudis and Emirati officials are also skeptical of the president’s attempt to revive a 2015 deal preventing nuclear weapon development in Iran because the plan has yet to account for Iranian missiles and bankrolling for Shiite **militias** across the region (Dorsey, 2022).

As founding members of OPEC, Riyadh and Tehran must occasionally see eye-to-eye, or at least remain cordial competitors with the shared goal of getting the best market value for their oil to protect their national interests. As of March 10, 2023, positive developments in Iranian and Saudi relations are emerging as diplomatic agreement talks in China, which maintains close ties with both nations, were announced in a joint statement published by the

Al-Qaeda – *Sunni pan-Islamic, Salafi Jihadist militant organization with leadership based in Afghanistan and Pakistan and a network of members and affiliates around the world.*

Militias – *a military force that engages in rebel or terrorist activities in opposition to a regular army.*



Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Alireza Bigdeli, Saudi Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Consular Affairs Ali al-Yousef, and others attend a ribbon cutting at the opening ceremony of the Iranian Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on June 6, 2023. Wang Haizhou/Xinhua via Getty Images

official Saudi Press Agency and Iran's state news media. The two countries agreed to reactivate a lapsed security cooperation pact as well as older trade, investment, and commercial agreement (Nereim, 2023). This conversation, in addition to increasing arms deals and collaborations from the Chinese in the region (Xie, 2022), may mean a new future for relations between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China, highlighting successful breakthroughs for Chinese political importance and growth in a region that was once dominated by US diplomatic and military controls.

Congressional Action

Several bills focused on human rights violations and crimes committed under the jurisdiction of Saudi government officials have emerged, especially in light of 9/11 and the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. For example, the law H.R. 1 by Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS) in 2007 exposed Saudi society's role in the 9/11 terror attacks. The bills HR 5223 "National Intelligence Reform Act of 2004" introduced by Rep. Christopher Shays (R-CT) and HR 5291 "Winning the War on Terror Act of 2004" introduced by Rep. Jim Turner (D-TX), put the US's friendly relations with Saudi Arabia under a microscope following 2003 attacks in Riyadh. They both urged Saudi Arabia to openly mend their relationship with the US, engage in political and economic reform, and respect cultural and religious diversity in Saudi Arabia to combat terrorism.

On July 25, 2019, the House of Representatives passed the Saudi Arabia Human Rights and Accountability Act of 2019, HR 2037 which required an unclassified report by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) on parties responsible for Khashoggi's murder, visa sanctions on all persons identified in such report, and a report on human rights in Saudi Arabia. Further legislations like the annual Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, HR 7856, also outlined committee views for the "disastrous Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen" and concerns over the role of arms sales in exacerbating civilian harm. Various sections called for reports to be made detailing violations of human rights and killings, including of Jamal Khashoggi, and government assessments of means through which further harm will be mitigated. The same bill also calls for prevention of nuclear proliferation and extremist propaganda.

Arms sales to Saudi Arabia in the United States frequently encounter strong congressional opposition. Recently, HR 7367, the "Values in Arms Exports Act of 2022" outlined Saudi Arabia and the UAE as "countries of concern" for revoking their eligibility to purchase defense articles due to patterns of harm or disregard of civilians, medical/aid workers and journalists, damage to medical and civilian infrastructure, and denial of humanitarian relief. Arms deals for Saudi Arabia are also compromised by existing laws in the US. The Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2751 et seq.) prohibits



Men in Yemen stand next to rubble from the aftermath of warfare in the area. The conflict in Yemen started in 2014 and has since seen thousands of civilians killed, according to monitoring groups. Hani Mahommed/AP

weapons transfers to foreign countries determined by the President to be engaged in a “pattern of acts of intimidation or harassment directed against individuals in the United States.” The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 directs the President to formulate and conduct international security assistance programs in a manner that will “avoid identification of the United States, through such programs, with governments which deny to their people internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms” (22 U.S.C. 2151 et seq.) With Saudi’s implication in various regional wars and its own limited protections for Saudi citizens, there’s a real possibility that ceased arms deals may be the next course of action for Congress. It appears that yearly congressional bills will continue to scrutinize US-Saudi relations since political issues regarding Saudi involvement in the Middle East continue to evolve.

Other Policy Action

Bill S.398 introduced by Sen. Bob Menendez calls for Saudi Arabian accountability for the atrocities in Yemen, along with a general outcry for peace. The UN attempted to broker peace in 2016 but has since resumed ongoing talks between Saudi and Houthi officials this past March. The International Committee of the Red Cross also attended these conversations. Other policies surrounding terrorism and human rights in the Middle East include 2017’s HR 1619, which urges Iran to stop smuggling weapons to terrorists and authorizing human-rights-conscious military training to increase security in Saudi Arabia among others, UN Resolution 2216 (2015) to end violence in Yemen by banning arms to Houthi rebels and supporting the Saudi-led coalition, and subsequent UN Resolution 2624 (2022) to renew the 2014 UN arms embargo, travel bans, and asset freeze until February 28, 2023 on those threatening peace and security in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the UAE.

There has also been policy action in response to fluctuations in the oil industry when Saudi’s disputes negatively threaten the American economy. In March of 2020, Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) proposed S 3687 following an OPEC stalemate between Saudi Arabia and Russia where Saudis dramatically dropped oil prices and subsequently impacted American oil producers. The bill proposed a withdrawal of American forces and funds in Saudi Arabia in response to Saudi Arabia’s aggression towards the United States petroleum industry.

Regarding the provision of arms to Saudi Arabia, in 2019 the UK’s Court of Appeals has deemed its arms sales “unlawful” and has prompted the government to suspend new arms while it reviews its processes (Sabbagh and McKernan, 2019). However, exports continued after mid-2020 and a case brought forth by the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), which contends that arms exports have

contributed to the deaths of thousands of civilians, was heard by the UK's High Court in late January (Jazeera, 2023).

IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

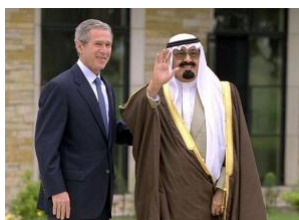
Conservative View

While both conservatives and liberals have emphasized the importance of maintaining US-Saudi relations to one extent or the other, both sides have mixed opinions on what is necessary to protect American interests.

Conservatives have tended to introduce legislation in favor of prioritizing American oil reserves despite former President Trump's view of Saudi energy's importance in creating American jobs. Bilateral relations were rather close as President Trump pushed for arms sales of US-made weapons, stood by Riyadh following reports of Saudi human rights violations, supported its stance against Iran, and visited Saudi Arabia on various occasions. In 2019, President Trump vetoed three other congressional resolutions (SJ Res 7, 36, and 38t) that sought to stop the United States from providing military support to Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen (Smith and De Luce, 2020).

Nonetheless, other conservatives have had different opinions. In a 2017 CNN interview, Florida Senator Marco Rubio said he would not have avoided conversations about human rights with Saudi Arabia as "it's in our national security interest to advocate for democracy and freedom and human rights (Rubio, 2017)." Conversely, former President George W. Bush forged close ties with Saudi Arabia. Regardless, under his tenure, the State Department designated the country as "a country of particular concern" in its annual report on International Religious Freedom in 2004 (Pace and Salama, 2017).

While conservatives seem to be split on how to approach resolving concerns brought on by US-Saudi relations, the major response has been relatively mild. Votes from Republicans siding with Democrats have fluctuated in joint resolutions on defense provisions in Saudi Arabia. This was seen in 2019 when several bills against arms sales barely passed and the Republican Party, apart from outspoken congressmen like Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), largely fell silent on issues and reverted to deferring to the Trump Administration on US-Saudi relations (Montgomery, 2019). This stance has continued into President Biden's term as conservatives like Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA) urge Biden to exhibit caution and continue relations with the country (Desiderio, 2022).



*Conservative
President George W.
Bush welcomes
Crown Prince
Abdullah of Saudi
Arabia to the Bush
family ranch in
Crawford, Texas,
Thursday, April 25,
2002.
The White House*

Liberal View

The US has remained engaged with Saudi Arabia under liberal administrations, but more cautiously. It is a misconception that liberals fully steer away from maintaining bilateral relations, given that the first president to foster ties with Saudi Arabia, even breaking protocol to invite King Abdelaziz and his sons to Washington, DC, was a Democrat. Several administrations, including under John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, have been yielding to US cooperation with the kingdom. For example, President Obama's first term had stronger relations with the nation compared to his second term when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran and the funds from Washington helped Iran expand its military—and thus threat—against Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia.

President Biden also visited Saudi Arabia in 2022 and wrote a positive op-ed about the kingdom in the Washington Post in an attempt to rectify declining relations between the two countries following Trump's relative success (Biden, 2022).

Democrats, however, continue to fight their long list of grievances against Saudi Arabia with more punitive bills in Congress. Although there is support on both sides, more forceful anti-Saudi resolutions for oil production cuts, human rights violations, and arms deal terminations tend to be introduced by liberals. Liberals also typically agree that egregious war crimes committed by Saudi Arabia should continue to be investigated and alleviated with limited, if not ceased, arms deals and humanitarian aid. They also have argued against nuclear technology being shared between the US and Saudi Arabia, but as with many issues on international relations, there are varying levels of support in Congress depending on plans of action, budgetary concerns, and geopolitical fallout.



This image taken from CCTV video obtained by the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet, Saudi Jamal entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul where he was later murdered. Khashoggi's murder continues to be a critical component of many policies introduced in shows journalist Khashoggi congress today.

The Associated Press

AREAS OF DEBATE

Provisions for Human Rights

US perception of Saudi Arabia's respect towards human rights remains a point of contention among many Americans inside and outside of government. Following the murder of Khashoggi, protection of US citizens and ambassadors in Saudi Arabia was questioned given the kingdom's extensive history of inhumane treatments, death penalty laws, and extremist presence and violence. Some argue that strict sanctions, restrictions, and terminations should be instated so that Saudi Arabia is forced to honor their commitment to protecting such rights. Others push for continued relations and are more hesitant to speak out against potential rights violations to keep tension among the countries lower. The following

are potential ways through which Congress could address rising suspicions and intensified conversations surrounding human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia:

1. Unclassified investigations on Saudi-backed war crimes committed in the Yemeni Civil War and the personnel responsible for committing or approving such deadly defense strategies.
2. Investigations by the DNI detailing how the KSA government is or isn't protecting human rights through education, speech/press, religious expression, and counterterrorism efforts.
3. Investigations by the DNI on detainment, sentences, and treatment of human rights activists, journalists, and religious or cultural minorities and a call to reverse human rights violations.
4. Investigations by the DNI on whether and how agreements with Saudi Arabia for U.S. security assistance associate the United States with governments that deny human rights and fundamental freedoms to their people; measures for dissociation if found.
5. Prohibiting funds from being made available by the intelligence community to assist airstrikes in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition.

UN Human Rights Council – an intergovernmental body responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe, for addressing situations of human rights violations, and making recommendations.

Each suggestion either subtly or directly confronts Saudi Arabia's relationship with human rights. A resolution that ends US support in war affairs with human rights violations can also call for an end to all or partial US support in Saudi Arabia through security, energy, educational, economic, or visa sanctions. Those in favor might argue that more comprehensive reports can shed light on potential risks of United States involvement in Saudi Arabia without compromising democratic principles and freedoms. Those against these solutions may argue repetitive investigations unnecessarily meddle with the leadership of the KSA government, which has a right to self-determination in the pursuit of its interests.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives and liberals alike see the value in protecting human rights abroad. More nuanced viewpoints arise when discussing the scope of US involvement in aiding to secure rights for Saudi Arabian individuals, with conservatives preferring more moderate commentary on Saudi abuses.

As the body which established guidelines on how to define and respond to human rights violations, the **UN Human Rights Council** has released several resolutions and statements of concern on this issue in Saudi Arabia. They would be an important **stakeholder** for consideration. Additionally, should a resolution be made to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia on accord of human rights,

the US's relationship with other countries having histories of human rights abuses may also come into question.

Arms Provisions to Saudi Arabia

The United States' biggest political leverage in Saudi Arabia is its military presence and defense assistance program. Arms are at the crux of nearly every important US-Saudi conflict, both as a tool for asserting US demands and chastising perceived Saudi misconduct. It is no wonder that arms deals are frequently demanded by Saudi Arabia; self-defense in the kingdom is of interest to both states amidst regional conflicts, oil disputes, and more. The US-Saudi bilateral relationship bends towards the arc of security, which makes for intense pawning of weaponry on a global chessboard. However, Saudis have also come to mistrust US defense support following the 2019 attacks on one of the largest oil fields in the kingdom and failed attempts at preventing Iranian nuclear and military proliferation. Continued arms sales may restore KSA relations and support America's economy.

Solutions involve a range of approaches. Congress can propose bills that will either halt arms sales or continue sales in Saudi Arabia. Policies prohibiting provisions to Saudi Arabia for any purposes can be implemented when violations occur regarding human rights, energy, security, and other investments. Policies continuing arms sales can be implemented conditionally should Saudi Arabia agree to maintain or increase its transactional patterns. Those favoring limited arms sales may argue Saudi refusal to cease its human rights violations and maintain its oil promises warrant US discontinuation of sales. Those more in support of arms sales may argue such policies support US diplomatic efforts in the region during a period of rebel insurgency and recent Saudi-Iran deals, or that continued arms deals allow for the defense of the Saudi citizen and critical infrastructure.

Furthermore, Congress might also consider proposing plans to fortify Saudi Arabia's nuclear armory, outlining manners for US nuclear support ranging from national reserves in the case of an imminent threat to the monitorization of nuclear proliferation in neighboring countries. Those in favor of nuclear provisions and safeguards could argue that early US intervention can prevent the threat of a global nuclear war and other nuclear accidents, like **Chernobyl**. Those opposed might contend that exporting technology is too costly and that other policies preventing nuclear growth can similarly prevent any global threat, especially given that the US has no formal **NATO**-style alliance with Saudi Arabia.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Liberals are generally in favor of banned arms and nuclear containment, while conservatives have pushed for continued weapons deals.

***Chernobyl** – the Chernobyl disaster was a nuclear accident that occurred in April 1986 at the No.4 reactor in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Soviet Union.*

Recently, Russia has outranked the US in the Forbes list of countries with the most nuclear weapons in the world (Washburn, 2023). Given that the US and Soviet Union signed the Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War, neither country can be directly involved in a nuclear war against the other. In light of this, the Security Council of the UN and Secretary General of the United Nations are stakeholders in ensuring this agreement and providing guidance should nuclear escalation occur in the Middle East.

Saudi Security Through Intelligence

Saudi Arabia tends to keep its governmental affairs confidential. In order to understand Saudi Arabian issues and needs, the US could leverage intel through some extended surveillance and monitoring period. Some suggested areas of intelligence might be:

Stakeholder – a person, group or organization with a vested interest, or stake, in the decision-making and activities of a business, organization or project.

1. The presence of Saudi Arabia in China, Russia, Iran, Yemen, Syria, or any other relevant foreign country.
2. Financial and military contributions to extremist or rebel groups within the kingdom and other relevant foreign countries.
3. Any changes in the threat to the US homeland for terrorist groups using Saudi Arabia or its allies for launching attacks.
4. The role of the US government in influencing the policies made in Saudi Arabia in areas of concern (such as arms proliferation, nuclear threats, and petroleum production; additional concerns about counternarcotics, refugees from countries with Saudi-back coalitions, and treatment and travel of US and non-Saudi immigrants in Saudi Arabia).

These suggestions would need to have a set time frame of report, guidelines for publishing in a classified/unclassified manner, which congressional committees would be involved, and a basis for updates. While those in favor may argue such information can only benefit the United States, those opposed may argue such surveillance violates Saudi autonomy.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Both liberals and conservatives support intelligence gathering in foreign countries and have long histories of proposing legislation in both chambers of Congress.

The US intelligence community consists of 18 organizations, several of which specialize in foreign intelligence, national security, and investigations. These organizations might be important stakeholders in conducting and analyzing surveillance reports.

Oil and Nuclear Surveillance

Energy is one of the most important assets for both countries; thus, monitoring its production, use, investments, imports, and

exports are very important for leverage in securing national interests. Top US intelligence officials have stated threats to US national security include "global health security, transnational organized crime, the rapid development of destabilizing technologies, climate, migration, and terrorism, ... because they pose challenges of a fundamentally different nature to our national security than those posed by the actions of nation states — even powerful ones, like China and Russia" (US Department of Defense, 2022).

Although in 2020 the US became a net exporter in oil for the first time since 1949 (US EIA, 2023), the US is still not entirely energy secure. The Biden Administration has issued executive orders to ban drilling in certain areas and presently hopes to move towards cleaner, renewable energy sources. With these actions, some congressmen argue that American jobs are on the line and that oil demand will turn to foreign sources of energy, often subject to fewer safety and environmental regulations. Additionally, this foreign oil may be imported from countries with human rights abuses, such as Saudi Arabia. Therefore, a plan for energy importation and monitoring could be considered. Continued surveillance of nuclear and petroleum proliferation in Saudi Arabia might be necessary to understand oil price fluctuations. As the US moves towards self-sufficiency due to its **energy revolution**, lawmakers must remain cognizant of the effect on the petrodollar, the geopolitical weight of importing less oil, and other concerns in energy development that might jeopardize the integrity of the US's homeland, like nuclear or other energy-powered weapons. Some suggestion solutions include:

1. An analysis of linkages between the energy sector of Saudi Arabia and corruption or human rights abuses.
2. Surveillance on the capability to increase petroleum products and associated global affairs in Saudi Arabia
3. Surveillance on the capability to increase nuclear technology as an energy source and for weaponry in Saudi Arabia.
4. An assessment on the consequences of ceased nuclear and petroleum imports to the US as opposed to consequences of increasing petroleum imports and sharing nuclear technology with Saudi Arabia.
5. Development of a comprehensive strategy to replace oil imported from Saudi Arabia with domestic carbon-free energy or renewable sources; this may include sanctions and prohibitions on imports.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives often push for the United States' Strategic Petroleum Reserves to be protected by limiting oil imported for or exported from it. Many are also in favor of supporting all forms of domestic energy development, including fossil fuels and nuclear

development. However, other conservatives have also backed former President Trump's efforts to increase oil exports to the kingdom.

Policy in favor of foreign energy development may be a divisive topic but legislation that increases American jobs is most likely to be supported on both sides of the aisle.

President Biden issued Executive Order 14008 which identifies climate change as an essential element of the foreign policy and national security strategy. Given that Saudi oil imports contribute to the US's carbon footprint, a report that validates scaling back funds for imports would likely be supported by the president.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – a military alliance originally established in 1949 to create a counterweight to Soviet armies stationed in eastern and central Europe after World War II. When the Cold War ended, NATO was reconceived as a “cooperative-security” organization and currently has 31 member states, including the US.

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

As members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, you will need to be mindful of the proposed costs of legislation drafted to address US-Saudi relations. The budget of the US Government for the Fiscal Year 2024 is expected to include the following pertinent approvals: \$3.4 billion to globally advance democratic governance and defend human rights, \$50 billion through the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) in direct foreign assistance, development and export finance, and private sector funding, \$24 billion across the several departments to increase climate resilience and bolster conservation (including \$366 million to better understand the impacts of climate change and \$311 million to create jobs reclaiming abandoned mines remediating orphaned oil and gas wells), and \$8.2 billion to recruit, retain, and develop a diverse and high-caliber national security workforce and modernize U.S. diplomatic and development systems.

Additionally, the budget includes \$52 billion in discretionary budget authority for the Department of Energy (a \$6.2 billion or 13.6-percent increase from the 2023 enacted level) which includes the \$2.1 billion rescission of Strategic Petroleum Reserve balances, nearly \$2 billion to support clean energy workforce and infrastructure projects, \$245 million to enhance the security of clean energy technologies and the energy supply chain, and \$11.9 billion for climate and clean energy research, development, demonstration, and deployment. Although the amount is unspecified, the Budget also plans to include a new Middle East and North Africa Opportunity Fund to support priorities for U.S. engagement and encourage de-escalation and peace across the region.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the US and Saudi Arabia have been entangled since the 1930s, having had several highs and lows in their

relationship following wars, conflicts over oil, human rights violations, national security interests, and ideological differences on governance. Members of Congress have disagreed across and within parties on how to handle specific issues; generally, it is helpful to research which lawmakers have introduced or cosponsored specific bills.

It might be more complicated and less necessary to negotiate the interests of your constituency solely based on party allegiances—remember several Saudi-related bills and opinions have been bipartisan. The US can either take a diplomatic approach to solving the issues and intervene in Saudi affairs directly, or resort to protecting its homeland and prioritizing policies that protect the future of American jobs and security strictly on US soil. It is important to consider how material costs for implementing one solution may differ from the startup costs of implementing a new team, procedure, or assessment for another solution.

While this briefing covers various topics, I hope you have noticed the intertwined, and often repetitive, nature of many issues and realize that your proposed legislation can also combine multiple solutions in unique and creative ways beyond the scope of what has already been covered.

GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

Given the large scope of this topic, I sought to get a combination of US and international opinions and facts. I would highly suggest starting at the bibliography below to see where you can find further information.

You might also want to check official US government pages (such as Congress.gov) for more details on proposed legislation, official statements, and other released documents. There are many articles out there, so to narrow down your search I would suggest starting with JSTOR, Google Scholar, or library databases that list credible sources.

Some reliable news websites to also check out are the New York Times, Associated Press News, BBC News, Reuters, CBS News, or The Guardian. Delegates should look for sources of information from stakeholders in US-Saudi conversations such as newspapers and articles from journalists and government officials in the US, KSA, United Kingdom, United Nations, and even involved countries such as the UAE, China, Syria, and Yemen if the source is unbiased, although this might be harder due to limited freedom of press. Additionally, this briefing does not elaborate on fiscal transparency and cybersecurity issues between the US and KSA which may be an added area of research if it may bolster your proposed solutions.

Delegates could also seek information from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think-tanks, analysts, and other groups that can provide insights independent from interest groups. Be vigilant and discerning with the information you find because this topic is divisive and ever-expanding. Be sure to follow up on bills introduced in Congress and their progress.

GLOSSARY

Al-Qaeda – a Sunni pan-Islamic, Salafi Jihadist militant organization with leadership based in Afghanistan and Pakistan and a network of members and affiliates around the world. The group has waged holy war on the US several times, nonetheless US operations managed to kill Osama bin Laden and his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Apostasy – the abandonment or renunciation of a religious belief; includes speaking out against Islam in Saudi Arabia

Arab Spring – a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 (Tunisia) and 2011 (Egypt), challenging some of the region’s authoritarian regime. Not every rebellion was successful, and protestors were often met with violent suppressions from their governments’ security.

Chernobyl – also known as the Chernobyl disaster; a nuclear accident that occurred on 26 April 1986 at the No. 4 reactor in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant of the Soviet Union

Convention against Torture – formally known as the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, is an international human rights treaty of the UN that defines and aims to prevent torture and other acts of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment

Energy revolution – the exponential adoption of cleaner energy technologies in the US including lowered costs for solar power, improved offshore wind technology, the introduction of fusion science, the shale boom, and the growth of nuclear and hydro-resources

Energy security – the association between a country’s national security and the continuous availability of varied forms of energy

Geopolitical – politics, especially international relations, influenced by geographical factors such as its land and resources

Hezbollah – a Shia militant and political group formed in Lebanon following Israeli invasion in 1982. It continues to oppose Israel and Western powers operating in the Middle East, and it functions as a proxy of Iran, its largest benefactor.

Hydraulic fracturing – also known as shale fracturing or fracking, is the process of injecting water, sand, and/or chemicals into a well to break up underground shale bedrock to free up oil or gas reserves.

Iranian Revolution – or the Islamic Revolution, was a popular uprising in 1978–79 that resulted in the fall of the UK, US, and Russia-backed authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic republic

Islam—an Abrahamic monotheistic religion centered on the Quran and teachings of Muhammad; adherents are called Muslims

Islamic State – also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), is a Sunni transnational, Salafi Jihadist militant group founded in April 2013. Despite the end of its territorial caliphate in 2019 and the death of several of its leaders since through US and Turkish airstrike operations, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has demonstrated considerable resilience.

Militia – a military force that engages in rebel or terrorist activities in opposition to a regular army

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – a military alliance originally established in 1949 to create a counterweight to Soviet armies stationed in central and eastern Europe after World War II. When the Cold War ended, NATO was reconceived as a “cooperative-security” organization and currently has 31 member states including the US.

Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) – a permanent intergovernmental organization of 13 oil- exporting developing nations that coordinates and unifies the petroleum policies of its Member Countries. It was founded on 14 September 1960 in Baghdad by the first five members: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela

Petrodollar – US dollars accepted as payment by an oil exporter; buying oil with US dollars keeps US influence and use of currency high

HARVARD MODEL CONGRESS

Riyadh – the capital and largest city of Saudi Arabia

Sanction – a threatened punishment for disobeying a law. In politics, typically it is action that is taken or an order that is given to force a country to obey international laws by limiting or stopping trade with that country, by not allowing economic aid for that country, etc.

Shariah – Islamic religious law of governing principles for spiritual, mental, and physical behavior followed by Muslims

Stakeholder – a person, group or organization with a vested interest, or stake, in the decision-making and activities of a business, organization or project

Tehran – the capital and largest city of Iran

UN Human Rights Council – an intergovernmental body responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe, for addressing situations of human rights violations, and making recommendations on them

The 1973 Oil Embargo- temporary cessation of oil shipments from members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, led by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, targeted at nations such as the US that supported Israel during the Yom Kippur War

The 9/11 attacks–series of airline hijackings and suicide attacks committed by 19 Al-Qaeda militants against targets in the US on September 11, 2001; it is the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil in US history

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