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Claremont McKenna College

Stronger as One? Examining US-Saudi Relations Since 9/11

Submitted to:

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By:

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For:

Senior Thesis

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Abstract

In the first several years following the attacks on September 11, 2001, many in both the American political elite and general public questioned the merits of the US's strong alliance with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as fifteen of the nineteen hijackers, as well as Osama bin Laden, were Saudi citizens. The Kingdom was known for its lax regulations surrounding terrorist financing, which played a role in al Qaeda's ability to carry out the 9/11 attacks. Due to this, many called for the US to end its historic partnership with the Saudis.

However, under further examination, it becomes clear that both the US and the Saudis need the strong alliance to survive. Despite divisions and criticism, more unites America and the Saudis than divides them. This paper seeks to understand why the US-Saudi alliance has endured in the years since 9/11. The Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations will be examined as case studies. This paper will then identify three fundamental pillars---economic interdependence, geopolitical threats, and security concerns---that can be considered driving factors in the relationship between the two states. These driving factors will be examined under each leader as well as how each impacted the alliance. In addition, using a variety of theories from leading international scholars, this paper will argue that the US-Saudi alliance is asymmetrical as the Saudis rely on the US much more than the US relies on the Kingdom. Meaning, the US can and should renegotiate the alliance on better terms to pursue American interests.

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Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional support throughout my life. You have always pushed me to be the best version of myself and to always strive for greatness. Without you, I likely would have never attended Claremont McKenna.

Frequently Used Abbreviations

AQAP - Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

ARAMCO - Arabain American Oil Company (now Saudi Arabian Oil Company)

GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council

EU - European Union

ISIS - The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

KSA - the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

MBN - Former Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef

MBS - Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman

OPEC - The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries

SANG - Saudi Arabian National Guard

SOCAL - Standard Oil of California

UN - United Nations

USMTM - US Military Training Mission

WMD - Weapon of Mass Destruction

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In September 2001, the United States had not been engaged in a war since the 1991 invasion of Kuwait. Many Americans had never heard of al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden, and the Middle East was largely a distant region with very little impact on American life, besides its influence over constantly fluctuating gasoline prices. After terrorists hijacked airplanes and attacked the United States (US) on September 11, 2001, claiming over two thousand American lives, the Middle East was pushed to the forefront of American foreign policy. Saudi Arabia, specifically, was at the center: fifteen of the nineteen participating terrorists were Saudi citizens, as well as the mastermind behind the attacks, Osama bin Laden. As Americans learned more about the hijackers, resentment towards Saudi Arabia grew. A poll by Zogby International showed that in January 2001, 56 percent of Americans viewed Saudi Arabia favorably and 28 percent unfavorably. By December 2001, only 24 percent viewed Saudi Arabia favorably and 58 percent unfavorably.¹ In the years that immediately followed the attacks, much of the American political elite openly questioned the value of the US-Saudi relationship.

While America's many of foreign relations and strategies have ebbed and flowed with each administration, one partnership has remained consistent: the alliance between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Though the relationship stemmed from modest beginnings---largely focused on KSA's vast oil reserves and America's military largesse in the wake of World War II---the alliance became deeply intertwined in the years since former President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that "the defense of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defense

¹ Sourced from: Gause, F. Gregory. "Saudi Perceptions of the United States since 9/11." In *With Us or Against Us*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Pp. 141.

of the United States”.² While the “oil for security” bargain is still relevant, today US-KSA cooperation incorporates major economic, geopolitical, and security interests and has remained a consistent priority for America’s national interest strategies.

However, since 9/11, proponents of US-Saudi relations have faced scrutiny from political leaders calling for a re-evaluation of the close partnership. Critics see the economic, geopolitical, and security ties that originally united the nations as fading. Specifically, some in the US government believe that America no longer needs a strong alliance with Saudi Arabia. To them, America’s values do not align with Saudi Arabia’s actions and the alliance no longer provides the benefits that it once did. The emergence of US shale oil production, for example, has decreased US dependence on foreign oil imports from the Kingdom.³ The last two decades have seen record highs in weapons exports from the United States to KSA, which have been used in contentious conflicts in the region.⁴ The Kingdom is not known for its high regards towards human rights and democratic ideals.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia’s involvement in a variety of proxy wars with its rival and neighbor, Iran, have drawn widespread criticism across the international community. Many of these conflicts have forced US intervention---costing American lives and resources---and fueled growing frustration.⁵ American weapons have enabled Saudi Arabia’s controversial regional military interests, such as the current civil war in Yemen between Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia’s coalition forces, which has been described by the United Nations as “the

² Roosevelt, Franklin. Letter to Edward Stettinius. “President Roosevelt to the Lend-Lease Administrator.” US Office of the Historian. US State Department, February 18, 1943.
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d893>.

³ F. Gregory Gause, "The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations." *Foreign Affairs*. July 2016.
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/future-us-saudi-relations>.

⁴ Christopher Blanchard, Rep, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, September 20, 2016, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1017814.pdf>.

⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2016,
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525>

world's worst humanitarian crisis".⁶ Saudi airstrikes, using American artillery, have caused the deaths of thousands of civilians.⁷ For the US, confronting Iran is equally important, though the US has preferred a diplomatic approach to contain and counterbalance Iran's growing influence in the region.

Although these divisions exist, the alliance nevertheless provides a variety of benefits to both parties and continues to serve American foreign policy goals. The free flow of Saudi petroleum to the global market is vital to American interests, as the Saudis possess considerable influence over oil prices. The Saudis are powerful members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), of which the US is not a member. Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest sites in Islam---Mecca and Medina---and the Saudi royal family and clerical establishment play leading roles in the Muslim world. The Kingdom hosts the headquarters of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the political and economic union of the immensely wealthy Persian Gulf states. Having an ally in these spheres allows the US to pursue interests it could not on its own. US-Saudi military and counterterrorism cooperation has thwarted countless military and terrorist attacks, enhancing the security of both states.

Despite such divisions and criticism, the fundamental pillars of the US-Saudi alliance---economic interests, geopolitics, and global security---remain largely intact and the relationship continues to succeed. This paper will seek to understand and answer the following questions. Why has the US-Saudi alliance endured since 9/11? What are the driving factors in the relationship? And, lastly, can the US negotiate a reset of the alliance in its favor? Classic alliance literature will be reviewed and applied to provide the framework for this analysis, as well as how

⁶ "Yemen Crisis: Key Facts." United Nations in Yemen. United Nations Association. Last modified January 19, 2021. <https://una.org.uk/yemen-crisis-key-facts>.

⁷ Ibid.

each fundamental pillar fits into the framework. The paper will then examine the partnership under the three administrations following 9/11: Presidents George W. Bush, Barack H. Obama, and Donald J. Trump. The three driving factors that I have previously identified will be examined under each leader, as well as how each impacted the alliance. Following this analysis, it will become clear that, despite divisions, the US-Saudi alliance is critical to both parties, which largely explains its durability. However, it will also be evident that the alliance is asymmetrical and the United States today possesses sufficient bargaining power to renegotiate terms of the alliance, as Saudi Arabia is much more dependent on the United States. Finally, recommendations for renegotiating the future of this alliance will be provided.

1.2 - Methodology

This paper will employ a literature review approach and several case studies to examine the US-Saudi alliance in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The literature review will examine the applicability of alliance politics framework to the partnership. Classic works from leading scholars Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, Glenn Snyder, and James Morrow will be used. Publications from a wide variety of academic institutions, newspapers, journals, and think tanks will be used to examine the relationship. The majority of sources this paper will utilize will be secondary and qualitative. Primary sources will be used to note the opinions and thoughts of important policymakers and figures that understand the relationship as well as in examining recent developments in the alliance that have not yet been considered in scholarly literature.

The quantitative data that will be used in this paper will come from a variety of secondary sources across the globe. While Saudi Arabia is known for its secrecy, the United States Government has made vast amounts of data and information pertaining to the alliance available.

Non-governmental institutes such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute have conducted studies on the global arms trade and, specifically, the bilateral US-KSA arms trade, which will be used. Official government and defense industry sources will be cited for statistics and figures. In using such a variety of sources, I hope to provide a broad view of the economic, geopolitical, and global security aspects of the alliance, and provide answers related to the durability of the alliance and its future.

Chapter 2 - Theories of Alliance Politics and Their Application to the US-Saudi Alliance

2.1 - Relevant Theories

A review of alliance politics literature will set the theoretical framework necessary for analyzing US-Saudi relations. In order to understand the resilience of the US-KSA alliance, it is important to first identify what kind of alliance it is. Alliance politics theories consider how relationships between allied states operate. Typically, alliances occur when states share mutual interests. Kenneth Waltz first argued that alliances are best understood through balances of power. In this view, alliances are best explained as the alignment of weaker states behind the dominant power in their geographic vicinity to ensure protection.⁸ While this is useful in understanding many historical alliances, such as the Baltic States' alignment with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, this cannot be applied to US-Saudi relations, as the United States and the Kingdom are not in the same geographic vicinity.

Stephen Walt, on the other hand, sought to challenge Waltz's theory, contending that balancing against a threat, rather than a dominant power, provides a more accurate explanation of the formation of international alliances.⁹ A real, visible threat provides more incentive for states to ally than simply a powerful neighbor. Though distribution of power is important, Walt lists three key factors used by states to evaluate threats: geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and assumed intentions. The greater a state's total resources and offensive power, such as population, industrial and military capability, and technological capacity, the greater the potential threat. Offensive power, Walt explains, is "the ability to threaten the sovereignty or territorial

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (United Kingdom: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

⁹ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

integrity of another state at an acceptable cost”.¹⁰ If a state’s intentions are perceived as aggressive, Walt argues, other states are likely balance against them, as the Allied powers did against expansionist Nazi Germany. Perceptions of intent play a crucial role in alliance choices.

When looking at the US-Saudi relationship, Walt’s theories provide a solid foundation for explaining the origins and continued durability of the alliance. American collaboration with Saudi Arabia began in 1933, when oil exploration in the Middle East first started. At the time, the US had major military capabilities but few regional intentions and a small geographic footprint in the Middle East, unlike other Western powers, making it an attractive ally for the imperialist-fearing Saudis. Great Britain and France, for example, controlled many colonies in the region. The relationship solidified during the 1945 post-Yalta meeting between President Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz Al Saud (known as Ibn Saud), the founder and first king of Saudi Arabia. Less than a decade after World War II, American military prowess was clear, while the Saudi military was weak at best. The Americans needed a reliable oil supply to develop and maintain global hegemony, while the Saudis needed protection from growing regional threats. These interests led to the original “oil for security” bargain. Both countries agreed on what they believed was the dominant Middle Eastern threat at the time: the growing influence of the Communist Soviet Union (USSR).

Naturally, the Americans were shaken by the USSR’s nuclear capabilities and Communism’s opposition to free market capitalism. For the Saudis, the nature of their system of rule naturally led to a fear of Communism: Saudi Arabia is both a monarchy and a theocracy.

The Sunni Al Saud family’s legitimacy rests on approval from Islamic Wahhabi clerics.¹¹ The

¹⁰ Walt, *Origins*, 24.

¹¹ Wahhabism is a religious sect within Sunni Islam, attributed to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The sect advocates for a return to the original teachings of Islam as described in the Quran and Sunnah (traditions of Muhammad). It has been described as “ultraconservative,” “orthodox,” and “puritanical.” Wahhabism has a longstanding alliance with the Al Saud family, dating back to 1744. However, it became significant in the early

alliance against “godless communism” expanded into a more expansive security arrangement after President Harry Truman promised Ibn Saud that he would protect KSA from the USSR’s growing influence.¹² In 1951, the two powers signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, which provided for American arms sales to KSA and American training of the Saudi military.¹³ Despite such investments, it would take decades for the Saudi military to develop---even today, it still depends on coalition forces. In the 1980s, Iran’s ascendance in the Middle East would provide another threat to both the US and Saudi Arabia, increasing the need to balance and further tightening the alliance. Ayatollah Khomeini’s harsh rhetoric towards the American government and other Western powers, combined with Iranian leadership’s calls for Shia Islamic uprisings against Sunni monarchs, provided critical domestic and international security threats for both parties.

Beyond balancing, it is important to understand the logic behind the US-Saudi alliance, as the US is clearly a much stronger power, capable of defending itself. Michael Altfeld presents a rational choice theory of alliances, which highlights the trade-off between increased security and decreased autonomy.¹⁴ Weaker states choose to relinquish some of their autonomy to larger, more powerful states in exchange for security. While this exchange is logical, it does not explain what a state could gain from holding influence over another state. James Morrow’s *Alliances and Asymmetry* expands on Altfeld’s theory and helps to explain why a global superpower, such as

twentieth century when Ibn Saud used it to unite the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and establish the modern Saudi state. For more information, see: David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*. (Iran: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005) and Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008).

¹² Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Pp 80.

¹³ Zack Beauchamp, “Beyond Oil: the US-Saudi Alliance, Explained.” *Vox*. January 6, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/6/10719728/us-saudi-arabia-allies>.

¹⁴ Michael Altfeld, “The Decision to Ally: A Theory and Test.” *Western Political Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December 1, 1984): 523–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/448471>.

the United States, would ally with a weaker party, such as Saudi Arabia, by creating the possibility of autonomy gains from alliances.

Morrow defines autonomy as “a state’s ability to determine its own policies” and as “the degree to which it pursues desired changes in the status quo”.¹⁵ A state’s security is its ability to preserve itself in the international sphere. In Morrow’s autonomy-security trade off, a strong state will provide security to a weaker ally and in return that state will give up some of its autonomy, allowing the stronger state to expand its sphere of influence, geographic capabilities, and capacity to affect regional politics. As will be discussed throughout this paper, the US has provided security to Saudi Arabia throughout the alliance. In return, KSA has granted the US autonomy in its affairs, providing major benefits to the United States. Among these benefits include US influence over KSA’s oil production, military presence on Saudi soil, and American guidance in Middle Eastern affairs. This is categorized as an asymmetric alliance, which, Morrow argues, is likely to last longer, as the mutual-dependence partnership will continue to provide net benefits to members.

Lastly, in order to evaluate the US’s potential ability to renegotiate the alliance, Walt’s notion of asymmetrical dependence is useful. In this case, leverage is enhanced if the supplier enjoys an asymmetry of dependence over the recipient. If the client state faces an imminent threat, but the patron does not, the patron’s aid should increase its leverage and influence over the client state. When considering the three driving factors of the relationship---economic stability, geopolitical concerns, and security---it becomes clear that the US has considerable leverage over KSA, especially since 9/11. In the past two decades, the Saudi royal family has faced more prevalent threats to its autonomy, many of which have required US interference.

¹⁵ James Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances,” *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (November 1991): 904–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111499>, 909.

Later in this paper, I will analyze this asymmetrical dependence and show that the United States has sufficient leverage to renegotiate the terms of the US-Saudi alliance in its favor.

2.2 - US - Saudi Dependency Linkages and Driving Factors

Economic, geopolitical, and security connections all play an integral part in the resilience of the relationship. While the specific issues under Bush, Obama, and Trump varied, the overarching linkages remained strong. This section will provide a broad understanding of the different driving factors of the relationship under each administration and how each impacts the alliance. Alliance politics literature will also be applied. Deeper analysis will come in the following chapters, which specifically consider each administration as a case study.

2.2.1 - Oil, Investments, and the Economy

As the foundational reason for the alliance, economic interdependence still plays a vital role in the US-Saudi relationship. In 1933, Ibn Saud awarded an oil concession to Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) which quickly became a consortium of American oil companies. In the years immediately following, this consortium would become the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), Saudi Arabia's sole national oil company.¹⁶ At this time, US firms in the consortium, such as Standard Oil of New Jersey (later Exxon) and Socony Vacuum (later Mobil), aided the government in designing wells, pipelines, refineries, and ports, in exchange for the Kingdom's cooperation on price and production rates. US manufacturer Baker Hughes provided Saudi Arabia with its first drilling equipment in the 1930s.¹⁷ Though ARAMCO has been

¹⁶ Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, 188.

¹⁷ Daniel Canty, "Baker Hughes Opens Saudi Arabian Superbase," *Arabian Oil and Gas*, April 22, 2010, <http://www.arabianoilandgas.com/article-7247-baker-hughes-opens-saudi-arabian-superbase/>.

completely owned by the Saudis since the 1980s, these firms still hold considerable ties to the organization and continue providing equipment and infrastructure consulting to the Saudis.

As Saudi Arabia controls about seventeen percent of the world's proven oil reserves, the Kingdom holds substantial influence over oil prices.¹⁸ Any loss of Saudi oil exports would profoundly affect the US's close allies, such as the European Union (EU), and US domestic petroleum prices. Thus, the US continues to protect the flow of Saudi oil into the global economy. Generally, the royal family has prioritized cooperation with the US. Since forming OPEC in the early 1970s, the Kingdom has held considerable sway over global oil prices and supply. Though at times OPEC and KSA's actions have run counter to US interests, the Saudis remain loyal to the United States. For instance, despite publicly endorsing and participating in the OPEC-led 1973 oil embargo in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia secretly coordinated to provide oil supplies for U.S. naval forces stationed in the Gulf.

Since the start of the Bush administration, the United States has pushed its domestic oil production capabilities, which has posed new challenges for the alliance. The early 2000s saw a steady increase in global oil prices, which strongly impacted the US economy. When prices peaked in 2007, President Bush met with Saudi King Abdullah, urging him to increase production and lower prices.¹⁹ With little success, record oil prices continued, which incidentally helped spur investment in American shale oil production. US shale production in 2008 increased 71% from the previous year, another 54% in 2009, and has steadily risen since then.²⁰ Oil production has risen steadily since 2009. In 2018, the US edged past Russia and Saudi Arabia to

¹⁸ "Saudi Arabia: Facts and Figures." About Us: Member Countries. OPEC. Accessed April 19, 2021. https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm.

¹⁹ Steven Lee Myers. "Bush Prods Saudi Arabia on Oil Prices." *The New York Times*, January 16, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/16/world/middleeast/16prexy.html>.

²⁰ "U.S. Field Production of Crude Oil." US Energy Information Administration, March 31, 2021. <https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=pet&s=mcrfpus2&f=a>.

become the world's largest crude oil producer, and is projected to produce more than the two combined by 2035.²¹ With such vast reserves, the US will be able to control oil prices more effectively than OPEC or Russia. Though collaboration will still be necessary, the US will not have to bend to the demands of OPEC and the Kingdom to the same extent that it did in the twentieth century.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is a major investor in the American economy, pumping cash flows from oil revenues into US markets and enterprises.²² The Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation, signed in 1974, was structured to make Saudi Arabia a direct stakeholder in the successful future of the United States. Led by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the agreement directed the Kingdom's growing oil revenues into US markets, ensuring that it would not be invested in adversarial states and further tying the Saudi economy to the United States. In 1986, Saudi tied itself tighter, pegging its currency, the riyal, to the US dollar, where it remains today. Such interconnectedness of both financial systems increases the costs of abandoning the alliance.

2.2.2 - Geopolitical Considerations

In his landmark Middle East case study, Walt concluded that geographic proximity is most important in determining which threats will prompt Middle Eastern states to seek allies. His hypothesis, to sum, stated that states that are seen as especially hostile---ie. those seeking to overthrow and dominate others---usually provoke other states to balance against such a threat.²³ Historically, Saudi Arabia saw itself as the leader of the Muslim world, being the birthplace of

²¹ Reuters Staff. "U.S. Oil Output to Surpass Russia and Saudi Arabia Combined by 2025: Rystad." Reuters, January 24, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-rystad-production-outlook/u-s-oil-output-to-surpass-russia-and-saudi-arabia-combined-by-2025-rystad-idUSKCN1PI21B>.

²² Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, 126.

²³ Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, 5-6.

Islam and the home to several important Islamic sites. This notion was challenged in 1979 when Iran's Islamic Revolution established a revolutionary theocracy with an explicit goal of exporting its views of Islam beyond its borders. Since the fall of the Shah, Iran has become an increasingly bellicose power towards both Saudi Arabia and the United States. Iranian leaders have openly and consistently criticized Western powers and those Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia, who ally with them. Though geographically Iran is of little threat to America, the US State Department has consistently categorized Iran as a "significant threat" to the US due to its antagonistic nature, destabilizing tendencies, and nuclear ambitions.²⁴

Historically, America's geopolitical interests in the region were driven by ensuring the free flow of oil, maintaining regional stability, and protecting its allies. American and Iranian foreign policy objectives stand in sharp opposition to each other. However, prior to 9/11, the Bush administration did not formulate or project a coherent strategy toward Iran. Saddam Hussein's Iraq held the attention of Washington. Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration began a drastic shift in its foreign policy goals in the region, as Iran's position as a threat to the United States grew. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq overthrew Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Arab who had been a major opponent of Iran. This opened the path for a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, which caused great concern for the Saudis and produced a rift in the US-Saudi alliance. During a September 2005 visit to Washington, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal warned the White House that Iraq was on the brink of civil war, with Iran as the major beneficiary. The foreign minister told the press that Bush's decision to invade Iraq "handed the country over to Iran without reason".²⁵

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Saudi Arabia Travel Advisory." September 17, 2019.

²⁵ Bruce Riedel. *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States Since FDR*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 148.

During the war, the Saudis agreed to provide quiet assistance to the American effort by allowing them to launch attacks on Saudi soil, as is expected in an asymmetrical alliance.²⁶ Sunni Saudi Arabia's concern with Shia Iran was justified: while Shia Muslims are a minority population in the country, they are largely concentrated in the Kingdom's oil-producing Eastern Province, where a successful uprising could have devastating consequences for the Kingdom's economy. In the years following the Iraq invasion, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry would steadily escalate, leading the American-Iranian rivalry to suffer the same fate. Iran would become the dominant power in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and would later turn Yemen into a proxy, investing in various civil wars. Iranian encroachment stoked fears among the Saudis and pushed them closer to their chief defender, the United States.

By the end of the Bush administration, the American relationship with Saudi Arabia was unsteady, largely due to such geopolitical spats. Yet despite this, Iran's role as a common threat managed to keep the countries united, especially as Iran's investments in regional conflicts and its nuclear capabilities became more apparent. During the Obama and Trump years, sectarian conflict would grow, pushing the allies to further balance against the Iranian threat.

2.2.4 - Security Ties

In an asymmetric alliance, according to Morrow, the dominant partner provides safety for its allies if they provide autonomy benefits in return.²⁷ This dominant power will protect its allies and balance out threats to both parties. Such asymmetry strengthens the relationship, as it creates a situation of mutual dependence, thus ensuring the durability of the alliance. The security relationship between the US and the Kingdom applies these characteristics. Throughout this

²⁶ Ibid, 141.

²⁷ Morrow, "Alliances".

paper, closer analysis of the US-Saudi security partnership in defense and counterterrorism will show the complex cooperation between the states, why such cooperation has endured, and the high costs of potentially abandoning the partnership.

When Saudi Arabia committed to allowing the US unlimited access to its oil resources and strategic geographic position, it did so expecting to be placed under the US military's umbrella of protection. In addition to verbal commitments to the Kingdom's defense, the US has played a vital role in the development of Saudi Arabia's defense capabilities. The first formal military cooperation agreement between the partners was established in 1953. The US Military Training Mission (USMTM) laid the framework for US military assistance, including equipment, planning, organization, and training methods. In 1977, the USMTM agreement with the Kingdom was renewed, extending oversight to all training and instruction, increasing close cooperation between the two states.

As the Saudi military improved its capabilities, collaboration between the allies widened. A military training agreement was signed in 1973, transferring the training of the Saudi National Guard (SANG) from the United Kingdom to the US. The SANG is primarily responsible for internal security and protection of the monarchy. While US training of SANG is managed by the US Army Military Command, SANG training is largely carried out by Vinnell Arabia, a subsidiary of American defense contractor Northrop Grumman, after a contract was awarded to the firm in 1975. The contract has been consistently renewed, and in 2015 a new contract, worth \$550 million, was reached between the Kingdom and Northrop Grumman. The contract grants Vinnell Arabia the responsibility of overseeing SANG's modernization.²⁸

²⁸ "Northrop Grumman Wins Saudi Arabian National Guard Contract With a Potential Value of \$550 Million." Northrop Grumman Newsroom. Northrop Grumman, January 10, 2010. [https://news.northropgrumman.com/news/releases/northrop-grumman-wins-saudi-arabian-national-guard-contract-w](https://news.northropgrumman.com/news/releases/northrop-grumman-wins-saudi-arabian-national-guard-contract-with-a-potential-value-of-550-million)ith-a-potential-value-of-550-million.

In addition to lucrative military training contracts, arms transfers between the US and Saudi Arabia represent a major component of the partnership and touch on both the economic and security dimensions. As highlighted in alliance politics literature, partners with strategic interests revolving around defense and security are more likely to have durable relations. To ensure US protection, KSA has signed several expensive and complex arms deals with the US government and American defense firms. Worth billions of dollars, these contracts are largely funded by the Kingdom's vast oil wealth and provide enormous economic benefits to the United States.

Beyond economic benefits, strengthening KSA's military capabilities is in the US's interest, as it reduces the need for the US to use its own troops in a potential conflict. Throughout their relationship, the US has been Saudi Arabia's top arms supplier. Between 1950 and 2004, the US sold over \$67 billion worth of arms to the Kingdom.²⁹ As regional conflicts and the Iranian threat continue to expand, both the US and KSA have invested heavily in increasing their defense capabilities in the region. From 2011 to 2016, Saudi Arabia accounted for 9.7% of total US arms exports, making it the top importer of US arms.³⁰

In exchange for protection, Saudi Arabia has provided the US with autonomy benefits. In 1945, the US and the Kingdom signed the Dhahran Airfield Agreement, which permitted the US to build an airfield close to nearby ARAMCO facilities. This was the first official sanctioning of US military presence on Saudi soil. Though the US relinquished control of the facility in 1996, it remained an important symbol of cooperation between the allies and has been used quietly for cooperation. During the 2003 Iraq invasion, for example, the Saudis secretly allowed US military

²⁹ Anthony Cordesman. Rep. *The Gulf Military Balance: Volume III*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 31, 2014. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-military-balance-volume-iii>. Pp 146.

³⁰ Alyas, Fatima. "U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations." Council on Foreign Relations, December 17, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-arabia-relations>.

operations from three different air bases and permitted US special forces to stage attacks on Saudi soil.³¹ General T. Michael Moseley, a top US Air Force general, recalled that the military “operated the command center out of Saudi Arabia... as well as sensors and tankers” and valued “[the Saudis] counsel, their mentoring, their leadership, and their support”.³² More recently, the US Navy’s elite Fifth Fleet, which operates out of neighboring Bahrain, has a massive presence in the Gulf, ensuring the safety of oil tankers navigating the seas.

Since the 9/11 attacks, the biggest and most successful driver of the US-Saudi security relationship has been counterterrorism cooperation. In the months following 9/11, criticism of Saudi Arabia and its state-sponsored literalist interpretation of Islam was widespread. Despite public scrutiny, the US continued to cooperate with the Kingdom. Being a major Arab and Sunni Muslim power, Saudi Arabia possesses both a major platform for combatting extremism and access to intelligence that US operatives could never obtain alone, making KSA a key regional ally. When Saudi Arabia became a target of Al Qaeda attacks, their role in the fight expanded. Terrorist groups united the US and Saudi Arabia again towards a new enemy, pushing them to further balance against the growing threat of Al Qaeda.

Among Osama Bin Laden’s main goals of Al Qaeda was the fall of the Al Saud monarchy, who he criticized as puppets of the West. In 2003, two bombs were detonated in different residential compounds, including one owned by Vinnell Arabia, in Riyadh, killing nearly one hundred and wounding several hundred.³³ After the Saudis concluded that Al Qaeda was behind the attacks, a large series of measures were introduced to expand counterterrorism cooperation between the US and the Kingdom. A joint task force was established by US security

³¹ John Solomon. “Saudis Secretly Helped U.S. in the Iraq War.” The Associated Press, May 30, 2004. https://web.kitsapsun.com/archive/2004/04-25/457408_saudis_secretly_helped_u_s_in_.html.

³² Ibid.

³³ Thomas Hegghammer. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2011.

and intelligence and their Saudi counterparts to share intelligence and combat terrorist financing. Among these was the Anti-Money-Laundering Statute, designed to reduce terrorist fundraising by criminalizing terror financing and money laundering.³⁴ Furthermore, the Saudis coordinated with the US Treasury Department in 2005 to establish the Financial Intelligence Unit.³⁵ Though still critical of Saudi Arabia's struggle to enforce private fundraising restrictions, the US has acknowledged and supported the Kingdom's efforts to disable Al Qaeda chapters in the kingdom. In the years since 9/11, this relationship has grown stronger and is considered a fundamental driving factor of the US-Saudi alliance.

2.3 - Driving Factors in Action

Each of these driving factors---economics, geopolitics, and global security---play an important role in the maintenance of the US-Saudi relationship. As alliance politics literature argues, as long as these factors remain relevant, the US-Saudi alliance should endure for years to come. In the following chapters, each of these factors will be discussed under each administration since 9/11: Bush, Obama, and Trump. It will become clear that these factors are paramount to the endurance of the alliance.

³⁴ Christopher Blanchard and Alfred Prados. Rep. *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*. Congressional Research Service, September 14, 2007. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32499.pdf>.

³⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 3 - Bush and Abdullah

In January 2001, President George W. Bush took the Oval Office. His predecessor, Bill Clinton, left him with a shaky alliance with Saudi Arabia. The Middle East peace process initiative---which made strides under Clinton---was moving to the back burner, overpowered by domestic issues, and the Crown Prince was growing frustrated with Washington.³⁶ In August 2001, Abdullah threatened to freeze Saudi political and military cooperation unless Bush sought to revive the process's failing negotiations.³⁷ In response, at the UN General Assembly in November, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that the US would pursue a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, supporting a key Saudi goal.³⁸ In any other time, Powell's unprecedented declaration of support would have sent shockwaves across the globe. However, Powell's statement was overshadowed by one of the most pivotal moments of the twenty-first century: the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001.

Looking at the ashes of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, American attitudes towards the Middle East were forever changed. In the days following, the ties between Saudi Arabia and the 9/11 attackers became undeniable, sparking national outcry. Fifteen of the nineteen Al Qaeda hijackers were Saudi nationals, and their leader, Osama bin Laden, was a member of one of the Kingdom's most notable families. Beyond this, the largest group of "enemy combatants" captured in Afghanistan in late 2001 were Saudis.³⁹ Though there was no direct evidence of Saudi government cooperation, it became evident that the Saudi political

³⁶ Though King Fahd remained the true ruler of the Kingdom, he suffered a debilitating stroke in 1995. Unable to perform his duties, his brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, served as de facto ruler until succeeding in 2005, following the death of King Fahd.

³⁷ David Ottoway, "The King and Us: U.S.-Saudi Relations in the Wake of 9/11," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (2009): 121-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20699567>, 122.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 122.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 121.

system allowed for widespread radicalization and funding, which enabled the attacks to occur. For years, according to several US official inquiries, Saudi oil money was funnelled to encourage radical anti-Americanism and Al Qaeda terrorism.⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist Wahhabi clerics draw a sharp line between a small number of true believers and everyone else---laying the seeds for extremism to flourish. As stated in this paper's introduction, in the aftermath of 9/11, polls showed marked disapproval of the Saudi regime and the US's special relationship with the Kingdom.

Yet, despite the strife sparked by the 9/11 attacks, continued common interests enabled the relationship to survive. Threats towards both the Kingdom and the US pushed the states closer together to counterbalance mutual antagonists. Under the Bush administration, US-Saudi relations ebbed and flowed, but the three fundamental pillars---economic wealth, geopolitical strategy, and security concerns---ensured that, though there were disagreements and points of contention, the alliance remained in place. This chapter will examine how each of these driving factors, along with threats faced, helped to sustain the US-Saudi alliance under President Bush. Under the Bush administration, each fundamental pillar played a central role in the preservation of the alliance in the rocky years immediately following September 11, 2001. Understanding the nuances of the alliance between Bush and Abdullah will lay the foundation for the progression of the alliance from Bush's inauguration to today.

3.1 - Economic Interdependence

3.1.1 - Petroleum and Infrastructure

⁴⁰ See, for example: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States: John Roth, Douglas Greenburg, and Serena Wille, *Staff Report to the Commission: Monograph on Terrorist Financing* § (n.d.).

The US-Saudi alliance began with a common interest in oil; as the Kingdom's petroleum capacity increased, so did the level of cooperation between America and KSA, and now the two states are widely interconnected economically. Bechtel, an American construction company, designed Jubail and Yanbu---two of the Kingdom's largest industrial cities.⁴¹ The Saudi electrical grid, which uses US standards, was "to a great extent" designed by Stone and Webster, another American firm.⁴² A variety of joint ventures between KSA's ARAMCO and America's ExxonMobil and Chevron Texaco provide revenue for both states, including SAMREF, an oil refining joint venture, and Yanpet, a chemicals company.⁴³ Beyond this, major financial linkages between the two states ensure the durability of the relationship, as both states depend on the success of the other. All of the Kingdom's oil income is in US dollars, which is then invested in US government treasury bills, helping to finance the US federal deficit.⁴⁴ Oil sales are paid in US dollars, who then pass the money to Saudi Arabian accounts, which are held in US banks. In addition, Saudi Arabia holds American financial leaders from top US banks, such as J.P. Morgan, as advisers to the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency. As Jean-Francois Seznec notes, "the two countries are inextricably linked in terms of finances".⁴⁵

In the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia was the world's largest producer and reservoir of oil, and the US was its largest consumer. Both states wanted to ensure the steady flow of Saudi oil to international markets without disruption from terrorists, Iran, or other global adversaries. For the

⁴¹ Jean-François Seznec. "Business as Usual: The Saudi-US Relationship." *Harvard International Review* 26 (2005): 56.

⁴² Seznec, "Business as Usual," 57.

⁴³ For more examples, see: "ExxonMobil in the Kingdom Today," ExxonMobil, last modified July 28, 2017, <https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/Locations/Saudi-Arabia/ExxonMobil-in-the-Kingdom-today>. and: "Our Parent Company & Affiliates," ARAMCO Americas, accessed April 30, 2021. <https://americas.aramco.com/en/who-we-are/about/our-parent-company-and-affiliates>.

⁴⁴ Matt Egan and John Defterios, "Saudi Arabia's Money Ties to the U.S. Are Massive...and Murky," CNN Business, April 19, 2016. <https://money.cnn.com/2016/04/19/investing/saudi-arabia-threat-dump-us-assets-911-bill/>.

⁴⁵ Seznec, "Business as Usual," 57.

US, uninterrupted access to oil is essential to the health and profitability of US industries. In the case of an energy shortage, the industries of automobiles, airlines, construction, petrochemicals, trucking, and agriculture would all face serious repercussions.⁴⁶ Beyond industry, the US war machine---which protects Saudi Arabia---relies on petroleum for its tanks, airplanes, helicopters, and ships. On the Saudi side, its main source of revenue, ARAMCO, is largely dependent on American protection and partnership. In 2005, the middle of the Bush Presidency, ARAMCO employed about 92% of the country's workforce.⁴⁷ Without steady oil flow, ARAMCO and the Kingdom would suffer major financial and economic losses, affecting nearly every Saudi citizen.

In the months prior to Bush's 2001 inauguration, the US experienced "severe oil and natural gas shortages in many parts of the country" along with periodic blackouts.⁴⁸ Oil imports, for the first time in history, rose to more than 50% of America's total consumption.⁴⁹ On March 19, 2001, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham told a National Energy Summit that "America faces a major energy supply crisis over the next two decades" and that "the failure to meet this challenge will threaten our nation's economic prosperity [and] compromise our national security".⁵⁰ Later in the year, Bush presented a national energy policy which provided a list of recommendations to avert such an energy crisis. The plan called for diversification of the US's fuel sources---ie. oil, natural gas, nuclear power, and hydroelectricity---and diversification of its origin, coming from a combination of the US, Northwest Africa, the Caspian Basin, and the Persian Gulf.⁵¹ While this was the message to the public, when looking at official administration

⁴⁶ Michael Klare, "Blood For Oil: The Bush-Cheney Energy Strategy" in Leo Panitch & Colin Leys (eds), *The Socialist Register* (2003): 166-184.

⁴⁷ Seznec, "Business as Usual," 57.

⁴⁸ Klare, "Blood For Oil," 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵⁰ Spencer Abraham, "Remarks to the US Chamber of Commerce," (speech, Washington, DC, March 19, 2001), *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/abrahamtext031901.htm>.

⁵¹ Gawdat Bahgat, "Oil and Militant Islam: Strains on U.S.--Saudi Relations," *World Affairs* 165, no. 3 (2003): 115-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672659>.

policies, it becomes clear that the Persian Gulf remained the US's priority and primary producer. Specifically, Washington had little intention of diversifying away from Riyadh. Pentagon briefings revealed that General Tommy Franks and his staff "crafted strategies that [would] allow us to secure and protect [Saudi] fields as rapidly as possible".⁵²

3.1.2 - Saudi Oil and the Post-9/11 Landscape

In the wake of 9/11, the preservation of Saudi oil fields remained a key component of the US's national security strategy. As threats from Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda against the global steady oil flow grew, the Bush administration took action in the spring of 2002. Though weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) were hailed as the primary reason for invasion, Vice President Dick Cheney gave equal importance to US energy security in an August 2002 speech. Cheney claimed that "should [Hussein's] ambitions [to acquire WMDs] be realized, the implications would be enormous... armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror and a seat at the top of 10% of the world's oil reserves, Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world's energy supplies, [and] directly threaten America's friends throughout the region".⁵³ In a nod to the original "oil for security" bargain, Cheney was specifically referring to Saudi Arabia as one of America's friends---the Kingdom and Iraq share a large border.

In an asymmetrical alliance, in times of need, the superpower will exert influence and power over the lesser nation in the alliance in exchange for protection. As Saudi Arabia relied on the US for security, it had to accept the terms and obligations of being under the American

⁵² Michael Klare, "It's the Oil, Stupid," *The Nation*, April 24, 2003.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/its-oil-stupid/>.

⁵³ Richard Cheney, "Remarks at the Opening Session of the 103rd National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars," Speech, August 26, 2002, *The New York Times*,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/26/international/middleeast/full-text-in-cheney-words.html>

security umbrella. With a war coming, the US pressured the Saudis to increase oil production to fuel the American war machine. Despite announcing that the Kingdom would “not participate under any condition or in any form in war against our brother Iraq,” Abdullah quietly aided the US during the 2003 invasion.⁵⁴ The Saudis provided tens of millions of dollars in discounted oil and gas for US forces.⁵⁵ Beyond fueling the US military, the White House pushed the Kingdom to use their oil reserves to keep the market stable during the war.⁵⁶ Iraq, another major oil producer, was in the midst of war, which significantly lowered their production capabilities and caused a decrease in supply, which could result in a global price increase. In response, at the request of the White House, Saudi oil production increased by 1.5 million barrels per day during the war, keeping the prices ranging from \$22 to \$28 per barrel.

In mid-2004, however, Saudi Arabia lost its ability to significantly influence oil prices. At an emergency OPEC meeting in May, Saudi oil minister Ali al-Naimi tried to stop the rise of oil prices at the behest of Washington. This request, which was quickly rejected, was a turning point in the Kingdom’s role in OPEC. Prices skyrocketed from \$40 per barrel in May to \$50 by November.⁵⁷ Bush expressed his frustration to his ally at his Texas ranch in April 2005. During the meeting, Abdullah detailed the steps that the Kingdom intended to take to cushion the global market from future increases in oil demand. In a joint statement following the meeting, both nations agreed “to continue their cooperation so that the oil supply from Saudi Arabia [would] be available and secure” and that America “appreciate[d] Saudi Arabia’s strong commitment to accelerating investment and expanding its production capacity to help provide stability and

⁵⁴ “Saudi Arabia Rejects Participation in War Against Iraq,” CNN World, March 18, 2003. <https://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/03/18/sprj.irq.saudi/>.

⁵⁵ Associated Press, “New Details on Saudi Help in Iraq War,” FOX, April 24, 2004. <https://www.foxnews.com/story/new-details-on-saudi-help-in-iraq-war>.

⁵⁶ Sharon Otterman, “Saudi Arabia: Withdrawal of U.S. Forces.” Council on Foreign Relations, February 7, 2005. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/saudi-arabia-withdrawl-us-forces>.

⁵⁷ Ottoway, “The King and Us,” 125.

adequately supply the market”.⁵⁸ Despite the apparent successes of the 2005 meeting, oil prices continued to climb through the next three years of the Bush administration, highlighting Saudi Arabia’s diminishing sway over the global oil market. By July 2008 crude oil prices reached \$147 per barrel, even with Riyadh’s major increases in production.

The economic and financial ties between the US and the Kingdom are undeniable. Despite divisions over oil prices and geopolitical concerns, the United States and Saudi Arabia continued to share important interests that kept them aligned under Bush. The interconnectedness of the American and Saudi economies further incentivized a strong alliance. As KSA controls the largest oil resources on Earth, its long term interests include stable and reasonable prices to prevent alternative energy sources from rising in popularity. Though the Kingdom logically would prefer higher oil prices to increase its annual revenue, long term desires for global oil dependence and stability overpower short term goals. Beyond this, keeping the White House happy remained a priority for the Saudis. Though no longer present on Saudi soil, the US military maintains a large presence in the Persian Gulf, providing protection for the Kingdom’s oil infrastructure. The Saudi military would not become capable of protecting its infrastructure until the late 2010s, and, even now, still relies largely on coalition forces and American arms. Such geopolitical links and concerns will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. Overall, it is clear that the economic and financial linkages between the Kingdom and the United States are vast and indispensable to both parties, further solidifying their relationship.

3.2 - Geopolitical Linkages

⁵⁸ “Joint Statement by President Bush and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah,” *The White House - President George W. Bush*, Office of the Press Secretary. April 25, 2005.
<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/04/20050425-8.html>.

Bush's response to 9/11 fundamentally altered the geopolitical composition of the Middle East largely in favor of the US-Saudi alliance's biggest adversary: Iran. Specifically, by removing the Taliban from Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein from Iraq, the White House removed Tehran's two biggest strategic challenges, allowing Iran to project power and influence across the Middle East, much to the anger of the Saudis. Soon after Hussein fell from power, the Saudi ordered the removal of the US Air Force from bases that it had used since the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War.⁵⁹ Despite this gesture, the Saudis continued to quietly welcome the deployment of US forces from bases within the GCC. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, for example, is now home to the US assets previously stationed in Saudi Arabia. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet patrols Saudi Arabia's eastern coast along the Persian Gulf, ensuring safe transport of Saudi oil. By encouraging US presence on the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia showed Iran that "US military muscle [had] not gone flabby after Iraq".⁶⁰ Throughout Bush's time in office, the US-Saudi-Iranian dilemma---through both direct confrontation and various proxies---would dominate Washington's foreign policy agenda.

3.2.1 - Relations Pre-9/11

When looking at the geopolitical interests of both Saudi Arabia and the United States, there is always a common concern: the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ever since the 1979 revolution that transformed Iran into a fundamentalist Shia stronghold, Saudi Arabia has been perpetually concerned with the threat posed by the Islamic Republic. Iran's destabilizing nature, political ambitions in the region, and growing nuclear program are threats to both the Kingdom and the US. Iranian leaderships' consistent anti-American, anti-Sunni rhetoric has further pushed

⁵⁹ Ottoway, "The King and Us," 123.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 24.

divisions. As Walt argued, alliances are stronger and last longer when states ally and balance against threats rather than powers. Iran is a real, visible threat to both parties, pushing them closer together as allies. When considering Walt's three factors used by states to evaluate threats, Iran fits each category: geographic proximity (to Saudi Arabia, which leads to US concern), offensive capabilities (Iran has a large and powerful military force) and assumed intentions (in the decades since 9/11, Iran has done very little to cooperate with either the Kingdom or the United States). With a war unfolding in Iraq and Iran expanding its influence in proxies, it was clear to both allies that geopolitical interests necessitated their close cooperation.

During the first nine months of the Bush administration, the White House was focused on the al-Aqsa Intifada, sparked by the fallout from the failed Israeli-Palestinian Camp David Summit in 2000. In her memoirs, former National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice recalled that "the low intensity war between Palistinians and Israelis dominated our security agenda" in the months leading up to September 2001.⁶¹ Gunfire, suicide bombings, and widespread violence by both the extremist Islamic group Hamas and Israeli retaliation groups lead to the deaths of both rebels and civilians. The crisis in the West Bank and Jerusalem stirred trouble for the US-Saudi alliance.

The Saudis expected Bush to continue his father's efforts of reconciliation and peace between the Israelis and Palestinians---but Bush had little interest in this. However, Bush's priority was establishing a good relationship with the Kingdom after the tumultuous Clinton years, and to do that, Bush needed to intervene in Israel. In early 2001, Bush and his team invited the Crown Prince to meet at the White House to introduce the new president to Abdullah. The Crown Prince's answer was "a firm and equivocal no".⁶² Before meeting, Abdullah wanted Bush

⁶¹ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown, 2011), 50.

⁶² Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 132.

to take dramatic action on Palestine: he wanted the US to stop the violence, meet with Arafat, the Palestinian leader, and for Israel to leave the West Bank and Gaza, two heavily Palestinian-populated lands. Though White House publicly expressed discontent with the situation, Washington did not intervene in the Intifada, defying Abdullah's requests.

Six months into the Bush administration, the US-Saudi alliance was in its biggest crisis since the 1973 oil embargo. In August 2001, Abdullah cancelled a high level military visit to Washington without notice and sent a letter which "crystallized the depth of Saudi anger at Washington".⁶³ The Saudi Ambassador to the US, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, showed the letter to Marwan Muasher, the Jordanian ambassador, who recalled that the letter "pointedly said it had become clear to Saudi Arabia that the US administration was working against Arab interests, and in a clear reference to oil prices [Abdullah] wrote that Saudi Arabia would reciprocate by pursuing its own interests without consideration for American interests," implying that the Saudis would no longer keep prices low to serve the US.⁶⁴ This was the first time that the Saudis leveraged oil as a weapon since the spring of 1974.

Abdullah's letter made it clear that the alliance was in jeopardy and moved the situation to the top of Washington's agenda. In late August, a letter was drafted and approved by the president, promising that the US would pursue a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the first overt and formal American commitment to a Palestinian state. More, Bush promised in the letter to publicly commit to this solution at the UN General Assembly meeting in the coming September.⁶⁵ On September 7, 2001, Bandar met the president and his staff at the

⁶³ Ibid, 133.

⁶⁴ Marwan Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 110.

⁶⁵ Elliott Abrams, *Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15.

White House, reporting that the letter and Bush's commitments had satisfied the Crown Prince and resolved the crisis.

To understand why the geopolitics of al-Aqsa Intifada had such a profound impact on the US-Saudi alliance, there are several political variables that must be considered. For Saudi Arabia especially, the Arab-Israeli conflict is relevant to several internal considerations. The legitimacy of the royal family, for example, is largely based on their adherence to Islam and the endorsement of Saudi Muslim clerics.⁶⁶ Wahhabism states that in order to have true Islamic government, followers must submit an oath of allegiance to a just Muslim ruler, who, in consultation with the Ulema (the leadership of the Wahhabi religious body), holds all of the political power.⁶⁷ This is the political structure that the al Saud family relies on for authority. A large segment of the Saudi population sees the Arab-Israeli issue as a religious conflict. By defending the Palestinians, the Saudis are also defending the right to practice Islam on holy lands. For the US, blatant human rights abuses, tension with its Israeli ally, and general Middle East instability did not serve American interests.

Most importantly, the looming threat of Iran played a massive role on both sides. The Saudi fear of Iran is largely based on legitimacy, encroachment, and nuclear capabilities. Iran's particular brand of Islam---hard-line Shiism---directly undermines the Sunni al Saud family and their claim to the throne. Beginning with Khomeini in 1979, Iranian leadership has repeatedly ridiculed and questioned the royal family's legitimacy, claiming that Saudi Islam was "American Islam".⁶⁸ Advocacy for the Palestinian cause has played a fundamental role in Iran's foreign policy; as a Muslim nation, it is Iran's responsibility to liberate Palestine from Israel. Tehran

⁶⁶ Bahgat, "Oil and Militant Islam," 117.

⁶⁷ Gawdat Bahgat, "Saudi Arabia and the War on Terrorism," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2004): 51-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858472>, 52.

⁶⁸ Daniel Byman, "Saudi Arabia's Own Iraq Nightmare," *Brookings Institution*, February 8, 2007. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/saudi-arabias-own-iraq-nightmare/>

used the Arab-Israeli conflict to undermine the House of Saud's image as the custodian of Islam, framing them as traitors to the religion. Iran consistently identified itself as the true protector of Islamic interests and the Muslim world by staunchly opposing Israel's territorial claims. Saudi Arabia's alliance with the US, Israel's strongest ally, was repeatedly criticized by Iran: how could the Kingdom serve Palestinian interests, and on a larger scale, Islamic interests, if its strongest ally is Israel's greatest protector?

The Islamic Republic's support of terrorist groups and violent insurgents across the region led the US to repeatedly identify Iran as a "key driver" of regional instability in the Middle East.⁶⁹ Through funding belligerent forces in Palestine, as well as Shia insurgents in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, Iran effectively surrounded Saudi Arabia with threats. Though not openly involved in the conflict, Iran has used its considerable resources to control proxies in the area. Hamas, the Islamist militant group, is heavily supported by Iran. According to US Congressional reports, Hamas's "military capacity, including arms, rockets, methods of combat, and general funding is largely provided by Iran".⁷⁰ In addition, the Israeli military repeatedly intercepted shipments of Iranian arms to the Gaza strip intended for Hamas. In 2010, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas confirmed that "Hamas is funded by Iran" and had been for many years, and "[Hamas] claims it is financed by donations, but the donations are nothing like what it receives from Iran".⁷¹

3.2.2 - 9/11 and the Iraq War

⁶⁹ U.S. House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Iran's Destabilizing Role in the Middle East*, Hearing, July 16, 2014, Washington: Government Printing Office, 2014.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Hamas 2010 Budget Mainly 'Foreign Aid' from Iran," *World Tribune*, January 5, 2010. https://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2010/me_hamas0005_01_05.html.

On September 8, 2001, Prince Bandar told former National Security Council member Bruce Riedel that “[he was] the happiest man in town” following the resolution of tensions between Crown Prince Abdullah and President Bush. Three days later, al Qaeda terrorists, including fifteen Saudi nationals, hijacked four American airplanes and drove them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania, leading to the bloodiest day in American history since the Civil War. Once CIA investigations uncovered that Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda were behind the attacks, CIA director George Tenet ordered that Prince Bandar be fully briefed. Abdullah supported Bush’s decision to invade Afghanistan and target the Taliban government, who were harboring bin Laden within their borders.⁷²

Once again, US-Saudi relations were pushed to the forefront of American foreign policy. Negative publicity and scrutiny towards Saudi Arabia and the US government’s relationship dominated news outlets. At the UN General Assembly, which had moved from September to November 2001, Bush vowed a swift defeat of the Taliban and al Qaeda. In a gesture to reaffirm the strength US-Saudi alliance, Bush kept his promise of a two state solution to the Palestinian question. He announced to the Assembly that “the American government also stands by its commitment to a just peace in the Middle East. We are working toward the day when two states---Israel and Palestine---live peacefully together with secure and recognized borders”.⁷³ This commitment was later formalized in Abdullah’s 2002 peace plan, which called for normalization of Arab-Israeli relations in exchange for a two state solution to the conflict. Abdullah hoped that finding peace would force the dissolution of Hamas and, as a result, force

⁷² In the days following 9/11, Bush called on the Taliban “to deliver to the United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in [the Taliban’s] land,” yet these demands were ignored. Sourced from: “Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 20, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

⁷³ George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly” (Speech, New York, NY, November 10, 2001), White House Archives, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011110-3.html>.

Iran to leave the region. Following a 2002 meeting between Bush and Abdullah, the president remarked that “our two nations share a vision of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security”.⁷⁴

On January 11, 2003, the US invited its ally’s ambassador, Prince Bandar, to the White House for an official briefing on Bush’s war plans for Iraq. The Saudis had many concerns; most notably, who would replace Saddam Hussein? Like the Kingdom, Hussein’s Iraq was a Sunni power, providing further insulation against Shia Iran. The Saudis understood that free elections in Iraq would likely lead to a Shia-dominated government. However, as Riedel notes, “the relationship with Washington was already on the ropes over Palestine; another public blow-up on Iraq would not help”.⁷⁵ So, the Saudis instead provided quiet assistance to the American war effort after the US launched its attack in March 2003.

Beyond the previously discussed oil-related assistance, the Saudis permitted widespread military operations within its borders. In return for protection from Hussein, the royal family quietly opened its borders to the American military, as would be expected in an asymmetrical alliance. While the ground campaign was based in Kuwait, the American air campaign against Iraq was largely managed in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government allowed the US to access three of its air facilities, giving flyover rights to the Air Force and allowing US Special Operations Forces to mount assaults into Iraq from Saudi soil. Air Force General T. Michael Moseley later recalled the Saudis as “wonderful partners” and explained that the US Air Force “operated airplanes out of Saudi Arabia, as well as sensors, and tankers”.⁷⁶ This close cooperation with the Kingdom, combined with the gesture of briefing the Crown Prince months prior to launching the

⁷⁴ George W. Bush, “Remarks After Meeting With the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia,” (Press Conference, Crawford, TX, April 25, 2002), White House Archives, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/04/text/20020425-4.html>.

⁷⁵ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 141.

⁷⁶ Associated Press, “New Details on Saudi Help.”

attack, highlights the value that Bush placed on Saudi approval of his actions in Iraq. Had Bush not cared about the Kingdom's reaction or opinions, it is likely that the Saudis would not have been briefed or consulted.

Yet despite the Bush administration's attempts to keep KSA happy, tensions still rose. With the fall of Baghdad in May 2003, Saudi Arabia's fears of a Shia Iraq came to fruition. The US intervention installed a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, sparking a shift in the Sunni-Shia balance of power in the Persian Gulf. The Saudis were appalled, as Prince Saud al-Faisal recalled to an audience at Rice University, the US had handed Iraq to Iran "on a golden platter".⁷⁷ Though the invasion was over, fighting between insurgent groups, both Shia and Sunni, continued for years during the US occupation. Iran trained, armed, and aided the Shia extremists in both Iraq and Afghanistan to challenge the US and KSA.⁷⁸ The Saudis viewed American-installed Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, as a puppet of Iran, as he was known as a longtime Iraqi politician with close ties to the Islamic Republic.⁷⁹ KSA did not believe that Maliki and the Shias were interested in sharing power with the Sunni minority---a development that could lead to a proxy war between Iran and the Shias and KSA and the Sunnis.

Nearly every conflict in the Middle East during the Bush administration could be boiled down to Saudi Arabia attempting to counter the looming threat from Iran. Both in Palestine and Iraq, the Saudi and US governments understood the implications of a loss: another Arab state under Iran's umbrella. Mutual fear and antipathy towards Iran kept the US-Saudi alliance together during the Bush years, despite some fractures. The basic US-Saudi disagreement was largely over how to construct a collective-security framework to protect the Arab states from

⁷⁷ Sourced from: Ottoway, "Oil and Militant Islam," 123.

⁷⁸ Stephen Hadley, "The George W. Bush Administration," *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, October 5, 2010. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/george-w-bush-administration>.

⁷⁹ "Timeline: US War in Afghanistan."

Iranian encroachment. Yet despite divisions over methodology, Iran's role as a common enemy and threat has pushed Riyadh and Washington closer together. Riyadh's role as a leader in the Arab world makes it a critical partner for Washington, while America's military prowess has helped to keep the Saudis loyal. The shared geopolitical interests between the two states, largely pertaining to Iran, have helped drive the durability of the alliance in the years since 9/11.

3.3 - Global Security Interests

Though initially Saudi Arabia's connection to the events on 9/11 brought widespread criticism, the attacks eventually helped strengthen the US-Saudi security relationship. In the 1990s, as stated by Riedel, "the royal family was in denial about the fact that a significant infrastructure of terror had developed under the surface calm" of the Kingdom.⁸⁰ An extensive underground network, catering to the most radical elements of Islam, had spread across the Kingdom. Saudi officials were convinced that they could manage it without American assistance via tough internal security measures, diplomacy, and assassination. However, the al Saud family was unsuccessful. In 2003, al Qaeda launched a sustained terrorist campaign in the Kingdom with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the House of Saud. Realizing that militant Islam was as much a threat to the Saudi government as it was to the US, Riyadh committed to cooperation with the Americans in the war on terror. Since 9/11, the counterterrorism relationship has been widely hailed as the most successful aspect of US-Saudi cooperation.

3.3.1 - The Security Landscape Pre-9/11

⁸⁰ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 114.

In 1991, Osama bin Laden, son of a prominent Saudi family, turned on the House of Saud and left the Kingdom for Sudan, frustrated with the royal family's decision to allow US troops to operate from Saudi soil. Like the Iranians, bin Laden regarded the Saudi monarchy as corrupt and un-Islamic, largely due its ties with the US. Three years later, he sent an open letter to the Saudi clerical establishment criticizing them for supporting the Middle East peace process, attacking it as "conferring legitimacy on the contracts of surrender to the Jews that were signed by traitorous and cowardly Arab tyrants," directly referencing the royal family.⁸¹ After moving to Afghanistan in 1996, he issued a statement calling for the removal of "the polytheists from the Arabian Peninsula," meaning the Americans.⁸² In 1998, bin Laden ordered al Qaeda to simultaneously attack US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing over two hundred people. Two weeks later, President Bill Clinton named bin Laden "Washington's biggest enemy."

Bin Laden and the Taliban used the Afghan mountains as their base for recruiting and training al Qaeda operatives. Saudi Arabia's political landscape played a major role in al Qaeda's ability to recruit soldiers: in the early 2000s, the Kingdom had one of the largest populations of young people in the world and not enough jobs to meaningfully employ them.⁸³ Because of technological advances, these unemployed young Saudis were exposed to regional and Western media more than any generation before, allowing them to learn new ideas and ways of life, both good and bad. As the royal family has little tolerance for dissent, young Saudis had few outlets for political expression. Bin Laden and al Qaeda capitalized on this, painting al Qaeda and political Islam as a way for young people to express their political beliefs and take action. Al

⁸¹ Osama bin Laden and Bruce B. Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: the Statements of Osama Bin Laden*. (London, UK: Verso, 2005), 9.

⁸² Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 128.

⁸³ Bahgat, "Saudi Arabia and the War on Terrorism," 52-53.

Qaeda's message of anti-Muslim oppression, heroism, and global jihad appealed to young Arabs seeking a better life.

US intelligence estimated that between ten and twenty thousand troops passed through these training camps, hailing from all corners of the globe.⁸⁴ Though it is difficult to gauge, experts estimate that about sixty six percent of al Qaeda's foot soldiers were Saudis.⁸⁵ Much of al Qaeda's funding, according to the 9/11 Commission, came from Saudi Arabia: "al Qaeda found a fertile fundraising ground in Saudi Arabia, where extreme religious views are common and charitable giving was both essential to the culture and subject to very limited oversight".⁸⁶ Zakat (tithing) is one of the five pillars of Islam, and is seen as a formal duty, compelling believers to donate part of their wealth to Muslim causes. Such charitable donations are difficult to track in the Kingdom---because KSA does not have a robust tax system, it is difficult to identify which citizens have money and how they spend it. To be clear, the 9/11 Commission "found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually" funded al Qaeda.⁸⁷ But, at the same time, the Kingdom did very little to monitor or prevent terrorist financing from occurring, as it was not yet a direct threat to the royal family.

Prior to 9/11, Washington did not condemn the Saudis' coddling of religious extremists. Tacit support of the Saudi clerical establishment was important for good relations with KSA, as the royal family needed the mosque's approval to rule, and the mosque held significant influence over both political and public opinion in the Kingdom. This failure to take action by the US was acknowledged in the months following the 9/11 attacks. The 9/11 Commission acknowledged that "before the September 11 attacks, the Saudi government resisted cooperating with the

⁸⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report*. (New York, NY: WW Norton, 2004), 67.

⁸⁵ Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil*, 225.

⁸⁶ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 171.

⁸⁷ Blanchard and Prados, *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*. 2.

United States on the al Qaeda financing problem, although the US government did not make this issue a priority or provide the Saudis with actionable intelligence about al Qaeda”.⁸⁸

3.3.2 - 9/11 and its Aftermath

In the months immediately following the attacks, strained relations emerged between the US and the Kingdom. Saudi officials refused to acknowledge the citizenship of the fifteen Saudi nationals who participated in the attacks. Prince Nayef, the Interior Minister, was a leading skeptic of Saudi complicity---in December 2002, over a year after the attacks, Naif asked, “Who has benefited from the September 11 attacks? I think they [the Jews] were the protagonists of such attacks”.⁸⁹ Investigations into terrorist financing soon followed. In 2002, an independent task force, sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, stated that “for years, individuals and charities based in Saudi Arabia have been the most important source of funds for al Qaeda... for years, Saudi officials have turned a blind eye to this problem”.⁹⁰

While the first months were marked by distrust and frustration, 2003 marked a turning point in the US-Saudi counterterrorism relationship. On February 14, 2003, bin Laden issued a statement urging his people to prepare for battle. Framed as a sermon, he called for the overthrow of all of the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, who he accused of betraying the Palestinian cause. George Tenet told Abdullah, “your family and the end of its rule is now the objective... al Qaeda operatives are prepared to assassinate members of the royal family”.⁹¹

Tenet then vowed that the US would provide all of the assistance it could to defeat al Qaeda. The

⁸⁸ Roth et al., *Monograph on Terrorist Financing*, 39.

⁸⁹ Alaa Shahine, “Saudi Interior Minister: Jews Were Behind September 11 Attacks” *Associated Press*, December 5, 2002.

⁹⁰ *Terrorist Financing, Report of an Independent Task Force*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2002), 1.

⁹¹ George Tenet and Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA*. (New York, NY: Perennial, 2008), 250.

first major attack in the Kingdom came on May 12, 2003, when al Qaeda operatives attacked three compounds in Riyadh that housed foreign workers, including employees of the US-based Vinnell Corporation. Twenty seven people were killed and more than one hundred and fifty wounded. With another common enemy, the Kingdom began to cooperate with the US, seeing al Qaeda as a deadly threat.

To combat al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and abroad, the Kingdom and the US took a series of measures. Between 2001 and 2002, all charitable groups in the Kingdom were audited to “assure that there [were] no links to suspected groups” and over 150 bank accounts suspected of being linked to terrorists were frozen.⁹² In August 2003, Riyadh and the White House reached an agreement to establish a joint task force to monitor terrorist financing in Saudi Arabia. The Financial Intelligence Unit was created in the Kingdom to collect intelligence on banking activity and enact new financial regulations. The measures taken included increased control of the charitable giving sector, systemic changes in the Saudi financial sector (specifically pertaining to cash-based transactions) and an active Saudi role in efforts to raise awareness of money laundering and terrorist financing issues.⁹³ In addition, updates in communication servers have enabled real time intelligence used to track, thwart, and catch terrorists to be more quickly exchanged between the states. Cooperation between the US and the Kingdom led to the identification of a network of over fifty shell companies that bin Laden used to move money around the world, which was quickly shut down.⁹⁴

The May compound bombings pushed Abdullah to appoint Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN), son of Interior Minister Nayef, as commander of Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism forces.

⁹² Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, *Initiatives and Actions in the Fight Against Terrorism*, Washington, D.C., August 2002.

⁹³ Alfred Prados, Rep, *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and US Relations*, Congressional Research Service, February 24, 2006. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IB93113.pdf>, 3.

⁹⁴ Saudi Embassy, *Initiatives and Actions*.

MBN was educated in the United States and had extensive training experience with both the FBI and Scotland Yard, making him highly qualified for the role. Over the next three years, al Qaeda launched a sustained terrorism campaign that killed over one hundred people and injured hundreds more. MBN led a ferocious campaign against the terrorists, circling information across the country and hunting al Qaeda. In 2004, the 9/11 Commission reported that “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is now locked in mortal combat with al Qaeda”.⁹⁵

The US military worked with the Saudis to establish a thirty five thousand person military to protect Saudi Arabia’s oil facilities.⁹⁶ By 2005, the US State Department confirmed that the Saudi government captured or killed all but seven of the Kingdom’s most wanted terrorists, as well as most of al Qaeda’s leadership in Saudi Arabia.⁹⁷ In a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee on November 8, 2005, US Treasury official Daniel L. Glaser described KSA as “one of the countries most central to our global counterterrorism efforts”.⁹⁸ Al Qaeda’s presence in the Kingdom quickly dissolved in late 2005.

By 2008, the US and the Kingdom were strongly allied against the threat of counterterrorism. In the same year, the US and Saudi Arabia signed a bilateral agreement on technical counterterrorism cooperation, where the US provides advisors to assist on security measures and assists in training Saudi forces, all funded by Saudi Arabia.⁹⁹ MBN remained commander of the counterterrorism forces and would remain a close ally with US intelligence forces in years to come. George Tenet later credited MBN with winning the 2003-2006 “war” with al Qaeda in the Kingdom.¹⁰⁰ Once again, despite a rocky start, the need to balance against a

⁹⁵ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 373.

⁹⁶ Ottoway, *The King and Us*, 126.

⁹⁷ Prados, *Current Issues and US Relations*, 3.

⁹⁸ Prados, *Current Issues and US Relations*, 3.

⁹⁹ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, January 10, 2016, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, 250.

common threat pushed the US-Saudi alliance closer together, driven by the need to end terrorism in both their lands.

3.3.3 - Military Cooperation

Saudi Arabia's armed forces have relied heavily on the American military for decades, both for arming and training. Joint exercises between the two countries' air forces and armies were common, and many Saudi officers were trained on US soil during the Bush administration. Between 2002 and 2007, nearly five thousand officers were trained by the US military. The US Military Training Mission to Saudi Arabia (USMTM) works with the Kingdom to "assist and advise the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces with respect to the building of military equipment, plans, organization... [and] the conduct of such training".¹⁰¹ In addition, Vinnell Arabia, the US defense contractor, was the primary firm charged with training the Saudi Arabian National Guard.

Between 2002 and 2009, the US sold over \$31 billion worth of American military arms to the Kingdom.¹⁰² For reference, America's second largest customer was Egypt, with \$17 billion in completed sales. While arms sales would play a large role in the economic ties between the US and Saudi Arabia under Presidents Obama and Trump, arms imports were relatively low during the Bush administration. Despite fluctuations, the Kingdom remained the second largest arms importer in the world between 1998 and 2017.¹⁰³ Arms procurement shrunk primarily because the Kingdom was recovering from massive spending during the 1991 Gulf War. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Kingdom ordered large volumes of American weapons.

¹⁰¹ USMTM Mission Statement, available at <http://www.usmtm.sppn.af.mil/>.

¹⁰² A. Trevor Thrall, Jordan Cohen, and Caroline Dorminey. "Power, Profit, or Prudence? US Arms Sales since 9/11." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (2020): 100-26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26915279>, 115.

¹⁰³ Pieter Wezeman, "Saudi Arabia, Armaments and Conflict in the Middle East," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 14, 2018. <https://sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2018/saudi-arabia-armaments-and-conflict-middle-east>.

However, most were not delivered until the late 1990s. As a result, between 2000 and 2004, the Saudi military largely focused on properly integrating these weapons into its forces, rather than purchasing more new arms.

A combination of higher oil prices, perceived regional threats, and counterterrorism pressures led Saudi officials to increase defense spending in the second half of the decade.¹⁰⁴ In 2007, the Bush administration requested Congress's approval for an arms package to the Kingdom and its neighboring Gulf countries worth over \$20 billion. The sale involved attack planes, missiles, and other weaponry of both offensive and defensive natures. Beyond the financial incentives of a major boost to American firms, the arms deal also played into the White House's greater geopolitical strategy. As one senior official told the *Washington Post*:

"This is a big development, because it's part of a larger regional strategy and the maintenance of a strong U.S. presence in the region. We're paying attention to the needs of our allies and what everyone in the region believes is a flexing of muscles by a more aggressive Iran. One way to deal with that is to make our allies and friends strong".¹⁰⁵

3.4 - Exit Bush, Enter Obama

By the end of the Bush administration, the US-Saudi alliance was on shaky ground. The strongest driving force behind the alliance was counterterrorism efforts. MBN had made the Saudi intelligence forces indispensable to the US in the fight against al Qaeda. A war in Lebanon between Israel and Iranian-backed Hezbollah was strengthening Iran's grip on the Levant, further encircling Saudi Arabia and heightening the al Saud family's anxiety. The Arab-Israeli peace process was at a stalemate once again, despite Bush's promise of a two state solution. Insurgency

¹⁰⁴ For more information, see Richard Grimmet, Rep, *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2000-2007*, Congressional Research Service, October 23, 2008. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL34723.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ Robin Wright, "U.S. Plans New Arms Sales to Gulf Allies." *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2007. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/27/AR2007072702454.html>.

and instability in Iraq was quickly turning the country into an Iranian satellite state. The search for bin Laden had gone cold, damaging morale on both sides.

Of the three driving factors, two were in jeopardy. The global financial crisis of 2008 led to a crash in oil prices, slashing the Kingdom's income. In America, unemployment was soaring and millions were losing their homes and life savings. The Saudis were concerned that America's influence in the region was limited due to its military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, which could put the Kingdom in a vulnerable position. Yet, it is clear, in spite of some differences, common interests and enemies between the two nations ensured that the US-Saudi relationship remained strong under Bush.

Chapter 4 - Obama, Abdullah, and Salman

To quote Prince Saud al Faisal, the Saudi Foreign Minister, by the end of the Bush administration, the US-Saudi relationship was a “train wreck”.¹⁰⁶ Oil prices were at record highs, strangling America and its industrial capacity. Iraq and Lebanon were firmly under the hand of Iran, further encircling the Kingdom, and Israel-Palestine peace talks were at a stalemate; the high-level peace conference hosted by Bush in Maryland in 2007 did nothing to move the needle. The only productive aspect of the relationship was in counter terrorism, largely due to MBN’s strong relationship with American security and law enforcement agencies.

About one month before the 2008 presidential election, the financial markets collapsed, causing the worst recession in American history since the Great Depression. Record levels of unemployment and foreclosure were widespread. Oil prices fell from \$147 per barrel in July to \$38 in December 2008, slashing KSA’s income and forcing it to rethink its economy. When President Barack Obama took office in January 2009, he inherited a struggling country. Beyond the economic meltdown, America was engaged in two major ground wars overseas, neither of which were making solid headway. In Iraq, Iranian-sponsored insurgents and al Qaeda soldiers were proving to be a challenge for the US military. The Taliban were regaining strength in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden had fallen off the grid and the hunt was cold.

The new president had notable ties to the Islamic faith. His father was a Kenyan Muslim, and he spent part of his childhood in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country. To show his determination to repair America’s relations with Muslims in the Middle East, Obama flew to Cairo, Egypt, to make a major address in June 2009. Prior to landing in Cairo, Obama flew to

¹⁰⁶ Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 152.

Riyadh to meet with Abdullah, further reinforcing his intention to prioritize the alliance. Obama sought the King's opinion on the most pressing matters in the region. The two leaders discussed Iran, Israel, and Palestine, but again, little progress was made. However, the president's Cairo speech was nothing short of spectacular and provoked glowing reactions across the Arab world. Obama spoke of the "great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world," calling for "a new beginning based on mutual interest and mutual respect".¹⁰⁷ Among a series of promises, the president hoped to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, close Guantanamo Bay, America's notorious and controversial terrorist prison, and bring home all US troops from Iraq.

Under President Obama, America would undergo great changes. Record oil import prices during the Bush administration led to an upsurge in domestic oil production, reducing America's dependence on Saudi oil. Continuing Iranian antagonism and growing nuclear ambitions, combined with the 2011 Arab Spring, would reshape America's role in the Middle East and its relationship with the region's leaders. On the security side, the Obama administration would sell billions of dollars in arms contracts to the Saudis over its eight years. A new terrorist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), would become a challenging new adversary to both the Saudis and the United States. A far deadlier branch of al Qaeda, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), formed from a merger of cells in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, opening a new front in the global fight against terrorism.

King Abdullah passed in 2015, leaving the Kingdom to his half brother, Salman, and his son, Muhammad. While Abdullah was fairly cautious for a monarch, King Salman and his son are much more bold, determined to revitalize the Kingdom and its place in the world. New concerns under Salman, such as Saudi Arabia's human rights record and its role in Yemen led

¹⁰⁷ Barack Obama, "Speech in Cairo to the Muslim World," Speech, June 4, 2009, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>.

many Americans to question the merits of the US-Saudi partnership, as many of the Kingdom's actions did not align with American values.

Eight years after the 9/11 attacks, the US-Saudi alliance remained on unsteady ground. However, the interconnectedness of the American and Saudi systems continued to ensure a strong alliance---the three fundamental pillars of the alliance played a foundational role in this. Despite rifts under Obama, more still united America and the Kingdom than divided them. This chapter will examine how each of the driving factors helped to sustain the US-Saudi alliance under President Obama. As under President Bush, these factors, combined with mutual threats, forced America and the Kingdom closer together.

4.1 - Economic Interdependence

4.1.1 - Oil Relations

The Obama administration oversaw major changes in US energy capabilities, and, as a result, changes in the country's relations with Saudi Arabia. When Obama took office in January 2009, America was pumping 5.1 million barrels per day. In April 2016, America extracted 8.9 million barrels of oil---a nearly 74% jump from 2009.¹⁰⁸ A combination of new technologies, primarily hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling, enabled such a boom. Typically, wells for oil and gas production are vertical, drilling straight through the Earth's surface to reach reserves deep underground. However, this method can be expensive, inefficient, and difficult in America, where many rock layers are solid and incredibly difficult to drill through. In the mid-2000s, US companies began to combine hydraulic fracturing, known as "fracking," and horizontal drilling.

¹⁰⁸ Harold Hamm, "Obama Has Presided Over America's Biggest Oil Boom Ever," CNNMoney, Cable News Network, July 21, 2016.
<https://money.cnn.com/2016/07/21/investing/trump-energy-plan-obama-oil-boom/index.html>.

Fracking is a process where water, sand, and chemicals are injected into the earth at very high pressures, breaking open layers of rock and releasing the oil and gas trapped inside.¹⁰⁹ Horizontal drilling allows oil producers to drill multiple wells from a single location, at different depths, with better accuracy. When these methods are combined, oil and gas can be extracted from massive underground shale rock formations at a reasonable price. As a result, oil imports fell from 30% of total consumption in 2005 to 10% in 2014.¹¹⁰

While historically oil production and security was the main driving force behind the US-Saudi relationship, under Obama, oil's importance in the alliance declined. America was no longer dependent on the Middle East for energy. Should something happen to Saudi Arabia's oil facilities, America could still operate effectively on the global stage with its own reserves. Tom Donilon, Obama's then-national security advisor, explained that "America's new energy posture allows us to engage from a position of greater strength... a cushion that helps reduce our vulnerability to global supply disruptions and price shocks".¹¹¹

Though the US was less dependent on Saudi oil, the Kingdom's petroleum production remained of vital interest to the US; the Persian Gulf produced 30% of the world's oil, and KSA produced one third of that, giving it considerable sway over global oil prices. For most of the seventy year alliance, the Saudis controlled the world oil market, largely due to both its vast reserves and America's backing. As the biggest producer and only one to maintain spare capacity, the Saudis have often used their power to stabilize oil markets by manipulating supply

¹⁰⁹ For an in depth explanation of hydraulic fracturing, see: "Energy and Security: Hydraulic Fracturing" The Strauss Center for International Security and Law, University of Texas at Austin, June 19, 2020. <https://www.strausscenter.org/energy-and-security-project/hydraulic-fracturing/>.

¹¹⁰ "Oil Imports and Exports," U.S. Energy Information Administration, United States Department of Energy, last modified March 2021. <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/oil-and-petroleum-products/imports-and-exports.php>.

¹¹¹ Tom Donilon, "Remarks at the Launch of Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy," Speech, New York, NY, April 24, 2013, White House Archives. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/24/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisor-p-resident-launch-columbia->

to fit both the Kingdom's and America's needs. Despite substantially increasing domestic production, the US still needed the Kingdom to bring stability to global oil markets.

In 2015, America's production surge flooded the market with petroleum, leading to a collapse in oil prices. Oil was hovering around \$55 per barrel, down from the \$90 average between 2011 and 2014.¹¹² For OPEC members, this glut severely strained their countries. Each of the member states primarily relied on oil revenues to finance their regimes, and low prices severely harmed their balance sheets. In the fall, OPEC members wanted to cut production to help increase price by reducing supply. The Saudis refused, knowing that if they cut volumes, their market share would be easily filled by American, Russian, or Iranian oil. In addition, falling oil prices hurt Iran---who has very little excess cash---much more than they hurt the Kingdom. The Saudis boosted production and defended their market share, knowing that with over \$700 billion in the bank, they had sufficient funds to continue operating their country despite a massive reduction in revenue.¹¹³

For the alliance, oil's role had changed, yet it remained a unifying factor. By refusing to cut production, the Saudis were helping the US in its strategy of choking Iran, hoping to force it to come to the negotiation table. After adding several million barrels of oil per day to global markets and driving prices down, the Saudis and the US were able to cut off Iranian oil exports without choking the global economy. International sanctions on Iran further negatively impacted Iran's oil capabilities. Financial sanctions have made it extremely difficult for Iran to attract foreign direct investment, which is needed to extract oil from Iranian soil. Sanctions on Iranian shipping and direct bans on the importation of Iranian crude have further inhibited Tehran's

¹¹² Kimberly Amadeo, "Behind the US Shale Oil Boom and Bust," The Balance, Dotdash, May 1, 2020. <https://www.thebalance.com/us-shale-oil-boom-and-bust-3305553>.

¹¹³ F. Gregory Gause, "Sultans of Swing? The Geopolitics of Falling Oil Prices," (Policy Briefing, Brookings Institution, Doha, Qatar, April 2015). <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/falling-oil-prices-english.pdf>, 2.

production. The US-Saudi effort to squeeze Iran played a large role in the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal. Signed by Iran and the Western powers in July 2015, the JCPOA provided sanctions relief to Iran in exchange for oversight of Iran's peaceful nuclear developments. Though no longer the key driver of the US-Saudi alliance, shared interests in oil production, pricing, and the global market kept the states together.

4.1.2 - Financial Ties

Many of the financial ties that existed under the Bush administration, such as the Kingdom's investments in the US and many Saudi-American joint ventures, remained relevant during the Obama years. By the end of 2016, the Kingdom estimated that it had invested \$1 trillion in America, including in government debt and US equity holdings.¹¹⁴ That is over one third of all of the Kingdom's international investments.

In 2014, about 90% of the Saudi government's revenue came from petroleum exports.¹¹⁵ Falling oil prices led to a reckoning for the Kingdom: despite having sufficient funds to ride out brief price collapses in oil, KSA's economy could not sustain itself without high oil revenues. In addition to growing competition in the oil market and the growing shift towards renewable energy, Saudi Arabia faced a demographic challenge, as more than half of the Saudi population is younger than 25, meaning demands for employment were going to explode in the next decade.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Hadley Gamble and Tom DiChristopher, "Saudi Oil Minister Praises Trump 'Bond,' Says US Relationship Has Never Been Better." CNBC, March 17, 2017. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/03/17/saudi-us-ties-stronger-than-ever-countries-see-eye-to-eye-on-iran-saudi-oil-minister-says.html>.

¹¹⁵ Gassan Al-Kibsi, et al., "Saudi Arabia Beyond Oil: The Investment and Productivity Transformation." Rep. McKinsey Global Institute, London, UK, December 2015. https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/employment%20and%20growth/moving%20saudi%20arabias%20economy%20beyond%20oil/mgi%20saudi%20arabia_full%20report_december%202015.ashx

¹¹⁶ Al-Kibsi et al., "Saudi Arabia Beyond Oil."

MBS and Salman recognized that the Kingdom was in need of large scale economic reforms, which resulted in a new strategic framework: Vision 2030.

Announced by MBS in April 2016, Vision 2030's key goals include reducing the Kingdom's dependence on oil through economic diversification, investment in non-oil international trade, and the development of new sectors within the Kingdom, such as healthcare, recreation, and tourism. To achieve these goals, the Vision 2030 relies heavily on foreign direct investment (FDI). As will be seen under the Trump administration, many US firms increased their financial ties with the Kingdom under Vision 2030. The Kingdom widened its investments in the US as well, agreeing to \$40 billion in infrastructure investments in the first several months of the Trump administration.¹¹⁷

4.2 - Geopolitical Concerns

4.1.1 - On the Heels of Cairo

During his first two years in office, Obama worked to uphold the promises he made during his Cairo speech. Direct negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas aimed to reach an official "final status settlement" to the conflict. The leaders hoped to create a separate state for the Palestinian people while keeping Israel a Jewish state. However, by the end of 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the peace process had broken down after the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that declared Israel's settlements in the Palestinian-majority Gaza Strip illegal. In the second half of Obama's presidency, new Secretary of State John Kerry would try again to restart negotiations with little success.

¹¹⁷ Tom DiChristopher, "Saudis Reportedly Plan to Invest \$40 Billion in US Infrastructure." CNBC, May 11, 2017. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/11/saudis-reportedly-plan-to-invest-40-billion-in-us-infrastructure.html>.

Obama's greatest concern, however, was Iran's accelerating pursuit of nuclear weapons and regional hegemony. The Saudis shared these concerns, frustrated that Bush's actions in Iraq had strengthened Iran's influence in the Arab world. In the last months of the Bush administration, leaked cables showed that the Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel al-Jubeir, "recalled the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program" at a meeting between him, King Abdullah, General David Petraeus, the top US military commander in the Middle East, and several other American and Saudi politicians.¹¹⁸ In response, Secretary of State Robert Gates explained that the United States had its hands full in Iraq and Afghanistan and could not pursue a war with Iran.

Despite declining the King's request, Gates understood the dangers of Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and President Obama kept him as Defense Secretary in his own cabinet. Other GCC nations shared the same fears towards Iran's nuclear ambitions. In another leaked cable, Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, the King of Bahrain, told the White House that Iran's nuclear program "must be stopped" and that "the danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it".¹¹⁹ If Iran gained nuclear weapons, only the narrow Persian Gulf separated Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC from nuclear annihilation. In addition, Obama and Gates feared that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons could lead to a major regional war. It was very possible that if Iran grew close to completing a nuclear weapon, the Israelis would take military action to stop it, as it did in Iraq in 1981 and in Syria in 2007. Both the White House and the Saudis agreed that if such an attack occurred, the Kingdom would likely be attacked to draw the US into the conflict. Gates later recalled that the leaders feared that an Iranian-Israeli conflict would force the US "to be

¹¹⁸ Dan Perry, "Israel Says Arabs Agree on Iran Threat." *The Seattle Times*, November 30, 2010. <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/israel-says-arabs-agree-on-iran-threat/>.

¹¹⁹ David Sanger, James Glanz, and Jo Becker, "Around the World, Distress Over Iran." *New York Times*, November 28, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/world/middleeast/29iran.html>.

drawn in to finish the job or to deal with Iranian retaliatory attacks against... our friends in the region,” provoking a regional war.¹²⁰ Gates’s “friends” largely referred to the Saudis.

4.1.3 - The Arab Spring and its Aftermath

The series of revolutions known as the Arab Spring sparked a major turning point in the geopolitics of the Middle East. Leaders across the region fell from power, creating political vacuums. Iran and Saudi Arabia both rushed to support states that fit their interests. The uprisings began in Tunisia in late 2010, where President Zine el Abedine Ben Ali fell in a matter of days. He stepped down on January 14, 2011 after twenty four years in power. Ben Ali, a close friend of King Abdullah, was invited to exile in Saudi Arabia, where he remains today. While the Tunisian revolution was a shock, it was not a serious concern for the Saudis; political instability was a common occurrence in the Middle East. However, no leader could have anticipated the explosion of protests in early 2011. As former CIA Director Leon Panetta wrote, CIA analysts had noticed tensions in the region “long before they blew... [but] we did not anticipate the flash points or the speed with which events might unfold”.¹²¹ During the Obama administration, the Arab Spring and its aftermath would prove to be the most divisive geopolitical issue for the alliance. The spread of democracy across the Middle East unsettled the Saudi monarchy, who pleaded with the US to intervene.

The protests in Tunisia quickly spread to Egypt, the most populous Arab nation and a close ally of both America and Saudi Arabia. On January 25, 2011, massive protests erupted in Cairo demanding the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. Within three days, the military was called to restore order. Inside the White House, advisors were split on how to respond to its

¹²⁰ Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 387.

¹²¹ Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 301.

friend's crisis. For three decades, Mubarak had been a strong ally, sending troops to defend KSA from Iraq in 1990, helping to maintain peace with Israel, and openly criticizing Iran's behavior. Behind the scenes, Robert Gates, Hillary Clinton, Vice President Joe Biden, and Tom Donilon pushed for patience, hoping for a smooth transition of power and little violence.¹²² The president's national security advisers, Dennis McDonough and Ben Rhodes, along with homeland security chief John Brennan, advocated for an intervention and a rapid change in leadership.

Rather than defend his ally, Obama chose to allow democracy to prevail. His message to Egypt was clear: the United States would no longer provide assistance to Egypt in any capacity if force and violence were used to keep Mubarak in power. Four days later, on January 29, Mubarak fired his cabinet and made Omar Sulaiman, his intelligence chief, vice president. For US officials, this was a frustrating move, as it forced them to decide whether to protect a loyal ally or to protect his people and their ability to exercise the same civil rights that are considered fundamental American values. In hopes of encouraging Mubarak to step down, Obama sent Frank Wisner, the respected former ambassador to Egypt, to speak with the president on January 31. The White House wanted Mubarak to pledge not to run again and begin a peaceful transition to Sulaiman, but Mubarak refused to leave office until his term expired in September. Two days later, in a televised address, President Obama demanded that the transition "must begin now". The protestors, emboldened by Obama's words, grew more aggressive with their demands. The army refused to intervene and Mubarak resigned on February 11.

The Arab world's most populous country was about to begin its own democratic experiment. In a speech following the transition, Obama announced that "the arc of history has

¹²² Gates, *Duty*, 504.

bent towards justice once more”. While many around the world saw the fall of Mubarak as a victory, the Saudis and other Gulf monarchs were appalled by America’s actions in Egypt. The Saudis in particular “blamed the United States, which they saw as having abandoned a loyal ally”.¹²³ Not only had America abandoned a loyal ally, but it helped force the same ally from office. The question among the Gulf States was: if Obama could easily dispense with Mubarak, could he do the same to them?

In February, the House of Saud began taking measures to ensure there would be no demonstrations on its soil. Abdallah announced the Kingdom would devote \$37 million to building new homes, schools, and mosques. A month later, he promised another \$93 billion to build more housing and provide jobs for more Saudis. All public sector employees---the majority of the Saudi workforce---received large pay bonuses. Buying the population, for \$130 billion, worked; there were very few protests in the Kingdom.¹²⁴

Abdullah’s insurance tactics proved to be the right decision. Days after announcing the aid package, more than 100,000 people gathered in the center of Manama, the capital city of neighboring Bahrain. Like Saudi Arabia, the small, oil-rich island nation of Bahrain is ruled by the Khalifas, a Sunni family. However, unlike KSA, Bahrain has a majority Shia population, who had periodically staged demonstrations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The House of Saud saw the uprising in Bahrain as a threat to itself as much as Bahrain---if the Shia majority took power in Bahrain, KSA faced two dire consequences. First, a Shia power in the Gulf could inspire unrest in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, which shares a border with Bahrain, is the largest primarily Shia region in the Kingdom, and home to most of the country’s oil reserves. Any unrest

¹²³ Gause, “The Future of US-Saudi Relations,” 118.

¹²⁴ Neil MacFarquhar, “In Saudi Arabia, Royal Funds Buy Peace for Now,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/world/middleeast/09saudi.html>.

in the Eastern Province could upend Saudi Arabia's oil production and global markets. Second, if Sunni Bahrain fell to a Shia, Iran could gain a strong foothold on the Arabian Peninsula and directly on Saudi Arabia's border. As Secretary Clinton wrote, the Saudis "saw the hidden hand of Iran... they worried that their large adversary across the water was fomenting unrest in order to weaken their government".¹²⁵

Once again, America was in a difficult position. Like Egypt, Bahrain had been an American ally for decades. Like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain had given up some of its land and autonomy in exchange for protection under the US military. The US Navy began operating out of Bahrain in 1947 and its port is now home to the Fifth Fleet, which is responsible for operations in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, including providing protection for Gulf oil transports. Naturally, the Navy wanted to keep the Khalifas in power. However, the White House was concerned with the image of America protecting a minority leader hated by so many of his subjects. At the same time, Washington feared the impact a lack of intervention could have on its alliance with the Saudis, as Bahrain was geographically much closer to Saudi Arabia and a stronger ally than Hosni Mubarak had been.

Rather than waiting for US assistance, on March 14, 1,200 Saudi troops crossed the causeway connecting Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. One Saudi official vowed that "Bahrain will get whatever assistance it needs... it's open ended".¹²⁶ Helicopters, tanks, and armored vehicles easily quashed the demonstrations and cleared the city center. Saudi forces continued to police Bahrain for years after the uprisings ended. For the House of Saud, supporting the Khalifas demonstrated that the Kingdom was willing to protect all Gulf

¹²⁵ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 158.

¹²⁶ Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html>.

monarchies from sectarian strife, sending a message to both Iran and its own Shia population. During the uprisings, Obama called Abdullah and urged him to restrain from harsh repression tactics. Abdullah's response highlighted the fear the Saudis felt towards Iranian encroachment: "Saudi Arabia will never allow Shia rule in Bahrain---never".¹²⁷

As the Arab Spring spread throughout the region, uprisings against President Bashar al Assad of Syria were growing. However, unlike Egypt and Bahrain, Syria had been a strong Iranian ally since 1980. When revolution engulfed Syria in March 2011, the House of Saud backed the rebels, hoping to replace Assad with a Sunni strongman to extend the Kingdom's influence and simultaneously cut back Iran's. Abdullah tasked Prince Bandar, known for being a dealmaker, with leading the Kingdom's efforts to topple the Assad regime. Bandar's involvement was a sign of how serious the Saudis were about this goal: Bandar was seen "jetting from covert command centers near the Syrian front lines to the Élysée Palace in Paris and the Kremlin in Moscow, seeking to undermine the Assad regime".¹²⁸ The conflict soon erupted into a bloody civil war that still rages today. Between 2012 and 2016, it was estimated that the Saudis bought and smuggled arms worth more than \$1 billion into Syria to aid the rebels.¹²⁹

The Syrian Civil War proved to be a unifying factor for the US-Saudi alliance. Both wanted to see the collapse of the Assad regime and to take away a key Iranian ally. To encourage this process, President Obama authorized Operation Timber Sycamore in late 2012. Run by the CIA's Special Activities Division, the operation's main objectives were supplying and training

¹²⁷ Martin Indyk, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), Pp 157-158.

¹²⁸ Adam Entous, Nour Malas, and Margaret Coker, "A Veteran Saudi Power Player Works To Build Support to Topple Assad," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2013.
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323423804579024452583045962>.

¹²⁹ Ivan Angeloveski, Miranda Patrucic, and Lawrence Marzouk, "Revealed: The £1bln of Weapons Flowing from Europe to the Middle East," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/27/weapons-flowing-eastern-europe-middle-east-revealed-arms-trade-syria>.

Syrian rebels. The Saudis provided most of the funding and weaponry while the United States led military training.¹³⁰ Though eventually decommissioned in 2017 by President Donald Trump, Operation Timber Sycamore brought the US and the Kingdom together during a period of strong frustration on both sides.

4.1.3 - Obama, Salman, and Iran

In the years following the Arab Spring, Abdullah's health deteriorated. The King had ruled Saudi Arabia---both as a de facto ruler and King---for over twenty years. As a strong but cautious leader, the King helped Saudi Arabia navigate the international sphere in the wake of 9/11 and the Iraq War. Despite rifts with both Presidents Bush and Obama, Abdullah was a patient leader and a firm believer in the US-Saudi partnership and helped to ensure its durability. The King died on January 23, 2015.

Following the death of Abdullah, his half-brother, Salman, took the throne. The 25th son of King Ibn Saud had served as governor of Riyadh for 48 years before being appointed Minister of Defense in 2011, where he oversaw the Kingdom's response to the Arab Spring. In his first months in office, the King made unprecedented changes to the power structure of the Kingdom. In April 2015, the King appointed his nephew, Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN), the interior minister, as the new crown prince, and his son, Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) as the new deputy crown prince. MBS, at 35 years old, was also appointed Saudi Arabia's defense minister.

Under Salman, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry steadily increased. The first challenge for the King and his defense minister was the worsening situation in Yemen. Uprisings in Yemen during

¹³⁰ Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?_r=0.

the Arab Spring forced longtime authoritarian Ali Abdullah Saleh to cede power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, in 2011. Saudi Arabia, working with other Gulf countries, had coordinated the political process that brought Hadi, a Sunni, to power. Though a national dialogue was instituted to resolve the country's divisions, little progress was made. Internal problems, such as attacks by jihadists, corruption, and an insurgency movement in the north weakened the power transition and led to widespread disillusionment with the new government.

Saleh, who refused to exile in 2011, began secretly colluding with the northern insurgents, the Shia Houthis, in 2014. Though Hadi led the country, much of Yemen's military remained loyal to Saleh and his family, giving Hadi and the Houthis formidable military power. In January 2015, Yemen's capital city, Sanaa, fell to the rebel alliance. Hadi was placed under house arrest and the Yemeni parliament was dissolved. Iran began openly supporting the Houthis almost immediately: direct commercial flights between Sanaa and Tehran operated daily and Iran promised to build an electrical power plant in Yemen and provide cheap oil.¹³¹ Both the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah had strong connections with the Houthis. It is estimated that Iran provides over \$20 million in aid each year to the Houthis, plus hours of military training for its fighters.¹³² With Tehran's backing and supplies, the rebels began marching towards Aden, the largest port on the Arabian Sea.

With Iran again gaining a foothold on the Saudi border, Salman and MBS chose to go to war to support Hadi and prevent Iran and the Houthis from consolidating control of Yemen. The King and his son put together a coalition of the Gulf monarchies (except Oman), Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and some African states to restore Hadi's rule. On March 25, 2015, MBS

¹³¹ Bruce Riedel, "Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?" Brookings Institution, December 18, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>.

¹³² Katherine Zimmerman, "Signaling Saudi Arabia: Iranian Support to Yemen's Al Houthis," Critical Threats, American Enterprise Institute, April 15, 2016. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/signaling-saudi-arabia-iranian-support-to-yemens-al-houthis>.

announced the beginning of Operation Decisive Storm, and the coalition began bombing Saleh and the Houthis across Yemen. In response, the Houthis launched missiles across the Saudi-Yemeni border.

In the choice between the Saudis and the Houthis, Obama backed the Saudis and the seventy year alliance. The Royal Saudi Air Force was entirely outfitted with American and British aircraft and munitions to stop the rebellion. The war could not continue without the backing of Washington and London. In the years since 2015, the Yemen war has been fought with little progress on either side. Airstrikes by coalition forces have killed thousands of civilians. Blockades have choked supply chains to Yemen, leading almost ten million Yemenis to be considered “one step away from famine” by the United Nations.¹³³

In the eyes of the Kingdom, Iran was the dominant power in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and soon would be in Yemen. Isolation, the Saudis believed, was the best tactic to control Tehran and prevent it from achieving regional hegemony. Therefore, when the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany chose to lift sanctions imposed on Iran by the UN in exchange for a nuclear accord, the Saudis were uneasy, but not enraged. The Saudis were more concerned with Iran’s growing influence than its nuclear capabilities, as the Saudis believe they are protected under the American nuclear umbrella. In the months leading up to the signing of the nuclear deal, Defense Secretary Ash Carter traveled to Saudi Arabia to discuss the nuclear deal. Carter said that the Saudis “welcomed” the deal, as long as the United States continued to maintain strong relations with the Kingdom.¹³⁴ Derek Chollet, an assistant secretary of defense,

¹³³ “Yemen Crisis: Why Is There a War?” BBC News. BBC, June 19, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

¹³⁴ Helene Cooper, “Saudi Arabia Approves of Iran Nuclear Deal, U.S. Defense Chief Says,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/23/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-deal-saudi-arabia.html>.

revealed that the Saudis “were never hellbent against the negotiations... they just wanted to be sure we had their back”.¹³⁵

On the surface, US-Saudi relations under Obama were marred with more public divisions than during the Bush administration. The Arab Spring tested the relations between the two states. By the end of the Obama administration, the sectarian conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia burned fiercely, with the United States stuck in the middle. However, outside of the public eye, the alliance remained strong. America and Saudi Arabia cooperated closely in Syria and Yemen. Obama had prioritized the House of Saud’s feelings when negotiating the Iran nuclear accord to ensure that its ally was satisfied with the agreement. Though the relationship was rocky at times, President Obama understood the importance that the shared geopolitical interests between America and the Kingdom held.

4.3 - Security Implications

As Obama was arriving in the Middle East in 2009, Osama bin Laden and his Egyptian deputy, Ayman Zawahiri, released messages to the world. From their hideouts in Pakistan, both leaders called on Muslims to shun Obama and America and to continue their path of global jihad. Bin Laden’s message was a grim reminder that, eight years after 9/11, al Qaeda remained a strong, dangerous force in the Middle East that would hold the White House’s attention for the next eight years. As John Brennan, Obama’s CIA Director, remarked, “Saudi Arabia is among our closest counterterrorism partners” and played a large role in rolling back al Qaeda’s influence in the region.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ John Brennan, “CIA’s Strategy in the Face of Emerging Challenges: Remarks by CIA Director John O. Brennan,” Speech, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, July 13, 2016.

The counter terrorism relationship formed under the Bush administration continued to expand under Obama, Abdullah, and later Salman. In stark contrast to Bush, however, Obama sought to distance himself from the overreliance on force that characterized the Bush era and led to the stalemate in Iraq. Obama's approach relied on a combination of targeted killings, intense surveillance, and security assistance to military and intelligence countries in partner states. By 2008, Saudi Arabia was a vital partner in America's efforts against al Qaeda and was a major beneficiary of Obama's security assistance policy. During the Obama administration, the president offered the Kingdom over \$115 billion in weapons, military equipment and training.¹³⁷

In April 2015, the US State Department credited the Saudi government with working to "maintain a robust counterterrorism relationship with the United States" including "enhanced bilateral cooperation".¹³⁸ New challenges, including the emergence of ISIS and AQAP, would test the US-Saudi alliance during the Obama years. Continued strategic security cooperation between both states would continue to anchor relations between the two states. Bilateral ties were bolstered by major new arms sales, security training agreements, counterterrorism cooperation, and shared concerns about ISIS and al Qaeda. The security challenges posed during Obama's time in office would further prove that the alliance is critical to both sides' survival.

4.3.1 - Al Qaeda's Continued Danger

In the summer of 2009, a Saudi al Qaeda operative named Abdullah al Asiri asked to defect to the Kingdom and offered to provide inside information on al Qaeda's organization in

¹³⁷ Yara Bayoumy, "Obama Administration Arms Sales Offers to Saudi Top \$115 Billion: Report," Reuters, Thomson Reuters, September 7, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-security/obama-administration-arms-sales-offers-to-saudi-top-115-billion-report-idUSKCN11D2JQ>.

¹³⁸ United States Department of State. Rep. *Country Reports on Terrorism: Saudi Arabia*. U.S. Government Printing Office, June 19, 2015. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5587c74115.html>

Yemen. Earlier that year, after its defeat in Saudi Arabia, al Qaeda terrorists inside KSA merged with the branch in Yemen to form AQAP. Both US and Saudi officials considered AQAP to be the most dangerous branch of al Qaeda, making it impossible to deny al Asiri's request. Al Asiri promised to give secret information on the merged network if he got to meet with MBN, the interior minister and head of Saudi intelligence forces. However, when MBN and al Asiri met, the meeting did not go as expected. Unknown to the Saudis, al Asiri's brother was among the most talented AQAP bomb makers and had hidden a bomb in al Asiri's rectum. Luckily, when the bomb exploded during the meeting, only al Asiri was killed, but the event underscored the threats that the House of Saud still faced, despite almost entirely removing al Qaeda from Saudi soil.

In 2010, the US-Saudi alliance publicly announced one of its great victories against AQAP. In early October, Saudi intelligence officials warned the US that AQAP was planning a terrorist attack against America. The Saudis' warning came several days after American officials intercepted several packages containing books, papers, and other seemingly innocuous items shipped from Yemen to Chicago. American officials assumed these shipments were a test run for terrorists. The Saudis provided tracking numbers for packages sent from Yemen for the next month, and on October 29, two bombs were intercepted in Dubai and England containing multiple ounces of PETN, one of the most powerful explosives known.¹³⁹ This last minute intelligence was the product of long-running Saudi intelligence operations to infiltrate AQAP.

In early 2011, Rahm Emanuel, White House Chief of Staff, received a call from CIA Director Panetta, who said, "I've got to see the president. I've got to see him today and I can't talk to you about what." When Emanuel asked for a reason for the last minute meeting, Panetta

¹³⁹ Eric Schmitt and Scott Shane, "Saudis Warned U.S. of Attack Before Parcel Bomb Plot." *The New York Times*, November 5, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/06/world/middleeast/06terror.html>.

said “I can’t on the phone,” highlighting the gravity of the situation.¹⁴⁰ Emanuel invited Panetta to the White House, who showed the chief and the president a series of photos of a remote compound in Pakistan and told the president that the CIA believed Osama Bin Laden was hiding in the compound. The compound was less than a mile from Pakistan’s Kakul Military Academy, the equivalent of America’s West Point. Knowing this, Obama decided to keep the operation against bin Laden secret from the Pakistani government. The president believed that if the Pakistanis learned that the CIA had found bin Laden, he would be alerted and the trail would grow cold once again.

Hunting bin Laden was a priority for both the Saudis and the Obama administration. As US Navy Admiral Bill McRaven later recalled, the president made this clear from his early days in office. McRaven, the architect of the raid that killed bin Laden, explained that Obama had said, “I want to put a priority on finding Osama bin Laden... this is my number one priority in terms of fighting al Qaeda. Put whatever resources you need into it”.¹⁴¹ Obama wanted to bring the mastermind behind the attacks on September 11 to justice. For the Saudis, bin Laden and al Qaeda were a threat to their legitimacy. In addition to bin Laden’s long history of blatant calls to overthrow the House of Saud, al Qaeda attacks in the Kingdom had killed hundreds of Saudis over the years, making the royal family look weak. At one in the morning on May 2, 2011, US Navy SEALs raided bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan and killed the man they believed to be bin Laden. Several hours later, McRaven confirmed that the man was bin Laden. The charismatic leader behind some of the deadliest terrorist attacks in history was dead.

¹⁴⁰ “Bin Laden: Priority Number One,” *The Obama Years: A Nine-Part Oral History*, History Channel, 2017. <https://www.history.com/the-obama-years/bin-laden.html>.

¹⁴¹ “Bin Laden, Priority Number One.”

4.3.2 - *The Birth of ISIS*

Without bin Laden's leadership, al Qaeda began to splinter. Though AQAP was the most dangerous al Qaeda cell, its Iraqi faction was the strongest and most unified. Created by Abu Musaib al Zarqawi after the 2003 invasion, the group was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of troops and civilians. Though Zarqawi was killed by American forces in 2006, the group's new leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, continued leading al Qaeda operations in Iraq. In 2014, al Baghdadi broke with bin Laden's Egyptian heir Ayman Zawahiri, and announced that his new group, ISIS, was the rightful heir to bin Laden. His forces quickly took Mosul, a large Iraqi city, where Baghdadi declared himself caliph, or leader of ISIS's caliphate---an Islamic state that strictly operates under Islamic law. ISIS declared that all pious Sunnis owed their allegiance to ISIS and that ISIS was the rightful custodian of Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina; directly challenging the legitimacy of the House of Saud.

Among al Baghdadi's first calls was to overthrow the House of Saud and end the monarchy. Much of ISIS's propaganda, including its digital magazine *Dabiq*, includes anti-Saudi imagery, such as pictures of the Kaaba in Mecca with the Islamic State's flag flying over it. Recognizing this threat, Abdullah hosted an international conference in September 2014, hoping to form an international coalition to fight ISIS. At that meeting, the US, Saudi Arabia, and many of the Gulf monarchies formed the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which has now grown to over eighty members. Beginning on September 22, 2014, the Royal Saudi Air Force, the US Air Force, and other coalition allies began bombing ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.

Through 2015, ISIS expanded aggressively in Iraq and Syria, raising the Saudis level of concern. Salman and MBS have made combating ISIS a priority since taking the throne. ISIS terrorists have attacked Shia mosques, Saudi security forces, and civilians within the Kingdom.

In addition, ISIS has openly called for Saudi subjects to assassinate senior members of the Saudi royal family.¹⁴² With US guidance, the Saudi government has taken strong steps in response.¹⁴³ Between 2014 and 2016, the Kingdom arrested over 1,600 suspected ISIS supporters. Supported by US security cooperation efforts, the Kingdom prevented several attacks against both Saudis and foreign targets.¹⁴⁴ The Kingdom has implemented better systems to monitor and stop Saudi citizens from traveling abroad to fight with radical groups and support the Islamic State. In December 2015, MBS announced that KSA would lead a 34-nation coalition to confront and defeat terrorist threats, called the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism. This was largely inspired by a series of videos released by ISIS in mid-December condemning the House of Saud as apostate tyrants, encouraging ISIS supporters to overthrow the government.

4.3.3 - Arms Sales and Security Training

In March 2010, Defense Secretary Gates flew to Riyadh to meet with Abdullah. After a long dinner, Gates and the king agreed to a \$60 billion arms sale---the largest ever to the Kingdom. The package would include fighter planes, attack helicopters, and a variety of new weapons. By the end of Obama's time in office, the administration will have offered more than \$115 billion in weapons, military equipment, and training; more than any other administration in the alliance's history.¹⁴⁵ The Saudi military is almost entirely outfitted with US military equipment, highlighting the Kingdom's dependence on the US.

¹⁴² Daniel Byman to the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The US-Saudi Counterterrorism Relationship*. Hearing, May 24, 2016. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>

¹⁴³ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Saudi Arabia," U.S. Department of State, January 14, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-saudi-arabia/>.

¹⁴⁴ Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia Arrests 431 People With Suspected Islamic State Links," *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-arrests-431-people-with-suspected-islamic-state-links-1437227998>.

¹⁴⁵ Bayoumy, "Obama Administration Arms Sales."

In addition to providing the Kingdom with most of its weaponry, the US led the initiative to modernize the Kingdom's military forces under the Obama administration. The massive arms sale in 2010 included the announcement that the Royal Saudi Air Force would reconstitute its main fighting forces with US F-15 fighter jets and other offensive aircraft. President Obama tasked the United States Military Training Mission inside the Kingdom with training the Saudi military on these new weapons. This was part of the joint Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program, which, over the course of the Obama administration, significantly strengthened the Kingdom's military capabilities. The program included the necessary training, logistics, support, and force integration for the Saudis' new weapons systems.¹⁴⁶ The Defense Department championed the deal's implications for both US and Saudi security, stating that the deal would "contribute to the foreign policy and national security of the United States by making a key regional ally and partner in the international fight against terrorism more capable of defeating those who would threaten regional stability".¹⁴⁷

At a US-GCC summit at Camp David in 2015, Secretary of State Kerry underscored the US's commitment to the Gulf States' security interests, announcing several new joint working groups "to expedite the delivery of capabilities needed to deter and combat regional threats, including terrorism and Iran's destabilizing activities in the region".¹⁴⁸ For Saudi Arabia, these promises were crucial---terrorist groups had a larger presence on Saudi soil than any other GCC member state. Terrorist groups actively undermined the Kingdom more than any other Gulf

¹⁴⁶ "Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program." Defense Security Cooperation Agency. U.S. Department of Defense, June 20, 2013.
<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/saudi-arabia-saudi-arabian-national-guard-modernization-program>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Secretary of State Kerry to Members of Congress, published by United States Institute of Peace – The Iran Primer: "The Final Pitch: New Appeal to Congress," September 2, 2015.

monarchy. Threats to KSA were more legitimate than any other GCC state, leading the Kingdom to attach closer to its biggest security partner: the United States.

4.4 - Major Changes: Obama to Trump

Barack Obama understood the importance of the US-Saudi relationship to America's global interests. Though the relationship had highs and lows, the president always prioritized keeping the Saudis happy and informed on America's actions. Obama and his administration defended the Saudis against accusations of their knowledge of the 9/11 plot, refusing to declassify a Senate report on the allegations. He also vetoed a bill that would have allowed family members of 9/11 victims to sue Saudi Arabia. Obama visited the Kingdom more than any other country in the Middle East, and more than any president before him. Though cooperation remained close between the two parties, relations had largely soured by 2016.

Obama had failed to deliver on his promise of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. He reduced America's presence in Iraq, which contributed to the rise of ISIS. During the Arab Spring, the Saudis perceived that the president was willing to let uprisings topple American allies, leading the royal family to question America's loyalty. Though the Saudis publicly endorsed the Iran nuclear deal, behind the scenes, they feared that negotiations would lead to an open dialogue between the US and Iran, and potentially an American pivot away from the Kingdom and towards Tehran. Though they were not a major driving factor in the alliance, the Saudis did not enjoy Obama's calls for political reform and human rights in the Kingdom. In November 2016, America voted in Donald Trump, a president who would show little care for Saudi Arabia's internal affairs, instead focusing on the alliance's three driving factors: economics, geopolitics, and security concerns.

Chapter 5 - Trump and Salman

On May 20, 2017, Air Force One touched down in Saudi Arabia, carrying the recently inaugurated President Donald Trump. The trip to the Kingdom was the new president's first foreign visit, showing the importance Trump placed on the relationship. The Saudi reception at the airport included a red carpet, a herd of horsemen, and a formal welcome by the Saudi color guard. As the presidential motorcade drove to Riyadh from the airport, billboards and skyscrapers had Trump's image plastered across them. Trump attended three summits in Riyadh: one with King Salman, one with the six leaders from the GCC, and one with Muslim leaders from around the world. By the end of the trip, Trump had met with all of the key figures in the Saudi government as well as many from the other Gulf States. After the trip, the Saudis, in an official statement, called Trump a "true friend of Muslims" and that the meeting marked "a significant shift in relations" across all fields.¹⁴⁹ The White House agreed to "further strengthen the United States-Saudi strategic relationship".¹⁵⁰ Following the summits, it was clear to both sides that the relationship under Trump would be a departure from his predecessors.

In the early days of the Trump administration, the Kingdom was undergoing a series of changes. By June 2017, eighty year old King Salman's political maneuvering had placed most of the power within the Saudi system in the hands of his son, MBS, who is now the de facto ruler of the Kingdom. Trump called personally to congratulate MBS on being named the new Crown Prince. Since the founding of the Kingdom, the power had consistently been in the hands of Ibn Saud's sons; now, MBS is the first grandson to control KSA. Under the banner of generational

¹⁴⁹ Josh Rogin, "Trump Resets US-Saudi Relations, in Saudi Arabia's Favor," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/03/16/trump-resets-u-s-saudi-relations-in-saudi-arabias-favor/>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

change, MBS has completely restructured much of the domestic social and political order. The Crown Prince has implemented many policies of social liberalization focused on youth and women. MBS's Vision 2030 has focused on economic diversification to lessen the country's dependence on oil exports. In addition, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy under MBS has become increasingly more aggressive, as the Kingdom is now asserting itself as a regional power, leading an anti-Islamist, anti-Iranian alliance of Arab states. While there have been some notable accomplishments, MBS's actions have led many in the US to question the merits of alignment with a leader who does not believe in US values.¹⁵¹

MBS has also ordered ruthless crackdowns on dissidents, royal rivals, and business elites, further distancing himself from American values. Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist who openly criticised the crown prince, was murdered directly on the orders of MBS in 2018, the CIA concluded.¹⁵² In a strange demonstration of loyalty to the Saudis, despite clear evidence, President Trump never held MBS responsible for the murder, instead stating "it could be very well that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event---maybe he did and maybe he didn't".¹⁵³ MBS's actions, and Trump's response, sparked both domestic and international outcry.

Despite rising questions about the future of Saudi Arabia under MBS, a working bilateral relationship is still in the US's national interest. This chapter will analyze how the three fundamental pillars of the US-Saudi alliance ensured strong relations between MBS and President Trump. Though the US continues to depend less on Saudi oil, America still retains significant interest in ensuring the free flow of oil from the region to the global market, which

¹⁵¹ Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, "It Wasn't Just Khashoggi: A Saudi Prince's Brutal Drive to Crush Dissent," *New York Times*, March 17, 2019.

¹⁵² Julian Barnes, "C.I.A. Concludes That Saudi Crown Prince Ordered Khashoggi Killed," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/politics/cia-saudi-crown-prince-khashoggi.html>.

¹⁵³ Office of the Press Secretary, "President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia," Statement, *CNN*, November 20, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/20/politics/trump-statement-saudi-khashoggi>.

influences prices. In addition, to continue to “make America great again,” President Trump recognized that foreign investment in the US was crucial. With a trillion-dollar sovereign wealth fund, the Kingdom holds enormous economic clout; keeping the House of Saud investing in the country was therefore critical to US interests.

Furthermore, both states hope to counter Iran’s geopolitical and nuclear goals, which can be achieved through collaboration. Neither the Saudi or US security apparatuses could sufficiently protect the region from terrorists or other adversaries without close cooperation. A strong working relationship, therefore, is necessary for serving both states’ geopolitical and security interests. As the largest and most powerful Gulf State, the success of MBS’s socioeconomic changes will have implications for the entire region. An unstable Saudi Arabia, whether due to MBS’s failed reforms, terrorist attacks, or internal strife, could disrupt the global economy, embolden jihadi groups, create a dangerous power vacuum in the Gulf, and have profound damage to US interests.

5.1 - Economic Ties

Despite such significant strides towards American energy self-sufficiency, the Saudis continue to play a central role in global energy markets. Saudi cooperation on oil pricing would be decisive for economic growth under President Trump. Oil is both a unifying factor and source of tension in the US-Saudi relationship. Mutual reliance on oil export revenues creates parallel interests for both states, yet for the Saudis, the stakes are much higher, as the Kingdom remains dependent on oil export revenues for most of its national budget. However, MBS’s Vision 2030 seeks to diversify the Kingdom’s revenues away from oil, largely by closely cooperating with the

United States. The financial ties created under both Presidents Bush and Obama would only tighten under President Trump.

5.1.1 - Oil: Boom and Bust

President Trump entered office during a period of comparatively stable oil prices. In his first two and a half years, prices ranged between \$44 and \$86 per barrel, while in Obama's first two and a half years, prices fell to nearly \$39 per barrel, then climbed to \$127 per barrel.¹⁵⁴ For the president's domestic economic vision---including massive investments in infrastructure and manufacturing---energy independence was fundamental. By the numbers, oil production surged to new records under the Trump administration: US crude output jumped from 9.14 million barrels per day in January 2017 to 12.34 million barrels per day in July 2019, a 35% increase, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

With America now as a top oil producer, Trump could employ the "oil weapon" in a way that the US never could have previously achieved. America's vast oil reserves, combined with the Kingdom's, could keep oil prices steady if US actions resulted in significant production cuts from major oil producers, as occurred in 2019 with Iran. The president withdrew America from the JCPOA and reimposed financial sanctions on Iran in 2018. In April 2019, the administration announced that it would impose sanctions on countries that imported oil from Iran, with the goal of "going to zero" Iranian oil exports, as stated Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.¹⁵⁵ In the same

¹⁵⁴ Brian Scheid, "Can President Trump Take Credit for Record US Oil Production?" S&P Global, July 3, 2019. <https://www.spglobal.com/en/research-insights/articles/can-president-trump-take-credit-for-record-us-oil-production>.

¹⁵⁵ Carol Morello, "US to Impose Sanctions on Allies in Drive to Push Iranian Oil," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-to-impose-sanctions-on-allies-in-drive-to-push-iran-oil-sales-to-zero/2019/04/22/cf9e7a93-d052-4951-b754-e1e5b068a224_story.html.

Also see: Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington, DC, Statement on the United States's Withdrawal from the JCPOA, May 8, 2018.

announcement, Pompeo noted that the US, KSA, and the United Arab Emirates would work closely together to ensure global demand was met and prices remained stable despite the loss in supply from Iran.

The sanctions, the administration hoped, would choke the Iranian economy, forcing it to renegotiate the JCPOA on better terms and reduce Tehran's funding of adversarial groups, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. For the Saudis, Trump's actions were music to their ears. Rather than trying to bridge divides, as Obama had, the president took the hawkish stance that the Saudis hoped for, blatantly favoring the Saudi side and placing "maximum pressure" on Iran. The Kingdom welcomed Trump's decision to pull out of JCPOA and the reimposition of sanctions. KSA's main concerns prior to the sanctions were that Iran was using its "economic gains" from oil revenue "to destabilize the region, particularly by developing ballistic missiles and supporting terrorist groups in the region," according to the Saudi Foreign Ministry.¹⁵⁶ After the reimposition of sanctions, Iran's oil exports fell by more than fifty percent, its GDP shrunk, and its currency's value fell by more than 60%.¹⁵⁷ Largely due to US-Saudi cooperation and increased production, global oil prices remained stable.

However, in March 2020, oil price stability came to a halt. Oil prices suffered their biggest fall since America launched air strikes on Iraqi troops following Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait.¹⁵⁸ Global lockdowns from the COVID-19 outbreak sent oil demand on a downward spiral. Back in 2016, Russia and the Kingdom came together to form OPEC+, an alliance between the 13 OPEC members and 10 other major oil producing countries, such as Oman,

¹⁵⁶ Reuters Staff, "Saudi Arabia Says Backs U.S. Decision to Withdraw from Iran Nuclear Deal," Reuters, Thomson Reuters, May 8, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-gulf-idUSKBN1I92SH>.

¹⁵⁷ "Six Charts That Show How Hard US Sanctions Have Hit Iran," BBC, May 2, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48119109>.

¹⁵⁸ John Deferios, "Why Oil Prices Are Crashing and What It Means." CNN, March 9, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/09/business/oil-price-crash-explainer/index.html>.

Mexico, and Sudan. The US is not a member of OPEC or OPEC+. Since 2016, the Kingdom and Russia have orchestrated steady production cuts to counter the growing American supply of petroleum in the market. In early 2020, Saudi Arabia wanted the organization to sharply increase production cuts, from 2.1 million barrels per day to 3.6 barrels per day to align with falling demand due to the pandemic.¹⁵⁹ At the time, the novel coronavirus had sent China, the world's largest importer of oil, into a complete lockdown. Worried about giving Americans an advantage over supply, Russia strongly opposed production cuts. On March 6, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak walked out of the OPEC headquarters in Vienna and told reporters that Russia would begin increasing production in April, blatantly defying the Saudis' requests.

In response, the Saudis flooded the market with oil, collapsing prices further and punishing Russia. ARAMCO announced that it would produce thirteen million barrels per day, a record high. The Kingdom offered oil refiners generous discounts for its crude, cutting selling prices by the most in over thirty years to continue flooding the market.¹⁶⁰ Over the next month, the oil market would descend into chaos---in some parts of the US, oil was trading at negative prices, meaning producers were paying consumers to take away their barrels of oil. On March 18, oil prices reached a 17 year low.¹⁶¹ The Saudis had started a price war at the worst possible time: by the end of March, most of the world was in lockdown with little demand for jet fuel, gasoline, or diesel.

Though not initially directly involved in the price war, the Saudi-Russian conflict had profound effects on the US shale industry. US firms in Texas, Nebraska, and other oil producing states---some of Trump's biggest supporters in the 2016 election---were facing a crisis. With

¹⁵⁹ Deferios, "Why Oil Prices are Crashing."

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Anjali Raval, David Sheppard, and Henry Foy, "Oil Prices Hit Lowest Level in 17 Years as Demand Plunges," *The Financial Times*, March 18, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/d63d0618-6928-11ea-800d-da70cff6e4d3>.

such low oil prices, American oil companies, who were largely built on debt, could face bankruptcy. The states themselves had fears of their own: low oil prices could potentially lead to deep losses in both statewide employment and tax revenue. When prices last collapsed in 2014, hundreds of US companies went bankrupt and over 170,000 jobs were lost.¹⁶² By late March, US Senators Kevin Cramer (R-ND) and Dan Sullivan (R-AK) introduced legislation to remove all US troops, Patriot missiles, and anti-missile defense systems from KSA unless MBS cut oil output.¹⁶³ In a private conference call, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) told Princess Reema, the Saudi Ambassador, that KSA was “waging economic warfare on Texas”.¹⁶⁴ President Trump, looking to protect the US oil industry, reaffirmed the Capitol’s pressure, calling MBS on April 2 and warning that he would be powerless to stop Congress from withdrawing troops from KSA if the Kingdom did not cut supply. The prospect of losing military protection, one Saudi diplomat told Reuters, made the House of Saud “bend at the knees”.¹⁶⁵

The Saudis, worried by political pressure from the US, showed signs that they were willing to find a solution with Russia. After a long series of negotiations organized by President Trump, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the other OPEC+ producers agreed to the largest coordinated production cut in history to salvage prices. In May and June, the producers agreed to cut 9.7 million barrels of oil per day, or about ten percent of the world’s output.¹⁶⁶ In a win for the US,

¹⁶² Clifford Krauss, “Oil Nations, Prodded by Trump, Reach Deal to Slash Production,” *The New York Times*, April 12, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/business/energy-environment/opec-russia-saudi-arabia-oil-coronavirus.html>

¹⁶³ Timothy Gardner, et al., “Special Report: Trump Told Saudis: Cut Oil Supply or Lose U.S. Military Support.” Reuters, April 30, 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/global-oil-trump-saudi/special-report-trump-told-saudis-cut-oil-supply-or-lose-u-s-military-support-sources-idUSL1N2CH29V>.

¹⁶⁴ Javier Blas, “Trump’s Oil Deal: The inside Story of How the Saudi-Russia Price War Ended,” *Fortune*, April 14, 2020. <https://fortune.com/2020/04/14/trump-oil-deal-inside-story-saudi-arabia-russia-price-war-ended/>.

¹⁶⁵ Gardner et al., “Special Report.”

¹⁶⁶ Krauss, “Oil Nations, Prodded by Trump.”

Trump brokered the final deal between MBS and Putin without having to deliberately cut American oil production.

Though the market has yet to fully recover, President Trump and OPEC+ successfully avoided a complete free fall of oil prices. The oil price collapse in 2020 reaffirmed Saudi Arabia's important role as a major power broker in the global oil market. When the Saudis flooded the market with oil, prices collapsed almost instantly, demonstrating the Kingdom's capabilities. Yet the incident also highlighted MBS's willingness to keep the US satisfied and meet President Trump's demands. Despite the US's increasing oil independence, it still needed to maintain strong relations with KSA. Riyadh demonstrated that its role as an ally is crucial to American interests.

5.1.2 - Financial Ties

The well-known US-Saudi financial ties only tightened under President Trump. Though the US-Saudi economic relationship was transitioning away from oil-based exchange, strong connections in the energy markets remained. In May 2017, ARAMCO took control of America's largest oil refinery in Port Arthur, Texas. Previously, ARAMCO owned fifty percent of the refinery in a joint venture with Royal Dutch Shell. As part of the deal, ARAMCO acquired exclusive rights to sell Shell-branded gasoline and diesel fuel in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, the eastern half of Texas, and the majority of Florida, strengthening its financial interests in the US.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Kingdom now employed a large number of Americans within US borders---and in a state that strongly supported Trump in the 2016 election.

¹⁶⁷ Matt Egan, "Saudis Take 100% Control of America's Largest Oil Refinery," CNNMoney, May 1, 2017. <https://money.cnn.com/2017/05/01/investing/saudi-arabia-buys-largest-oil-refinery-port-arthur/index.html>.

To help diversify away from oil, MBS has relied heavily on US debt and equity markets. Hoping to show loyalty to Trump and the US government, the Kingdom held \$114.4 billion in US government bonds in 2017.¹⁶⁸ Though this number would fluctuate during the Trump years, the Kingdom remained a top holder of US debt throughout the administration.¹⁶⁹ In the private sector, by 2018, the Kingdom was “the largest single funding source” for America’s thriving startup industry.¹⁷⁰ Between 2016 and 2018, MBS directed at least \$11 billion of Saudi money into US startups, more than the total raised by any single venture capital fund. The Kingdom’s sovereign wealth fund holds minority stakes in a variety of powerful American firms, including Boeing, Facebook, Citigroup, and Bank of America.¹⁷¹ In total, as of mid-2020, KSA’s sovereign wealth fund had a portfolio of almost \$10 billion in US-listed stocks.¹⁷² With Saudi money funding American innovation, MBS and President Trump had another common interest: maintaining the stability and growth of American financial markets.

To further spur growth in the Kingdom, MBS announced that the Kingdom would sell shares of ARAMCO to the public. The ARAMCO initial public offering (IPO) was designed to raise funding for MBS’s diversification plans and was directly outlined in the initial Vision 2030 pitch. Of the nine banks chosen to help underwrite the IPO, five are American: JP Morgan,

¹⁶⁸ Andrew Torchia, “Saudis Boost U.S. Treasury Holdings Ahead of Trump Visit, Economic Talks.” Reuters, May 19, 2017.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-usa-treasuries/saudis-boost-u-s-treasury-holdings-ahead-of-trump-visit-economic-talks-idUSKCN18F1NB>.

¹⁶⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury. Rep. *Major Foreign Holders of Treasury Securities*. U.S. Government Printing Office, April 15, 2021.

¹⁷⁰ Eliot Brown and Greg Bensinger, “Saudi Money Flows Into Silicon Valley-and With It Qualms,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2018.

https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-backlash-threatens-u-s-startups-1539707574#link=%7B%22role%22:%22standar%22,%22href%22:%22https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-backlash-threatens-u-s-startups-1539707574%22,%22target%22:%22_blank%22,%22absolute%22:%22%22,%22linkText%22:%22Wall%20Street%20Journal%22%7D.

¹⁷¹ Saeed Azhar and Kanishka Singh, “Saudi Wealth Fund Boosts U.S. Holdings with Stakes in Citi, Boeing, Facebook,” Reuters, Thomson Reuters, May 16, 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-pif/saudi-wealth-fund-boosts-u-s-holdings-with-stakes-in-citi-boeing-facebook-idUSKBN22S0BQ>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, and Citigroup.¹⁷³ For their roles in the process, the firms earned millions.

It is clear that it remains in the US's interest to maintain strong economic ties with Saudi Arabia. MBS's economic reforms have potential benefits for the US. The Crown Prince has focused on opening up his country to the outside world from education to entertainment through cultural exchanges, sporting events, and concerts---all of which were rare (or illegal) under previous Saudi leaders. The country's massive young population---67% of Saudis are under 35---can help generate massive amounts of revenue for both the US and KSA, creating new opportunities for both states.¹⁷⁴

5.2 - Geopolitical Concerns

While President Obama sought to bridge divides between the Kingdom and Iran, telling both to make a "cold peace" and "share the neighborhood," the Trump White House emphatically took sides.¹⁷⁵ The president embraced the view that the Kingdom is the geopolitical anchor of the Middle East and could therefore play a strong role in maintaining stability. Throughout his time in office, Trump offered public defenses of the Kingdom's most controversial actions, including domestic purges, the blockade of Qatar, the Yemen War, and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Trump's policy rested on the notion that if given unconditional support, the Saudis could make a decisive difference in advancing US geopolitical interests in the Middle East.

¹⁷³ Rory Jones, Summer Said, and Maureen Farrell, "Big U.S. Investment Banks Crowd Into Aramco IPO," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2019.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/big-u-s-banks-crowd-into-aramco-ipo-11568284430>.

¹⁷⁴ Christopher Blanchard, Rep. *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*. Congressional Research Service, February 18, 2020. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>.

¹⁷⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

The Saudis also understood the importance of American presence in the Middle East for both its own domestic stability and regional stability as a whole. As Saudi foreign minister Adel al Jubeir remarked, “our view is that when America disengages, it creates tremendous danger in the world, because it leaves vacuums, and into those vacuums evil forces flow”.¹⁷⁶ For King Salman and MBS, the most threatening “evil force” was Iran. For years, the Saudis viewed Iran as the root of instability in the Middle East and were frustrated by America’s lack of action. Both Presidents Bush and Obama failed to take sufficiently decisive action towards Iran in the eyes of the Saudis. In the Trump White House, Iran’s role as a common enemy brought the US and the Kingdom closer together. After Trump’s first visit to the Kingdom in 2017, the joint statement emphasized “the need to contain Iran’s malign interference with the internal affairs of other states” and that this would be a priority for the alliance.¹⁷⁷

5.2.1 - Trump, MBS, and “Maximum Pressure”

Following the May 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA, President Trump enacted a wide variety of sanctions, in addition to oil, to increase pressure on Tehran. The goal of the campaign, according to the State Department’s Brian Hook, was “to deprive the Iranian regime of the money that it needs to destabilize the Middle East and... to bring Iran to the negotiating table”.¹⁷⁸ Sanctions included measures on Iran’s purchases of commercial aircraft and services, its exports of carpets and food to the US, and its trade in dollars, precious metals, industrial products,

¹⁷⁶ Sourced from: Gerald Feierstein, Rep. “US-Gulf Relations in the Age of Trump,” *Middle East Institute*, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17607>. Pp 1-2.

¹⁷⁷ “Joint Statement by President Trump and King Salman Bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia.” *US Government Information Center*, Office of the President of the United States. May 23, 2017. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201700355/html/DCPD-201700355.htm>.

¹⁷⁸ Rick Gladstone and Sahil Chinoy, “What Changes and What Remains in the Iran Nuclear Deal,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2018.

software, and sovereign debt.¹⁷⁹ To squeeze the Iranian economy, Trump also enforced sanctions on industries including shipping, oil, petrochemicals, insurance, energy, and financial services, all major sources of revenue for the Islamic Republic.¹⁸⁰

The Saudis supported and welcomed Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal and reimpose sanctions. In a statement, the Kingdom claimed that Iran "took advantage of the economic benefits afforded by the lifting of sanctions and used them to continue its destabilizing activities in the region, especially by developing its ballistic missiles and supporting terrorist organizations in the region, including Hezbollah and the Houthi militias, which used the capabilities provided by Iran to target civilians in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen".¹⁸¹

Furthermore, Trump launched a pressure campaign on Swift, a Belgian messaging network that facilitates cross border payments that was primarily used by Tehran. Swift's services connect over eleven thousand financial institutions across the globe and allows them to transfer money easily. Trump's actions effectively cut Iran off from most of the global financial system. In 2019, the US designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization---the first time that the US named a branch of a foreign government as a terrorist group. Trump explained that the designation would "significantly expand the scope and scale of our maximum pressure on the Iranian regime".¹⁸² The White House also announced it would no longer grant any waivers to countries to purchase Iranian oil, further isolating Tehran.

Trump's actions significantly weakened Iran. As stated previously, after the US reimposed sanctions, Iran's oil exports fell by more than fifty percent, its GDP shrunk, and the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ "Joint Statement by President Trump and King Salman," May 23, 2017.

¹⁸¹ "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Statement on the United States Withdrawal from the JCPOA." The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, May 8, 2018.

<https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/kingdom-saudi-arabias-statement-united-states-withdrawal-jcpoa>.

¹⁸² Helene Cooper, "The U.S. Has Turned Up Pressure on Iran," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/14/us/politics/us-iran.html>.

value of its currency fell by more than sixty percent.¹⁸³ Saudi officials widely approved of Trump's maximum pressure campaign; it was the direct action that Obama never took. In an interview, al Jubeir endorsed President Trump, stating that the Saudis think "appeasement doesn't work. Actions count, not words... as far as we're concerned, maximum pressure is the only way".¹⁸⁴

In response to its worsening economic position, Iran began violating the terms of JCPOA, enriching uranium and signaling its intent to restart its nuclear program. Military escalation between the US, Iran, and KSA soon followed. On May 5, 2019, the US deployed Air Force bombers to the Middle East to "send a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on United States interests or those of our allies would be met with unrelenting force," according to former US National Security Advisor John Bolton.¹⁸⁵ One week later, four oil tankers---two belonging to KSA, one to the UAE, and one to a Norwegian company---were attacked in the Persian Gulf. Both John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed Iran for the attack. Military escalation increased as Iran continued restarting its nuclear program.

Throughout 2019 and early 2020, the US would continue deploying troops and defense weaponry to the Middle East to counter Iran. After a September attack on two of the Kingdom's biggest oil facilities, President Trump reinforced the Kingdom with three thousand troops, multiple fighter jets, and new missile technology. Though the Houthis claimed responsibility for

¹⁸³ "Six Charts That Show How Hard US Sanctions Have Hit Iran."

¹⁸⁴ Reuters Staff, "Saudi Minister Says Maximum Pressure Only Way to Get Iran to Negotiate." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, October 24, 2019.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-saudi/saudi-minister-says-maximum-pressure-only-way-to-get-iran-to-negotiate-idUSKBN1X30XM>.

¹⁸⁵ Matt Spetalnick and Idrees Ali, "U.S. Deploying Carrier, Bombers to Middle East to Deter Iran - Bolton," Reuters, Thomson Reuters, May 6, 2019.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-iran/u-s-deploying-carrier-bombers-to-middle-east-in-warning-to-iran-bolton-idUKKCN1SC015?edition-redirect=uk>.

the attack, the Saudis believed the attack was “unquestionably sponsored” by Iran.¹⁸⁶ Officials in the US, United Kingdom, France, and Germany all backed the Kingdom’s claims, including Defense Secretary Mark Esper.¹⁸⁷ Satellite technology, according to KSA’s Col. Turki al Malki, revealed that the attack came from the north, near Iran, while Yemen lies on the Kingdom’s southern border. In addition, the Kingdom’s analysis of the wreckage revealed that the drones and cruise missiles used in the attack were of Iranian origin.¹⁸⁸

5.2.3 - Proxy Conflicts

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and banned Qatari planes from using their airspace and sea routes.¹⁸⁹ Led by the Saudis, the group cut ties due to issues with the pro-Islamist Qatari government and its ties to Iran and several terrorist groups. Qatar has long been accused of funneling money to radical groups in Syria, Libya, and other Arab nations, drawing widespread criticism across the Arabian Peninsula. Qatar is also home to the US’s main Air Force base in the region, the forward headquarters of the US Central Command, and home to ten thousand US troops, meaning good relations with the country are in the US’s interest.

Despite this, President Trump’s loyalty to the Saudis did not waver. In fact, the president openly praised the Kingdom, tweeting “so good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and

¹⁸⁶ Bill Chappell, “Saudi Arabia Says Iran 'Unquestionably Sponsored' Attack On Oil Facilities,” *NPR*, September 18, 2019.
<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/18/761985624/saudi-arabia-says-iran-unquestionably-sponsored-attack-on-oil-facilities>

¹⁸⁷ Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, “Trump Orders Troops and Weapons to Saudi Arabia in Message of Deterrence to Iran.” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/world/middleeast/trump-saudi-arabia-iran-troops.html>

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ For background, see Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar: The Gulf’s Problem Child,” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, June 5, 2017.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/qatar-gcc-saudi-arabia-yemen-bahrain/529227/>.

50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism and all reference was pointing to Qatar”.¹⁹⁰ After this, KSA and the other Arab nations issued thirteen demands to Qatar to resolve the dispute, including shutting down diplomatic posts in Iran, expelling members of the IRGC, and only conducting trade with Iran if it complied with US sanctions. It would not be until January 2021 that Saudi Arabia would agree to open its borders and airspace to Qatar.

Saudi policies toward Iraq reflect the Kingdom’s anxieties towards Iran and its growing sectarian sphere of influence in those states. Upon taking office, President Trump pushed the Saudis to unite with Iraq to counter Iranian objectives and ensure a united front in the fight against ISIS.¹⁹¹ The US’s task was to strengthen Iraqi-Saudi relations to prevent regional bickering, reintegrate Iraq into the Arab region, and establish a coordinated strategy against Iran and ISIS. The first major breakthrough came in December 2015, when Saudi officials sent an ambassador to Baghdad after a 25 year absence following the 1991 Persian Gulf War. From there, relations have accelerated considerably. Under the guidance of the White House, the Saudis have intensified efforts to strengthen relations with Iraq to counter Iranian influence, cement its regional leadership position, and bolster its economy.¹⁹²

In 2017, the two states established the Iraqi-Saudi Joint Coordination Council. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson participated in the inaugural meeting, where he acknowledged that the US was “grateful for this progress and urge[d] [Iraq and KSA] to expand this vital relationship for the stability of the region”.¹⁹³ In 2019, signed thirteen bilateral agreements in areas including

¹⁹⁰ Donald Trump, Twitter post, June 26, 2017.

¹⁹¹ Holly Ellyatt, “US Pushes Saudi Arabia, Iraq on United Front to Counter Iran,” CNBC, October 23, 2017. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/22/us-pushes-saudi-arabia-iraq-on-united-front-to-counter-iran.html>.

¹⁹² “Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad,” International Crisis Group, May 22, 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/186-saudi-arabia-back-baghdad>.

¹⁹³ Ellyatt, “US Pushes Saudi Arabia.”

security, trade, energy, and political cooperation. Most notably, in 2020, Iraq and Saudi Arabia opened the Arar border crossing, increasing mobility and connectivity between the two countries to help facilitate future trade, cooperation, and investment. By strengthening this alliance, the Saudis are building political support and influence without direct military action, giving the Kingdom a stronger support base. Through US encouragement, Iraq is becoming increasingly less dependent on Iran, therefore reducing Tehran's regional capabilities.

The coalition war in Yemen steadily escalated with increased tensions in the Middle East. Houthi attacks on the Saudi border continued killing Saudi civilians and security personnel and the Saudis retaliated aggressively. Growing Iranian military support for the Houthis increased Saudi anxiety. The Saudis categorized the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization that benefits from Iranian security support to the detriment of the Kingdom. High profile attacks on Riyadh in November 2017 and in 2019 only made matters worse. As the conflict unfolded, reports of civilian casualties and displacement; food, medicine, and water shortages; and increased attacks on civilians led to widespread criticism. In August 2019, U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen Lise Grande said, "Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Nearly 80 per cent of the total population, 24.1 million people, requires some form of humanitarian assistance and protection. Ten million people are a step away from famine and starvation and 7 million people are malnourished".¹⁹⁴ Saudi officials acknowledged some shortcomings in their operations, but placed most of the blame on their adversaries, such as Iran. In October 2019, the UN confirmed that both the Houthis and Yemeni government were restricting humanitarian access and supplies into the most devastated areas.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Statement by the U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen Lise Grande, August 29, 2019.

¹⁹⁵ U.N. Document S/PV.8642, Briefing by U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock to the U.N. Security Council, October 17, 2019.

President Trump has shown unwavering support for the Saudi coalition's role in the conflict in Yemen, despite intensifying public and congressional scrutiny. Since the start of the conflict, the American-trained Saudi military has used American weaponry, logistical assistance, and shared intelligence to advance.¹⁹⁶ In 2017, the Trump administration notified Congress that it planned to resume sales of precision-guided bombs to the Kingdom---which had been suspended due to concerns about civilian deaths under Obama.¹⁹⁷ Reports soon began to appear stating the Saudis were using American weapons to interfere with humanitarian aid to civilians in Yemen---which sparked outcry in Congress. Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) called Trump's actions in Yemen "part of an alarming pattern of Trump turning a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's actions that fly in the face of American values".¹⁹⁸

In April 2019, President Trump came again to the aid of the Kingdom and vetoed a bipartisan Congressional resolution that would have forced an end to US military involvement in the conflict. In his veto message, the president called the resolution unnecessary and dangerous.¹⁹⁹ It is clear that countering Iran's regional influence was a fundamental priority of the Trump administration. Unlike past presidents, Trump's actions were much more direct and confrontational, much to the Saudis' delight. The common enemy---Iran---brought the Saudis and the US closer together under Trump and enabled both sides to further their geopolitical agendas.

¹⁹⁶ Blanchard, "Background and US Relations," 2020 Edition.

¹⁹⁷ Reuters Staff, "Trump to Resume Precision Munitions Deliveries to Saudis: Officials," Reuters, Thomson Reuters, June 13, 2017.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-arms-congress/trump-to-resume-precision-munitions-deliveries-to-saudi-officials-idUSKBN1942GG>.

¹⁹⁸ Mark Landler and Peter Baker, "Trump Vetoes Measure to Force End to U.S. Involvement in Yemen War," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/trump-veto-yemen.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Landler and Baker, "Trump Vetoes Measures."

5.3 - Global Security

Over fifteen years after 9/11, countering terrorist threats and enhancing global security remains a common interest for both the US and the Kingdom. President Trump made the struggle against radical Islam a signature of his presidential campaign. He promised to “combat the violent, extreme, and twisted ideologies that purport to justify the murder of innocent victims”.²⁰⁰ Under his leadership, close US-Saudi security cooperation continued and expanded. MBS’s initiatives to combat religious extremism and prevent young Saudis from joining terrorist groups were widely successful. On military cooperation, arms sales to support Saudi defense needs strengthened relations between the two states.

5.3.1 - Counterterrorism Cooperation

As under President Obama, security cooperation between the US and the Kingdom was a major unifying factor in the relationship under the Trump administration. In 2017, during his first visit to Riyadh, President Trump announced a strategic vision for joint cooperation with the Kingdom. The vision included new initiative to fight terrorism, terrorist financing, and religious extremism. During his visit, Trump and Salman inaugurated the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology. The center was founded by a cooperative of countries hoping to confront extreme ideologies by monitoring groups across the globe. The “strong historical and strategic relations” between the Kingdom and the US were highlighted in a joint statement following the inauguration, in addition to promised cooperation on international terrorism.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Sourced from: John Hannah, “It’s Time for Saudi Arabia to Stop Exporting Extremism,” *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/03/its-time-for-saudi-arabia-to-stop-exporting-extremism/>.

²⁰¹ Office of the Press Secretary, “Joint Statement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America,” White House, May 23, 2017.

In May 2017, cooperation between the Kingdom and the US expanded as the two states signed an agreement to chair the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, a collaborative institution designed to confront new and evolving threats coming from terrorist financing. Run through the US Treasury Department, the center's goals are to identify, track and share information about terrorist financial networks, coordinate joint disruptive actions, and support other countries in building counterterrorism institutions.²⁰² US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin explained that the center would “enhance existing tools and cooperation with partners in the Gulf to forcefully address evolving threats”.²⁰³

MBS has taken a strong lead in combating extremism at home and abroad. The Crown Prince's steps included significantly reducing the power of the Kingdom's once all-powerful religious police, distancing himself and the House of Saud from leading Saudi clerics, and imprisoning extremist clerics within the Kingdom. Abroad, the Kingdom's Muslim World League, a religious group charged with spreading Wahabbism, surrendered its lease of the Grand Mosque of Brussels after Belgian authorities charged it with spreading extremism. The head of the league, Mohammed al-Issa, at the request of MBS, has also taken steps to promote religious tolerance, including encouraging Muslims to “embrace the nations they live in” and positively integrate into society, rather than separate themselves.²⁰⁴

To prevent terrorist groups from recruiting young Saudis, MBS and the US have taken a series of powerful measures. As stated before, the Kingdom has a large population of young people, many of whom experienced unemployment and socioeconomic hardship under Abdullah, which often led them to join terrorist organizations. As of 2020, sixty seven percent of the

²⁰² “U.S. and Saudi Arabia to Co-Chair New Terrorist Financing Targeting Center.” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 21, 2017. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0092.aspx>.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Mohammed Al-Issa, “Mohammed Al-Issa: My Advice to Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar,” Fox News, April 10, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/mohammad-issa-tlaib-omar>.

Kingdom's twenty million citizens were under 35.²⁰⁵ Through Vision 2030, MBS has led a massive push to create meaningful jobs for these young Saudis. In addition, joint US-Saudi diplomatic efforts under Trump and MBS have focused on improving education opportunities for young Saudis. This has included efforts to encourage Saudis to study in the United States. Between 2016 and 2020, thousands of Saudis came to the United States to pursue a higher education.²⁰⁶ Not only does this reduce the likelihood of terrorist recruitment among young Saudis, but it also encourages amicable attitudes towards America.

5.3.2 - Arms Sales and Defense Cooperation

Though Saudi Arabia's armed forces have relied on US arms, training, and military support for decades, the relationship grew significantly under Trump. In May 2017, the president signaled a deepening of bilateral defense cooperation with the announcement of defense sales worth potentially \$110 billion during his first visit to Riyadh. These arms sales were designed to considerably improve the Kingdom's military capabilities, providing a deterrent against attacks by both terrorists and foreign adversaries such as Iran. According to the US State Department, the Trump White House remained "committed to providing the Saudi armed forces with the equipment, training, and follow on support necessary to protect Saudi Arabia, and the region, from the destabilizing effects of terrorism, countering Iranian influence, and other threats".²⁰⁷

The US military worked closely with the Saudis to improve training and defense capabilities under the Trump administration. In 2018, the State Department approved the continuation of the US's Maintenance Support System in the Kingdom, which supports the Saudi

²⁰⁵ Blanchard, "Background and US Relations," 2020 Edition, 11.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁰⁷ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Saudi Arabia." U.S. Department of State, January 14, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-saudi-arabia/>.

military by managing and installing military equipment, training Saudis on the use of the equipment, and other related components of logistical and programmatic support.²⁰⁸ In addition, in 2020, the Saudis requested an extension of their contract with the US Security Assistance Office, which provides support to the Ministry of Defense through a variety of measures including technical assistance, training, and advisory support. The Defense Department endorsed the request, stating that the extension would “support the foreign policy goals and national security objectives of the United States by improving the security of a friendly country”.²⁰⁹

In light of the 2019 attacks on the Kingdom’s oil facilities, US officials began exploring joint air-defense operations with the Saudi military to increase protection against air and missile attacks.²¹⁰ As stated previously, in the weeks following the attacks, President Trump deployed an additional three thousand troops to the Kingdom. In a show of support for the House of Saud and the security alliance, Hook stated that the troops were “there to defend our interests and to help Saudi defend itself”.

5.4 - Trump to Biden: The Saudis Lose Their Greatest Partner

The Trump administration left behind a chaotic scene in Washington. By November 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had killed over 250,000 Americans, Black Lives Matter protests were erupting across the country, and the country was divided largely along party lines. Many, including Trump’s adversaries in the 2020 election, sharply criticized the president’s relationship

²⁰⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Saudi Arabia – Continuation of Maintenance Support Services,” Defense Security Cooperation Agency, March 22, 2018.

<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/saudi-arabia-continuation-maintenance-support-services-mss>.

²⁰⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Saudi Arabia – Security Assistance Office Support Services, U.S. Training Mission to Saudi Arabia,” Defense Security Cooperation Agency. December 1, 2020.

<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/saudi-arabia-security-assistance-office-sao-support-services-us>.

²¹⁰ Benoit Faucon, Gordon Lubold, and Summer Said, “U.S., Saudis Heighten Security Defenses After Attacks on Oil Industry,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 2019.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-saudis-heighten-security-defenses-after-attacks-on-oil-industry-11571304601>

with the Saudis. The president spent four years endorsing nearly every action taken by the Saudi government, regardless of potential controversies. He praised MBS's crackdown on hundreds of top Saudis and stood by the Kingdom when the CIA concluded that MBS had orchestrated the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. He went out of his way to protect the Saudis from Congress, vetoing a resolution to end US military assistance in Yemen as well as several other measures aimed at blocking arms sales to the Kingdom.

It is clear that under President Trump, the three fundamental pillars of the alliance---economics, geopolitics, and security---all helped the relationship endure. The president understood the important role that the Saudis played in the region and used that to advance American interests. Trump wagered America's military superiority over the Kingdom to advance American interests while still maintaining strong relations with KSA. Countering Iran, the biggest common threat between the Kingdom and the US, was the central unifying factor. Efforts to weaken Tehran can be seen across the economic, geopolitical, and security policies undertaken by the president.

Chapter 6 - A New Beginning for an Old Alliance?

6.1 - A Positive Course Correction

Alliance politics literature states that a client must be able to credibly threaten alternatives to influence its patron's behavior. Despite Saudi Arabia's economic power, the United States holds enough influence and strength to survive without the Kingdom, while the latter could not do so without strong ties. No great power can provide benefits for the Kingdom or support it in the ways that the US has, and the Kingdom could not maintain the same level of prominence and stability without American assistance. Russia currently does not have the capabilities to and China does not want to. While the US undoubtedly benefits from its partnership with Saudi Arabia, the relationship is largely imbalanced. It is time for the US to reassert its dominance over the Kingdom as the stronger power in the alliance. The Saudis rely on the US for much more than the US does on the Kingdom, and this imbalance can be leveraged by America to advance its interests and establish a more beneficial relationship.

Economically, foreign direct investment (FDI) is a leading tool in understanding the widespread economic ties between the US and the Kingdom. A closer look at FDI between the US and the Kingdom further reveals deep imbalances in the relationship. The US economy is robust and well established, while the Saudi economy relies largely on oil revenues and foreign investments, though Vision 2030 is attempting to move the country away from oil. The United States has traditionally ranked among the highest foreign investors in the Kingdom, accounting for 20% of the Kingdom's FDI inflows in the past decade.²¹¹ By comparison, the United Arab Emirates, KSA's top investor, accounts for about 21%, and France, the third largest investor,

²¹¹ "Saudi Arabia: Foreign Investment," Santander Trade, Banco Santander, April 2021. <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/establish-overseas/saudi-arabia/foreign-investment>.

accounts for 9%.²¹² In 2019, US FDI in KSA was \$10.8 billion.²¹³ However, examining America's FDI statistics reveal the imbalance between the states: Saudi Arabia relies much more heavily on US investment. In 2019, Japan was the top investor in US markets with a position of \$619.3 billion, followed by the United Kingdom, with \$505.1 billion.²¹⁴ Saudi Arabia, in comparison, invested \$6.2 billion in 2019, a comparatively small amount.²¹⁵

In addition to economic diversification, MBS has sought to modernize the Kingdom's infrastructure and business sectors with help from American firms. In 2015, for example, Riyadh and General Electric opened the Saudi GE Innovation Center in Dhahran's Techno Valley, a major technological hub in the Kingdom. The center focuses on bringing GE's cutting edge technology to the Kingdom and building the "next generation of human capital skill sets in materials and data science".²¹⁶ Furthermore, the Kingdom signed \$15 billion in new agreements with GE in 2017 to upgrade the country's power, healthcare, energy, and mining industries and to provide technical skills and training to young Saudis.²¹⁷ Bechtel, the private engineering firm who originally designed much of the Kingdom's infrastructure, has been leading a project to develop a metro system in Riyadh.²¹⁸ The firm is also managing the Kingdom's \$11 billion expansion of Jubail Industrial City to build roads, industrial complexes, and education facilities

²¹² "Saudi Arabia: Foreign Investment."

²¹³ "Saudi Arabia: US Trade Facts," United States Trade Representative, Executive Office of the President, last modified February 2021. <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/middle-eastnorth-africa/saudi-arabia>.

²¹⁴ "Direct Investment by Country and Industry," Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce, July 23, 2020. <https://www.bea.gov/news/2020/direct-investment-country-and-industry-2019>.

²¹⁵ "Saudi Arabia: US Trade Facts."

²¹⁶ "GE Launches Global Research, Technology Innovation and Manufacturing in Saudi Arabia." GE News, General Electric, March 16, 2015.

<https://www.ge.com/news/press-releases/ge-launches-global-research-technology-innovation-and-manufacturing-saudi-arabia>

²¹⁷ Tomas Kellner, "Saudi Arabia And GE Partner On \$15 Billion In New Projects," GE News, General Electric, May 21, 2017. <https://www.ge.com/news/reports/saudi-arabia-ge-partner-15-billion-new-projects>.

²¹⁸ For more information, see: "Landmark Metro Will Help Revolutionize Transport in the Region." Press Center, Bechtel Corporation, last modified February 2021. <https://www.bechtel.com/projects/riyadh-metro/>.

in the city. Between FDI, trade agreements, and American firms' ties with Saudi infrastructure, it is clear that the Saudi government relies heavily on the United States.

Furthermore, alliance literature argues that weaker states chose to relinquish some of their autonomy to larger, more powerful states in return for security guarantees. This is clearly applicable to the US-Saudi relationship. During the Bush administration, the US “essentially” managed its air campaign and special operations against Iraq from inside the Saudi border.²¹⁹ In addition, the Kingdom used its oil and power gained from its massive reserves to ensure that oil prices remained stable and the US military was sufficiently fueled. In return, President Bush promised to uphold the security guarantees that Washington has long provided to Saudi Arabia and helped to strengthen Riyadh's military and counterterrorism infrastructure. During the Obama presidency, the Saudis closely cooperated with the US, allowing them unprecedented access to their domestic affairs in order to support counterterrorism efforts in exchange for protection and strategic training. The Saudis benefitted from America's robust global security infrastructure under President Trump as well. When Trump threatened to withdraw military support for the Kingdom, MBS immediately honored the President's requests on several occasions, including, for example, the 2020 oil price war.

The Saudi military could not protect the Kingdom without the massive support provided by the United States. Nor could the Saudis easily switch to another patron, such as China or Russia, which underscores the asymmetric alliance where the Kingdom benefits from strong security links with America that could not be easily replaced. The Kingdom's long history of military purchases from the US highlight KSA's dependence on America as its security patron. While the Kingdom's oil wealth has given it strong purchasing power, its military is heavily

²¹⁹ John Bradley, *Saudi Arabia Exposed: Inside a Kingdom in Crisis*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 210-211.

integrated and supplied with US security systems, arms, training, and maintenance, making it difficult for the Kingdom to switch to other weapons systems. The Kingdom's existing weapons cache cannot be operated interchangeably with other weapons systems and also requires US technical expertise to operate. For the Saudis to switch to, for example, Russian weapons, it would need to invest billions in completely re-outfitting the military.

In addition, the Kingdom cannot credibly seek alternative security partners due to the US's military presence in the Gulf, which KSA benefits from. No state could replace the US's military presence in Bahrain, where the US Navy's regional team is headquartered, or Qatar, which hosts US Central Command for the Middle East as well as the Al-Udeid air base. In addition, thousands of troops are stationed along the Kingdom's borders---in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates.²²⁰ Such geopolitical and security dependencies highlight the imbalance in the US-Saudi partnership. Saudi Arabia's negotiating power with the US is severely limited by these military constraints. It would be both incredibly difficult and costly for the Kingdom to find a partner with the same security capabilities, arms supplies, and military presence in the Gulf that the US offers.

6.2 - Renegotiating the Alliance

On the campaign trail, current President Joe Biden vowed to end US support to Riyadh in Yemen, to stop selling weapons to the Kingdom, and to protect the rights of women and political dissidents around the world---a nod to those imprisoned by MBS. Biden has pledged to reassess America's relationship with the Kingdom after the controversies under President Trump. The

²²⁰ Rashaan Ayesh, "Where U.S. Troops and Military Assets Are Deployed in the Middle East," Axios, September 21, 2019. <https://www.axios.com/where-us-troops-deployed-middle-east-5e96fdb2-c7ba-4f26-90b4-7bf452f83847.html>.

new president's regional goals should include de-escalating tensions between the Kingdom and its regional adversaries in addition to ending the various civil wars and proxy conflicts that have entangled the Middle East. Ending the campaign in Yemen and engaging in meaningful, constructive regional diplomacy would be a positive first step for MBS. The Kingdom's recent engagement with Israel, for example, could potentially lead the way for all Arab states to resolve the ongoing crisis in the Levant. In time, positive, productive conversations between the GCC, led by the Saudis, and Iran, could potentially lead to greater stability in the region; a key interest for both sides. Confidence building measures between the US, Saudi Arabia, and regional actors would likely go a long way in helping to restore faith in diplomacy in the region.

At the same time, the US should implement these changes with caution. Too much change too fast could unsettle the Saudis, who are not known to welcome any shift in domestic affairs. Prior to MBS's rise to power, the Kingdom had largely been ruled in the same manner since its founding. Cautious pressure should be used; the US should outline its goals for the Kingdom and the region while simultaneously reassuring the Saudis that their partnership remains a priority. Moreover, it is important that the US ensure that MBS remains satisfied with all decisions made, as he is likely to rule the Kingdom for decades to come.

6.3 - Concluding Remarks

Since the 1940s, the US-Saudi alliance has faced a variety of challenges and has managed to survive. As alliance politics literature states, client states that rely on stronger states for security are likely to have longer lasting partnerships. This, combined with the autonomy-security tradeoff, allowed the US-Saudi alliance to endure in the tumultuous years immediately following 9/11 and in the decades since. Shared concerns over economic welfare,

regional tensions, and growing Islamist extremism have provided justification for strategic cooperation. Saudi Arabia's unique role as a leader in both the Islamic and Arab worlds, its political and economic clout, and its vast oil reserves all provide ample reasoning for the US to remain in an alliance with the Kingdom. However, it is also clear that in the twenty years since 9/11, both the US and KSA have undergone significant changes. Priorities for both sides have changed and positive course correction for the alliance is necessary in order to ensure its durability through the twenty-first century.

Though many question the future of the alliance, it is clear that the ties between the US and the Kingdom run deep, and likely will for many years to come. Both countries' systems are too intertwined to justify a decoupling. The three main driving factors---economics, geopolitics, and security---have played a fundamental role in ensuring the endurance of the US-Saudi alliance. Although the alliance is asymmetrical, the US still reaps a variety of benefits from the partnership. Bilateral cooperation advances US interests and can continue to do so in the future, as long as the Saudis continue to play a leading role in the Arab world. When looking at history, regardless of political party, the Saudis have always been willing to work with US presidents, as they need help from US presidents to survive. It is a question of whether US presidents will be willing to work with the Saudis moving forward, which will largely depend on the Kingdom's abilities to provide sufficient benefits to the US to justify the asymmetrical alliance.

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