

Are We Facing a Shift in KSA-US Relations or is it Only a Temporary Weakening?

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Key Points

- Historically, the KSA-US alliance was initially formed to counter Soviet influence in the region. It provided robust Access, Basing, and Overflight (ABO) for the US to provide security and stability while securing national interests.
- The Biden administration has been testing relations with its indefectible ally both diplomatically and militarily.
- The KSA is at turning point to lean to other Great power competitors. A temporary or even complete cessation of trade seems to be the very manner to force KSA to look elsewhere, shifting to others partners of choice.
- Thanks to KSA's good relations with both China and Russia, KSA has no fundamental problem deepening security cooperation with these two countries.
- The policy change that was sought and implemented with regard to Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the Biden administration's term seems to be counterproductive. The US seems to have lost more than time, but credibility and confidence.

Introduction

Despite all the ideological differences between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA or the Kingdom), their partnership has so far been considered very strong, even though it was not based on a common foundation. The stopping support for KSA and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the war in Yemen, freezing already prepared arms sales, removing the Houthis from the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list, and publishing a US Secret Service report on the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, are just a few key actions with which the new US administration began its four-year term. It is true that with the start of any new administration in the US there are likely changes to the level and depth of relations. The question is whether this US administration will go so far as to disrupt long-standing ties and threaten stability and balance in the region. In order to answer the question, this paper will examine economic, diplomatic, and military relations chronologically.

Historical Background - Economy (Oil Dependency) and Diplomacy

KSA did not achieve statehood until 1928, and only after bloody fighting on the Arabian Peninsula between several local kingdoms. The winner of the warring period was Ibn Saud, the new state's namesake. However, Ibn Saud required military support from the Wahhabis to consolidate power. Diplomatic relations between the US and KSA did not begin until 1931.¹

The US-KSA relationship originated because of oil interests. In 1933, the Saudi monarchy granted the US-based Standard Oil exclusive rights to explore for oil in the country's eastern province. In 1938, the joint US-Saudi venture, later called ARAMCO, found staggering reserves.²

The manifestations of US foreign policy towards the Middle East at the beginning of the 20th century were based on the private and economic interests of the US, and these policies resulted in Woodrow Wilson's "open-door policy." This policy veiled its economic interests with moral rhetoric and liberal goals, but lacked any concrete solutions or plans for the future. For the Saudis, an alliance with the US meant an influx of capital, military support, and industrial technology. Also, affiliation with the US granted KSA esteem in the international system, and the Middle East particularly. In exchange for exclusive oil extraction rights and lucrative pricing, the US provided KSA with military training and advanced military technologies. Additionally, the US supplied technical assistance in the development of oil and gas processing facilities and transport infrastructure.³

World War II (WWII) ushered in the next phase of US-KSA relations. The US government wanted to protect its companies' investments in KSA, especially when the US war effort was consuming giant quantities of crude. In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared the security of Saudi Arabia a "vital interest" of the US, despite KSA's official neutrality in the conflict. After WWII, KSA began pushing for a bigger role in ARAMCO. The Saudis' peacefully assumed control of ARAMCO, though they didn't nationalize it outright until 1980. Even though the US' direct role in the Saudi oil sector waned, the US-KSA partnership managed to deepen.

An alliance for countering Soviet influence in the Middle-East

Both countries agreed on the Middle East's primary existential threat: Soviet influence in the region. KSA's system of rule made the Kingdom a natural enemy of Soviet communism. The KSA and US allied themselves against this common enemy and expanded their economic relationship into a more expansive security alliance. In 1951, the KSA and US established the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement which was the first formal defense agreement between the two nations. It provided the Saudi military with US arms sales and training. US politicians thought, "Religion (Islam) can be an instrument to stop the expansion of irreligious communism."⁴ Therefore, the US deepened Saudi support and promoted the Saudi King as the leader of Arab states. The non-covert military cooperation between the US and KSA included intelligence sharing whereby the US and KSA's clandestine services partnered to undermine the Soviet regime.

¹ Otázky proč Staff, "Proč jsou Spojené státy americké a Saúdská Arábie spojenci [Why are US and Saudi Arabia allies]," *Otázky proč*, August 3, 2019, <https://otazkyproc.cz/historie/proc-jsou-spojene-staty-americke-a-saudska-arabie-spojenci> (accessed May 10, 2021).

² Zack Beauchamp, "Beyond oil: the US-Saudi alliance, explained," *Voxmedia*, January 6 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/6/10719728/us-saudi-arabia-allies> (accessed May 9, 2021).

³ Robert Lacey, "Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia," October 15, 2009, Viking/Penguin Group (NYC).

⁴ Zack Beauchamp, "Beyond oil: the US-Saudi alliance, explained," (accessed May 9, 2021).

In 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, which many countries interpreted as Soviet expansion into the Middle East. The KSA and US seized the opportunity to indirectly fight the Soviets by secretly supplying weapons to Mujahedeen rebels in the fight against the Soviet occupation.

An alliance for a robust US Access, Basing, and Overflight

The US-KSA relationship strengthened further after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Concurrent with the US invasion, King Fahd declared war against Iraq. Iraqi aggression concerned the US regarding KSA's safety from Saddam's ambition to control the oil reserves in the region. After King Fahd's approval, US President George H. W. Bush deployed a large US military force (543,000 troops) to protect KSA from a possible Iraqi invasion (Operation Desert Shield/Storm). Nearly 100,000 Saudi troops to form a US-Saudi military alliance. Allied forces defeated the Iraqis within four days, and forced the Iraqi invasion force to retreat back to Iraq.⁵ After the Gulf War's end, about 5,000 US military personnel remained in KSA. Their mission was to enforce a no-fly zone over southern Iraq and defend several key Saudi facilities from Iraqi aggression. In addition to protection from Iraq, this signaled to KSA a wider US security commitment to the region, even though the Soviet threat had passed.⁶

The Middle East's post-Cold War order generally benefitted the US. Most regional powers allied themselves with the US, including KSA, Israel, Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt. US policymakers believed the provision of security guarantees to regional partners would ensure the stability of global energy markets and limit the probability of destabilizing new wars.⁷ The US troop presence in KSA not only ensured the security of the Middle Eastern countries, it also gained the much-needed ABO for the US, and increased influence with Saudi Arabia and other regional countries. Along with the substantial weapons technologies that flowed into these countries from the US, these nations also strengthened economic ties and above all, placed obstacles to other great powers that sought to penetrate the Middle East. However, several recent decisions by the new US administration could possibly degrade these benefits and ties.

Analysis - Economy (Oil Sufficiency) and Diplomacy

Former President Donald Trump worked closely with the Gulf countries, particularly KSA and the UAE, to pursue a tough policy towards Iran. Trump's successor, President Joe Biden, has largely cooled relations with KSA and may return the US to the previous nuclear agreement with the Iranian regime, from which Trump withdrew.⁸ For now, the US dependence on oil, especially from the Middle East, has practically disappeared as the US is able to

⁵ Michael R. Gordon, "Bush's Aim's: Deter Attack, Send a Signal," *The New York Times*, August 8, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/08/world/bush-sends-us-force-saudi-arabia-kingdom-agrees-confront-iraq-bush-s-aim-s-deter.html> (accessed May 5, 2021).

⁶ BBC News Staff, "US pulls out of Saudi Arabia," *BBCNews*, April 29, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2984547.stm (accessed May 2, 2021).

⁷ David B Ottoway and Robert G. Kaiser, "Marriage of Convenience: The U.S.-Saudi Alliance," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2002, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/liveonline/02/news/news_saudi021302.htm (accessed May 7, 2021).

⁸ Eliška Kubátová, "Rivalové na cestě k normalizaci. Saudové a Íránci usilují o zmírnění napětí, Blízký východ tají dech [Rivals on the road to normalization. Saudis and Iranians are working to ease tensions, and the Middle East is holding its breath]," *iRozhlas*, May 5, 2021, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/iran-saudska-arabie-teheran-rijad-rozhovory-jemen-syrie-blizky-vychod-kraus_2105050620_eku (accessed 06 May 2021).

produce enough oil for its own use.⁹ In early 2021, the US did not import a single barrel. It might seem that the great bond between these countries has disappeared and nothing can prevent the loosening of ties with KSA, for which the US Congress has long been pushing. However, KSA still controls the world oil market. Such an influence cannot be ignored by the US.¹⁰

In early February, the new US administration announced a reset for KSA relations. Some manner of reset is normal procedure with every new US administration.¹¹ However, something different is happening in this case. The US halted its support for KSA in Yemen.¹² The US is still supporting defensive operations, but stopped supporting any offensive Saudi-led coalition operations. This decision affects Foreign Military Sales, in particular the sale of precision-guided munitions that the Kingdom seeks¹³ such as the GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb I, and Paveway air-to-ground “smart” bombs (potentially worth \$800 M). The US is now reluctant to sell these because these munitions is likely to further aggravate the Yemeni people’s suffering.¹⁴ Further, the US may not want KSA to acquire such technology due to the risk of its use against Israel. Given the time-consuming process that precedes such an acquisition as arms sales, one of the main elements of security cooperation, such a temporary or even complete cessation of this trade seems likely to force KSA to look elsewhere for its partners of choice.

The Biden administration appointed Tom Lenderking as the new special envoy to Yemen, Tom¹⁵ and removed the Houthis from the FTO list. Arab countries mostly perceived the move negatively, especially KSA considering the move gave the Houthis courage to continue even more aggressive attacks on KSA.¹⁶ The US also stated that it wanted to use diplomatic efforts to end this long-lasting conflict. But these so-called efforts were already tried many times, either by the UN, or the US, without any tangible results.¹⁷ As a consequence, KSA has started

⁹ Julian Lee, “Don’t Believe the U.S. Energy Independence Hype,” *Bloomberg Markets*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-02-28/what-energy-dependence-the-u-s-still-needs-russian-oil-and-middle-eastpeace> (accessed May 10, 2021).

¹⁰ Sheela Tobben and Julian Lee, “U.S. Imports No Saudi Crude for First Time in 35 Years,” *Bloomberg*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-06/saudi-oil-exports-to-u-s-at-zero-for-first-time-in-35-years> (accessed May 14, 2021).

¹¹ Bhavya Sukheja, “Joe Biden To ‘recalibrate’ Relations With Saudi Arabia Downgrading Crown Prince,” *Republicworld.com*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/us-news/joe-biden-to-recalibrate-relations-with-saudi-arabia-downgrading-ties-withking-salman.html> (accessed May 10, 2021).

¹² Saphora Smith, “Biden decision to stop support of Saudi-led war in Yemen greeted with cautious relief,” *NBC News*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/biden-decision-stop-support-saudi-led-war-yemen-greeted-cautious-n1256868> (accessed May 14, 2021).

¹³ Lyse Doucet, “Yemen war: Joe Biden ends support for operations in foreign policy reset,” *BBC News*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55941588> (accessed May 31, 2021).

¹⁴ Bruce Riedel, “It’s time to stop US arms sales to Saudi Arabia,” *Brookings*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/orderfrom-chaos/2021/02/04/its-time-to-stop-us-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

¹⁵ Joyce Karam, “Exclusive: Tim Lenderking to be US envoy for Yemen,” *The National World*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/the-americas/exclusive-tim-lenderking-to-be-us-envoy-for-yemen-1.1159963> (accessed May 4, 2021).

¹⁶ John Hudson and Missy Ryan, “Biden administration to remove Yemen’s Houthi rebels from terrorism list in reversal of Trump-era policy,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/biden-administration-to-remove-yemeshouthi-rebels-from-terrorism-list-in-reversal-of-trump-era-policy/ar-BB1dqZ0m> (accessed May 11, 2021).

¹⁷ Jumana Jabeer, “Six years of devastating conflict in Yemen’s tumultuous history,” *The Diplomatic Affairs*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.thediplomaticaffairs.com/2021/03/31/six-years-of-devastating-conflict-in-yemens-tumultuous-history/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

negotiations with the Houthis, and even Iran to try to stabilize the situation and ease the Yemen conflict.¹⁸ Another sign of a change in US behavior towards KSA was the reluctance of the Biden administration to contact the leaders of the Kingdom. While Trump's first steps after his election in 2017 led primarily to KSA, this was not the case for President Biden.¹⁹ President Biden kept King Salman²⁰ waiting for five weeks before the first telephone conversation. President Biden refused to speak to the Crown Prince, the *de facto* ruler of the country and successor to the throne.²⁰

Conclusion

Politically, the US still considers KSA to be its largest ally in the Middle East. KSA is the country that is or should be a guarantor of stability and security in the region. However, the current steps the Biden administration has taken toward KSA can be seen as either a high level of diplomacy that is difficult to recognize or as a test of the strength of relationships and the patience of the Kingdom's leaders. For now, it is difficult to contemplate any benefit the US can achieve from this new approach to KSA. The outcomes of this relationship reset may include: 1) a waste of time; 2) loss of trust; 3) loss of influence; and even 4) loss of economic opportunities which will benefit potential new partners of choice. The Biden administration has tried to use initial and significant pressure on KSA, but KSA is too important an ally for the US and other western countries. The pressure will therefore slowly fade away and the US will have to re-reset the relationship.

Thanks to KSA's good relations with both China and Russia, KSA has no fundamental problem deepening security cooperation with these two countries. Economically, the relationship between KSA and US rivals is even better. In February 2019, KSA signed over 30 economic cooperation agreements with China worth \$28 B.²¹ KSA will actually need Chinese investments to reach its goals for Vision 2030. Therefore, the US may progressively lose more influence in KSA. The current US administration might not accept such an end state.²²

The policy change sought and implemented regarding KSA at the beginning of the Biden administration's term seems counterproductive. The US may have lost not only time, but credibility and confidence. Of course, this cooling seems temporary, but the US will have to redouble its efforts and energy to return to a state of better relations.

¹⁸ Jackie Northam, "Saudi Arabia, Iran Meet In Effort To Reduce Middle East Tensions," *Boise State Public Radio News*, May 15, 2021, <https://www.boisestatepublicradio.org/2021-05-15/saudi-arabia-iran-meet-in-effort-to-reduce-middle-east-tensions> (accessed May 19, 2021).

¹⁹ Jonathan Karl, Cecilia Vega and John Santucci, "Why Trump chose Saudi Arabia for first foreign trip," *ABC News*, May 4, 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-visit-israel-vatican-saudi-arabia-foreign-trip/story?id=47203934> (accessed May 21, 2021). ²⁰ SBS News Staff, "Joe Biden holds first call with Saudi King Salman, 'affirming the importance of human rights'," *SBS News*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/joe-biden-holds-first-call-with-saudi-king-salman-affirming-the-importance-of-human-rights> (accessed May 14, 2021).

²⁰ Aya Batrawy, "Saudi court issues final verdicts in Khashoggi killing," *ABC News*, September 7, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/saudi-court-issues-final-verdicts-khashoggi-killing-72861877> (accessed May 15, 2021).

²¹ Chen Yurong, "Graphics: How is BRI bolstering China-Saudi Arabia ties?" *CGTN*, November 20, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-20/Graphics-How-is-BRI-bolstering-China-Saudi-Arabia-ties--VzqqKFdXSo/index.html> (accessed May 31, 2021).

²² TOI Staff, "US-Saudi relations: Why Saudi Arabia may look at China, Russia if Biden gets tough," *The Times of India*, March 4, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/toi-original/us-saudi-relations-why-saudi-arabia-may-look-at-china-russia-if-biden-getstough/videoshow/81316691.cms> (accessed May 17, 2021).

Recommendations

- Reassure government and military leaders about ongoing unchanged security cooperation with the Kingdom.
- Support KSA peace efforts in Yemen.
- Appreciate and support the Kingdom's humanitarian activities, not only in Yemen, but also in other AOR countries.
- Support Saudi efforts in negotiations with Iran on stability and improving overall security in the region.