

# CATO

P O L I C Y

A N A L Y S I S

SEPTEMBER 20, 2023 NUMBER 961

# Pariah or Partner?

## Reevaluating the U.S.-Saudi Relationship

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he U.S.-Saudi relationship is stuck. America's policy toward the kingdom is rooted in flawed rationales and supported by a system of lobbying and influence designed to sustain the status quo. Those policies are proving ineffective at navigating the changing landscape, both in the Middle East and globally, while reaping virtually no benefits for the United States. The longer these fruitless policies persist, the more they will harm U.S. interests.

The long-standing rationales for close U.S.-Saudi relations—centered on oil, counterterrorism, and preserving regional stability—are flawed. What Washington needs from the region on those issues is quite limited and simple

to achieve. Despite the high costs and dubious benefits of the current approach to Saudi Arabia, there is a growing chorus in Washington to deepen the relationship with Riyadh. New rationales for expanding the relationship include the return of great power competition to the Middle East and the expansion of the Abraham Accords, which are increasingly being linked together as the new lodestar of Middle East policy. These new rationales also do not withstand scrutiny. It is time for a fundamental reevaluation of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The United States should approach Saudi Arabia as it would any other state that does not share our interests or our values: from arm's length.



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## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing chorus in Washington to deepen the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Middle East more generally.<sup>1</sup> Some argue that the problems between Washington and Riyadh are the result of U.S. unreliability and that the only way to mend the relationship is by reaching a new strategic compact with Saudi Arabia that would include increased U.S. security commitments to the kingdom. According to this perspective, Saudi Arabia has become more important, and not less, to the advancement of U.S. interests.<sup>2</sup> These arguments are buttressed by a broader network of special interests and lobbying in Washington that is designed to sustain status quo policies and American primacy in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

Saudi officials are likewise calling for building a new—and-improved U.S.-Saudi relationship. For example, Reema Bandar al-Saud, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States, notes that “there have been some turbulent waters in the U.S.-Saudi relationship” but argues that Riyadh’s relationship with Washington is more important than ever and so the two countries must work together to “build a partnership around energy, stability, and regional growth.”<sup>4</sup>

**“Today, U.S. and Saudi strategic interests do not align. No amount of concessions to Riyadh will change this. To the contrary: Saudi Arabia actively undermines both U.S. interests and values.”**

These arguments are wrong. Today, U.S. and Saudi strategic interests do not align. No amount of concessions to Riyadh will change this. To the contrary: Saudi Arabia actively undermines both U.S. interests and values. Despite this disconnect, the United States has yet to adjust its course and continues to operate on autopilot toward Saudi Arabia—and the Middle East more generally—without a concrete agenda or set of explicit strategic interests. This has resulted in counterproductive policies that undermine regional stability, implicate the United States in the actions of problematic actors such as Saudi Arabia, and damage long-term U.S. interests.

The Biden administration is eagerly trying to bolster the

U.S.-Saudi relationship, presenting new rationales for increasing American commitments to the Middle East. First is the return of great power competition to the Middle East and globally. Second is the expansion of the series of normalization deals brokered, in part, by the United States between Israel and several Arab states, popularly referred to as the Abraham Accords. Operating under these new rationales, Biden is currently considering going where no other president has gone before: signing a mutual security pact with Saudi Arabia and helping the kingdom develop a civilian nuclear program in return for Riyadh normalizing relations with Israel.<sup>5</sup>

However, this reasoning is unfounded, and the concessions the Biden administration is considering granting Saudi Arabia risk causing profound damage to U.S. strategic interests and furthering America’s commitment to the underlying sources of instability within the Middle East. Instead of deepening its entanglement in the region, the United States should recognize the limited strategic importance of the Middle East for American interests and begin reevaluating the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

I begin this paper by outlining the evolution of U.S.-Saudi relations and the current state of the relationship. Then I examine the three traditional rationales cited for strong U.S.-Saudi relations—oil, counterterrorism, and regional stability—followed by an evaluation of two new rationales for continuing and expanding the U.S.-Saudi relationship: great power competition and the expansion of the Abraham Accords. Finally, I propose changes to the U.S.-Saudi relationship, which should serve as a foundation for overhauling foreign policy in the Middle East more broadly.

## U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONS: A SHORT HISTORY

The current (third) Saudi state was established in 1932 by Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud, commonly referred to as Ibn Saud. The bedrock of contemporary U.S.-Saudi relations was established roughly 13 years after the establishment of the third Saudi state during a meeting between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz in 1945. This meeting was the foundation of an uneasy partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia that has persisted for nearly eight decades.

As British and French dominance in the region eroded, Saudi Arabia became the first Middle Eastern country to enter the sphere of U.S. interests.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S.-Saudi strategic relationship emerged following the end of World War II and was rooted in the importance of oil for global postwar energy needs as well as Ibn Saud's desire to help the faltering Saudi economy. American interest in Saudi oil had emerged immediately following the creation of the third Saudi state: in 1933, the House of Saud granted the American company Standard Oil exclusive rights to search for oil in the country's eastern province.<sup>7</sup> In 1938, the world's largest source of petroleum was discovered in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

## “The Dhahran Airfield Agreement marked the beginning of an enduring U.S.-Saudi relationship, structured in very transactional terms: Saudi oil for American security.”

After the meeting between FDR and Ibn Saud, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed the Dhahran Airfield Agreement, allowing the United States to build and operate Dhahran Air Base, thereby establishing America's formal military presence in the Persian Gulf. This new installation assured the physical protection of Saudi oil and marked the beginning of an enduring U.S.-Saudi relationship, structured in very transactional terms: Saudi oil for American security.

The U.S.-Saudi relationship evolved beyond its original transactional bargain and gradually grew to represent a central component of Washington's hegemonic interests in the region. After World War II, as the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union escalated, so too did Washington's relationship with Riyadh.

The Cold War lasted more than four decades, with the two global superpowers vying for political, economic, and military dominance in the Middle East. For the United States, involvement in the Middle East during the Cold War was rooted in three primary objectives: opposing communism, maintaining dominance over the region's oil supplies and routes, and protecting the newly created state of Israel.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States deepened its relationships with various autocratic rulers across the region, including in Saudi Arabia, whom they perceived as the best guarantors of their strategic interests.<sup>8</sup> In 1951, Washington and Riyadh established a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, allowing the United States to provide arms to Riyadh and train the Saudi military.<sup>9</sup>

Saudi Arabia quickly emerged as a partner for the United States in its geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union, particularly by promoting religion as a strategic bulwark against the growing power of socialist and communist movements in the region. Islam was viewed by the United States as a “powerful anti-communist belief system” capable of “luring Muslim youth away from radical socialist and communist trends, in addition to what was defined as subversive Arab nationalism with its anti-imperialist rhetoric.”<sup>10</sup>

As the Cold War expanded, so too did the U.S.-Saudi relationship. In 1979, three events sent shock waves throughout the region: the overthrow of the shah in Iran and the establishment of the Islamic Republic; the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of rebels led by Juhayman al-Otaybi; and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In the wake of these dramatic events, during his State of the Union address on January 23, 1980, President Jimmy Carter declared the commitment of the United States to protecting the free movement of oil out of the Middle East and the preservation of the security of this “crucial region” through what would soon be labeled the Carter Doctrine:

Let our position be absolutely clear: an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.<sup>11</sup>

This speech was followed by the creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) in March 1980, which was oriented primarily toward the Middle East, particularly the Persian Gulf region. The task force would later evolve into U.S. Central Command in 1983, which continues to serve as the foundation of America's military presence in the region.

After the Soviet Union dissolved, the international system moved from the bipolar competition of the Cold War to

unipolarity. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990 produced a new regional crisis—one that would once again draw the United States and Saudi Arabia closer together. Fearing that Saddam Hussein would continue his push into Saudi Arabia, Riyadh turned to the United States for assistance. The United States, under President George H. W. Bush, deployed more than 500,000 troops to Saudi Arabia and, on January 17, 1991, Operation Desert Shield morphed into Operation Desert Storm as the United States and more than 40 other partner nations forcibly drove Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait and back into Iraq, cementing America's expansive military presence in the Middle East.

Despite these expansions of the U.S.-Saudi strategic partnership since 1945, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has not always been harmonious. Tensions between the countries have existed from the very beginning, most notably as a result of strong U.S. support for the Zionist movement and, later, the state of Israel following its establishment in 1948.

At times, this resulted in open tensions between Washington and Riyadh. For example, due to Washington's support of Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), led by Saudi Arabia, launched an oil embargo against the United States and other countries that had supported Israel during the conflict. The embargo was coupled with large oil production cuts, though the impact of both on the U.S. economy has been considerably exaggerated.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, following Washington's unwavering support for Israel in the wake of the failed 2000 Camp David Summit and the eruption of the Second Intifada, Saudi Arabia threatened to "reevaluate" its relationship with the United States if Washington did not try to quell the violence, arguing that it had a moral obligation to intercede, given its military support for Israel. Riyadh vowed to "reciprocate by pursuing its own interests without consideration for American interests," in a clear reference to using oil as leverage.<sup>13</sup>

Despite recurring tensions, the U.S.-Saudi relationship persisted and grew following three critical events during the first decade of the 21st century: the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003; and the 2011 Arab uprisings.

Of the 19 individuals involved in executing the 9/11 attacks, 15 were Saudi nationals. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks,

"Saudi Arabia was put under international pressure that criticized its transnational Wahhabi links, its promotion of an uncompromising religious ideology, and its sponsorship of radical religious education worldwide."<sup>14</sup> Al-Qaeda placed the al-Saud in their crosshairs as well, denouncing them as puppets of the West and launching a series of attacks inside the kingdom. As the United States commenced what would come to be known as the Global War on Terror (GWOT) following the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Riyadh joined with Washington and came to be considered an essential partner in the campaign.

**“Tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United States have existed from the very beginning, most notably as a result of strong U.S. support for the Zionist movement and, later, the state of Israel.”**

As the Bush administration set its sights on Baghdad, Saudi Arabia refused to participate in the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein and the devolution of Iraq into a state of civil war, the Iran-Saudi rivalry escalated considerably as Tehran's strategic presence across the country expanded. So, too, did the GWOT intensify and escalate as militant groups exploited the subsequent power vacuum throughout Iraq and gradually established branches and affiliates across the region, including in the Arabian Peninsula, which targeted Saudi Arabia directly. Security cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia increased dramatically as a result of the GWOT and concern over Iran.

The Arab uprisings in 2011 sent shock waves across the Middle East and were pivotal for the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The al-Saud viewed the uprisings as an existential threat to their own authority as well as the broader regional authoritarian order and balance of power.<sup>15</sup> Saudi Arabia was displeased with the response of the United States to the uprisings, particularly in Egypt: Riyadh detested Washington for not doing more to save the regime of Hosni Mubarak, whom they accused the United States of "abandoning."<sup>16</sup>

This displeasure was coupled with the official withdrawal of American troops from Iraq in 2011, Washington's inaction in Syria following President Barack Obama's establishment of a "red line" concerning Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, and the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the United States and Iran in 2015, all of which furthered tensions between the al-Saud and the Obama administration.

However, the notion of U.S. "disengagement" neglects the fact that the United States actively sought to preserve its status during the Arab uprisings. The United States viewed the uprisings as a threat to American interests in the Middle East. Washington "worried about losing its Arab client regimes in the Middle East," and sought to reverse this revolutionary wave and return to the status quo.<sup>17</sup> The United States worked to undermine the Arab uprisings, both directly through maintaining support for its allied authoritarian partners and indirectly by supporting the counterrevolution led by regional actors such as Saudi Arabia.

In fact, approved weapons sales from the United States to Saudi Arabia reached record heights under the Obama administration, totaling more than \$111 billion throughout Obama's eight years in office.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, his administration provided critical support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen via logistical and intelligence support.

Nevertheless, the Saudis did not lament the end of Obama's presidency, for they would soon have an enthusiastic new partner enter the White House. But before this, Saudi Arabia would begin a shift toward a new era in the country's history.

## The Rise of Mohammed bin Salman

The death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud in 2015 and the accession of Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud has arguably ushered in one of the most significant shifts in the history of Saudi Arabia, with profound ramifications for the U.S.-Saudi relationship. This is primarily a result of the rise to power of King Salman's son, Mohammed bin Salman, popularly referred to as MBS. Initially appointed as deputy crown prince and minister of defense, MBS rose to the position of crown prince in 2017 after forcibly sidelining Muhammad bin Nayef, who had held the position since 2015. With the support of his father, MBS embarked upon a campaign of power consolidation and centralization,

amassing more power than any other individual in the history of the modern Saudi state.<sup>19</sup>

A cult of personality has been constructed around MBS both at home and abroad to buttress his authority. Saudi Arabia and its allies have gone to great lengths presenting MBS as a "reformer" leading the kingdom into the future. Many in the West have embraced this image of MBS, with one *New York Times* columnist describing MBS' reforms as "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at last."<sup>20</sup>

**"The U.S.-Saudi relationship survived the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003; and the 2011 Arab uprisings."**

Indeed, there have been a number of significant changes within Saudi Arabia in the past several years. These changes included attempting to distance official Saudi Arabian history from Wahhabism;<sup>21</sup> allowing women to drive, live alone, and travel without a male guardian;<sup>22</sup> limiting the religious police's powers;<sup>23</sup> permitting public entertainment venues, such as cinemas and concerts;<sup>24</sup> and arresting religious clerics and scholars labeled as "extremists" by the regime.<sup>25</sup> These are in addition to the introduction of the so-called Vision 2030 plan to pivot the Saudi economy away from dependence on oil and transition away from the old "ruling bargain" that has historically underpinned the al-Saud's authority, characterized by luxurious state patronage and welfare in return for the political acquiescence of Saudi citizens.<sup>26</sup> To help advance this image of reform and modernity abroad, MBS has initiated a number of grand vanity projects while also expanding Saudi presence in various global theaters, particularly sports.<sup>27</sup>

And yet, despite these changes, regime control over state and society in Saudi Arabia has never been greater. This is the paradox of Saudi Arabia's "reformer" crown prince: although MBS has loosened certain social restrictions, he has simultaneously expanded his personal stranglehold on all political, economic, and social affairs within Saudi Arabia to an unprecedented level.

In his efforts to establish absolute authority and eliminate

alternative power centers capable of challenging his rule, MBS has targeted fellow royals and other elites, journalists, religious clerics, human rights activists, women's rights activists, and many more in an unprecedented wave of repression. Often carried out under the pretense of fighting corruption or extremism, these purges have ultimately been used as a mechanism to solidify MBS' ultimate authority over the state.

Central to this campaign of power consolidation is the new nationalist project being spearheaded by MBS to restructure authoritarian rule within Saudi Arabia.<sup>28</sup> A new Saudi-first form of hypernationalism is being nurtured by the state as MBS attempts to transition Saudi identity away from a purely Islamic one to a Saudi national identity.<sup>29</sup> Although this new nationalism did not appear out of nowhere—its foundation was established during the era of King Abdullah—it has accelerated dramatically under MBS and is directed primarily toward Saudi Arabia's young population: according to a 2022 census, it is estimated that approximately 63 percent of Saudis are under the age of 30.<sup>30</sup>

**“There have been a number of significant changes within Saudi Arabia in recent years. Despite these changes, regime control over state and society has never been greater.”**

MBS welcomed the arrival of Donald Trump to the White House. Trump embraced the kingdom and its ambitious new ruler. A first for a U.S. president, Trump's first trip abroad after taking office was to Saudi Arabia, where he extolled the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Trump embraced the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, doubling down on U.S. support for the campaign and vetoing bipartisan efforts seeking to end American involvement in April 2019.<sup>31</sup> Following the murder of Saudi journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, Trump stood staunchly beside MBS even after the CIA confirmed the murder was carried out by a team of Saudi operatives and concluded, with “medium to high confidence,” that it was ordered by the crown prince himself.<sup>32</sup>

Trump's relationship with MBS remained strong, and

despite international condemnation of the murder, Trump authorized the sharing of sensitive nuclear power information with Riyadh shortly thereafter.<sup>33</sup> Trump often lauded his relationship with MBS, praising the young ruler for his “spectacular job” in leading a “revolution” in Saudi Arabia.<sup>34</sup> Trump also bragged about how he shielded MBS following the murder of Khashoggi, claiming to have “saved his ass” by getting Congress to leave him alone following the incident.<sup>35</sup>

Trump showered Saudi Arabia with advanced weaponry, approving almost \$35 billion in arms sales while in office.<sup>36</sup> This included, among other things, the declaration of a national emergency to push through Congress an \$8 billion weapons sale to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Jordan.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the Trump administration assumed a very hard line on Saudi Arabia's primary regional competitor, Iran. Alongside his continued support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, Trump withdrew from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear accord with Iran, reimposed comprehensive sanctions on the country, and approved the assassination of the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, during a visit with Iraqi officials.<sup>38</sup> After his presidency, it was revealed that Trump was close to ordering a military strike on Iran during his final months in office.<sup>39</sup>

However, the relationship between Trump and MBS was not totally quarrel-free. Amid an oil price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia in 2020, Trump presented MBS with an ultimatum: OPEC must cut oil production or risk losing American security protection.<sup>40</sup> Riyadh's price war with Moscow resulted in a flooded oil market which, coupled with decreased demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, drove the price of oil sharply lower and caused alarm among U.S. oil producers regarding their own profitability. According to Reuters, Trump told MBS that without production cuts, “there would be no way to stop the U.S. Congress from imposing restrictions that could lead to a withdrawal of U.S. forces.”<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, Trump hesitated to respond directly against Iran to the attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil refineries in 2019, despite Saudi Arabia urging him to do so.<sup>42</sup> After proclaiming that the United States was “locked and loaded” to respond to the incident, Trump publicly stated that he did not wish to start a war with Iran.<sup>43</sup> Instead of direct retaliation, Trump deployed an additional 2,800 troops to

Saudi Arabia in response to the attacks.<sup>44</sup>

Despite these tensions, the relationship between the Trump administration and MBS was overwhelmingly solid, continuing after Trump's tenure as president through multibillion dollar investments and business ventures that further cemented the relationship between the crown prince, Trump, and Trump's entourage. For example, six months after leaving the White House, Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and former senior adviser, secured a \$2 billion investment from the Saudi Public Investment Fund, which is led by MBS.<sup>45</sup>

## “While campaigning against Trump, Joe Biden vowed to turn Mohammed bin Salman into a global pariah. Once in office, these vows proved to be empty rhetoric.”

While campaigning against Trump, Joe Biden lambasted Riyadh's abysmal human rights record, stating he would end arms sales to Saudi Arabia and cease support for the war in Yemen, vowing to turn MBS into a global pariah.<sup>46</sup> On the two-year anniversary of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, Biden proclaimed he would make sure that “America does not check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil,” stressing that “America's commitment to democratic values and human rights will be a priority.”<sup>47</sup> During Biden's first weeks in office, the administration stated it planned on recalibrating the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia.<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately, these vows to recalibrate the U.S.-Saudi relationship and turn MBS into a global pariah proved to be empty rhetoric. Biden's approach to Saudi Arabia has been rooted in continuity, not change. He refused to hold MBS accountable for the murder of Khashoggi despite the released CIA report directly implicating MBS in the murder; has continued to support Saudi Arabia and the UAE amid their disastrous military campaign in Yemen and plunging the country into a humanitarian crisis; and has, to date, approved almost \$7 billion in weapon sales to the kingdom.<sup>49</sup>

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration shifted to panic mode as Middle

East partner states, including Saudi Arabia, did not assume Washington's position on the war and Moscow. Saudi Arabia balked at Washington's request to increase oil output as prices continued to climb globally.<sup>50</sup> In fact, OPEC+ has continued to cut production, and Saudi Arabia announced in June 2023 that it will further cut production unilaterally by an additional 1 million barrels per day.<sup>51</sup> After Biden's vow to impose consequences on Saudi Arabia for its refusal to slash production, Riyadh threatened Washington with major economic consequences if it did so.<sup>52</sup>

Following these developments, Saudi Arabia's defenders in the United States blamed America, calling for the United States to recommit to Saudi Arabia and the Middle East more generally.<sup>53</sup>

Scrambling to preserve the status quo, several top Biden administration officials—including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, CIA Director William Burns, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and Biden's top Middle East adviser, Brett McGurk—have all traveled to Saudi Arabia to reassure Riyadh of America's commitment to its security. Biden himself traveled to Saudi Arabia in July 2022, seeking to signal his commitment to Riyadh while also prodding Riyadh to increase oil production, and wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post* a week prior to his trip seeking to justify the visit amid widespread criticism of the move.<sup>54</sup> Biden stressed the importance of strengthening the U.S.-Saudi relationship, speaking explicitly about the U.S. commitment to uphold Saudi Arabia's security and defense.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the Biden administration is currently considering further policy concessions and security commitments to Riyadh to shore up the relationship, citing the return of great power competition—particularly China's expanding footprint in the Middle East—and the advancement of the Abraham Accords as the new strategic rationale for doing so.

## TRADITIONAL RATIONALES

Enduring rationales for a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship typically revolve around three main issues: access to oil, joint counterterrorism efforts, and upholding stability in the Middle East. These rationales have guided U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia for decades and are regularly raised to justify a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship. However, the

analysis underpinning these rationales is wrong. These justifications also neglect how Saudi Arabia has contributed to undermining U.S. interests in all three areas.

## Oil

Oil has been central to the U.S.-Saudi relationship since its inception. But times have changed, as have global energy markets, as well as American and Saudi interests.

Proponents of a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship typically point to the importance of the Persian Gulf for the global oil market. The Persian Gulf is home to almost half of the world's oil reserves, accounts for one-third of global oil production, and is home to two of the most critical maritime chokepoints for global energy—the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.<sup>56</sup> But the direct reliance of the United States on Persian Gulf oil has decreased considerably. The United States is now the world's largest oil producer, and only imported 7 percent of its oil from Saudi Arabia in 2022.<sup>57</sup> Still, this does not insulate the United States from the policies of Persian Gulf states. The price of oil will always be impacted by international developments because oil is a global, fungible commodity, the price of which is primarily dictated by supply and demand.<sup>58</sup>

Many commentators in the United States believe that the continued provision of security for Saudi Arabia will lead to Riyadh deliberately adopting oil policies that are favorable to the United States. This assumption is incorrect. Saudi interests—more specifically, MBS' interests—as well as global supply and demand, dictate Saudi oil policy.<sup>59</sup> Riyadh benefits from high oil prices. The cradle-to-grave Saudi welfare state—largely designed to co-opt Saudi citizens into supporting the existing regime through public sector employment and luxurious benefits courtesy primarily of oil revenues—is currently overextended. The new nationalist transformation MBS seeks to establish as the bedrock of his authority, involving ambitious new domestic projects estimated to cost trillions of dollars, is also dependent on funding from oil revenues.<sup>60</sup>

The centerpiece of this new nationalist project is Vision 2030—MBS' grand economic plan to transition the country away from oil and to restructure state-society relations inside Saudi Arabia. However, progress on Vision 2030 is lagging badly in two critical areas: private sector growth and

non-oil government revenue.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, although Saudi Arabia's economy grew 8.7 percent in 2022 thanks to high oil prices—yielding the kingdom's first budget surplus in almost 10 years—the IMF projects this growth to slow to 1.9 percent in 2023, the steepest growth downgrade among major economies in the world.<sup>62</sup> Given the continued centrality of oil to the Saudi economy and MBS' desperate need to increase revenue, it is foolish to think Riyadh will be swayed to adopt oil policies that do not advance its own core interests.

There are also several oil-related concerns typically cited when discussing the importance of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

A leading concern is the notion that Saudi Arabia could “weaponize” its oil policies with the specific intention of hurting the United States. At its core, the notion of the oil weapon is “the idea that a major oil-or-gas-exporting state could use supply shutoffs to compel policy changes in an importing state.”<sup>63</sup> However, Saudi Arabia faces the same problems that any other state seeking to weaponize a global commodity would inevitably encounter.<sup>64</sup>

**“Given the continued centrality of oil to the Saudi economy, it is foolish to think Riyadh will adopt oil policies that do not advance its own core interests.”**

The idea of the oil weapon is rooted in misunderstandings of the global oil market and the interests of producing countries. Attempts to weaponize oil have, historically, had considerable long-term negative ramifications for producer countries and their own economies.<sup>65</sup> Embargoes against specific countries are rarely effective, given that oil is a global commodity and countries can replace lost imports with relative ease.<sup>66</sup> Efforts by Saudi Arabia to unilaterally drive oil prices through the roof would impose large costs on oil consumers around the world, particularly China, who is Riyadh's largest oil consumer.<sup>67</sup> Such a strategy would also jeopardize Saudi market share at precisely the same time Riyadh desperately needs oil revenues for its grand domestic projects. Revenue from oil still accounts for roughly 40 percent of Saudi GDP and the vast majority of total Saudi exports, rendering the Saudi economy heavily reliant on petroleum.<sup>68</sup>



Another oil-related concern often cited is the prevention of a regional hegemon from dominating Middle East oil. This reasoning posits that if one state—either an external or regional actor—were able to establish control over the region’s oil, they could then influence the global oil market in negative ways for the United States or, at the very least, disrupt the flow of oil from the Middle East. But, as I discuss below, no external or regional actor is capable of establishing hegemony within the Middle East.

Iran is often cited as the most likely belligerent to either attempt regional hegemony or disrupt Middle East oil output by launching a military operation to close the Strait of Hormuz. Such a move would cause global anger against Tehran, especially from Asian importers who constitute the majority consumer of Gulf oil and liquefied natural gas.<sup>69</sup> China in particular would suffer greatly as a result of such disruption, considering that Beijing gets more than half of its oil from the Persian Gulf.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, arguments pointing toward the possibility of Iran launching such an effort in the Strait of Hormuz tend to underestimate the logistical difficulties of doing so. Such a campaign would require tremendous resources and could well fail. Moreover, it would render Iran—or any other state—vulnerable to retaliation, either directly or against its interests elsewhere in the region.<sup>71</sup>

Given the inability to sway Riyadh on its oil policies and the absence of a threat to Middle East oil, the United States is effectively underwriting the security of Saudi Arabia while getting nothing in return.

## Counterterrorism

Cooperation on counterterrorism is repeatedly cited as a critical element of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, with Riyadh regularly depicted as a critical partner for such efforts.<sup>72</sup> The U.S. presence in the Middle East is thought to stabilize the region and prevent the Middle East from spawning “catastrophic terrorism.”<sup>73</sup> Saudi Arabia cooperates with the United States on counterterrorism, primarily through intelligence sharing, countering terrorism-related financing, and assisting in U.S. military operations.<sup>74</sup> Others cite Saudi Arabia’s religious role—being home to both Mecca and Medina—and how this grants Riyadh a unique role in Muslim world leadership.<sup>75</sup>

Taking a step back, it is first necessary to recognize how terrorism as a threat has been greatly inflated and that U.S. foreign policy has tended to make the problem worse, not better.<sup>76</sup> The GWOT has been catastrophic for countering the real grievances that can lead to terrorism. It has contributed to an estimated 4.5 million deaths and the displacement of 38 million people.<sup>77</sup> This is in addition to widespread and systemic torture, incarceration, and surveillance.

**“The threat from terrorism has been greatly inflated, and U.S. foreign policy has tended to make the problem worse, not better.”**

The fact that Saudi Arabia is cited as a critical counterterrorism partner is actually rather ironic. For decades, the kingdom has devoted considerable resources to promoting a puritanical version of Islam.<sup>78</sup> From the funding of universities, charities, mosques, and so on, Saudi proselytization of an ultra-conservative form of Islam has truly been global in form.

MBS presents himself to the West as a break from this past. His efforts to present himself as a reformer are most glaring regarding religion, where he vows to return Saudi Arabia to a moderate form of Islam.<sup>79</sup> Many in the West have echoed such sentiments: Steven Cook and Martin Indyk, for example, claim that

Bin Salman’s decision to curtail these radical activities at home and abroad in favor of promoting a more moderate and tolerant Islam is a welcome development that could resonate in other Muslim countries. Should that effort falter at home, however, extremist Islam could come roaring back, creating a ripple effect across the Islamic world.<sup>80</sup>

But is religion actually being reformed within Saudi Arabia? Perhaps the best way to characterize what is happening would be the restructuring of religion toward MBS’ broader project of power consolidation.<sup>81</sup> Religious authority is being centralized under the authority of MBS and brought under

the direct control of the monarchy. The endeavor to return Saudi Arabia to so-called moderate Islam is a comprehensive effort by the state to eliminate its enemies under the guise of combating extremism and promoting moderation.<sup>82</sup>

**“Mohammed bin Salman has not sought to fundamentally reform Wahhabi doctrine and teachings. His project of moderate Islam is about loyalty and the centralization of religious power.”**

Domestically, the effort to battle “extremist” clerics represents an offensive against religious figures who challenge either MBS’ absolute authority or his policies, not an assault on Wahhabism or the religious establishment. Mohammed bin Salman’s alliance with the official religious establishment remains intact and he has not sought to fundamentally reform Wahhabi doctrine and teachings.<sup>83</sup> Aided by new anti-terror legislation, this campaign is designed to target dissent, not extremism per se. Although Riyadh has targeted some clerics with extreme leanings, the vast majority have been peaceful advocates for political, economic, or social reform.<sup>84</sup> MBS’ project of moderate Islam is about loyalty and the centralization of religious power.<sup>85</sup>

Under MBS, Saudi Arabia’s historic embrace of intense religiosity is now shifting toward a new form of Saudi hypernationalism. However, this reorientation toward overt nationalism does not equate to the decoupling of religion from Saudi identity. Islam continues to be marshaled as a mechanism of state identity, both internally and externally. Instead, whereas religion by itself has traditionally served as the basis of Saudi identity, it no longer is the sole source of identification for the Saudi state.

Abroad, Saudi Arabia has increasingly turned toward the promotion of so-called moderate Islam. There are two key elements to this government-sponsored moderate Islam. First is the promotion of a politically quietist and statist conceptualization of Islam that stresses absolute obedience to established authority.<sup>86</sup> Critical here is the portrayal of all forms of Islamism—whether mainstream or more radical—and all forms of political opposition as manifestations of extremism

and radicalism in order to eliminate all independent or dissenting religious and political voices capable of challenging state authority. Second, in the efforts to brand themselves as moderate, these regimes have also adopted the strategic usage of interfaith tolerance.<sup>87</sup> The curation of such an image is designed to present these actors as stabilizing forces throughout the Middle East despite their repressive policies at home and aggressive foreign policies that contribute to the underlying sources of regional instability.

This project of moderate Islam is designed to present an image to the West that shows the problems plaguing the Middle East as inherently religious. It is an attempt to draw attention away from how the authoritarian policies of states such as Saudi Arabia are often the underlying catalysts for regional instability, allowing those states to repress anyone they deem as a threat to their own rule under the guise of countering so-called extremist behavior.<sup>88</sup> MBS’ promotion of moderate Islam is inherently political, designed to support his domestic and geopolitical objectives instead of actually countering specific religious interpretations or practices.

The GWOT has been dramatically counterproductive, rooted in a misunderstanding of Islam and the interests of regional autocrats. Despite the fawning over MBS’ turn toward moderate Islam, this project is not a solution to countering extremist behavior; it is a cover for political repression.

## **Stability**

The United States regularly anchors its relationship with Saudi Arabia on the belief that strong ties between Washington and Riyadh serve to promote the shared interest of Middle East stability.<sup>89</sup> Riyadh is perceived by the United States as a partner in ensuring political, economic, and societal order throughout the Middle East. Additionally, a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship is viewed by many as critical for preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon. Through a strong relationship with Riyadh, Washington believes it will be able to prevent the emergence of a dominant, hostile power in the region that could work against U.S. interests.

But Saudi Arabia does not promote political, economic, or societal order throughout the Middle East, nor is it the U.S.-Saudi relationship that is preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon.

America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia epitomizes

the myth of authoritarian stability that has underpinned U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East for decades. This myth refers to the false notion that autocratic rulers serve as the best guarantors of American interests in the region. As I have detailed at length previously, this account gets things backward: rather than being the solution to the region's problems, these actors are responsible for producing and exacerbating the greatest underlying problems in the Middle East. A blank check from Washington allows them to act with impunity both at home and abroad.<sup>90</sup>

## “Unwavering devotion to the al-Saud is not necessary to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon. No actor in the region possesses the ability to dominate the Middle East.”

Unwavering devotion to the al-Saud is not necessary to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon. No actor in the region possesses the ability to dominate the Middle East. Power in the Middle East is relatively balanced between the Gulf states, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel.<sup>91</sup> Coupled with the relative weakness of regional militaries (with the exception of Israel), the high costs of war, and a regional geography that does not favor domination, it is virtually impossible for one actor to dominate the Middle East.<sup>92</sup>

Far from promoting regional stability, Saudi Arabia—along with other U.S. partners in the region—shares blame for destabilizing the Middle East. Washington's unwavering support for the kingdom encourages behavior that is repressive, aggressive, and threatening to U.S. interests, while directly implicating the United States in Riyadh's policies.

Saudi Arabia is involved in almost every conflict zone and geopolitical fault line spanning the greater Middle East. Unwavering U.S. support has emboldened Saudi Arabia, allowing the kingdom to pursue reckless policies, knowing that the United States will come to its aid and will not hold it responsible.

After the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia rushed to aid allied autocratic forces to crush the democratic aspirations of the disenfranchised masses and further entrench the greatest

underlying divide within the Middle East: that between the autocratic governments that dominate the region and the people they rule over.<sup>93</sup>

Saudi Arabia has pursued myriad destabilizing and reckless policies. Particularly devastating for the region has been the decades-long Saudi-Iran conflict. Competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional influence has affected almost every corner of the Middle East.<sup>94</sup> In order to advance its own objectives, Riyadh has sought to steer U.S. foreign policy in the region toward confrontation with Iran, despite it being in contrast to the interests of the United States.<sup>95</sup>

Saudi Arabia's reckless behavior also extends far beyond its competition with Iran. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, alongside the UAE, spearheaded an air, land, and naval blockade of Qatar that lasted until 2021. Popularly referred to as the “Gulf crisis,” Saudi Arabia and its partners allegedly included plans for a military operation against Doha before being dissuaded by the United States.<sup>96</sup> That same year, MBS effectively kidnapped Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri while he was in Saudi Arabia, pressuring him to resign his position.<sup>97</sup> In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has, alongside the UAE, led a military intervention that produced the world's worst humanitarian crisis and caused more than 377,000 deaths.<sup>98</sup> The U.S. weapons that were sold to Saudi Arabia and the UAE were transferred to al Qaeda-linked fighters and other hardline militant groups in Yemen.<sup>99</sup> Saudi Arabia is also increasingly pursuing influence in new theaters, such as the Horn of Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>100</sup> Globally, Saudi Arabia is engaged in expansive surveillance, hacking, and harassment efforts, including inside the United States.<sup>101</sup>

Recently, however, Saudi foreign policy appears to be shifting due to changing regional and international conditions. The attack on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities, attributed by U.S. officials to Iran, coupled with the United States not responding directly against Tehran despite pressure from Riyadh, highlighted Saudi vulnerability.<sup>102</sup> Across the Middle East, counterrevolutionary forces have largely succeeded, evidenced by an authoritarian resurgence. The openings for political change and the intense competitions for regional influence that resulted from the uprisings have, for now, receded. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has been unable to defeat the Houthis, despite expending considerable amounts of money in the process: at its height, the war cost Riyadh an estimated \$5–6 billion a month.<sup>103</sup> Moreover,

China and Russia have both expanded their respective footprints throughout the Middle East as the region enters a new period of multipolarity.<sup>104</sup>

Saudi Arabia has responded to this array of challenges with an increasing turn to diplomacy. Riyadh ended the blockades against Qatar, sought to reintegrate Syria's Bashar al-Assad back into the regional fold, is engaging in (largely unsuccessful) negotiations in Yemen, and reestablished diplomatic relations with Iran that had been suspended in 2016.<sup>105</sup> Of particular note is the recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have long battled for regional influence, as noted previously. Following the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the foreign ministers of the two countries met in Tehran, where they highlighted areas of cooperation and their shared desire to increase trade.<sup>106</sup> During this meeting, Saudi Arabia invited Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, for an official visit to the kingdom.<sup>107</sup> Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, later traveled to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in August 2023 to discuss "neighborly policy" and sustainable bilateral ties.<sup>108</sup>

## “Strong partnerships with dictatorships are increasingly held to be essential to combating Russian and Chinese advances in the region.”

These developments are, on the surface at least, a significant reversal from when, just a few years earlier, MBS referred to Iranian strongman Ayatollah Khamenei as being worse than Adolf Hitler.<sup>109</sup> Diplomacy of this nature should be encouraged. However, this recent turn by Riyadh and Tehran should not be interpreted as a cessation of long-standing strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both countries remain fundamentally at odds regarding the regional distribution of power in the Middle East. This turn toward de-escalation should be interpreted as opportunistic maneuvering by both parties, given the changing regional and international contexts as well as the increased concern with pressing domestic issues.<sup>110</sup>

Although such developments are promising, the underlying

distrust and geopolitical tensions between Saudi Arabia and its regional competitors have not disappeared. The competition is best thought of as being frozen, with both regional and international contexts currently favoring de-escalation.<sup>111</sup> However, such conflicts can easily be reignited, particularly considering that the root causes of the Arab uprisings have only grown worse.<sup>112</sup> Conditions can shift rapidly, as can the strategic calculus of ambitious actors across the Middle East.

## NEW RATIONALES

While the traditional rationales of oil, counterterrorism, and stability continue to underpin the case for a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship, they are quickly giving way to new justifications centered on great power competition in the Middle East and the advancement of the Abraham Accords.

### Great Power Competition

As Washington has settled on competition with Russia and China as the new organizing principle of its foreign policy, that logic is now one of the most commonly cited reasons for continued deep U.S. engagement in the Middle East. Strong partnerships with dictatorships are increasingly held to be essential to combating Russian and Chinese advances in the region. Brett McGurk, the current White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, argues that partnerships with Arab autocracies such as Saudi Arabia provide the United States with a unique comparative advantage over U.S. competitors in the region.<sup>113</sup> According to this line of thought, if the United States does not maintain these strong relationships, it would create a strategic vacuum to be filled by Russia or China, resulting in Saudi Arabia and others turning toward Moscow or Beijing as their "great power guarantors."<sup>114</sup>

Both Russia and China have considerably expanded their respective footprints in the Middle East, including with Saudi Arabia. Russia and Saudi Arabia have continued to coordinate on oil production following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, much to Washington's displeasure.<sup>115</sup> Saudi Arabia more than doubled its imports of discounted and sanctioned Russian oil in the second quarter of 2022 so that it can use this fuel domestically while selling its own oil at higher prices

internationally.<sup>116</sup> Moscow has also expanded its weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.<sup>117</sup> Ties between Saudi Arabia and China have also expanded, with President Xi Jinping visiting the kingdom in December 2022.<sup>118</sup> China is Saudi Arabia's largest trade partner and oil consumer, and investments between the two countries have reached record heights.<sup>119</sup> Similar to Russia, China has also expanded its weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.<sup>120</sup> Beijing has also widened its diplomatic posture in the region, helping broker the reestablishment of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023.<sup>121</sup>

## “Neither Russia nor China is capable of filling an American void in the Middle East, nor do they desire to.”

At the same time, neither Russia nor China is capable of filling an American void in the Middle East, nor do they desire to. As I have argued elsewhere, Moscow and Beijing benefit from the U.S.-led security order in the region, for it has “provided the security umbrella for them to become more involved in the region without having to assume the costs of physically protecting their interests.”<sup>122</sup>

Russia and China are opportunists in the Middle East, and neither of them is able or willing to build a new political and security order in the region. As the American experience in the Middle East has shown, an external hegemon attempting to maintain a regional order requires an enormous amount of political, economic, and military resources, and still runs a high risk of failure.

Both Russia and China are facing considerable economic troubles at home, particularly Moscow after its disastrous invasion of neighboring Ukraine.<sup>123</sup> Moscow and Beijing are far more concerned with their own immediate neighborhoods and are also undermined by the authoritarian nature of their own governments, which need to dedicate vast amounts of resources to police the state internally to maintain their own authority.

States within the region are well aware of the limitations facing Russia and China. Regional actors such as Saudi Arabia have sought to manipulate great power politics in order to advance their own strategic objectives.<sup>124</sup> In the short term, Saudi Arabia and other U.S. regional partners have

cultivated Washington's anxiety about losing its position relative to Russia or China and are pressing for major policy concessions, resulting in a type of “reverse leverage.”<sup>125</sup> Saudi officials have themselves acknowledged this: according to the *Wall Street Journal*, “in private, Saudi officials said, the crown prince has said he expects that by playing major powers against each other, Saudi Arabia can eventually pressure Washington to concede to its demands for better access to U.S. weapons and nuclear technology.”<sup>126</sup>

In the long term, Saudi Arabia and other regional states are recognizing multipolarity as a reality and are positioning themselves accordingly to best advance their own interests. The United States should do the same.<sup>127</sup> If navigated correctly, the return of multipolarity to the Middle East can be a net benefit for the United States.

## The Abraham Accords

The advancement of the series of normalization agreements brokered by the Trump administration between Israel and various Arab states—the Abraham Accords—has rapidly emerged as a new framework for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.<sup>128</sup>

The desire to broker Saudi-Israel normalization has assumed a central position in the Biden administration's approach to the region, which has argued that the United States has a national security interest in brokering formal diplomatic relations between those countries.<sup>129</sup> There have been a flurry of reports indicating that the Biden administration is pushing for Saudi-Israel normalization by the end of 2023.<sup>130</sup> Biden centered his dual visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia in 2022 on this issue of normalization.<sup>131</sup> In return for normalization with Israel, Saudi Arabia is pressing the Biden administration for more formalized security commitments, as well as help with developing their civilian nuclear program—namely, the ability to independently enrich uranium.<sup>132</sup>

The United States has little to gain from brokering Saudi-Israel normalization, and the concessions Saudi Arabia is demanding in return are detrimental to U.S. interests.<sup>133</sup>

There is no strategic incentive for, or benefit to, the United States for granting policy concessions and/or increasing security commitments to Saudi Arabia in exchange for formally normalizing relations with Israel.

Informal Saudi-Israel ties have grown considerably over the past two decades.<sup>134</sup> The strategic interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel have increasingly converged, especially following the Arab uprisings and growing shared fears over preserving regional status quo.<sup>135</sup> The shared strategic interests of political elites within Saudi Arabia and Israel has ushered in dramatic new levels of cooperation, under the aegis of what has been referred to as “implicit normalization.”<sup>136</sup>

Saudi Arabia does not require U.S. support to normalize relations with Israel. The two countries have already worked together toward shared strategic objectives, and it is in their own strategic interest to continue to do so.

## “The United States has little to gain from brokering Saudi-Israel normalization, and the concessions Saudi Arabia is demanding are detrimental to U.S. interests.”

Although Saudi Arabia and Israel share several strategic interests, MBS has signaled to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Riyadh retains its own agency and will not bear the costs of military confrontation against Iran. This is particularly relevant, given that tensions between Israel and Iran continue to escalate. Riyadh does not wish to confront Tehran directly because of the catastrophic ramifications that Iran’s retaliation could wreak on Saudi territory. This was arguably one of the central rationales behind the restoration of relations between Riyadh and Tehran. The deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran has already reportedly caused a stir inside Israel, particularly for Netanyahu, who seeks to formalize an anti-Iran regional alliance.<sup>137</sup>

MBS is attempting to exploit growing fears in Washington that the United States is losing influence in the Middle East, particularly as other actors, such as China, are expanding their own regional presence. This strategy appears to be working: Biden and his team are reportedly seriously considering providing Saudi Arabia with a security guarantee in return for Riyadh formally normalizing relations with Israel.<sup>138</sup> Numerous administration officials have traveled to Saudi Arabia to discuss this possibility.<sup>139</sup> Such a move would

be disastrous for U.S. interests, entrapping Washington as Riyadh’s security guarantor despite a fundamental disconnect between U.S. and Saudi interests and values. This agreement would risk American lives to defend a repressive dictatorship and provide a framework for other regional dictators to pressure the United States into similar concessions.

Instead of advancing U.S. interests, a deal that increased U.S. security commitments to Saudi Arabia in exchange for normalizing relations with Israel would further solidify U.S. support for the underlying sources of regional instability within the Middle East.

All the Arab states that joined the Abraham Accords were granted considerable policy concessions for doing so—such as approving the provisioning of F-35 stealth fighters and MQ-9 Reaper drones to the UAE and formally recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the contested Western Sahara—without any serious debate as to whether such tradeoffs were in the interests of the United States. The Abraham Accords provided the United States with negligible benefits while compounding the core problems that continue to lead to instability in the Middle East. The regional order the accords sought to buttress is inherently unstable. Worse, the Abraham Accords are rapidly emerging as a springboard for further U.S. commitments and entanglements in the region at a time when the Middle East no longer represents a core theater of U.S. interests.<sup>140</sup> Washington must not pay the costs of normalization while sacrificing its own interests in the process.

## REEVALUATING U.S.-SAUDI POLICY

It’s past time for an official reevaluation of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Currently, U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia—and the Middle East in general—is on autopilot, underwriting the interests of autocratic actors while harming the interests of the United States. It is not a question of whether the United States engages with these actors, but rather how Washington engages to best advance U.S. interests and values. What is needed is not a rupture of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, but a restructuring, one that reflects changing regional and international contexts and the limited U.S. interests in the region.

Saudi Arabia is actively undermining American interests in the Middle East while the United States continues

to provide security for the kingdom. It is imperative to recognize the fundamental disconnect between U.S. and Saudi interests.

A new approach should be largely limited to diplomacy. Washington should end its complicity in the crimes, atrocities, and destabilizing behavior of Saudi Arabia by ending weapons sales and removing U.S. troops from the kingdom. Unwavering U.S. support has emboldened Riyadh to pursue reckless and destabilizing policies because it is comfortable in the assurance that the United States will come to its aid and not hold it responsible for its actions. What incentive does Saudi Arabia—or any other state in the region—have to abandon its repressive and aggressive domestic and foreign policies when the United States “all but guaranteed their existence through the provision of diplomatic, economic, and military assistance?”<sup>141</sup>

**“Saudi Arabia shares neither U.S. interests nor U.S. values. Saudi Arabia is not an ally. For this reason, Washington should stop treating it as such.”**

Critical to this new approach is the abandoning of a dangerous new paradigm that is increasingly dominating U.S. foreign policy considerations in the region: great power competition. The Middle East does not represent a theater of core U.S. interests, and the expanding footprints of Russia and China in the region do not constitute a threat to American security or prosperity. Instead, if navigated correctly, the return of multipolarity to the Middle East could be a net benefit for the United States, providing Washington with an opportunity to distance itself from the region.

The greatest danger to the United States are the regional actors who seek to entrap the United States as their continued security guarantor, despite not sharing U.S. interests or values. Washington must recognize its regional partners

are using the return of great power politics to pressure the United States into doubling-down on supporting autocrats while sacrificing its own interests in the process.

Restructuring U.S.-Saudi relations is a needed first step toward a broader deemphasis of the Middle East in U.S. foreign policy. Washington’s continuous support for actors such as Saudi Arabia and the artificial regional order they preside over has resulted in a vicious cycle: by committing itself to the root of regional instability, the United States repeatedly finds itself having to confront challenges that are largely the product of its own presence and policies in the Middle East.

A U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East divorced from these autocratic actors would be able to engage the region solely from a perspective of American interests.

## **CONCLUSION**

The U.S.-Saudi relationship is in desperate need of an overhaul. The prevailing reasoning for maintaining a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship does not hold up to scrutiny. Saudi Arabia shares neither U.S. interests nor U.S. values. Saudi Arabia is not an ally. For this reason, Washington should stop treating it as such. This would entail winding down U.S. arms sales, military basing, and the political cover currently provided to the kingdom—rather than potentially expanding these and similar commitments. Such moves should be the first step in a broader revamping of U.S. Middle East policy toward more limited objectives in the region that advance the interests of the American people.

The United States should approach Saudi Arabia as it would any other state that does not share our interests or our values: from arm’s length. When it comes to U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia, less is more. The United States must decide whether it will continue underwriting actors such as Saudi Arabia and the artificial status quo in the Middle East, or whether it will recognize the failures of its own policies and limit its involvement to a level commensurate with U.S. interests.

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## CITATION

Hoffman, Jon. "Pariah or Partner? Reevaluating the U.S.-Saudi Relationship," Policy Analysis no. 961, Cato Institute, Washington, DC, September 20, 2023.



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