



Photo Source: [Yaniv Fair](#) (2018)



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Saudi-U.S. Relations: Navigating a Second Trump Term

Dr. Abdulaziz Sager
Chairman, Gulf Research Center (GRC)
December 2024





Saudi-U.S. Relations: Navigating a Second Trump Term

How the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency will impact Saudi-American relations is unclear, although his administration's distinct foreign policy priorities could signal some challenges to be confronted. It is too early to suggest a shift in Saudi-American relations, but assuming that ties will follow the previous experience could be quickly outdated.

During his previous term, Trump emphasized a transactional approach to diplomacy, fostering close ties with Saudi Arabia centered on mutual economic and security interests. This included multi-billion-dollar arms deals, cooperative efforts to counter Iranian influence, and support for Saudi's Vision 2030. A new Trump presidency may renew these dynamics, focusing on deepening trade and investment links while maintaining robust security cooperation. However, evolving global challenges, including shifting geopolitical alliances, could provide a different trajectory for bilateral relations.

The circumstances that shaped President Trump's first term differ from today's geopolitical landscape, making it difficult to assume continuity in his approach. Over the past four years, profound changes in the regional and global political climate have reshaped the context of American foreign policy, necessitating a recalibration to address emerging challenges and opportunities. Regionally, the developments since October 7, 2023, including Hamas' attack on Israel, Israel's subsequent war on Gaza, the broader conflict involving Hezbollah and Lebanon, direct military exchanges between Israel and Iran, as well as threats from Yemen's Houthi group to international maritime security and ongoing field developments in Syria have added layers of complexity.

This impacts Saudi Arabia's position and role within the national system. In terms of regional affairs, Saudi Arabia's de-escalatory approach, including growing dialogue with Iran, refraining from normalization with Israel without a clear path forward on Palestinian statehood, and other mediation efforts suggest a recalibration of its regional leadership role within a nuanced framework for cooperation. In this context, Saudi Arabia's proactive diplomatic engagement signals an independent foreign policy that may occasionally diverge from U.S. priorities. Consequently, while a Trump administration might usher in a period of renewed strategic partnership, it would also need to adapt to a Saudi Arabia that is more assertive of its national interests and global standing.



Trump's previous support for Israeli expansionist policies—including the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Israeli sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights—directly contradicts Saudi Arabia's stance on a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital.

The appointments made so far by President Trump in terms of leading foreign, defense, and strategic policy, suggests further unwavering support for Israeli policies, including its expansionist and settlement agendas. A number of those expected to oversee Middle East policy are staunch opponents of resolving the Palestinian issue through a two-state solution. Most are openly dismissive of the principle of establishing an independent Palestinian state and show little inclination to acknowledge or support political rights for the Palestinian people. This composition signals a potential continuation of policies that prioritize Israeli interests, further complicating efforts to achieve a balanced approach to regional peace and stability.

Riyadh, in the meantime, is adamant that a political solution to the Palestinian cause is essential to finally bring to an end the cycle of conflict that has consumed the Middle East for the past decades. Trump's unwillingness to shift his policies to accommodate Saudi demands could, therefore, lead to a clash of priorities, as Riyadh will find it hard to compromise on its core conditions for peace. Without a "magic solution" that satisfies all three parties, Riyadh, US, and Israel, a deadlock appears increasingly likely.

President-elect Trump has been equally unequivocal in his strong support for Israel targeting Iran's nuclear program. In stark contrast to President Biden's approach, Trump openly endorsed the legitimacy of Israeli military action to neutralize Iran's nuclear ambitions. Throughout his first term, Trump maintained a hardline stance on Iran, leading efforts to dismantle the 2015 nuclear agreement and imposing maximum pressure on Tehran.

Saudi Arabia recognizes the critical importance of regional stability for its developmental goals and long-term vision. As the Kingdom seeks to expand diplomatic engagement with Iran and foster a constructive political dialogue, it is opposed to any conflict or attack on Iran that could escalate tensions or draw Saudi Arabia into a broader confrontation. Such a scenario would undermine regional security and hinder the Kingdom's efforts to cultivate economic growth, pursue ambitious reforms, and strengthen its role as a mediator in promoting peaceful coexistence in the Middle East.



There are other issues of concern. Despite his close relationship with Saudi Arabia, Trump showed little enthusiasm for meeting Riyadh's suggestions for a formal defense or security guarantee agreement with the United States. Similarly, he was not particularly supportive of Saudi Arabia's push to develop a peaceful national nuclear program with full nuclear fuel cycle capabilities, including uranium enrichment.

The key question in relation to the above issues is to what degree the incoming Trump administration would exert pressure on Riyadh to align closely with U.S. priorities. While the Biden administration allowed Saudi Arabia a degree of diplomatic flexibility and room to maneuver, a Trump administration is unlikely to offer the same latitude. Based on past behavior and the composition of his team, which supports a polarizing agenda—it is clear that they may not fully understand or tolerate Saudi Arabia's nuanced approach to diplomacy. As a result, the ability to balance relations with global powers and navigate a neutral, pragmatic approach may be compromised, narrowing Saudi Arabia's options and forcing difficult choices in response to U.S. demands.

The challenge for the Kingdom thus lies in navigating these differences while preserving Saudi Arabia's independence in its foreign policy and the pursuit of its national interests. Ultimately, the ability to find common ground will determine the trajectory of Saudi-American relations and their collective role in shaping the future of the region but it is difficult at this stage to see how this common ground can be established.

Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



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

19 Rayat Alithad 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

