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Saudi Arabia and the United States: Renewing the Strategic Relationship in Complex Times

Amnah Mosly
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The decades-long strategic relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States has been marked by both deep and continued cooperation as well as occasional tensions, especially during the past few years, with the Biden administration calling for a “recalibration” of ties during the early part of his first election. However, recent developments suggest a renewed commitment by the U.S. side to restore and reinforce this partnership.

Diplomatic Engagement

One of the most significant developments is the increase in visits by U.S. officials to the Kingdom. The official visit of President Biden as part of the Jeddah Security and Development Summit in July 2022 set the wheels in motion with President Biden [stating](#) that the U.S. would “remain an active, engaged partner in the Middle East” and “[would] not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran.” He [added](#) that the interests of the U.S. are “closely interwoven” with the success of the Gulf region. Addressing the leaders of the GCC countries, President Biden [underlined](#) that “the United States is invested in building a positive future in the region... [and] is not going anywhere.”

Since the Jeddah Summit, U.S. engagement in the Gulf has increased as evidenced by high-level visits, wider dialogue, and cooperation on various issues and mediation efforts. One key meeting that took place between U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Crown Prince and Prime Minister, HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman in May 2024, included talks about agreements between Riyadh and Washington in the areas of a strategic and military partnership, enhancing economic cooperation, and addressing the Israel-Palestine issue to ensure a reliable path to establishing a Palestinian state. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken also undertook several visits to the Kingdom to push for diplomatic solutions to end the crisis situation in Gaza and prevent wider regional instability.

Most recently, the Ambassador of the U.S. to Saudi Arabia, Michael Ratney, [stated](#) that the two countries are working on finalizing a “historic” bilateral strategic agreement that would “significantly and fundamentally transform the region’s dynamics.” The Ambassador [emphasized](#) that “these changes are likely to bring significant benefits to the Palestinian people, stressing that if these elements align and an agreement is reached, it could fundamentally transform the dynamics of this part of the world for the better.”

Security & Defense Partnership

The U.S. Ambassador emphasized the value of the military alliance between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in light of regional tensions, pointing out that U.S. defense industries have been operating in the Kingdom for a long time. Moreover, as a result of improved ties between Riyadh and Washington, especially with Saudi’s diplomatic efforts to de-escalate regional and international tensions, including in Yemen, the U.S. [announced](#) its decision to resume offensive weapons sales to the Kingdom. A State Department Official [reiterated](#), “Saudi Arabia remains a critical security partner for the United States, particularly at a time of high regional instability.” The U.S.



Ambassador [attributed](#) the decision to lift the suspension of sales to the fact that “Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in a diplomatic effort to stop the war in Yemen and maintain a calm and mitigation of civilian harm if there were a military conflict again,” and that “the circumstances have changed; the partnership has grown and with that naturally comes changes in our own approach.”

Ambassador Ratney also emphasized Washington’s commitment to maritime security in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, particularly as the war in Gaza continues to pose a risk of escalating into a wider regional conflict, given the rapid increase in Houthi attacks on the Red Sea since October of last year. The U.S. Ambassador [highlighted](#) that the U.S. military and naval forces have been actively working to deter Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, [stating](#), “we do this because freedom of navigation [in] this part of the world is profoundly important and our commitment to the security of Saudi Arabia and this entire region is paramount.”

Economic Cooperation

The economic partnership between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, which started through oil, now looks beyond fossil fuels. The U.S. remains a key player in Saudi Arabia’s diversification efforts under Vision 2030, with American companies involved in various sectors, including technology, infrastructure, and energy diversification. The U.S. Ambassador [explained](#) that “along with healthcare, infrastructure, advanced technology, and artificial intelligence, there are tremendous opportunities as the Saudi economy grows and diversifies, and new U.S. companies are brought in” and that the U.S. is “now working with the Saudi government and Saudi companies in areas that we would not have imagined in the past, for example, space exploration for commercial purposes.” This economic partnership is crucial for both countries, as Saudi Arabia is looking to attract foreign investment to transform its economy, and the U.S. is seeking to maintain its influence in the region through economic ties.

The U.S. has acknowledged that China is also playing a role in the region, specifically on the economic front. Ambassador Ratney [confirmed](#) that the strategic deals between Riyadh and Washington focus primarily on enhancing the U.S.-Saudi partnership, noting that Saudi Arabia, like the United States, has significant relations with China. The announcements of U.S. projects and initiatives, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, show continued U.S. commitment and reassurance that Washington is not abandoning the region, especially in the face of growing Chinese influence.

Conclusion

Overall, the Saudi-U.S. relationship has proven resilient, adapting to changing geopolitical and economic circumstances over the decades. Predictions that the U.S. is withdrawing from the region or that Saudi Arabia is shifting its attention to other partnerships fall short of serious analysis. While recent years have seen significant challenges, both Riyadh and Washington understand that there are clear reasons for maintaining a strong strategic partnership. The policy adjustment by the United States to mend and strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia also reflects an understanding of the Kingdom’s vital role in both regional and international stability. Moving forward, the relationship is likely to continue evolving, shaped by both nations’ efforts to balance their strategic interests with the changing dynamics of the global order.

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المعرفة للجميع



**Gulf Research Center
Jeddah
(Main office)**

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Riyadh**

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Geneva**

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge**

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Brussels**

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

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