

## US-Saudi Relations and the Visit of Prince Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to Washington D.C



*President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King AbdulAziz Al Saudi on board the USS Quincy in 1945*

### Background:

On October 14, 2020, the Saudi Foreign Minister visited the United States to launch the two nations' strategic dialogue, which serves to strengthen the long-standing relationship between the two countries. The visit comes amid rising concerns over regional, transnational and international threats such as the global pandemic and its implications, rising threats stemming from Tehran, global challenges such as terrorism, environmental concerns, and global economic challenges. To address the security challenges in the region. This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of official relations between the two nations, and while specific threats remain imminent, areas of opportunity available through cooperation between the two nations are more significant than ever. The Kingdom is now four years into Vision 2030, and opportunities for greater economic cooperation and integration are ever evolving. Global governance is also in a transformative phase, and the relationship between the two nations acts as a pillar to maintaining stability, prosperity, and security. Security cooperation between the two nations is also at an important cross-road as the Kingdom and the U.S continue to develop [MESA](#) (Middle East Strategic Alliance) to deter malicious state and non-state actors. The U.S initiative for MESA was welcomed by Saudi Arabia in its effort to advance prosperity and security in the region. The Kingdom remains committed to the plans laid out in the [Warsaw Process](#) to enhance regional cooperation and promote security over fragility. Saudi commitment to the Warsaw process outlines the Kingdom's devotedness to multilateral initiatives to advance global strategic priorities in the Middle East. The bipartisan relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States is based on reciprocity, good governance, and promoting and celebrating human/cultural achievements. This commentary highlights critical aspects of US-Saudi relations and how they relate to the visit of Prince Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud to Washington D.C., looking at media reports, the press conference, and the Minister's dialogue with the Washington [Institute](#).



*Prince Faisal Bin Farhan twitter post following the meeting with U.S Secretary of State Mike Pompeo*

**Overview:**

The visit of Prince Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to Washington D.C. accomplished a myriad of affairs, further strengthening the continuity of the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. As the international community continues its battle to curb the health, economic, and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Saudi Foreign Minister's visit demonstrated that bilateral relations between the two nations are more important than ever in combatting current and future global challenges. The launch of the strategic dialogue between the two nations is based on the fundamentals of constructive discussion to strengthen their eight decade-long relationship.



*Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and U.S Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pictured during the press conference.*

King Abdulaziz along with U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt built the foundations of the formal relationship between the two states, which has evolved over the years through a shared global governance outlook based on the rule of law. Cultural bonds between the two nations have been strengthened by nearly 50,000 Saudi students studying in the U.S every year, mutually beneficial

economic relations based on reciprocity and defence/security arrangements between the two that place stability at the forefront of policies. Saudi Arabia and the U.S. have collectively combatted communism, terrorism, belligerent state actors, and transnational non-conventional threats. Their relationship today is based on four primary objectives, which are the preservation of peace and stability, counter-terrorism, sustainable energy policy and global economic growth. To achieve these objectives, the newly-launched strategic dialogue aims to create an institutional relationship between government and non-government entities in both nations for the collective good.

The dialogue will not be solely based on what the two nations will gain, but also how it will contribute to global and regional prosperity, and cooperation. The visit further outlined the joint mission of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to concentrate efforts on negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy to collectively face global challenges in a more crucial time than ever. As the host of this year's G20 summit, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has deployed multilateral measures to curb the immediate impacts of the pandemic by contributing to the G20 initiative of raising \$ 21 billion to therapeutics and the development of a Covid-19 [vaccine](#).

**Key takeaways from press [conference](#) of Secretary of State Pompeo and Foreign Minister Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saudi:**

- Both the Saudi Foreign Minister and the U.S. Secretary of State outlined the strength and continuity of bilateral relations based on combatting mutual concern issues, including:
  - Threats stemming from the Iranian regime, such as:
  - The incessant need to counter the Iranian regime's destabilizing regional activities.
  - The importance of the U.S.-Saudi partnership in confronting the Iranian regime's nuclear ambitions.
  - The Iranian regime's interventionist policies in Yemen.
  - The shelling of Saudi civilian sites by Iranian manufactured weapons.
  - Iran's ballistic missile program.
  - Cooperative efforts to curb the short and long-term effects of Covid-19.
  - Further developing the economic and security cooperation between the two nations.
  
- Both the Secretary and the Foreign Minister expressed their commitment to a political settlement in Yemen, stressing that:
  - A potential political settlement is being undermined by the Houthi cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia.
  - The Houthis are acting on behalf of the Iranian regime rather than Yemeni citizens.
  - There is a need to swiftly return to de-escalation.
  - They support a political solution to the conflict facilitated by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths.

**Bilateral relations and Kingdom's Vision 2030:**

The Kingdom's' robust economic and social transformation program for 2030 places the Saudi economy's diversification at its heart by creating a high-tech future generation leading to the development and creation of NEOM (a technologically advanced industrial city). Areas of cooperation in which Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has laid these foundations, include joint venture relations between U.S. and Saudi corporations and investment opportunities. The strategic dialogue launched by the Saudi Foreign Minister during his recent visit further strengthens this relationship and opens opportunities for both nations in economic growth and employment. Saudi Vision 2030's economic diversification plan includes wide-ranging investments in tourism from which U.S. private

and public corporations can benefit. Furthermore, Vision 2030 has allowed the Saudi workforce to become more gender-inclusive while promoting an environmental, social, and governance-related consciousness at the forefront of development. The Kingdom's youth population remains vibrant, entrepreneurial, and committed to achieving the Vision, representing a model for high-growth social and economic development globally. In this way, the Saudi Foreign Minister's visit to the U.S. aims to take the relationship to the next level in promoting mutually beneficial arrangements among the two nations' citizens.

While no country, including the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, was immune to the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, The foreign minister stated that Vision 2030 remains on target, yet resource allocation to meet the demands of Personal Protective Equipment as well as loans, stimulus packages and subsidies to individuals, large and small companies, along with aid to other nations have placed some domestic initiatives on temporary hold. Nevertheless, the Saudi Foreign Minister underscored his confidence of a rapid ramp-up once these immediate concerns are addressed. Saudi Vision 2030 was designed to be flexible and anticipate natural ups-and-downs of global economic activity, yet at the same time targeted in its commitment to domestic and global prosperity. This represents an unprecedented opportunity for cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. and serves as one of the pillars of their new strategic dialogue. While opportunities exist for regional economic growth and prosperity, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. must continue to work together to ensure that a stable Middle East is achieved.

Besides the significant economic reforms Saudi Arabia is currently undertaking, progress has also been made in areas of human rights, judicial reforms, the death penalty, and the role of women in society. The work towards further advancing human rights in Saudi Arabia is an area in which the Kingdom is committed to making ongoing progress. The Saudi Foreign Minister emphasized that all citizens are equal under Saudi law, and that the courts are independent and therefore take actions as they see fit based on Saudi law.

#### **Iran:**

In October 2017, Donald Trump withdrew U.S support from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ([JCPOA](#)) and subsequently re-imposed economic sanctions on Iran in November 2018. Since the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement, tensions in the Gulf have continued to increase through Iranian state aggression, Iranian support of proxies, and U.S./Saudi efforts to counter threats posed by Iran on crude oil prices, trade routes, and regional stability/security. Since the U.S. withdrawal, the region has progressed further into a cycle of conflict, with Iran supporting proxy warfare, most notably in Yemen, covert operations in the Kingdom, false flag attacks, and the funding of terror networks. The threats this poses to the international arena is of great concern to both global security and economic prosperity. The concentration of oil-related businesses in the region and thus the implications of Iran's ongoing activities to disrupt the oil market through malign activities in the Gulf and targeting oil facilities in Saudi Arabia demonstrate how joint Saudi-U.S. efforts to combat such threats are imminent and necessary.

Iran provides strategic, logistical, and economic support to several paramilitary groups in Bahrain, Afghanistan, Palestine, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon respectively, and provides indirect support to Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other non-state actors, thus destabilizing the wider Middle East in efforts to "export the revolution." The interception of Iranian weapons shipments on their way to Yemen and the identified Iranian-manufactured weapons on the battlefields across the region proves the unjustifiability of Iran's attempts to invoke deniability. Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are both committed to a re-negotiated settlement with Iran that must be coherent, cohesive, and conclusive

in countering Iranian threats such as supporting terror organizations, its ballistic missile program as well as to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon now and in the future.

Progress towards such an agreement has not materialized, and, since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, the region's security has deteriorated further as Iran continues its destabilizing activities. Donald Trump's maximum pressure campaign has been welcomed by Saudi Arabia, and Iran's economy has been devastated by the sanctions. Indicators such as oil output, economic growth, the value of the currency, fluctuating inflation, among others, signal a suffering Iranian [economy](#). Therefore, to prevent further escalation, the continuation of confronting Iranian activities by crippling their economy and proportional retaliation on its proxies in Yemen is necessary to counter the Iranian regime's threat to global security.

#### **Palestine:**

The Saudi Foreign Minister's dialogue with The Washington Institute addressed Saudi policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and outlined the Kingdom's commitment to peace, security, and the commitment to a Palestinian state. The Kingdom has put-forward multiple negotiation efforts and welcomes any initiatives that bring parties together to address and ultimately end long-standing the conflict. The Saudi Foreign Minister's re-affirmation of the Kingdom's commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative places at its core that it is up to the two parties to ultimately normalize relations between the two through candid negotiations and discussions conducted in good-faith. The Kingdom welcomes efforts by the United States to end the conflict through its mediation efforts, and while disagreements may exist on some technicalities between the two countries to end the conflict, the overall commitment of a peaceful settlement remains the driving force of the two nations' coordinated efforts on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

#### **Qatar**

The Saudi Foreign Minister addressed the Qatar-GCC issue coherently in the Q&A segment of the webinar with the Washington Institute. The Kingdom maintains its position on the importance of Gulf unity, fundamentals of non-interference, and notions of international law on good neighborliness. The Kingdom is committed to finding a solution and is willing to engage with its Qatari "brothers" on finding a path forward, which will be good news for Qataris and the region as a whole. This comes as the Kingdom has outlined legitimate concerns over Qatar's policies in the region concerning the harbouring of belligerent actors, spreading hateful content on state-backed news networks, and compliance-related issues. The Kingdom remains hopeful that its [13 demands](#) can be met sooner rather than later, so that the normalization of relations can occur, and regional unity and mutual prosperity can return to the forefront of Qatari policy. The Saudi Foreign Minister was optimistic that a solution could be found soon to address the legitimate regional and global concerns caused by Qatar's actions.

#### **Yemen:**

The Kingdom maintains its position towards the commitment of a political settlement in Yemen based on Yemeni citizens' interests rather than a third party or external actors. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Kingdom has deployed efforts to finding a peaceful solution and offer equal representation to the Houthis based on their proportionate size and based on the perseveration of security along the Kingdom's borders. The Saudi Foreign Minister is confident that once the Houthis begin placing the welfare of Yemeni civilians at the forefront of their policies, a political settlement will come. While Saudi coalition airstrikes have been denounced for their impact on civilians, the

Kingdom has deployed various measures to openly investigate the unintended human cost of war, to minimize those negative impacts. In parallel with UN efforts, Saudi Arabia has been the leading donor in aid and relief efforts to Yemen, including depositing [\\$2 billion in the central bank](#) in Aden to correct the balance of payments in the country and re-generate GDP growth as well as aid from the King Salman Relief Fund. The Kingdom remains committed to the Yemeni cause, and the Saudi Foreign Minister pledged that Saudi Arabia would not abandon the people of Yemen.

On the other hand, Iran has continued its aggressive foreign policy by providing logistical support and equipment to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who have launched over 300 Iranian-manufactured missiles directly into Saudi villages, cities, and airports. Notably, the Iranian attacks on Saudi cities and oil facilities have originated in and were directed by the government in Tehran, with accuracy, technical capacity, and undetected maneuvering over Saudi air space. Iran has supported the Houthi rebels by providing small arms, short-range missiles, and [financial aid](#), prolonging the war and causing spillover effects of the conflict into Saudi Arabia. Iran continues to play a belligerent role in the conflict as the chief provider of arms to Houthi groups, to the detriment of Yemeni citizens. This grave violation of international law and human rights is at the nature of the Houthi strategy of guerrilla warfare, which consists heavily of minefields, using civilian locations as weapons depots and IED's that have targeted civilians. The Houthis have also recruited [child soldiers](#), a severe violation of international law, further complicating US-Saudi efforts to create a safe and secure environment.

**Press conference:** <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-saudi-foreign-minister-prince-faisal-bin-farhan-al-saud-after-their-meeting/>

**Washington Institute:** <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-conversation-with-foreign-minister-prince-faisal-bin-farhan-al-saud>

*\*Ghassan Shams is a researcher at the Gulf Research Center*