

The Saudi-U.S. Alliance and the Modern Middle East: An Oil-Dependent Alliance since the 1930s

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia has long been regarded as a key strategic ally of the United States in the Middle East. The foundations of this alliance can be traced to the discovery of oil in the kingdom in 1933 by the American firm Standard Oil of California. Over time, this economic relationship evolved into a broader “oil for security” arrangement in the 1950s. Through this alliance, the U.S. emerged as a significant political actor in the region, while Saudi Arabia utilized its oil wealth to influence regional dynamics. Early Saudi leaders such as King Abdul Aziz and King Faisal effectively leveraged oil to influence U.S. policy, particularly regarding Israel, whereas subsequent Arab leaders have been less successful in employing similar strategies. This paper finds that contemporary Arab leadership tends to pursue foreign policy agendas that do not challenge U.S. interests in the region. Nonetheless, Saudi-U.S. relations have experienced fluctuations over time, and in recent years, the Israeli attack on Qatar, which was carried out with U.S. approval, has further deepened the rift between the two countries. In response, Saudi Arabia has signed a strategic mutual defense agreement with Pakistan, signaling a shift toward greater military independence from the U.S. This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, employing historical analysis and drawing primarily on secondary sources to examine the origins and transformation of the Saudi-U.S. alliance from the 1930s to the present.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, United States, Oil, Middle East, Petrodollars, Security

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Suudi Arabistan-ABD İttifakı ve Modern Ortadoğu: 1930'lardan Bu Yana Petrol Bağımlı Bir İttifak

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Özet

Suudi Arabistan, uzun süredir Ortadoğu'da Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin en önemli stratejik müttefiklerinden biri olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu ittifakın temelleri, 1933 yılında American Standard Oil of California şirketi tarafından Suudi Arabistan'da petrolün keşfedilmesine dayanmaktadır. Zamanla ekonomik nitelikli bu ilişki, 1950'li yıllarda daha kapsamlı bir "güvenlik karşılığında petrol" düzenlemesine evrilmiştir. Söz konusu düzenleme, ABD'nin bölgesel güvenlik mimarisinde etkin bir aktör hâline gelmesini sağlarken Suudi Arabistan'ın da petrol gelirlerini bölgesel ve uluslararası siyasal süreçler üzerinde bir etki aracı olarak kullanmasına imkân tanımıştır. Kral Abdülaziz ve Kral Faysal gibi erken dönem Suudi liderleri özellikle İsrail meselesi bağlamında petrolü ABD dış politikasını etkilemek amacıyla stratejik bir kaldıraç olarak kullanmış ancak sonraki Arap liderlerin benzer stratejileri uygulama konusunda aynı ölçüde başarı gösteremedikleri görülmüştür. Bu bağlamda çağdaş Arap liderlerinin büyük ölçüde ABD'nin bölgedeki çıkarlarına doğrudan meydan okumaktan kaçınan dış politika gündemleri benimsedikleri ileri sürülebilir. Bununla birlikte, Suudi Arabistan-ABD ilişkileri tarihsel süreç içerisinde çeşitli gerilimler ve dalgalanmalar yaşamıştır. Son yıllarda ABD'nin onayıyla Katar'a yönelik olarak gerçekleştirilen İsrail saldırısı, iki ülke arasındaki görüş ayrılıklarını daha da derinleştirmiştir. Buna karşılık Suudi Arabistan'ın Pakistan ile stratejik bir karşılıklı savunma anlaşması imzalaması, Riyad yönetiminin ABD'ye olan askerî bağımlılığını azaltma yönünde bir arayışa girdiğine işaret etmektedir. Bu çalışma, tarihsel analiz yöntemini temel alan ve ağırlıklı olarak ikincil kaynaklardan yararlanan nitel bir araştırma tasarımı çerçevesinde, Suudi Arabistan-ABD ittifakının 1930'lu yıllardan günümüze uzanan kökenlerini ve geçirdiği dönüşümü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suudi Arabistan, ABD, Petrol, Ortadoğu, Petrodolarlar, Güvenlik

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التحالف السعودي الأمريكي والشرق الأوسط الحديث: تحالف قائم على النفط منذ ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين

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ملخص

تعد المملكة العربية السعودية إحدى أهم الحلفاء الاستراتيجيين للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في الشرق الأوسط، منذ فترة طويلة. حيث تعود جذور هذا التحالف إلى اكتشاف النفط في السعودية من قبل شركة "أمريكان ستاندرد أويل أوف كاليفورنيا" عام 1939. ومع مرور الوقت، تطورت هذه العلاقة الاقتصادية في المقام الأول إلى اتفاقية "النفط مقابل الأمن" الأكثر شمولاً في أعوام خمسينيات القرن العشرين. وساهمت هذه الاتفاقية في أن تصبح الولايات المتحدة فاعلاً مؤثراً في هيكلية الأمن الإقليمي، في الوقت الذي مكّنت فيه المملكة العربية السعودية من استخدام عائداتها النفطية كأداة للتأثير على المراحل السياسية الإقليمية والدولية. وفي هذا الإطار يمكن القول إن زعماء سعوديين سابقين مثل الملك عبد العزيز والملك فيصل، استخدموا النفط ورقة ضغط استراتيجية للتأثير على السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية، لا سيما في سياق القضية الإسرائيلية، لكن الزعماء العرب اللاحقين لم يتمكنوا من تحقيق النجاح نفسه في تطبيق استراتيجيات مماثلة. وفي هذا السياق، يمكن القول إن القادة العرب المعاصرين تبنوا إلى حد كبير أجندات سياسية خارجية تتجنب التحدّي المباشر للمصالح الأمريكية في المنطقة. إلا أنه رغم ذلك، شهدت العلاقات السعودية الأمريكية توترات وتقلبات عديدة عبر التاريخ. وقد أدى الهجوم الإسرائيلي على قطر الذي نفذته بموافقة الولايات المتحدة العام الماضي إلى تعميق الخلافات بين البلدين. وفي المقابل، فإن توقيع السعودية اتفاقية دفاع استراتيجي مشترك مع باكستان يشير إلى مساعي الرياض لتقليص اعتمادها العسكري على الولايات المتحدة. يهدف هذا المقال من خلال منهجية بحثية نوعية تعتمد على أساليب التحليل التاريخي وتستفيد بشكل أساسي من المصادر الثانوية، إلى دراسة جذور وتطور التحالف السعودي الأمريكي منذ ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين وحتى اليوم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السعودية، الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، النفط، الشرق الأوسط، بترودولار، الأمانالصومال

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Introduction

This paper examines the origins and evolution of the Saudi-U.S. alliance through a historical analysis methodology. The paper is guided by the following research question: What factor(s) accounted for the formation of the Saudi-U.S. alliance in the twentieth century? In attempting to answer the research question, the study focuses on delineating events and people, both at regional and international levels, that contributed to the formation of the Saudi-U.S. alliance. The contribution of this study lies in enhancing understanding of the dynamics of political relations in the Middle East.

For centuries, European powers, most notably the United Kingdom and France, played a pivotal role in delineating the borders of the modern Middle East, a process that contributed to enduring conflict and substantial loss of life across the region. In contrast, the U.S. became involved in the region's internal affairs primarily through corporate interests in the years preceding the Second World War. This early engagement laid the groundwork for a strategic bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia. The origins of this relationship can be traced to 1933, when King Abdul Aziz, founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and commonly known as Ibn Saud, granted a concession to the American firm Standard Oil of California (now Chevron) to explore for oil. This agreement ultimately led to the establishment of the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), marking the beginning of a long-standing energy partnership.

Over time, the Saudi-U.S. relationship has evolved beyond economic considerations to encompass strategic socio-political dimensions. Key historical events – including the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Makkah, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991), and more recently, the Israeli occupation of Gaza and Syria – have significantly shaped the trajectory of this alliance, which formally begun in 1943 with the establishment of a U.S. legation in Jeddah for economic and military purposes. As a result, the bilateral relationship has become increasingly characterized by exchanges of oil and petrodollars in return for security guarantees and military support.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology through the lens of historical analysis, utilizing secondary sources to trace the origins and

transformations of the Saudi-U.S. alliance since the twentieth century. Historical Analysis is a significant methodological technique in the arts and sciences, as it examines “the social, economic, political, educational, artistic, and religious”¹ dimensions of human activity over time. The aim of adopting a historical approach lies in pursuing “historical truth.”² This objective is achieved through historical inquiry, wherein sources are critically sourced, and their interrelationships are synthesized to construct coherent, chronological narratives that elucidate changes and continuities across time and space. Thus, the sources used in this paper were selected and analyzed based on their relevance to the history of Saudi Arabia and its relationships with regional countries and global actors, especially the U.S.

The selection and analysis processes centered on identifying the events and individuals that “constituted the past”³ of the Kingdom and how they shaped its diplomatic future. Given that any source represents a “constructed and selective representation of experience,”⁴ the sources utilized in the paper were critically evaluated to determine the factors that shaped them and their relevance to the conclusions being drawn. Thus, a foundational element of historical analysis lies in identifying the causal factors underlying past experiences, which provide explanatory frameworks for analyzing historical phenomena. From this perspective, the paper identifies the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia during the twentieth century as the primary catalyst for the formation of the Saudi-U.S. alliance.

The New Kingdom and Its Quest for Oil

The Arabian Peninsula spans approximately 1,300 miles in length and 1,200 miles in width.⁵ According to James Wynbrandt, initial human settlement occurred between 15,000 and 20,000 years ago, near the end of the last Ice Age.⁶ The area, which eventually became the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, “remained politically fragmented,” composed mainly of “autonomous tribes and towns.” It was not until the twentieth century that a tribal leader, Ibn Saud, consolidated power “over neighboring regions”⁷ and formally established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. During the First World War, al-

1 Fred M. Fling, *The Writing of History: An Introduction to Historical Method* (Yale UP, 1920), 15.

2 Fling, *The Writing of History*, 15.

3 Martha Howell, and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Cornell UP, 2001), 1.

4 Allistair S. Thomson, “Life Stories and Historical Analysis,” in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh UP, 2016), 105.

5 John E. Peterson, *Historical Dictionary of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed., (The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 26.

6 James Wynbrandt, *A Brief History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed., (Facts on File, 2010), 7.

7 Peterson, *Historical Dictionary*, 6.

though initially a European war, the U.S. became increasingly involved from 1915 onward, primarily as a supplier of munitions in significant quantities to Britain and France,⁸ the principal imperial powers in the Middle East at the time, alongside the Ottoman Empire. The conclusion of the war in 1918 led to the dissolution of longstanding empires and the emergence of new nation-states in the region, thereby initiating a paradigm shift in its political configuration. Among these newly formed states was Saudi Arabia, which attained formal independence in 1932.

From its inception, Saudi Arabia faced significant financial challenges.⁹ Its indebtedness led to a suspension of payments to creditors, an inability to secure additional loans, and further economic decline exacerbated by the global depression of 1929–1933, which drastically reduced pilgrimage revenues, the kingdom's primary source of income. Consequently, many state employees went unpaid for extended periods, and the nation became embroiled in a "border dispute with Yemen."¹⁰ These adverse conditions were fundamentally altered by the discovery of vast petroleum reserves beneath the desert sands¹¹ during the reign of King Abdul Aziz (Ibn Saud). This development revitalized the Saudi economy and internationally elevated the Kingdom's geopolitical significance.

In the aftermath of the Great War, "oil sources outside the United States were predominantly controlled by British-Dutch monopolies,"¹² prompting concerns among American companies about potential exclusion from the emerging Middle Eastern oil market. In response, the U.S. government, seeking to facilitate the acquisition of foreign concessions by domestic firms, formulated a "policy of support" to assert its interests abroad. At the San Remo Conference in 1920, where the postwar disposition of the Ottoman Empire was under negotiation, Britain and France reached an agreement regarding the division of Iraqi oil. However, the U.S. intervened, advocating an open-door policy to ensure the inclusion of "American companies"¹³ in these arrangements. Leveraging Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's (the founder of the Modern Turkish Republic) opposition to the annexation of Mosul by Iraq, the U.S. threatened to support Turkish claims unless American firms were granted participation in the oil deals. As a result of this strategic pressure, an agreement was reached between 1921 and 1922, allocating "20 to 25 percent of

8 Bryn O'Callaghan, *An Illustrated History of the USA* (Longman Group Limited, 1990), 88.

9 See, for example, Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (Saqi Books, 1998).

10 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 187.

11 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 187.

12 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 639.

13 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 639

the future oil company's shares to the United States."¹⁴ In this context, Paul Stevens' assertion that "the oil companies were seen to be an extension of colonial power"¹⁵ in the Middle East is substantiated.

Using their modern names, the prominent oil companies operating in the Middle East during the early decades of the twentieth century were BP, Chevron, Exxon, Gulf, Mobil, Shell, Texaco, and the French CFP. Collectively, they were referred to as the "Eight Sisters" or "the Majors." Their activities in the region were primarily based on concessionary agreements negotiated with local governments. However, from the mid-twentieth century onward, the nature of these agreements began to evolve, increasingly taking the form of "joint ventures, production-sharing arrangements, and service contracts,"¹⁶ particularly with the entry of new market participants. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the initial effort to locate oil began in 1922, led by a New Zealander, Major Frank Holmes. Wynbrandt notes that Ibn Saud granted Holmes a concession "covering approximately 30,000 square miles in the Eastern Province (al-Hasa)," in exchange for an annual royalty of £2,000.¹⁷ In 1925, Holmes also obtained a concession in Bahrain, but he sold it to the U.S.-based Gulf Oil Company, as British firms showed little interest, believing there was no oil in the area. Nevertheless, British opposition to increased American involvement in the region led Gulf Oil to transfer its Bahrain concession to Standard Oil of California (now Chevron), due to "existing agreements in Turkey and Iraq that effectively precluded Gulf Oil from operating in Bahrain."¹⁸

With the discovery of oil in Bahrain in 1932, Chevron turned its attention to Saudi Arabia, where Holmes had "forfeited Ibn Saud's trust after his failure to pay for the earlier concession" and was engaged in negotiations with "Kuwait on behalf of Gulf Oil." As a result, Chevron approached Ibn Saud independently of Holmes. On May 29, 1933, following several rounds of deliberation, an agreement was reached between Abdallah al-Sulaiman, the Saudi minister of finance, and Lloyd Nelson Hamilton, Chevron's representative. This agreement was enacted in July 1933, following its ratification by royal decree from Ibn Saud. Subsequently, in November 1933, the concession was

14 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 640.

15 Paul Stevens, "Oil and Development," in *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*, ed. Youssef M. Choueiri (Blackwell, 2005), 408.

16 Stevens, "Oil and Development," 408.

17 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 191.

18 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 191.

“transferred to the California-Arabian Standard Oil Company,”¹⁹ a Chevron subsidiary, renamed the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco) in 1944.

The Americans secured the concession largely because they lacked an imperial past or colonial ambitions in the Middle East.²⁰ Hence, by the end of 1933, there were “eight oil experts in Saudi Arabia.”²¹ Drilling began in 1935, but it was not until 1938 that Chevron commenced “commercial production in Saudi Arabia,” producing “over 500,000 barrels annually”²² from 1939 onward. Aramco became “profitable in 1938,” and during the 1950s, a new agreement was reached to “share the revenues generated from oil exploitation in equal parts.”²³ Over time, the Saudi state gradually assumed full control of the company, first acquiring “25 percent of the company in 1973, then 60 percent in 1974,” and ultimately taking complete ownership in 1980. Since then, oil has accounted for approximately “90 percent of the country’s overall exports and close to 75 percent of state revenue.”²⁴

Growing Saudi-U.S. Ties

For a considerable period, the U.S. regarded Saudi Arabia as falling within the sphere of influence of Europe, particularly Great Britain. Consequently, it was not until 1940 that the first American diplomat, Bert Gish, the U.S. envoy to Egypt, was accredited to “represent the U.S. government”²⁵ in Saudi Arabia. During Second World War, the strategic importance of oil, coupled with forecasts predicting the eventual depletion of the U.S. oil reserves, prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to recognize the necessity of cultivating a “stronger relationship” with Saudi Arabia. He “declared the kingdom vital to the defense of the United States,” thereby making it eligible for “American Lend-Lease assistance and foreign-aid loans and grants.”²⁶ According to Peterson, the Saudi-U.S. relationship has been fundamentally rooted in oil, although it also encompasses significant “strategic and political dimensions.”²⁷ This characterization led Bronson to describe the alliance as “an exchange of oil for security.”²⁸

19 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 643, 645.

20 See, for example, Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 644; Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 191.

21 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 649.

22 Wayne H. Bowen, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (Greenwood Press, 2008), 104.

23 Soleri E. Lecha, and Luciano Zaccara, “Saudi Arabia: Family, Religion, Army and Oil,” in *Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power*, ed. Ferran Izquierdo Brichs (Routledge, 2013), 163.

24 See, for example, Lecha and Zaccara, “Saudi Arabia: Family,” 163.

25 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 195.

26 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 195.

27 Peterson, *Historical Dictionary*, 150.

28 See, for example, Rachel Bronson, “Understanding US-Saudi Relations,” in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, ed. Paul Arts and Gerd Nonneman (New York UP, 2005).

Although the Second World War, which began in 1939, did not alter the territorial integrity of the Arab world as the First World War had, it had a significant economic impact. This was particularly evident in Adolf Hitler's strategic interest in using the region as a corridor to reach Iran, Afghanistan, and India – routes from which he aimed to attack “the USSR and weaken the British Empire.” Additionally, the Nazi regime sought to exploit the Middle East's oil resources,²⁹ which were in high demand due to the war. Before the Second World War, European powers, especially Britain, dominated the Middle East. However, during the war, U.S. foreign policy “underwent profound changes,”³⁰ as the country began to challenge British dominance in the region. The U.S. administration sought to assert control over American oil concessions in the Middle East to prevent “the consolidation of British influence,” particularly in Saudi Arabia. To reduce operational expenses, it attempted “to shift the financial burden onto the American taxpayer.”³¹ These actions ultimately brought the U.S. and Saudi Arabia into a closer political and economic relationship.

During the war years, the U.S. emerged as the predominant economic, political, and military power in the region, particularly in its relations with Saudi Arabia. Members of the Saudi royal family, along with influential Saudi businessmen, cultivated strong ties with the U.S., leading to substantial “investments”³² across various sectors of the American economy. At a certain point, the U.S. government sought to establish its military and political presence in the Kingdom, extending the bilateral relationship beyond economic cooperation. This development laid the foundation for the U.S. to assume the role of principal guarantor of Saudi Arabia's external security. This strategic commitment was tested in the early summer of 1942, when the possibility of the war encroaching upon the Arabian Peninsula became increasingly apparent. Following the British defeat at Tobruk that year, German forces launched an offensive against the Baku oilfields in the Caucasus and advanced to the foothills of the Caspian Sea. Concurrently, Japanese forces seized “the Nicobar and Andaman Islands off the coast of India.” These events exposed Saudi Arabia, precariously situated “between two advancing Axis fronts,” to significant strategic vulnerability. Moreover, concerns arose that if Axis forces succeeded in securing control over both shores of the Mediterranean, Allied maritime routes “to the Nile Delta, the

29 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 654.

30 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 660.

31 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 660.

32 Lecha and Zaccara, “Saudi Arabia: Family,” 176.

Persian Gulf, India, and the Red Sea” would be severely disrupted, necessitating a lengthy detour around “the Cape of Good Hope.”³³

Furthermore, German control over the Baku oilfields raised concerns that “the Soviet Union would lose nearly 90 percent of its fuel resources,” making Saudi Arabia “the next vital source for oil”³⁴ and, consequently, a region that must be defended. A debate subsequently emerged between Britain and the U.S. regarding who should assume responsibility for the defense of Saudi oilfields. According to Fallon, a final decision on the matter was never reached, as the British “victory at the Battle of El Alamein in November 1942 halted the Axis advance in the Middle East,”³⁵ and Saudi Arabia remained neutral throughout the war. U.S. activities in the region eventually led to the formalization of diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in 1943 through “the establishment of a U.S. legation in Jeddah,” which was followed by the American decision to develop “their own air facilities in the Gulf,” rather than relying on “British infrastructure to connect the Middle Eastern and North African theatres to South Asia and the Pacific.”³⁶

In October 1943, Crown Prince Saud (Saud bin Abdulaziz Al Saud) visited Washington, D.C., in an official visit as part of “a month-long” diplomatic mission. Accompanying him were Prince Faisal and their brother Prince Khalid, who also met with President Roosevelt, members of Congress, and other senior U.S. government officials. In response, the U.S. dispatched “two delegations led by U.S. Army generals.”³⁷ The objectives of the American visits were twofold: the first delegation sought to evaluate the Kingdom’s oil resources and their strategic significance to the U.S., while the second, under the leadership of General Ralph Royce, was tasked with making arrangements for “the construction of military airfields in Dhahran and Dawqa.”³⁸ The Dhahran military base was constructed between 1944 and 1946. Upon its completion, “a U.S. military mission” arrived in Saudi Arabia to assist in training the Saudi armed forces, working in conjunction with a contingent of “British military instructors,”³⁹ both groups having been invited by King Ibn Saud. This series of events marked the inception of what would become a longstanding and strategic partnership between Saudi Arabia and the U.S.

33 Matthew H. Fallon, *The US, the UK and Saudi Arabia in World War II: The Middle East and the Origins of a Special Relationship* (I.B. Tauris, 2016), 63.

34 Fallon, *The US, the UK and Saudi Arabia*, 63.

35 Fallon, *The US, the UK and Saudi Arabia*, 67.

36 Peterson, *Historical Dictionary*, 150.

37 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 196.

38 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 664; Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 196.

39 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 664.

On February 14, 1945, President Roosevelt, returning from the Yalta Conference, met with King Ibn Saud along the Suez Canal to underscore the strategic “importance of Saudi Arabia”⁴⁰ to U.S. policy in the Middle East. The meeting yielded several key outcomes. Although Ibn Saud “agreed to grant U.S. naval vessels access to Saudi ports,” he firmly rejected Roosevelt’s proposal to support the resettlement of Jewish refugees in Palestine. He asserted instead that “Germany, not Palestine,” should bear responsibility for addressing the plight of displaced Jews, emphasizing that “the Arabs had done nothing” to them. Furthermore, Ibn Saud made it clear that even though the U.S. had a military base in Saudi Arabia “it would not be occupied as other Arab states had been” and added that “the property would be leased for only five years” and “transferred back to Saudi Arabia with all its buildings and structures.”⁴¹ Despite these reservations, Roosevelt succeeded in persuading Saudi Arabia to abandon its position of neutrality and formally declare war on the Axis powers in 1945. In exchange, the U.S. agreed “to supply light” weaponry to the kingdom, facilitated Saudi Arabia’s “entry into the U.S.,” and offered assurances that the U.S. would not adopt policies hostile to Arab interests. Roosevelt also pledged that U.S. policy regarding Palestine would not be altered “without full and prior consultation with both Arab and Jewish”⁴² representatives. However, the U.S. position on the question of Palestine shifted significantly under President Harry S. Truman, Roosevelt’s successor.

The Cold War Decades, Petrodollar, and the Saudi-U.S. Arms Relations

The Cold War era commenced in 1945 and drew both Africa and South America into its sphere of influence. It was characterized as “the first total war between economic and social systems,” which Walker called “an industrial test to destruction.”⁴³ This period coincided with the decolonization and subsequent independence of most Arab countries in the Middle East from European powers, with the notable exception of Palestine. As Rashid I. Khalidi notes, the Palestinians were denied the independence eventually granted to neighboring Arab nations, due to British support for the Zionist movement. This alliance contributed to the dismantling of Palestinian society, exemplified by “the expulsion and flight of about half of the Palestinian Arab population of 1.3 million and the subsequent expropriation of their

40 Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi*, 665.

41 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 196.

42 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 197.

43 Martin Walker, *The Cold War: A History* (Holt Paperbacks, 1993), 1.

property.”⁴⁴ The Palestinian question remains a deeply contentious issue in the Middle East. Palestinians were entangled in the broader Jewish question following the persecution of Jews under Nazi Germany, an experience later used to legitimize the Zionist project in Palestine. This context lends weight to Ibn Saud’s earlier assertion to President Roosevelt that responsibility for the post-Second World War resettlement of Jewish refugees should rest with Germany, rather than with Palestine or the Arab world.

For the remaining Arab countries, attaining independence was accompanied by pressing security demands and establishing economic and political stability. This transition, “from colony to independent state,” occurred in a context marked by fears of renewed European colonial intervention and the widespread “perception that the establishment of the state of Israel constituted a form of neo-colonialism.”⁴⁵ The state of Israel was established in 1948 in the geographic and symbolic heart of the Arab world by the Zionist movement with support from Western powers. This development precipitated the first Arab-Israeli War in the same year.

In the process of establishing a Jewish state, a significant number of Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their land through what has been described as “a deliberate and systematic campaign of psychological terror, territorial acquisition, and ethnic cleansing,” facilitated, in part, by British authorities.⁴⁶ During the 1948 conflict, the states of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Transjordan deployed units of their regular armies into Palestine. Nevertheless, the governments of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon opted to resettle displaced Palestinians outside of Palestine.⁴⁷ This decision contributed to the further entrenchment of Zionist control and enabled the continued displacement of Palestinians from their homes and properties. Hence, Khalidi characterizes the latter’s actions as “timid,” undertaken “partly in deference to the preferences”⁴⁸ of the U.S. A similar approach was evident in 2025, when President Trump announced his intention to acquire the Gaza Strip and called on Jordan and other Arab states to absorb Palestinians fleeing the Hamas-Israel conflict, which began in 2023. The Zionist strategy of displacing Palestinians has historically involved measures such as “the razing of houses and villages, the mining of fields and towns, the

44 Rashid I. Khalidi, “Observations on the Right of Return,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 2 (1992): 30.

45 Ross Harrison, “Shifts in the Middle East balance of Power: A Historical Perspective,” *Aljazeera Centre for Studies* (2018): 4.

46 Rosemarie M. Esber, “Rewriting the History of 1948: The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Question Revisited,” *Holy Land Studies* 4, no. 1 (2005): 69.

47 Esber, “Rewriting the History of 1948,” 56.

48 Khalidi, “Observations on the Right,” 31.

looting of personal property, and the destruction of crops and other means of livelihood”⁴⁹ – tactics that continue to be employed in Gaza in 2025, now manifested in intensified bombardments targeting civilians, including infants, children, and women, as well as infrastructure, agricultural land, and refugee shelters.

During the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the U.S. pursued alliances with Arab states in an effort “to gain regional dominance.”⁵⁰ This geopolitical competition significantly shaped the modern Middle East and contributed to divisions among Arab nations. Saudi Arabia aligned itself with the U.S., opposing the Soviet Union and other European powers by expanding oil-based relations and a comprehensive security partnership. For instance, in the 1950s, British military bases in Iraq and Jordan were perceived by Saudi Arabia as a strategic threat, primarily due to the Kingdom’s geopolitical rivalry with both states. Josh Pollack argues that the Saudis’ uneasiness about the British bases stemmed from the fact that both Iraq and Jordan “were ruled by kings of the Hashemite dynasty, which Abdul Aziz (Ibn Saud) had earlier displaced from the Red Sea emirate of Hejaz;” the proximity of these Hashemite-ruled states to Saudi oil fields “encouraged the Saudis to conclude a mutual defense assistance pact with the U.S. in 1951.”⁵¹

This marked the first official defense agreement between the two nations and allowed for the sale of American munitions and the provision of American-style military training to the Saudi military. By 1953, the U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM) had been established to “replace earlier British teams in Saudi Arabia.”⁵² The USMTM and the Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program (PM-SANG) have overseen U.S. defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia under “special bilateral agreements funded by Saudi purchases since the 1950s.”⁵³ The sale of arms to Saudi Arabia started slowly but grew exponentially from the 1960s onward. According to Peterson, between 1950 and 1964, total sales agreements amounted to \$87 million, with deliveries totaling \$75 million. By 1965, sales agreements had reached \$342 million, rising to \$2 billion in 1974, \$35 billion by 1980 in arms agreements, and over \$11 billion in deliveries. By 1997, arms agreements had reached \$93.8 billion.⁵⁴

49 Esber, “Rewriting the History of 1948,” 69.

50 Harrison, “Shifts in the Middle East,” 4.

51 Josh Pollack, “Saudi Arabia and the United States, 1931-2002,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2002): 79.

52 Peterson, *Historical Dictionary*, 151.

53 Christopher M. Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia: Background and US Relations,” *Congressional Research Service* version 72 (2018): 21.

54 Peterson, *Historical Dictionary*, 151.

The U.S.-Saudi alliance faced challenges following the deaths of President Roosevelt in 1945 and King Ibn Saud in 1953. President Harry S. Truman, who succeeded Roosevelt, adopted a markedly pro-Israel position in the context of the Palestine issue, which significantly strained U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. When American diplomats in the region questioned the rationale behind this policy shift, Truman reportedly stated, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands of people who are anxious for the success of Zionism. I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."⁵⁵ This policy realignment contributed to the entrenchment of Zionism in Palestine, a process accompanied by significant loss of life and the systematic destruction of Palestinian cultural and historical heritage, an ongoing reality to this day. Consequently, Palestinians have, since then, largely been denied recognition as a people with a legitimate national cause. Instead, they have often been portrayed as "a random agglomeration of atomized individuals of no fixed identity, whose future was to be determined" by "whatever arrangements were most convenient to the powers that be."⁵⁶

Moreover, the U.S.-Saudi alliance experienced a decline during the Eisenhower administration. To expand its regional influence and counter Soviet expansion, the administration sought additional partners beyond Saudi Arabia, forming an anti-Soviet coalition known as the Baghdad Pact, which included Britain, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Türkiye. The Pact included "some of Saudi Arabia's opponents," which annoyed the kingdom to the point that it dismissed a U.S. aid mission in 1954. That same year, the Saudi government granted a Greek shipping company, led by Aristotle Onassis, exclusive rights to transport all Saudi oil shipped by sea – excluding "oil transported tankers owned by concession-holding companies, their affiliates and oil buyers." Further distancing itself from U.S. strategic interests, Saudi Arabia "signed a mutual defense agreement" in 1956 with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was widely "perceived in the West as being aligned with the Soviet Union." However, Onassis ultimately "withdrew from the contract" following "protests from rival shipping firms and their respective governments."⁵⁷

During this period, significant political developments unfolded within the Kingdom. Following the death of Ibn Saud in 1953, Saud III ascended to the throne; however, his reign was marked by internal conflict, particularly a

55 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 213.

56 Khalidi, "Observations on the Right," 31.

57 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 214.

power struggle with Crown Prince Faisal. In 1958, the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) by Egypt and Syria provoked concern in Saudi Arabia, particularly for King Saud III. In response, the U.S. and the UK supported “the unification of Jordan and Iraq as a counterbalance” to the perceived pro-communist orientation of the UAR. Saudi Arabia, however, “declined to join or endorse” this Western-backed union, primarily due to apprehensions that it would enhance the regional influence of the Hashemite dynasty.⁵⁸ This refusal strained Saudi relations with Jordan. Subsequently, it was revealed that an assassination plot targeting Egyptian President Abdel Nasser – allegedly financed by King Saud III – had emerged around the time of the UAR’s formation. This revelation significantly undermined the king’s standing. It prompted senior members of “the royal family and the religious establishment (ulema)”⁵⁹ to advocate for the transfer of executive authority to Crown Prince Faisal. Consequently, in 1961, Prince Faisal was appointed acting head of state during King Saud III’s medical treatment abroad. In 1964, Faisal formally assumed the throne, marking a critical shift in the kingdom’s political leadership.

With the formation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960, oil and politics became deeply intertwined in the Middle East, particularly during the 1970s. Saudi Arabia held significant influence within OPEC. Following the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967 and the Israeli annexation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and Jerusalem, many Arab states began to consider using oil “as a political weapon against the U.S.,”⁶⁰ which had long been a key supporter and financier of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian and surrounding Arab territories. With Israel now occupying Arab lands, war broke out in 1973. During this conflict, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger appealed to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to persuade Egypt and Syria to halt their military campaign. In response, King Faisal urged Kissinger to convince “Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories,” warning that OPEC would otherwise reduce oil production by “5 percent and raise prices by 17 percent each month”⁶¹ until the conflict was resolved. Simultaneously, Israel requested military support from the U.S., prompting President Nixon to provide “over \$2 billion in aid.” In retaliation, King Faisal declared “a unilateral oil embargo against the U.S. and the Netherlands,”⁶² which was later extended to other Western nations

58 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 217.

59 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 217.

60 Bowen, *The History of Saudi*, 116.

61 Wynbrandt, *A Brief History*, 231.

62 Bowen, *The History of Saudi*, 116.

supporting Israel. This embargo had significant economic consequences, as crude oil prices surged, substantially increasing Saudi Arabia's oil revenues. However, the embargo was relatively short-lived, ending in 1974 following Kissinger's successful ceasefire negotiation between the Arab states and Israel.⁶³ Subsequently, diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. were restored, culminating in President Nixon's visit to the Kingdom later that year.

Although Saudi Arabia had established an alliance with the U.S., Israel and the Shah's regime in Iran remained Washington's closest allies during the Cold War era. However, the failure of the Carter administration to protect the Shah's regime from being overthrown by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 raised significant doubts within the Saudi leadership regarding the reliability of American security assurances. Additionally, the Cold War period witnessed the emergence of the Yemeni state in the 1970s as a perceived "Soviet ally on Saudi Arabia's doorstep."⁶⁴ In the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the brief seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, which Saudi authorities suspected involved Soviet influence, further heightened security concerns. By 1980, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War exacerbated regional instability. Relations between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. deteriorated further following the fall of the Shah, particularly in 1982, when "Israel and its supporters in the U.S." opposed the proposed sale of American Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft to Saudi Arabia. This opposition was fueled by speculation that the Saudi regime "might collapse,"⁶⁵ similarly to that of the Shah, and by claims that such arms could potentially "be used against Israel."⁶⁶ Consequently, Saudi Arabia diversified its arms suppliers during the 1980s to safeguard its national security, turning to Britain, France, China, and other countries.

Another significant event during the Cold War that influenced Saudi-U.S. relations was the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. This occupation raised concerns that it would lead to a permanent and expansive Soviet presence in the region. In response, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan covertly supported the anti-Soviet mujahedeen resistance by providing 'funding and weapons to the Afghan jihad' – a movement that Osama bin Laden joined in the 1980s, during which he also recruited Saudi fighters.⁶⁷

63 See, for example, Bowen, *The History of Saudi*.

64 Pollack, "Saudi Arabia and the United States," 80.

65 Peterson, *Historical Dictionary*, 154.

66 Pollack, "Saudi Arabia and the United States," 83.

67 "US-Saudi Arabia Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated December 7, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-arabia-relations>.

The two countries were drawn even closer following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, when American military support once again flowed into the kingdom. Saddam Hussein's aggression, motivated by Kuwait's productive oil industry, alarmed Saudi Arabia due to its shared border with Iraq. This invasion significantly deepened the Saudi-U.S. relationship and reinforced the "petrodollars for security" paradigm that characterized their strategic partnership by the end of the Cold War in 1990.

Post-Cold War Saudi-U.S. Relations (1990-2025)

Political analysts regard the meeting between President Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz aboard the USS Quincy on February 14, 1945 as a pivotal moment that initiated the subsequent development of Saudi-U.S. political relations.⁶⁸ In the 1980s, the Jimmy Carter doctrine, which was based on the U.S. using all necessary means, including military force, to protect its interests in the Middle East, reassured Saudi Arabia of the commitment of its Western power to come to its defense when needed. Despite this, Saudi Arabia became concerned, especially due to "the war in Afghanistan between Soviet troops and Mujahedeen," on one hand, and "the war between Iraq and Iran" in the 1980s on the other hand, which signaled that "the regimes of Saddam Hussein and that of the Ayatollahs"⁶⁹ were threats to the Kingdom. Thus, in addition to security assurances from their American partners, Saudi Arabia, from the 1980s, started to consider ways of protecting itself from external attacks away from the American commitments. In 1981, the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) by the countries on the Arabian Peninsula gave Saudi "an area of direct influence, where it could exercise a predominant status"⁷⁰ as an emerging power in the Middle East.

According to Marcy Agmon, the U.S. objectives⁷¹ in the Middle East during the Cold War era, centered on containing Soviet influence, continuing to access oil resources in the region, and towards the preservation of security and stability of friendly states. Although the oil for security "guarantee shifted according to the fundamental dynamics of the Cold War,"⁷² American rela-

68 See, for example, Christopher M. Blanchard, "Saudi Arabia: Background and US Relations," *Congressional Research Service* (2009).

69 David Hernandez, "The United States and Saudi Arabia Alliance in the 21st Century. The presidency of George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump," *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, no. 15 (2020): 215-216.

70 Hernandez, "The United States and Saudi," 216.

71 Marcy Agmon, "Post-Cold War U.S. Security Strategies for the Persian Gulf," *RAND Research* (1949): 7.

72 Austin Andersen, "Alliance in Flux: Oil and the US-Saudi Strategic Bargain Reconsidered," *CMC Senior Theses* (2025): 30.

tions with Israel “have been changing the balance of the equation”⁷³ for both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Thus, since the end of the Cold War, the Saudi-U.S. interests have been reduced to a common interest to prevent conflicts “from threatening the political status quo” in the region and the “differences over the Arab-Israel conflict and other regional issues.”⁷⁴ For instance, during the First Gulf War, the two nations cooperated to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. President George Herbert Walker Bush, with congressional support, launched Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm between August 2, 1990-January 17, 1991 and January 17, 1991-February 28, 1991, respectively, in defense of Saudi Arabia and to prevent Saddam’s aggression from reaching the country. Saudi Arabia was a vital part of the allied coalition that expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait in February 1991. For instance, the Joint Arab-Islamic Force, which was commanded by Lt. General Khalid bin Sultan “was a principal component of the coalition”⁷⁵ and Operation Desert Storm was launched from inside Saudi Arabia using its “military complexes as a base of operations.”⁷⁶

Hence, the outcome of the First Gulf War on the Saud-U.S. ties was that while “it marked the first time the U.S. had large-scale military personnel on the ground” in the country, it raised contentious debates over Saudi’s reliance on a non-Muslim, democratic, Western nation for its security.⁷⁷ Pressure was brought to bear on the Saudi ruling class to the extent that Saudi princes “were forced to reformulate” their alliance with the U.S. to remove American military personnel from the country. Since then, Saudi Arabia is the only country in the Gulf “that does not officially allow the establishment of foreign troops and military bases on its territory.”⁷⁸ This further pushed Saudi Arabia in the last years of the 20th century to work towards modernizing its military capabilities towards attaining military autonomy from its reliance on the U.S. Furthermore, in September 1993, Yasser Arafat was freed by the Israeli cabinet following the signing of the Oslo Accords between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. Upon his return to Palestine, Arafat “openly supported Iraq against Kuwait,” and this “reversed the bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Palestine.” Despite Arafat’s action, Saudi Arabia advocated for a free Palestinian state based on the pre-1967

73 Cansu Tokar, “The Foreign Policy of the United States towards Saudi Arabia and Iran in the 21st Century,” Ms Thesis, Department of International Relations, METU (2022): 53.

74 Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia,” (2009): 5.

75 Alfred B. Prados, “Saudi Arabia: Post-War Issues and U.S. Relations,” *Congressional Research Service & The Library of Congress*, updated August 20, 2001, 1.

76 Andersen, “Alliance in Flux,” 37.

77 Andersen, “Alliance in Flux,” 37.

78 Hernandez, “The United States and Saudi,” 216.

borders, a decision which “created tension between Saudi Arabia and the U.S..”⁷⁹

When President Bill Clinton’s administration took office in January 1993, the anti-communist agenda that had dominated the Cold War era and had brought Saudi Arabia and the U.S. closer, no longer existed as the Berlin Wall had fallen in 1989 and the Soviet Union had collapsed by 1991. Nevertheless, in the Gulf region, the U.S. identified Iran and Iraq as potential threats to its interests in the Middle East. To counter their influence, the Clinton administration adopted a policy of dual containment towards Iran and Iraq. Rather than engaging in a strategy of balancing the two,⁸⁰ the U.S. chose to leverage its own strength, along with that of its regional allies, to contain them. Under this policy, Iran was subjected to various sanctions, including those imposed by the UN, restrictions on military transactions and exports to other nations, as well as ideological warfare. Meanwhile, Iraq faced UN-imposed sanctions, including the establishment of “no-fly zones over the northern and southern regions of the country.”⁸¹ While the administration adopted a firm stance toward countries in the region as part of its fight against terrorism, perceived as a threat to international security and stability, it maintained a more lenient approach toward Saudi Arabia. In 1998, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz visited Washington, D.C., at the invitation of Vice President Al Gore, where he discussed several key regional and international issues.⁸² These included the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Iraqi government’s decision to suspend cooperation with the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as well as Iran’s renunciation of terrorism and its expressed desire to improve relations with neighboring countries. Additionally, the discussions addressed the roles of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in the international economy, among other matters. During these engagements, Saudi Arabia expressed support for the Clinton administration’s peace efforts aimed at achieving a lasting resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In recent decades, the Saudi-U.S. alliance has been significantly affected by the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S. during the presidency of George W. Bush, in which 15 out of the 19 hijackers were reportedly Saudi nationals. As a result, Saudi Arabia faced accusations in the U.S.

79 Tokar, “The Foreign Policy,” 89.

80 Seyed Mohsen Mirhosseini, “Evolution of Dual Containment Policy (the Policy of Clinton’s Administration – Clinton’s Doctrine) in the Persian Gulf, *Sociology and anthropology* 2 (2014).

81 Mirhosseini, “Evolution of Dual Containment,” 108.

82 “Joint Statement on United States-Saudi Relations,” *The American Presidency Project*, September 25, 1998.

of having contributed to “the creation or strengthening of jihadist groups across various Muslim countries, starting with Afghanistan.”⁸³ American foreign policy, especially after 9/11, in the Middle East was different compared to the policy it pursued during the Cold War. For instance, for several decades, American policy in the region “operated on the assumption that democracy there would jeopardize U.S. political and economic interests.”⁸⁴ However, the Bush administration pursued a foreign policy that emphasized support for democratic movements worldwide, integrating this approach into its broader economic doctrine. This policy was grounded in the belief that “only direct engagement with local problems could effectively address the rise of radicalism and the threat of terrorism.”⁸⁵ This policy heightened tensions in the Middle East, where the political systems of most countries were grounded in ideologies fundamentally different from the democratic model promoted by the Bush administration. Hence, the Bush administration’s justification of combating radicalism through the promotion of democracy and direct involvement in the internal affairs of regional states created a rift with Saudi Arabia. This tension became particularly evident following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 – undertaken on the pretext that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) – as well as in the administration’s strategic approach toward Iran. The invasion of Iraq occurred primarily because the U.S. sought “to secure global hegemony,”⁸⁶ a goal closely tied to control over the international oil market, rather than due to the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction. Subsequently, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud expressed disagreement with what he described as the White House’s “direct and belligerent strategy,”⁸⁷ viewing the U.S. as no longer serving as a stabilizing force in the region.

As Saudi Arabia positions itself as a stabilizing force in the region, its regional foreign policy has increasingly focused on curbing Iran’s influence. This has been reflected in efforts to garner support for the Sunni bloc led by Saudi Arabia, in contrast to the Shia bloc aligned with Iran, particularly in conflict-prone states such as Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. For instance, in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni political party, the Future Movement, while Iran backs its ally Hezbollah. Similarly, in Palestine, Saudi Arabia aligns itself with the Fatah-led government of President Mah-

83 Lecha and Zaccara, “Saudi Arabia,” 176.

84 Bradley L. Bowman, “Realism and Idealism: US Policy toward Saudi Arabia, from the Cold War to Today,” *Parameters* 35, no. 4 (2005): 91.

85 Hernandez, “The United States and Saudi,” 217.

86 Raymond Hinnebusch, “The International politics of the Middle East,” (Manchester UP, 2003): 206.

87 Hernandez, “The United States and Saudi,” 212.

moud Abass, whereas Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, looks to Iran for support. In 2007, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia attempted to reconcile Fatah and Hamas through mediation efforts. However, the agreement collapsed within months,⁸⁸ leading to violent clashes between the two Palestinian factions. As a result, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, while Fatah consolidated its authority in the West Bank.

The rift between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. deepened during the administration of President Barack Obama, beginning in 2009. Obama's policy of nuclear détente with Iran was met with disapproval from Saudi Arabia, which believed that it would "serve to strengthen the position of the Iranian regime" while attempting to prevent nuclear escalation. Furthermore, the U.S. decision during the 2011 Arab Spring to refrain from taking an active role in the internal conflicts of certain countries heightened insecurities among many Arab states. This led to a growing perception that American power was "no longer one of their most reliable sources of support."⁸⁹ For instance, the fall of the Saudi-aligned Hosni Mubarak administration in Egypt in 2011 – an outcome the U.S. did not prevent – the protracted conflict in Syria, and the 2015 Iranian nuclear agreement further contributed to the growing distance between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. However, Saudi Arabia also supported the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011, which ultimately resulted in the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi, and in 2015, it led a military campaign in Yemen following the ousting of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi by the Houthis.

However, with the arrival of the Donald Trump administration in 2017, relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia improved significantly, with the U.S. expressing "full support for Saudi Arabia's regional role."⁹⁰ Since then, the U.S. Congress has supported arms sales to Saudi Arabia. For example, during President Trump's first term (2017-2021), he advocated for the sale of munitions to Saudi Arabia because such sales would "create half a million American jobs."⁹¹ Furthermore, during his visit to the kingdom in 2017, he brokered "a series of arms deals" totaling approximately \$350 billion over a decade.⁹² In addition, Saudi Arabia's exports to the U.S. exceeded \$18.8 billion in 2017, while U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia were valued at over \$16.3

88 Gregory F. Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East," *Council on Foreign Relations* (2011): 17.

89 Hernandez, "The United States and Saudi," 212.

90 "US-Saudi Relations: A timeline," *Aljazeera*, May 18, 2017.

91 "US-Saudi Arabia Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated December 7, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/US-saudi-arabia-relations>.

92 "US-Saudi Arabia Relations,"

billion. The trade was primarily driven by “U.S. imports of hydrocarbons from Saudi Arabia and U.S. exports of weapons, machinery, and vehicles to Saudi Arabia.”⁹³ However, Trump’s foreign policy marked a departure from that of previous administrations. He promoted an “America First” approach, withdrawing the U.S. from several international agreements and organizations, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Agreement. His administration also implemented a travel ban targeting several Muslim-majority countries, withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA), and prioritized policies aimed at securing U.S. borders from illegal immigration. In 2017, during a summit held in Riyadh, President Trump met with leaders from across the Muslim world and urged them to unite in the fight against terrorism. This represented a departure from the approaches of the Bush and Obama administrations, while President Bush pursued military interventions to assert U.S. influence, President Obama often distanced himself from traditional allies, including taking a more critical stance toward Saudi leadership. Thus, the emerging signal was that, aside from maintaining strong support for Israel, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East had largely shifted toward a strategy of mediation and non-intervention, thereby creating a power vacuum that other regional and international actors sought to fill. As part of his “America First” policy, President Trump initiated the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2020, formalized through the Doha Agreement signed between the U.S. and the Taliban.

Under the Joe Biden administration (2021-2025), Saudi Arabia received commendation for its “efforts to de-escalate regional conflicts,” hoping that such initiatives might eventually lead to the normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel, framed within the context of U.S. national security interests.⁹⁴ However, before taking office, Biden criticized the Trump administration for giving a “blank check for Saudi Arabia to pursue” what he described as “a disastrous set of policies.” He consequently pledged to “re-assess the U.S.-Saudi relationship” by advocating for the rights of Saudis “to speak their minds freely without fear of persecution and violence.”⁹⁵ While in office, President Biden introduced the “Khashoggi Visa Ban” on approximately 76 Saudi nationals, suspended the sale of munitions to Saudi Arabia, ended U.S. support for Saudi military operations in Yemen, and removed the Houthis from the U.S. list of designated terrorist organizations.

93 Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia: Background,” 24.

94 See, for example, Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia: Background and US Relations,” *Congressional Research Service* (2023).

95 Haydn Welch, Sheridan Cole, and Seth Binder, “Broken Promises: Biden’s Retreat from Saudi Arabia Accountability,” *Middle East Democracy Center* (2014): 2.

However, his rhetoric toward the Saudi Crown Prince later softened, and his decision not to impose sanctions on the Crown Prince for the murder of Khashoggi led many to view the Biden administration as having abandoned “its opportunity to reshape the U.S.-Saudi relationship in a manner more aligned with U.S. interests.”⁹⁶ Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. were drawn closer together, as the Biden administration sought Saudi cooperation in increasing oil production. This was part of a broader strategy to economically isolate Russia in response to its aggression in Ukraine. Additionally, the U.S. aimed to boost oil supply to help mitigate rising inflation at home. To this end, Biden visited Riyadh in July 2022. Although by 2023 the two nations had strengthened their relations, the Biden administration’s foreign policy aimed to gradually reduce “the U.S. security presence” in the Middle East, acknowledging that either Russia or China could seek to fill the resulting power vacuum. During a meeting in Riyadh, President Biden stated that “if partners in the region were able to defend themselves,”⁹⁷ Iran would be compelled to pursue more constructive relations with its neighbors, and Saudi Arabia would, in turn, be encouraged to normalize relations with Israel.

When Trump returned to power in 2025 and visited the Kingdom, Saudi Arabia committed to investing \$600 billion in the U.S. to “build economic ties that will endure for generations to come.”⁹⁸ In the same week, on the second leg of his trip to Qatar, Trump signed a \$1.2 trillion agreement encompassing a “historic sale of Boeing aircraft and GE Aerospace engines to Qatar Airways,”⁹⁹ alongside agreements in defense, security, and other economic investments. Before signing this agreement, the Qatari royal family presented Trump with a super-luxury Boeing 747-8 jumbo jet, valued at \$400 million, to serve as the new Air Force One. The aircraft was described as “a flying palace.”¹⁰⁰ While these defense and economic agreements suggest a continuity in U.S.-Saudi ties, political developments on the ground in the

96 Welch, Cole, and Binder, “Broken Promises,” 3.

97 Welch, Cole, and Binder, “Broken Promises,” 11.

98 “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Historic \$600 billion Investment Commitment in Saudi Arabia,” The White House, May 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-historic-600-billion-investment-commitment-in-saudi-arabia/>.

99 “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Historic \$1.2 Trillion Economic Commitment in Qatar,” The White House, May 14, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-historic-1-2-trillion-economic-commitment-in-qatar/>.

100 “Trump Administration Poised to Accept ‘palace in the sky’ as a Gift for Trump from Qatar,” ABC News, May 12, 2025.

region tell a more complex story. In recent times, political tensions in the region have intensified due to escalating conflicts involving Israel and various actors, including Hamas, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iran. For instance, in June 2025, the U.S. and its Israeli ally conducted strikes on three nuclear sites in Iran. Subsequently, on September 9, Israel, with U.S. approval, carried out airstrikes in Doha, Qatar, targeting Hamas leaders who were engaged in negotiations with Israeli officials aimed at ending the Israel-Hamas war. The Trump administration faced widespread international condemnation for permitting Israeli strikes on Qatar, a country widely regarded as a close ally of the U.S. The latter strike alarmed Saudi Arabia, which promptly entered into a strategic mutual defense agreement with Pakistan on September 17, 2025 in Riyadh. By and large, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, apart from its economic objectives, has increasingly been reduced to prioritizing the security of Israel, while neglecting the security concerns of long-standing allies such as Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

The paper illustrates that the discovery of oil in 1933 was the primary factor that brought Saudi Arabia and the U.S. together. Although the U.S. possesses domestic oil resources, its relationship with Saudi Arabia has persisted to the present day, driven by its growing energy consumption and a shared commitment to limiting Iran's power and influence in the region. By 1943, the U.S. had established formal diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and, in 1951, concluded a mutual defense assistance pact with the kingdom. While the U.S. sought access to oil, Ibn Saud strategically leveraged this resource to secure a commitment from Roosevelt to refrain from pursuing policies hostile to Arab interests, particularly regarding the settlement of Jews in Palestine. In response to the Israeli occupation and annexation of Arab territories in Palestine and Syria during the 1960s and 1970s, and with the support of President Nixon and other Western leaders, King Faisal imposed an oil embargo, lifting it only when a ceasefire agreement was achieved.

Relations between the two countries deteriorated during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. In the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq War contributed to the formation of the GCC, which provided Saudi Arabia with a platform to exert a degree of regional political influence. Although the First Gulf War brought Saudi Arabia and the U.S. into closer cooperation as they worked together to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the events leading up to the conflict resulted in the large-scale deployment of U.S. military personnel on Saudi soil. This presence raised security concerns for the Saudi leadership

and generated domestic and regional pressure, ultimately prompting the withdrawal of U.S. forces. As a result, Saudi Arabia became the only country in the region that does not support hosting foreign troops. In the post-Cold War era, Saudi-U.S. relations have largely focused on conflict prevention in the region, though the Israeli-Palestinian issue remains a persistent point of divergence.

Furthermore, the foreign policies of Bush and Obama contributed to a further divergence in U.S.-Saudi relations. While the Bush administration pursued direct intervention in regional affairs to advance its strategic objectives, the Obama administration adopted a more diplomatic approach, notably engaging in negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. This shift was viewed by Saudi Arabia as a move that empowered Iran as a regional power rather than containing its influence. This sentiment was reflected in King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's eventual perception of the U.S. as no longer serving as a stabilizing force in the Middle East.

Subsequent efforts by the Trump and Biden administrations to repair relations with the Saudi leadership were accompanied by a clear message: the U.S. would reduce its military footprint in the region and encourage regional actors to assume greater responsibility for their own security. This policy shift aimed to pressure Iran into fostering constructive relations with its neighbors, including Israel. In response to these developments, and particularly in light of the U.S. allowing Israeli strikes against targets in Doha, Saudi Arabia strategically signed a mutual defense agreement with Pakistan. This move was part of a broader initiative, since the beginning of the 21st century, to achieve greater military autonomy and reduce its longstanding dependence on the U.S.

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