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Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations

Updated October 2, 2023

Congressional Research Service

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RL33533



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The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled by the Al Saud family since its founding in 1932, wields global influence through its administration of the birthplace of the Islamic faith and by virtue of its large oil reserves (17.2% of global total) and its role as a major oil exporter. Since acceding to the throne in 2015, King Salman bin Abd al Aziz (age 87) has empowered his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (age 38), as heir apparent, Prime Minister, and the central figure in Saudi policymaking. Under the leadership of the Crown Prince, the kingdom has pursued dynamic domestic and foreign policies while taking steps to reassert and confront challenges to rulers' authority.

Saudi leaders' top priority at home appears to remain their *Vision 2030* initiative, through which the kingdom is attempting to transform its economy, public finances, and social contract. Abroad, Saudi officials conduct a multidirectional foreign policy that embraces parallel partnerships with the United States and U.S. strategic competitors, such as Russia and China. Saudi policy toward the Middle East region currently appears to prioritize détente; in March 2023, the kingdom reestablished diplomatic relations with Iran in an agreement facilitated in part by China. Lower regional tensions may contribute to Saudi government efforts to market the kingdom as an attractive hub for investment, commerce, and tourism—all central to the *Vision 2030* initiative. Continued Saudi cooperation with Russia on oil output decisions bolsters revenue for both countries.

While directing the implementation of far-reaching economic and social changes, the Crown Prince has centralized control over security forces, sidelined potential political rivals (including some royal family members and religious conservatives), and cracked down on public dissent. The state has recognized some women's rights and now actively promotes women's participation in the economy. Many young Saudis have embraced these changes, but citizens' views vary. Strict controls on public expression, arrests of activists and potential critics, and reported Saudi state involvement in transnational repression limit foreign observers' ability to understand Saudi social, economic, and political dynamics. The Saudi government rejects international scrutiny and criticism of its human rights practices as interference in Saudi domestic affairs.

During the Biden Administration, the U.S.-Saudi relationship at times has appeared strained, but public comments in 2022 and 2023 from both countries have highlighted ongoing cooperation and new collaborative opportunities. During a June 2023 visit to Saudi Arabia, Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted ongoing U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism and regional security cooperation and promoted emergent U.S.-Saudi collaboration on global infrastructure financing, digital communications technology development, and clean energy adoption initiatives.

The Biden Administration supports the kingdom's economic and social reform initiatives, praises Saudi efforts to deescalate regional conflicts, and describes potential Saudi diplomatic normalization with Israel as "a declared national security interest of the United States." Various sources suggest that Saudi Arabia may condition future normalization-related choices on Israel's approach to the Palestinians, U.S. security commitments, and/or changes to U.S. policy on the kingdom's nuclear energy program. Press reports citing unnamed U.S. officials suggest that as part of its push for Saudi-Israel normalization, the Biden Administration has discussed a possible mutual defense agreement with Saudi Arabia. A defense treaty would require the advice and consent of the Senate.

As of June 2023, nearly 2,700 U.S. military personnel were deployed in the kingdom "to protect U.S. forces and interests in the region against hostile action by Iran and Iran-backed groups." These forces are in addition to hundreds of U.S. personnel supporting long-running U.S.-Saudi security cooperation programs for military and internal security forces. Officials also renewed a bilateral agreement for internal security force training in 2023. In the 118th Congress, the Senate version of a Fiscal Year 2024 (FY2024) National Defense Authorization Act (S. 2226) would identify Saudi Arabia as a "major security partner" and make Saudi foreign military sale purchase orders eligible for priority production and delivery consideration. The House-passed and Senate committee versions of FY2024 foreign assistance appropriations bills (H.R. 4665, S. 2438) would place nonproliferation related conditions on the use of certain funds to support possible U.S. nuclear exports to Saudi Arabia. S.Res. 109 would direct the Department of State to report in detail on Saudi human rights practices.

Contents

Overview	1
Potential Saudi-Israel Normalization	4
Selected Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues	7
Selected Domestic Developments and Issues	7
Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as Principal Decisionmaker	7
Vision 2030 and Economic Reform	9
Human Rights	13
Women’s Rights and Social Change	15
Selected Saudi Foreign Policy Issues	16
The People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia	16
Iran	18
Gulf Neighbor Relations	18
Yemen	19
Syria	20
Sudan	20
U.S.-Saudi Relations	21
Security Cooperation and Arms Sales	21
U.S. Foreign Assistance to Saudi Arabia	24
U.S.-Saudi Trade and Investment	24
Legislation in the 118 th Congress	25
National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2024 (H.R. 2670, S. 2226)	26
Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Appropriations Act, 2024 (H.R. 4665, S. 2438)	26
Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2024 (H.R. 4365)	27
A resolution requesting information on Saudi Arabia's human rights practices pursuant to section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 (S.Res. 109)	27
Outlook	27

Figures

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia: Crude Oil Production	10
Figure 2. Saudi Arabia: Selected Fiscal Data	12

Tables

Table 1. Saudi Arabia Map and Country Data	3
Table A-1. Proposed Major U.S. Foreign Military Sales to Saudi Arabia	30

Appendixes

Appendix A. Proposed Major U.S. Foreign Military Sales to Saudi Arabia 30

Contacts

Author Information..... 32

Overview

The Biden Administration is pursuing a policy of reengagement with Saudi Arabia after a period of reevaluation, limited retrenchment, and apparent strain in the bilateral relationship. Close U.S.-Saudi security ties built on decades of arms sales, training, and advisory support anchored the relationship through recent difficulties, and, as of 2023, senior U.S. and Saudi officials remain in regular contact. U.S. officials report that they are discussing new collaborative opportunities with Saudi counterparts, including a potential mutual defense agreement.¹ Congressional and executive branch concern about Saudi human rights practices and Saudi conduct in the war in Yemen have contributed to tension between the longstanding partners since 2015, and some Saudi nationals have questioned U.S. support for Saudi security. President Joe Biden's July 2022 visit to Saudi Arabia, and his meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (often informally referred to by the initials MBS), appeared to close a chapter during which U.S. engagement with the Crown Prince reportedly was limited following Saudi officials' 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Under the leadership of King Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud (age 87) and his son, the Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (age 38), Saudi Arabia is pursuing an economic and social transformation agenda at home and a multifaceted foreign policy involving complex relationships with the United States, U.S. rivals, other G-20 economies, and the developing world. These initiatives suggest Saudi leaders are attempting to leverage the kingdom's potential and resources to retain and expand Saudi influence in a world shaped by great power competition and expectations of global energy transition and reduced fossil fuel consumption.² China's facilitation of Saudi-Iran diplomatic reengagement in 2023 drew new attention to China's evolving role in the Middle East. Saudi energy policy coordination with Moscow and oil sales to Beijing bolster Saudi oil revenues, supporting *Vision 2030* investments.

The Biden Administration has praised Saudi efforts since 2021 to de-escalate tensions with Qatar and the Houthis in Yemen, and has shared Saudi leaders' accept-but-verify approach to Saudi-Iran détente.³ From the Saudi government's perspective, lower regional tensions may contribute to its efforts to market the kingdom as an attractive hub for investment, commerce, and tourism—all central to its *Vision 2030* plans.⁴

The Administration is actively pursuing Saudi-Israeli normalization as a “a declared national security interest of the United States,”⁵ and is discussing related questions with Congress. Various reports suggest that Saudi Arabia may condition normalization-related choices on Israel's approach to the Palestinians, formal U.S. security commitments, and/or changes to U.S. policy on the kingdom's nuclear energy program.⁶

¹ See U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud at a Joint Press Availability,” press release, June 8, 2023; and, The White House, “Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Trip to Saudi Arabia,” July 27, 2023.

² King Salman has health challenges. A leadership transition could occur at any time.

³ The White House, “Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud,” April 11, 2023.

⁴ An unnamed senior Saudi official said, “Our domestic success is linked to stability in the region,” and the kingdom intends to use its political, economic, and convening power to be more active in regional diplomacy. Samer Al Atrush and Andrew England, “Saudi Arabia's journey from troublemaker to diplomat,” *Financial Times*, May 6, 2023.

⁵ “Keynote Address by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 4, 2023.

⁶ See, for example, Michael Crowley, Vivian Nereim, and Patrick Kingsley, “Saudi Arabia Offers Its Price to Normalize Relations with Israel,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2023.

Background: Strains and Change in U.S.-Saudi Relations, 1990-2022

U.S.-Saudi ties deepened during the Cold War, rooted in common interests in securing Saudi oil resources and shared official antipathy toward the Soviet Union and communism. Arab-Israeli wars limited U.S.-Saudi partnership, but successive U.S. Administrations expanded U.S.-Saudi defense cooperation in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and Saudi-led oil embargo, in spite of some congressional opposition. The U.S. defense of Saudi Arabia and neighboring Kuwait from Iraqi forces in 1990 and 1991 saw hundreds of thousands of U.S. military forces deploy to the kingdom, with thousands remaining through the 1990s at the invitation of Saudi leaders. The U.S. presence drew condemnation from some Saudi Islamists, nationalists, and extremists, some of whom also voiced opposition to the Al Saud family's rule. Terrorists attacked facilities hosting U.S. government personnel in the kingdom in November 1995 and June 1996, killing and injuring U.S. civilian and military personnel.

Some Saudi nationals' leadership and participation in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States and some Saudis' support for transnational Islamist extremism led many Americans to scrutinize U.S.-Saudi ties during President George W. Bush's Administration. Saudi leaders and some Saudi citizens similarly reexamined the bilateral relationship in light of the U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and U.S. support to Israel in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation under Presidents Bush and Obama helped Saudi Arabia defeat a years-long campaign of insurgent terrorism and contributed to U.S. and coalition efforts to undermine transnational terrorist threats and prevent attacks by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State organization.

During President Barack Obama's tenure, the United States and Saudi leaders responded dissimilarly to popular unrest in the Middle East. Saudi leaders grew critical of U.S. policy toward Iran and opposed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement. At Saudi Arabia's request, the Obama Administration in March 2015 initiated U.S. military support to Saudi-led coalition military operations in Yemen against the Houthi movement, including the provision of aerial refueling, intelligence, and military advice. President Obama reduced some U.S. support after Saudi-led coalition operations continued to cause civilian casualties.

President Donald Trump was explicit about his desire to strengthen ties to Saudi leaders, and the Trump Administration opposed various congressional proposals to limit U.S. arms sales to the kingdom or to end U.S. military support to Saudi-led coalition operations in Yemen. As congressional opposition to U.S. support for Saudi operations in Yemen grew, the Trump Administration halted U.S. refueling of Saudi-led coalition aircraft and pressed Saudi counterparts to respect the law of armed conflict and allow greater humanitarian access to Yemen.

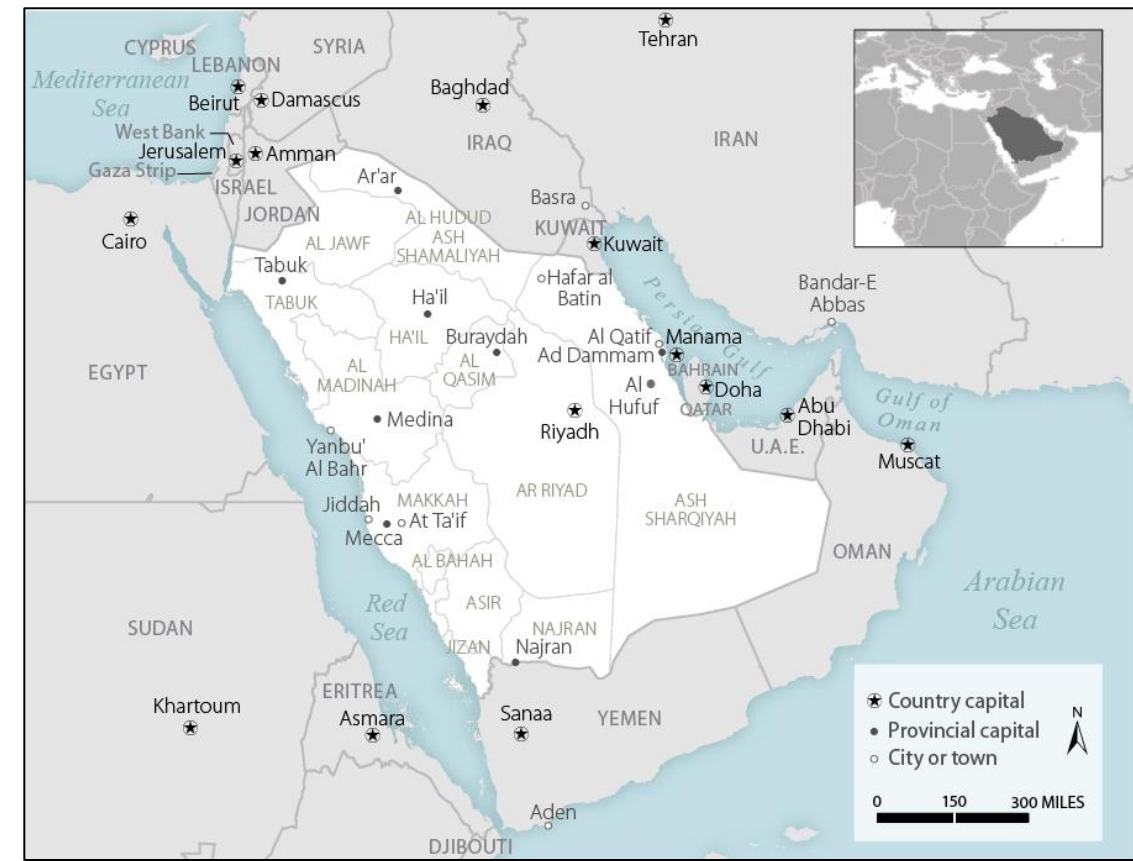
Following Saudi officials' October 2018 murder of Saudi journalist and U.S. O-visa holder Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, Trump Administration officials reiterated U.S. concerns about human rights issues, imposed sanctions on some Saudi officials, and pledged continued investigation and advocacy on cases of human rights concern. Some proposals in Congress have called for more tangible changes to the U.S.-Saudi relationship and for specific consequences for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after the U.S. Director of National Intelligence reported to Congress in February 2021 that the Crown Prince "approved" an operation "to capture or kill" Khashoggi.⁷ Saudi officials disputed the report's conclusions.

The Trump Administration engaged Saudi officials in civil nuclear cooperation talks and insisted that the kingdom forgo acquisition of nuclear fuel cycle technologies that could increase nuclear weapons proliferation concerns. In 2019, President Trump deployed U.S. military personnel and assets to Saudi Arabia in response to escalating cross-border attacks on Saudi infrastructure by Iran and Iran-backed groups. These attacks and the U.S. response reportedly influenced Saudi and other Arab Gulf leaders' views on U.S. security commitment to the region. Trump Administration officials reportedly sought to convince Saudi leaders to normalize relations Israel.

After a presidential campaign in 2020 during which President Joe Biden criticized Saudi Arabia's human rights record, Biden Administration officials stated their intent to recalibrate rather than rupture the U.S.-Saudi relationship while bolstering U.S. support for Saudi efforts to defend Saudi territory. President Biden ceased U.S. military support for Saudi offensive military operations in Yemen, and in 2021, the Biden Administration reviewed U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia before suspending two munitions sales, approving several defensive system sales, and altering the deployment of U.S. military platforms and personnel in the kingdom. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine arguably increased the strategic importance to the United States of Saudi decisions concerning oil production and the kingdom's relations with Russia. Press reports have suggested that President Biden withheld personal engagement with the Crown Prince until July 2022, when the President travelled to Saudi Arabia, and Administration officials announced some new bilateral initiatives. Since mid-2022, Saudi and U.S. officials have emphasized the potential for continued bilateral cooperation, as independent observers differ in their prognoses and prescriptions for U.S.-Saudi relations.

⁷ Office of the Director for National Intelligence, "Assessing the Saudi Government's Role in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," February 11, 2021.

Table I. Saudi Arabia Map and Country Data



Land: Area, 2.15 million sq. km. (more than 20% the size of the United States); Boundaries, 4,431 km. (~40% more than U.S.-Mexico border); Coastline, 2,640 km. (more than 25% longer than U.S. west coast)

Population: 35.9 million (2023 U.S. est.); ~18.8 million nationals (KSA est.); < 30 years of age: 63% (KSA est.)

GDP (PPP): \$1.594 trillion (2021 est.)

GDP per capita, PPP: \$44,300 (2021 est.)

Budget (revenues; expenditure; balance): \$340.53 billion; \$312.80 billion; \$27.73 billion surplus (2022)

2023 Budget (revenues; expenditure; balance): \$314.7 billion; \$336.5 billion; \$21.9 billion deficit (est.)

Unemployment Rates (Q1 2023): 8.5% (Saudi nationals), 16.1% (Saudi females), 4.6% (Saudi males)

Crude Oil and Natural Gas Reserves: 258.6 billion barrels (2021 est.); 9.423 trillion cubic meters (2021 est.)

Public Debt: \$262 billion, ~25% GDP (2022 est.)

Net Foreign Assets: ~\$440.5 billion (2022 est.)

Sources: CRS using U.S. Department of State, Esri, and Google Maps data (all 2013), CIA *World Factbook* estimates (March 2023), International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2023 Article IV Consultation Report (September 2023), and Saudi Ministry of Finance and General Authority for Statistics projections and data (March and September 2023).

Note: According to the U.S. executive branch: (1) The West Bank is Israeli occupied with current status subject to the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement; permanent status to be determined through further negotiation. (2) The status of the Gaza Strip is a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations. (3) The United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 without taking a position on the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty. (4) Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative. Additionally, the United States recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019; however, U.N. Security Council Resolution 497, adopted on December 17, 1981, held that the area of the Golan Heights controlled by Israel's military is occupied territory belonging to Syria. The current U.S. executive branch map of Israel is available at <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/israel/map>.

Potential Saudi-Israel Normalization

The Biden Administration views the prospect of Israeli-Saudi normalization as a potentially transformative change that could contribute to the stability of the Middle East region and encourage governments of other predominantly Muslim countries to follow suit.⁸ The Saudi government has maintained a conditional approach to recognition of and formal engagement with Israel, while also supporting other Arab states' burgeoning ties to Israel in line with U.S. goals. Saudi Arabia publicly supports key Palestinian demands,⁹ while Saudi leaders have engaged quietly with Israel based on shared security concerns about Iran. Saudi Arabia granted Israel flyover rights within its airspace to facilitate direct Israeli airline travel to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, and in July 2022, the White House welcomed Saudi Arabia's decision to open its airspace to all civilian air traffic bound to or departing from Israel.¹⁰ The Biden Administration in July 2022 announced changes to the U.S. military observer presence on the Red Sea island of Tiran in conjunction with the island's transfer to Saudi control under a Saudi-Egyptian agreement endorsed by Israel.¹¹

Saudi officials have not publicly revised the kingdom's commitment to the Saudi-sponsored 2002 Arab Peace Initiative—which calls for the creation of a Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem—as a reference point for the kingdom's conditions on normalization with Israel. Saudi Arabia recognized the Palestinian declaration of statehood in November 1988. In August 2023, the kingdom named its Ambassador to Jordan as nonresident Ambassador to “the State of Palestine and consul general in the city of Jerusalem.”¹² Saudi officials' comments on the relationship between normalization with Israel and Palestinian statehood have varied since 2022.

- In an interview published in March 2022, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said, “We look at Israel as a potential ally but before that it should solve its problems with the Palestinians.”¹³
- In January 2023, the Saudi Foreign Minister stated, “We have said consistently that we believe normalization with Israel is something that is very much in the interest of the region. However, true normalization and true stability will only come through giving the Palestinians hope, through giving the Palestinians dignity. That requires giving the Palestinians a state, and that's the priority.”¹⁴
- In a June 2023 press conference with Secretary Blinken, the Saudi Foreign Minister said normalization “would bring significant benefits to all. But without

⁸ U.S. Department of State, Secretary Antony J. Blinken with The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg at The Atlantic Festival, September 28, 2023.

⁹ King Salman has reiterated the kingdom's commitment to the terms of the peace initiative put forward by his predecessor King Abdullah under the auspices of the Arab League in 2002. This initiative calls for normalization of Arab relations with Israel following the conclusion of a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace accord, the establishment of a Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem, and a “just solution” for Palestinian refugees.

¹⁰ Previously, in 2020, Saudi Arabia granted Israel flyover rights within its airspace to facilitate direct Israeli airline travel to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. The kingdom expanded those flyover rights in July 2022.

¹¹ Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Jake Sullivan discussed Saudi-Israel normalization with MBS,” *Axios*, October 20, 2021.

¹² Saudi Press Agency, “Ambassador Al-Sudairi delivers a copy of his credentials as Non-Resident Ambassador Extraordinary to the State of Palestine and Consul General in the city of Jerusalem to the Advisor to the Palestinian President,” August 12, 2023.

¹³ Al Arabiya, “Saudi Arabia open to full ties with Israel, on condition of Palestine state: Saudi FM,” December 5, 2020.

¹⁴ Saudi Foreign Minister comments in Davos, Switzerland, reported in Abeer Abu Omar and Manus Cranny, “Saudi Arabia Says a Palestinian State Is Key to Ties With Israel,” January 19, 2023.

- finding a pathway to peace for the Palestinian people, without addressing that challenge, any normalization will have limited benefits. And therefore, I think we should continue to focus on finding a pathway towards a two-state solution, on finding a pathway towards giving the Palestinians dignity and justice.”¹⁵
- In a September 2023 interview, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declined to specify what Palestinian-related terms Saudi Arabia would insist on as part of a potential normalization agreement saying, that he did not want to affect ongoing negotiations with the Biden Administration. The Crown Prince called the Palestinian issue “very important” and said, “We need to solve that path. ...we hope that it will reach a place that will ease the life of the Palestinians.”¹⁶
 - In a September 2023 speech to the U.N. General Assembly, the Saudi Foreign Minister said, “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emphasizes that the security of the Middle East region requires swiftly finding a just, comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue; this solution must be based on legitimate international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative in a way that guarantees the right of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state on the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem.”¹⁷

Some analysts, including two former U.S. officials, have speculated that Saudi Arabia seeks additional commitments from Israel and the U.S. government in conjunction with potential normalization.¹⁸ These accounts suggest that Saudi Arabia—in addition to any Palestinian-related requirements—may seek Israeli support for the kingdom’s reported priorities in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. These may include formal U.S. commitments on the defense of Saudi Arabia; “a congressionally endorsed affirmation of the U.S.-Saudi alliance”; continued U.S. arms supplies with “NATO-like” terms for the kingdom; a U.S. sale of F-35 fighter aircraft to the kingdom; and/or a relaxation of U.S. insistence that Saudi Arabia accept restrictions on its nuclear program related to uranium enrichment.¹⁹ Saudi officials have not publicly specified conditions or requests.

Depending on the content and form of any commitments or initiatives pursued by the Biden Administration related to Saudi-Israeli normalization, Congress may consider various tools and legislative approaches for shaping and conducting oversight of U.S. policy. A defense or security agreement or treaty, a U.S. civil nuclear cooperation agreement, and/or arms sales related steps each could require congressional action or review.

U.S. and Saudi officials have made varying statements about the nature of their discussions and how close they are to reaching related agreements. In a July 2023 CNN interview, President Biden said that “We’re a long way” from an Israel-Saudi normalization deal that could partly depend on what Saudi Arabia might ask of the United States.²⁰ In August 2023, National

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud at a Joint Press Availability,” June 8, 2023.

¹⁶ “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman,” interview by Bret Baier, *Special Report*, Fox News, September 20, 2023.

¹⁷ Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan, Remarks before the U.N. General Assembly, at UN News, “Saudi Foreign Minister outlines plans for better, greener Middle East,” September 23, 2023.

¹⁸ Dion Nissenbaum, Dov Lieber, and Steven Kalin, “Saudi Arabia Seeks U.S. Security Pledges, Nuclear Help for Peace With Israel,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2023; John Hannah, “Israel Can Normalize Ties with Saudi Arabia – with Biden’s Help,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 4, 2023; and Robert Satloff and David Schenker, “Inside Saudi Arabia: A Trip Report,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 4, 2022.

¹⁹ Ibid. Quotes from Satloff and Schenker, “Inside Saudi Arabia.”

²⁰ Transcript: Interview with U.S. President Joe Biden, *CNN*, July 9, 2023.

Security Advisor Jake Sullivan described Saudi-Israeli normalization as something that “would benefit the United States of America in a fundamental way,” and that “it’s something we continue to work on in close consultation with both the Saudis and the Israelis.”²¹

In September 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken shared his view that such normalization would be “a transformative event in the Middle East and well beyond” and “singularly positive,” and said that it remains a “possible” but “difficult proposition.”²² Secretary Blinken also said that as part of any U.S.-facilitated agreement, the United States “would expect progress on a number of issues in a number of areas that clearly are in our interests.” In light of the major issues in the bilateral relationship since 2021, these areas could include energy policy, technology transfer, nuclear nonproliferation, global infrastructure investment, Saudi relations with Russia and China, military access and transit, and/or mutual contributions to security and development in the Middle East region. In a September 2023, interview the Saudi Crown Prince denied reports that the talks had been suspended and said “every day we get closer.”²³

September 2023 press reports citing unnamed U.S. officials said that U.S. and Saudi officials have discussed the prospect of a mutual security agreement, including a possible treaty akin to U.S. treaties with Japan and South Korea, and the prospect of U.S.-administered uranium enrichment under a U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation agreement.²⁴ Respective U.S. treaties with Japan and South Korea each state that the treaty parties would consider an attack on the treaty parties in geographic areas defined in the treaties to be dangerous to their security and commit the treaty parties to acting to meet the common danger, consistent with their constitutional provisions and processes.²⁵ A comparable U.S.-Saudi treaty would require the advice and consent to ratification by a two-thirds majority of the Senate.²⁶

Several extant bilateral executive agreements provide for U.S.-Saudi security cooperation, including agreements setting terms for decades-long training and advisory programs. At times, past U.S. administrations have offered discrete security assurances to Saudi Arabia in private correspondence with Saudi leaders, but the United States has, with the exception of the 1990-

²¹ The White House, “Press Gaggle by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” August 22, 2023.

²² U.S. Department of State, Remarks, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at a Joint Press Availability,” Washington, D.C., September 15, 2023.

²³ “Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman,” interview by Bret Baier, *Special Report*, Fox News, September 20, 2023.

²⁴ Edward Wong and Mark Mazzetti, “Biden Aides and Saudis Explore Defense Treaty Modeled After Asian Pacts,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2023; and, Dion Nissenbaum and Dov Lieber, “Saudi Uranium Enrichment Floated Under Possible Israel Deal,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2023.

²⁵ See United States Treaties and Other International Agreements (TIAS): Volume 5, Part 3 (1954) and Volume 11, Part 2 (1960). Article III of the U.S.-Republic of Korea Mutual Defense Treaty (TIAS 3097) states: “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other, would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” Article V of the 1960 U.S.-Japan Mutual Security and Cooperation Treaty (TIAS 4509) states: “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes.”

²⁶ For more information on U.S. treaties, executive agreements, their effect on U.S. law, congressional influence, and transparency measures, see CRS Report RL32528, *International Law and Agreements: Their Effect upon U.S. Law*; CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11048, *International Agreements (Part I): Overview and Agreement-Making Process*; CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11049, *International Agreements (Part II): Examining Tools for Congressional Influence Over International Instruments*; and, CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11050, *International Agreements (Part III): Transparency Measures*, by Stephen P. Mulligan.

1991 Gulf War, generally refrained from making binding public commitments to directly defend Saudi Arabia.²⁷

Congress and successive presidential administrations have sought the kingdom's commitment to forgo the most proliferation-sensitive nuclear facilities—those for enriching uranium or reprocessing spent nuclear fuel to obtain plutonium—and Saudi Arabia's acceptance of enhanced international safeguards on its nuclear program.²⁸ Previous administrations linked prospects for a U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation agreement to these conditions, and Congress has limited the use of certain funds to support possible U.S. nuclear exports to Saudi Arabia unless the kingdom makes such commitments. Depending on its nature and extent, possible future U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation may require Department of Energy (DOE) authorizations and/or congressional approval of U.S.-Saudi agreements.

Selected Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues

The kingdom faces considerable challenges and opportunities at home and abroad. The central dynamics in Saudi Arabia in recent years have been the rise to dominance of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, his divergence from previous patterns of Saudi leadership, and the domestic and foreign policy changes he has introduced.

Selected Domestic Developments and Issues

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as Principal Decisionmaker

In September 2022, King Salman via royal decree named the Crown Prince as Prime Minister under an exception to the kingdom's 1992 Basic Law, which states that the king holds that position. Some observers saw the change as affirming the leadership role the Crown Prince plays and a means to formalize existing arrangements while boosting the status afforded in diplomatic settings to the Crown Prince and his brother Prince Khalid bin Salman (who the king promoted

²⁷ In 1949, the Truman Administration communicated a series of “assurances” to then-King Abd al Aziz ibn Saud in the context of discussions about the potential extension of U.S. access rights to a nascent military airfield at Dhahran in eastern Saudi Arabia. At the time, the king and other Saudi officials had expressed concern about the potential hostile intentions of neighboring monarchies in Jordan and Iraq ruled by the Hashemite family, from whom the Al Saud had taken control of western Arabia, including Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina, in the 1920s. In November and December 1949, the U.S. government privately but formally expressed to the king its “concern for Saudi Arabia” and “desire to insure (sic) its territorial integrity and political independence.” President Truman reaffirmed those assurances in a 1950 letter to King Abd al Aziz. Following the Suez crisis of 1956, President Eisenhower in 1957 wrote to then-King Saud bin Abd al Aziz and said that, “Should Israel attempt to conquer any Arab state the United States would, as it did last October, take action to prevent this. ...The United States stands fully prepared to meet aggression against the free states of the Middle East.” See U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “President Truman to King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia,” October 31, 1950 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa*, Volume V, 711.56386A/10–3050; and “Message From President Eisenhower to King Saud,,” September 12, 1957 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1957*, Volume XVII, 783.00/9–1157. In August 1990, President George H.W. Bush announced the deployment of U.S. military personnel and equipment to Saudi Arabia at the request of the Saudi government following Iraq's invasion of neighboring Kuwait. President Bush said that “the sovereign independence of Saudi Arabia is of vital interest to the United States,” and defined the U.S. forces' mission as “to assist the Saudi Arabian Government in the defense of its homeland,” and “to preserve the integrity of Saudi Arabia and to deter further Iraqi aggression.” President Bush said U.S. forces would “defend themselves, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and other friends in the Persian Gulf.” President George H.W. Bush, “Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia,” August 8, 1990.

²⁸ See CRS In Focus IF10799, *Prospects for U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Energy Cooperation*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Paul K. Kerr.

to Defense Minister).²⁹ Others interpreted the change as related to judicial proceedings in the United States and other jurisdictions where the Saudi government has sought or may seek to assert sovereign immunity for the Crown Prince.³⁰ The Biden Administration cited the Crown Prince's elevation to Prime Minister in a November 2022 "suggestion of immunity" to a U.S. court; this action led to the December 2022 dismissal of a case against the Crown Prince that alleged his responsibility for Saudi officials' 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi.³¹

For decades, political decisionmaking in the kingdom reflected a process of consensus building among a closed elite presided over by senior members of the Al Saud family. Since becoming Crown Prince in 2017, Mohammed bin Salman has centralized decisionmaking in security and economic affairs.³² Members of the conservative Salafist Sunni religious establishment long shaped government decisions on social and legal issues, but their remaining influence appears minimal. Some representatives of this community have endorsed swift and dramatic liberal changes to some social policies since King Salman's coronation in 2015, while authorities have imprisoned others operating outside state structures for disfavored foreign ties and possibly for opposing change.³³ These shifts have occurred in the midst of what one long-time observer of the kingdom's politics has described as "an aggressive nationalist rebranding"³⁴ of the state and its vision of citizenship and identity.

Several long-time observers of Saudi affairs have noted that the apparent leadership consolidation that has taken place since 2015 represents a departure from patterns and practices among the Al Saud that had prevailed in the kingdom since the mid-1960s.³⁵ Centralizing power since 2015 may have enabled King Salman and his son to make domestically controversial changes to some social, economic, and fiscal policies, but rival family members, disgruntled religious conservatives, and other constituencies may harbor resentment over their lost influence. As time goes on, these changes could remain durable and any remaining opposition could diminish. Alternatively, opposition individuals or groups could make specific challenges or maintain informal networks in hopes of preserving some influence. The Crown Prince's rise demonstrates how sudden changes in leadership may result in substantive changes in the direction and efficacy of Saudi policy.

Political Structure, Succession, and Leadership

²⁹ Zaid Sabah, "Saudi King Names Crown Prince Mohammed as Prime Minister," *Bloomberg*, September 27, 2022.

³⁰ Kareem Fahim and Amy B. Wang, "Judge asks U.S. if Saudi crown prince should be immune from suit," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2022; and Benjamin Barthe, "NGOs file suit in Paris against Saudi crown prince over Khashoggi murder," *Le Monde*, July 28, 2022.

³¹ Edward Wong, "U.S. Court Dismisses Suit Against Saudi Ruler in Khashoggi Killing," *New York Times*, December 6, 2022. Specifically, the Department of State said it considers the Crown Prince "immune while in office." Letter from Richard C. Visek, Acting Legal Adviser, U.S. Department of State, to Brian M. Boynton, Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Civil Division, U.S. Department of Justice, November 17, 2022.

³² Kristin Smith Diwan, "Saudi Arabia Reassigns Roles within a More Centralized Monarchy," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, January 22, 2019.

³³ For an overview, see Raihan Ismail, "How is MBS's consolidation of power affecting Saudi clerics in the opposition?" *Washington Post*, June 4, 2019. For a detailed discussion, see Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2019), pp. 97-101.

³⁴ Vivian Nereim, "'Traitor' Is the New 'Infidel' as Nationalism Grips Saudi Arabia," *Bloomberg*, March 3, 2019.

³⁵ See, for example, Stig Stenslie, "The End of Elite Unity and the Stability of Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2018), pp. 61-82; F. Gregory Gause III, "Fresh Prince: The Schemes and Dreams of Saudi Arabia's Next King," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018; and, Gause, "Why the U.S. Should Stay Out of Saudi Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, December 18, 2018.

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy governed in accordance with a 1992 Basic Law, and its legal system is largely rooted in the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic law as interpreted and applied by state-appointed judges.³⁶ The Basic Law states that male descendants of the kingdom's founder, the late King Abd al Aziz bin Abd al Rahman Al Saud (aka Ibn Saud, 1875-1953), shall rule the country. An appointed, 150-member national Shura Council provides limited oversight and advisory input on some government decisions, and municipal councils with both appointed and elected members serve as fora for public input into local governance. An Allegiance Council of 34 senior princes selects the king and crown prince. According to the Department of State "Only select members of the ruling family have a voice in the choice of leaders, composition of the government, or changes to the political system."³⁷ The kingdom's population is culturally diverse, and regional and tribal identities remain relevant in social and political life. Official discrimination, Saudi government concerns about perceived Iranian efforts to destabilize the kingdom by agitating Saudi Shia, and anti-Shia terrorism have complicated efforts to improve sectarian relations.

The Al Saud family has exercised sole control over state affairs since Ibn Saud and his allies conquered most of the Arabian Peninsula during the early 20th century and founded the eponymous kingdom in the 1930s. King Salman succeeded his late half-brother King Abdullah bin Abd al Aziz following the latter's death in January 2015. King Salman in 2015 and 2017 announced dramatic changes to succession arrangements left in place by King Abdullah, surprising observers of the kingdom's politics. These changes resulted in Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman being placed in line to succeed his father. The Crown Prince is a leading member of the generation of grandsons of Ibn Saud; members of this generation have assumed political and economic leadership roles.

The internal politics of the ruling Al Saud family remain a subject of international speculation. Rumored discontent among royal family members has not manifested in documented, public efforts to challenge or undermine the Crown Prince's agenda, but the reported detentions of some prominent princes since 2017 suggests that some discord among them exists.³⁸ In November 2017, a number of prominent royal family members and businessmen were detained for months in the Ritz Carlton hotel in Riyadh as part of a declared anti-corruption campaign. In March 2020, former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, Prince Ahmed bin Abd al Aziz (the king's full brother), and some other royal family members reportedly were detained on suspicion of plotting a coup d'état.³⁹

Vision 2030 and Economic Reform

The Crown Prince presides over the kingdom's national economic transformation initiatives as Prime Minister, head of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, and chairman of the board of the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund—the Public Investment Fund (PIF). Growth in state revenue, spending reductions, and borrowing have bolstered the kingdom's ability to invest in support of its *Vision 2030* Vision Realization Programs,⁴⁰ National Transformation Plan, and Fiscal Balance Plan, which have set goals to expand employment opportunities for young Saudis

³⁶ The kingdom's Islamic legal system is based on the Quran and traditions (hadith) of the Prophet Mohammed, supplemented by limited civil service and commercial codes. Marwa Rashad, "Saudi Arabia announces new judicial reforms in a move towards codified law," Reuters, February 8, 2021. For background, see Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Saudi Arabia," March 20, 2023.

³⁸ Some members of the royal family reportedly objected to some post-2015 changes in intra-family letters reported after 2015, during meetings of the Allegiance Council, and through other channels. See David Ignatius, "A Cyclone Brews over Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2015; Hugh Miles, "Saudi Royal Calls for Regime Change in Riyadh," *The Guardian*, September 28, 2015; Vivian Nereim, "Saudi Prince Addresses Questions of Loyalty After London Video," Bloomberg, September 5, 2018; and Reuters, "In Saudi Arabia, criticism of Crown Prince grows after attack," October 2, 2019.

³⁹ Prior to Prince Mohammed bin Nayef's March 2020 detention, former U.S. intelligence official Bruce Riedel had said that the prince had been under "house arrest" or "palace arrest." See Riedel, "Four years into Salman's reign, Saudi Arabia more unpredictable than ever," *Al Monitor*, January 16, 2019; Riedel, interview with Martin Smith, *PBS Frontline*, October 1, 2019; Stephen Kalin and Marwa Rashad, "Saudi Arabia detains senior royals for alleged coup plot, including king's brother: sources," Reuters, March 6, 2020; Summer Said, Justin Scheck, and Warren Strobel, "Top Saudi Royal Family Members Detained," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2020; Summer Said and Jared Malsin, "Saudi Authorities Begin Release of Princes Questioned in Roundup," *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2020.

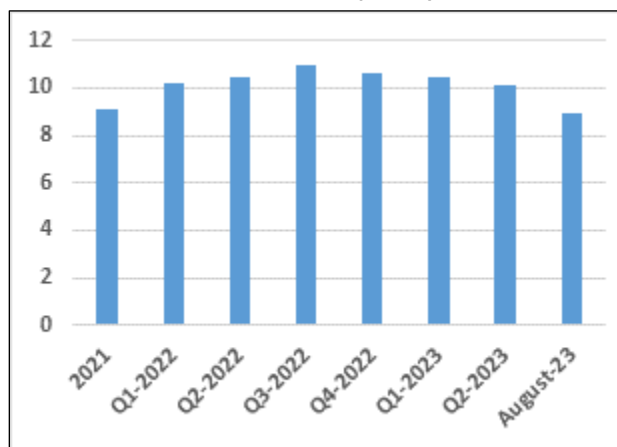
⁴⁰ Vision Realization Programs guide the implementation of *Vision 2030* programs across various sectors.

while attracting foreign investment to new sectors and creating new sources of non-oil-based state revenue and private sector activity.⁴¹ The International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) September 2023 report on Saudi Arabia states that “The implementation of the Vision 2030 reform agenda—which led to substantial improvements in the regulatory and business environment—is continuing unimpeded towards a productive and green economy.”⁴² The IMF generally has commended reform goals and efforts under *Vision 2030* and the National Transformation Plan, which in part reflect long-standing IMF recommendations for structural reforms to encourage private sector growth, diversify revenue sources, and improve employment opportunities for young Saudis.⁴³

Successive Saudi leaders have pursued these goals, but with more narrow and gradual targets than those of *Vision 2030*. Historically, Saudi policymakers have faced challenges in balancing these types of reforms with concerns for the preservation of regime and national security, social stability, and cultural and religious values. The kingdom’s long generous support to citizens through subsidies and public employment have grown less fiscally sustainable. In making oil production, investment, and fiscal decisions, Saudi officials consider global economic conditions, investment plans and spare production capacity among oil producers, domestic economic development, oil consumers’ policies, the fiscal needs of the kingdom’s neighbors, the vulnerability of oil infrastructure, and longer-term energy market trends, such as expected global transition away from fossil fuels.

At present, Saudi state finances and the kingdom’s ability to implement its ambitious economic transformation agenda remain dependent on revenue derived from oil exports.⁴⁴ Among the G20 countries, Saudi Arabia had the highest economic growth in 2022 due to high global oil prices stemming in part from the effects of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Higher oil prices and global economic recovery have been a boon for the kingdom, replenishing state coffers after a challenging period of lower revenue and higher-than-planned spending to offset the economic

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia: Crude Oil Production
Million barrels per day



Source: OPEC Monthly Oil Market Reports, October 2022 and September 2023.

⁴¹ See, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Article IV Consultation Reports, 2017-2023; Peter Waldman, “The \$2 Trillion Project to Get Saudi Arabia’s Economy Off Oil,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, April 21, 2016; Ben Hubbard and Kate Kelly, “Saudi Arabia’s Grand Plan to Move Beyond Oil: Big Goals, Bigger Hurdles,” *New York Times*, October 25, 2017; Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudi Arabia’s sleepy city offers prince a cautionary tale,” *Financial Times* (UK), May 27, 2018; Al Omran, “Record numbers of foreign workers leave Saudi Arabia,” *Financial Times* (UK), July 10, 2018; and, Rory Jones, “In Rare Step, Saudi’s Sovereign Wealth Fund Raises \$11 Billion Loan,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2018.

⁴² IMF Article IV Consultation Report, September 2023.

⁴³ IMF, 2022 and 2023 Article IV Consultation Reports, August 2022 and September 2023.

⁴⁴ State-owned oil giant Aramco reported an annual profit of \$161 billion in 2022, contributing to the fiscal surplus. However, in the first quarter of 2023, declines in oil prices from 2022 highs and reduced export volumes contributed to a return to quarterly deficit for the kingdom.

effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.⁴⁵ Some analysts project that Saudi Arabia's fiscal break-even oil price is \$80 per barrel; oil prices in 2023 have fluctuated between a low of around \$70 per barrel to more than \$90 per barrel. As of October 2023, the kingdom projected a deficit for 2023 through 2026, but reported record low unemployment and low inflation.⁴⁶

U.S. officials support Saudi plans to diversify its economy and develop green energy infrastructure, but have also encouraged Saudi Arabia and its partners in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the OPEC Plus (OPEC+) group to increase oil output as a means of moderating global oil prices following the 2022 onset of the Russia-Ukraine war.⁴⁷ Saudi Arabia temporarily increased oil production in mid-2022 (**Figure 1**) before deciding to cut production in concert with Russia and other OPEC+ producers in October 2022 and April 2023, and to make further voluntary unilateral cuts to its own production in July 2023 and through the end of the year. Market analysts attribute these cuts to Saudi officials' desire to bolster oil revenue and fund transformation efforts, though sustained lower output could result in lower growth if higher prices are not sustained.⁴⁸

Non-oil revenue overall and as a share of government spending has increased rapidly since *Vision 2030* implementation began in 2016 (**Figure 2**), but most deficit reduction since 2020 has come from higher oil proceeds.⁴⁹ The government introduced a value added tax (VAT) in 2018 and tripled it to 15% in July 2020 in response to budget pressures. IMF assessments call for the kingdom to maintain this higher rate and continue to reduce energy subsidies while expanding targeted support to vulnerable segments of the population.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ "Saudi Aramco's full-year profit more than doubles on soaring oil prices," CNBC, March 20, 2022.

⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance. Pre-Budget Statement for Fiscal Year 2024, September 30, 2023.

⁴⁷ As of September 2023, official OPEC+ membership included 13 OPEC countries and 10 non-OPEC countries, representing nearly 52% of world oil production as of calendar year 2022. See U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Today in Energy*, "What is OPEC+ and how is it different from OPEC?" May 9, 2023.

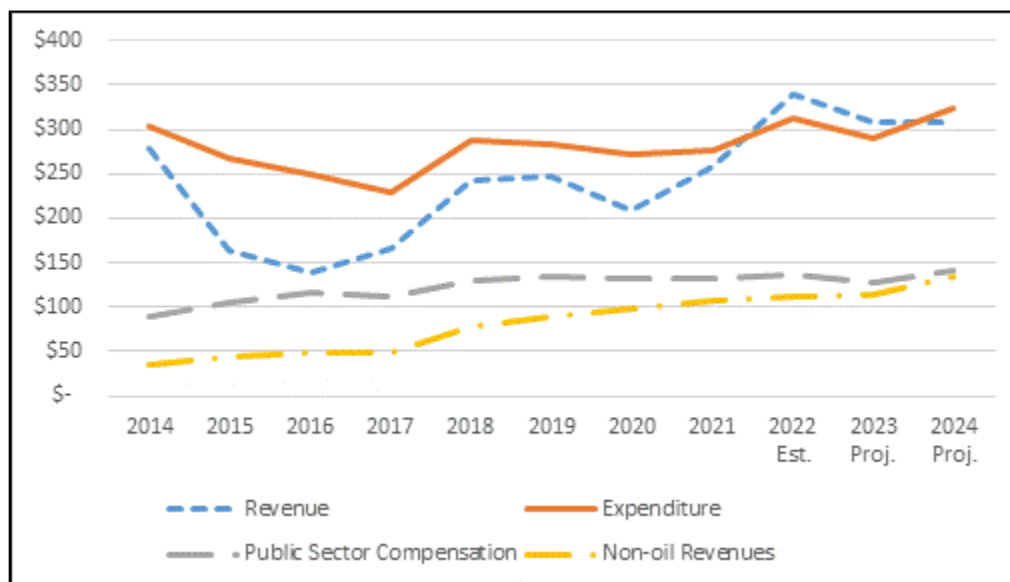
⁴⁸ See, for example, Anna Hirtenstein, "Saudi Arabia and Russia Win Big in Gamble on Oil Cuts," *Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2023; and, Abeer Abu Omar, "IMF Says Saudi Oil Cuts Will Spare Economy Where It Matters Most," September 6, 2023.

⁴⁹ IMF Article IV Consultation Report, August 2022, p. 9.

⁵⁰ IMF Article IV Consultation Reports, August 2022 and September 2023,

Figure 2. Saudi Arabia: Selected Fiscal Data

historical \$, billions



Source: Compiled by CRS from International Monetary Fund (IMF) Article IV reports, 2017-2023, and Saudi Ministry of Finance data, 2023. Data for 2022 reflects actual totals for Revenue and Expenditure.

Following an assessment of progress toward *Vision 2030* goals in early 2021, the Crown Prince announced plans to channel additional public and private investment toward the plan's efforts. Under the "Shareek" initiative, the government has directed large publicly listed Saudi companies to redirect dividends toward capital investment in the domestic economy.⁵¹ Saudi leaders have announced that foreign companies pursuing state contracts in Saudi Arabia will be expected to have their regional headquarters in the kingdom by 2024, setting up an explicit rivalry with established business hubs, such as Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.⁵² The kingdom also is continuing to invest in several "giga-projects" to create new thematic hubs of economic activity, including the NEOM⁵³ project in the kingdom's northwest, the Red Sea Project tourism zone along the western coast, and the Qiddiya entertainment and sports complex near Riyadh.⁵⁴

Attacks on Saudi infrastructure and reported human rights violations since 2017 have demonstrated interrelations among Saudi politics, regional security, and the kingdom's economic transformation plans. International observers and investors appear to be weighing these factors from a variety of perspectives. Foreign private sector actors intending to participate in and profit from new investment and expanded business opportunities in the kingdom have had to navigate

⁵¹ Ghaida Ghantous and Saeed Azhar, "Saudi Arabia announces \$1.3 trillion private sector investment push led by Aramco, SABIC," Reuters, March 30, 2021; and, Karen E. Young, "MbS has a new growth story," Amwaj Media/American Enterprise Institute, April 6, 2021.

⁵² See Matthew Martin, Vivian Nereim and Zainab Fattah, "Saudi Arabia Adds Pressure on Global Firms to Move to Riyadh," Bloomberg, February 16, 2021; and, Zainab Fattah, "Saudi TV Stations Begin Shift to Riyadh in Challenge to Dubai," Bloomberg, September 1, 2021.

⁵³ According to NEOM officials "The name 'NEOM' is derived from two words. The first three letters from the Ancient Greek prefix neo-meaning 'new'. The fourth letter is from the abbreviation of *Mostaqbal*, an Arabic word meaning 'future'."

⁵⁴ Andrew England and Ahmed al Omran, "Saudi prince powers ahead with futuristic city and sports giga-projects," *Financial Times*, August 16, 2020.

political and security developments that have resulted in uncertainty. This includes concerns about the kingdom's human rights practices and attacks on infrastructure and populated areas by foreign adversaries. Outside actors hoping to support Saudi Arabia's transformation plans as a hedge against political discord in the kingdom that could result from the initiatives' failure may face related challenges in convincing investors to make long-term investment commitments. The kingdom's adversaries could leverage relatively low cost, high impact attacks to amplify investors' doubts in the future.

Human Rights

During his July 2022 visit to Saudi Arabia, President Biden said that he and the Crown Prince "discussed human rights and the need for political reform," and the President said he "made clear that the topic was vitally important to me and to the United States."⁵⁵

Saudi law does not guarantee freedom of assembly, expression, religion, the press, or association; rather, the government strictly limits each of them. Limited freedom of association exists in practice, but political parties are prohibited, as are any groups in opposition to the government. Since the 1990s, authorities have repeatedly detained, fined, arrested, or imprisoned individuals associated with protests, public advocacy, or criticism of the government, and have placed travel restrictions on critics, activists, and their family members, including U.S. nationals.⁵⁶ A Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) presides over terrorism cases, including those cases involving alleged violations of restrictions on political activity and expression contained in counterterrorism and cybercrimes laws adopted since 2008.⁵⁷

In March 2023, the Department of State's 2022 report on human rights practices in Saudi Arabia described credible reports of a wide variety of human rights violations, including "reports that authorities attempted to intimidate critics living abroad, pressured their relatives in country, and in certain instances abducted or pressured dissidents and repatriated them to the country."⁵⁸ The U.S. Department of Justice has charged individuals for allegedly assisting the government of Saudi Arabia in accessing the social media accounts of dissidents and for lying to investigators in inquiries related to harassment of Saudi nationals in the United States.⁵⁹ In 2022, Saudi authorities issued long prison sentences to Saudi and U.S. nationals reportedly related to private and public expression while abroad.⁶⁰

Saudi officials generally defend the kingdom's judicial processes and reject outside criticism. In August 2023, a Saudi court sentenced a Saudi national to death on charges that cited his social media and other online activity.⁶¹ Asked about the case in a September 2023 interview, the Crown Prince denied being able to direct or influence the decisions of Saudi judges and

⁵⁵ The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on His Meetings in Saudi Arabia," July 15, 2022.

⁵⁶ An October 2021 NGO report found that "At least eighty-nine U.S. persons or their family members were detained, disappeared, or under travel bans at some point in 2021 in Saudi Arabia." Freedom Initiative, *Friend or Foe? Saudi Arabian Government Repression in the US and Worldwide*, October 2021.

⁵⁷ See American Bar Association Center for Human Rights, *Saudi Arabia: Counterterror Court Targets Activists*, April 2019.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Saudi Arabia," March 20, 2023.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Isabel Debre, "FBI arrests Saudi man for using fake accounts to harass and threaten nation's critics," PBS News Hour, July 19, 2022.

⁶⁰ Ellen Knickmeyer, "Saudis in US targeted as kingdom cracks down on dissent," Associated Press, November 2, 2022.

⁶¹ Jon Gambrell, "Saudi man receives death penalty for posts online, latest case in wide-ranging crackdown on dissent," Associated Press, August 30, 2023.

expressed his own criticism of some Saudi laws while indicating his intention to implement further legal reform.⁶²

The Department of State reported that in 2022, the kingdom's "SCC and the Public Prosecutor's Office were not independent entities, as they reportedly were required to coordinate their decisions with government authorities, including the king and crown prince."⁶³ In the same report, the Department said that "Human rights activists claimed that SCC judges received implicit instructions to issue harsh sentences against human rights activists, reformers, journalists, and dissidents not engaged in violent activities." In March 2022, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet condemned the kingdom's execution of 81 individuals, including some tried for alleged violations of the 2008 counterterrorism law. She said the executions did not conform to "international human rights and humanitarian law and may amount to a war crime."⁶⁴

The Department of State's March 2023 report did not provide an update on members of the royal family detained in March 2020, including the former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef Al Saud, Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and Prince Nayef bin Ahmed Al Saud, a former head of army intelligence.⁶⁵ The report included a nongovernmental organization's confirmation that Prince Turki bin Abdullah, a son of the late King Abdullah and former governor of Riyadh Province, was sentenced to 17 years on corruption charges after five years of pretrial detention.

Lawyers for Saudi entities have levied corruption allegations against Saad bin Khalid Al Jabri, a high-ranking former colleague of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, in court filings.⁶⁶ Al Jabri denies the charges and has accused the Saudi government of trying to assassinate him. Saudi authorities have tried and imprisoned two of his children. In January 2023, the U.S. government prevailed in its assertion of the state secrets privilege in related court proceedings in the United States.⁶⁷

The March 2023 Department of State report also refers to a U.N. inquiry into allegations that Saudi security forces used firearms excessively against civilians at the Saudi-Yemen border and otherwise allegedly subjected some migrants to "killings, torture, arbitrary detention, and sexual abuse." Human Rights Watch released a report on the alleged killings and abuses in August 2023.⁶⁸ U.S. officials reportedly raised the allegations with Saudi officials, who have denied the

⁶² "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman," interview by Bret Baier, *Special Report*, Fox News, September 20, 2023.

⁶³ U.S. Department of State, "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Saudi Arabia," March 20, 2023.

⁶⁴ U.N. News, "UN rights chief decries mass execution of 81 people in Saudi Arabia," March 14, 2022.

⁶⁵ The Department of State reported: "In early March [2020] authorities reportedly detained four senior princes: Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, King Salman's full brother; his son, Prince Nayef bin Ahmed, a former head of army intelligence; Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, former crown prince and interior minister; and his younger brother, Prince Nawaf bin Nayef. The detentions were not announced by the government ... In August lawyers representing Prince Mohammed bin Nayef said they were increasingly concerned about his well-being, alleging that his whereabouts remained unknown five months after he was detained and stating that he had not been allowed visits by his personal doctor. Prince Nawaf's lawyers stated he was released in August, but there were no updates on the other three as of year's end." U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights, 2020, Saudi Arabia, March 31, 2021.

⁶⁶ Stephen Kalin and Bradley Hope, "Saudi Arabia's Ousted Spymaster Is Accused of Embezzling Billions," *Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2021.

⁶⁷ Bryce Klehm, "DNI Haines Asserts State Secrets Privilege in Civil Lawsuit Involving Saudi Arabia," *Lawfare*, September 3, 2021; and, Kevin Koeninger, "Saudi spymaster, US gov't say asset fight threatens state secrets," *Courthouse News Service*, September 30, 2022; see *Sakab Saudi Holding Co. v. Aljabri*, No. 22-1052 (1st Cir. 2023).

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch, "'They Fired on Us Like Rain,' Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border," August 21, 2023.

reports.⁶⁹ U.S. officials stated that U.S. training for Border Guard forces under the U.S.-Saudi bilateral interior security support agreement focused on maritime security.⁷⁰

Women's Rights and Social Change

Some major social changes have been introduced in conjunction with the kingdom's *Vision 2030* transformation initiatives, notably the recognition of women's right to drive and some changes to "guardianship laws" that have long empowered Saudi men to control the personal lives of female relatives and partners. The March 2023 Department of State human rights report notes some steps by Saudi authorities to improve human rights conditions, including through continual removal of some restrictions on the rights of women. Women's participation in the Saudi labor force already has exceeded *Vision 2030* targets.

Social changes implemented to date have been sweeping, and their pace and scope have surprised many longtime observers of the kingdom. However, as noted above, these reforms have been accompanied by a stifling of dissent, the disempowerment of some religious conservatives, and the imprisonment of some clerics and liberal activists with the potential to act as influential critics. Notably, authorities implemented the significant reforms in terms of women's rights described above in conjunction with the imprisonment of many leading women activists. Since 2021, authorities have released some of these women under travel bans and other limits; in 2022, others were sentenced.⁷¹ Social and gender practices are changing at the government's direction and with the government's support, though the scope and embrace of change reportedly varies in different areas of the country and in different communities.

Policy changes since 2017 have removed many official restrictions on women, though in some cases, rules empowering women's male "guardians" (husbands or designated male relatives) continue to apply. In March 2022, the Crown Prince announced the cabinet's approval of a new personal status law, which the government said was intended to address shortcomings that created disadvantages for women in cases involving marriage, divorce, child custody, and other personal matters.⁷² The law came into effect in June 2022.⁷³ According to Human Rights Watch, the new law "entrenches discriminatory provisions on women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and decisions relating to children. Rather than dismantling it, the law instead codifies male guardianship and sets out provisions that can facilitate and excuse domestic violence including sexual abuse in marriage."⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Missy Ryan, Sarah Dadouch, John Hudson, and Karen DeYoung, "U.S. presses Saudi Arabia on reported migrant massacres," *Washington Post*, August 31, 2023.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Associated Press, "A Saudi woman gets a 45-year prison sentence for social media use that remains unclear," August 31, 2022.

⁷² See Saudi Gazette, "Al-Samaani: Personal Status Law reinforces mother's right for custody of children," March 10, 2022; and U.S. Department of State, "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Saudi Arabia," April 12, 2022.

⁷³ Saudi Gazette, "Saudi Personal Status Law limits judiciary's discretionary power, reduce inconsistencies," September 1, 2022.

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2023: Saudi Arabia," January 2023.

Selected Saudi Foreign Policy Issues

The People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia

U.S. global competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia and the Saudi monarchy's willingness to engage in defense and energy cooperation with these U.S. rivals add strategic complexity to the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The Crown Prince has denied that Saudi oil policy coordination with Russia is intended to strengthen Russia's ability to wage war on Ukraine, and he has described Sino-Saudi trade and diplomatic cooperation as reflecting the discrete interests of both countries. Like past Saudi leaders, he has alluded to the potential for Saudi Arabia to deepen its cooperation with others if closer ties with the United States are not possible.⁷⁵

Saudi Arabia has long maintained a diverse set of defense suppliers, but relies on the United States and some European partners for most of its defense needs. At times, the kingdom has acquired capabilities that the United States and partners in Europe have been unwilling or unable to provide. Since 2015, this has included systems such as armed unmanned aircraft⁷⁶ and, reportedly, new ballistic missiles systems and related production technology from China.⁷⁷ China's military has conducted joint exercises with Saudi counterparts.⁷⁸ In August 2021, Saudi Arabia and Russia signed a defense cooperation agreement "aimed at developing joint military cooperation between the two countries."⁷⁹ Russian and PRC military cooperation with Iran and the performance of the Russian military during the war in Ukraine could dissuade the kingdom from deepening military ties to Russia and China or procuring some Russian or PRC weapons systems.

As noted above, since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, U.S. analysts have scrutinized Saudi energy policy and diplomacy, with some observers criticizing Saudi leaders' unwillingness to more fully distance themselves from Russia and noting Saudi decisions through mid-2022 to increase oil output only gradually in line with agreements previously reached among oil producers, including Russia.⁸⁰ Saudi-Russian energy negotiations have been central to the duration of the OPEC+ arrangement, with a June 2018 bilateral energy cooperation agreement seeking "a balanced market...supported by a reliable and sufficient supply."⁸¹ At times, reported Saudi-Russian disagreements have led to divergent approaches,⁸² but Saudi-Russian coordination with other OPEC+ members has continued, with oil output managed according to agreed country-specific targets. Saudi Arabia has unilaterally reduced its oil output

⁷⁵ In a March 2022 interview, he said: "Where is the potential in the world today? It's in Saudi Arabia. And if you want to miss it, I believe other people in the East are going to be super happy." Graeme Wood, "Absolute Power," *The Atlantic*, March 3, 2022.

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2019.

⁷⁷ Phil Mattingly, Zachary Cohen and Jeremy Herb, "U.S. intel shows Saudi Arabia escalated its missile program with help from China," CNN, June 5, 2019; Jared Malsin, Summer Said, and Warren P. Strobel, "Saudis Begin Making Ballistic Missiles With Chinese Help," *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2021.

⁷⁸ Reuters, "China, Saudi Arabia launch joint naval exercise -media," November 19, 2019.

⁷⁹ Deputy Minister of Defense Prince Khalid bin Salman Al Saud (@kbsalsaud), Twitter, 5:56 PM, August 23, 2021.

⁸⁰ David Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia Chooses Putin over Biden on Ukraine to Keep Oil Prices High," Wilson Center, March 2, 2022; Josh Rogin, "Opinion: America's Gulf 'allies' are now Putin's enablers," *Washington Post*, May 5, 2022.

⁸¹ RFE/RL, "Russia, Saudi Arabia Agree To Expand Cooperation On Oil, Gas," June 15, 2018.

⁸² Jinjoo Lee, "How a Tenuous Saudi-Russia Oil Alliance Could Melt Down," *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2020.

since June 2023 in response to what it argues is oversupply in the market. Upward pressure on oil prices has generated renewed scrutiny of Saudi decisionmaking in this area.

Greater Saudi energy exports to China also have underpinned deepening Sino-Saudi economic and diplomatic ties, leading to new cooperation initiatives in areas such as uranium exploration and nuclear technology. In May 2023, Saudi Arabia provided approximately 14% of China's oil imports, but increasing imports of discounted oil from Russia to China were eroding Saudi Arabia's position as the PRC's top foreign oil supplier.⁸³ China has submitted a technical bid for the construction of two planned nuclear energy reactors in the kingdom. In August 2020, Saudi authorities denied press reports citing unnamed Western officials that claimed Saudi Arabia with China's help built a facility for milling uranium oxide ore.⁸⁴ Such a facility would not violate Saudi Arabia's nonproliferation commitments but would require declaration. Chinese state entities have assisted in surveys of uranium deposits in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁵ Other press reporting described a separate possible undeclared site.⁸⁶

In December 2022, PRC leader Xi Jinping traveled to Riyadh to attend the inaugural China-Arab States Summit and the inaugural China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit—effectively raising PRC's ties to the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council to the head-of-state level. The kingdom and the PRC agreed to upgrade the China-Saudi Arabia High-level Joint Committee to the prime minister-level and host biennial meetings at the head-of-state level.⁸⁷ The two sides also reached a *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement*. Prior to 2022, President Xi had last visited Saudi Arabia in 2016, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited China in 2019. Chinese telecommunications firms provide 5G and data services in Saudi Arabia, including Huawei, which in 2022 launched an innovation center in the kingdom and in September 2023 opened a cloud data center there.

In July 2022, the White House announced a Memorandum of Cooperation between the U.S. National Telecommunication and Information Administration and the Saudi Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to “connect U.S. and Saudi technology companies in the advancement and deployment of 5G using open, virtualized, and cloud-based radio access networks and the development of 6G through similar technologies.”⁸⁸ The agreement included Saudi commitments to invest in the deployment of such technologies via the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, and some analysts have noted the agreement's potential implications for global U.S.-PRC technology competition.⁸⁹

⁸³ Summer Said and Benoit Faucon, “Russia Set to Overtake Saudi Arabia in Battle for China's Oil Market,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2023.

⁸⁴ Warren P. Stroebel, Michael R. Gordon, and Felicia Schwartz, “Saudi Arabia, With China's Help, Expands Its Nuclear Program,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2020.

⁸⁵ China National Nuclear Corporation, “CNNC and Saudi Arabia expedite uranium and thorium collaborations,” September 1, 2017; Suzan Katamoura et al, “Uranium/Thorium Resource Assessment in Saudi Arabia,” International Symposium on Uranium Raw Material for the Nuclear Fuel Cycle: Exploration, Mining, Production, Supply and Demand, Economics and Environmental Issues, June 27, 2018.

⁸⁶ Mark Mazzetti, David E. Sanger, and William J. Broad, “U.S. Examines Whether Saudi Nuclear Program Could Lead to Bomb Effort,” *New York Times*, August 5, 2020.

⁸⁷ Foreign Ministry of the PRC, “President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia,” December 9, 2022.

⁸⁸ The White House, “FACT SHEET: Results of Bilateral Meeting Between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” July 15, 2022.

⁸⁹ Claude Barfield, “Biden Touts Saudi 5G Open Radio Access Network Deal, but Huawei Still Dominates the Middle East,” American Enterprise Institute, August 1, 2022.

Iran

Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties to Iran in 2016 following attacks on a Saudi diplomatic facility in Iran that occurred in the wake of the kingdom's execution of a Shia cleric convicted of treason.⁹⁰ In 2021 and 2022, officials from Saudi Arabia and Iran engaged in several rounds of talks hosted by Iraq and Oman; the talks reportedly focused on regional security issues and aimed at deescalating Saudi-Iranian tensions. In April 2023, China facilitated the apparent culmination of those talks, resulting in a reopening of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic ties. Saudi and Iranian authorities also agreed to reactivate bilateral agreements reached in the late 1990s and early 2000s that committed the two governments to respecting each other's internal security and cooperating in related security matters.

Iran has named an ambassador to the kingdom and reopened its embassy, consulate, and delegation to the multilateral Saudi Arabia-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Tehran in August 2023. In June 2023, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud visited Iran and relayed an invitation for Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to visit Saudi Arabia.⁹¹ In August 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian traveled to Saudi Arabia and met with the Crown Prince.

Saudi-Iranian relations have thawed, but the two countries' foreign policies continue to appear divergent in key areas. Iran's government opposes normalization with Israel, and Iran could undermine any further steps by Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with Israel. U.S. and Saudi officials share concerns over Iran's nuclear, missile, and unmanned aerial vehicle programs, as well as continuing Iranian support for armed groups in the Middle East region, especially for the Ansarallah (aka Houthi) movement in Yemen, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. When multilateral talks with Iran over its nuclear program were still underway in 2021, the Saudi government expressed support for a possible agreement that "ensures that Iran will not now or ever gain access to nuclear weapons technology."⁹² In a September 2023 interview, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman reiterated that if Iran obtains a nuclear weapon, then Saudi Arabia would be compelled to follow suit.⁹³ In 2023, Saudi-Iranian relations also have appeared strained over energy issues, such as Iranian attacks on commercial shipping in the Gulf region and rights to the Saudi-Kuwaiti offshore Al Durra field.⁹⁴

Gulf Neighbor Relations

In January 2021, Saudi Arabia lifted closures of its land and sea borders and airspace to Qatar, along with related diplomatic and economic isolation measures that it had imposed in 2017. Mirroring the resolution of a previous confrontation in 2014, an agreement reached between the parties provides for an end to the isolation measures in exchange for new understandings about state-backed media coverage and an end to Qatar's pursuit of legal damages.⁹⁵ Saudi and Qatari

⁹⁰ Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia Cuts Ties With Iran Amid Fallout From Cleric's Execution," *New York Times*, January 3, 2016.

⁹¹ Amir Vahdat, "Saudi foreign minister in Iran as part of restoration of diplomatic ties after a 7-year rift," AP, June 17, 2023.

⁹² Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud quoted in Reuters, "Saudi Arabia says sees an emboldened Iran around Middle East," August 3, 2021.

⁹³ "Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman," interview by Bret Baier, *Special Report*, Fox News, September 20, 2023.

⁹⁴ Nick El Hajj, "Dispute over Persian Gulf gas field poses early challenge to Saudi-Iranian rapprochement," AP, July 31, 2023.

⁹⁵ Al-Ula Declaration, signed by Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, (continued...)

leaders have met frequently since reaching the agreement. Qatar's Emir departed the Saudi-hosted Arab League summit in May 2023 in apparent protest of the Saudi-brokered League decision to welcome Syrian President Bashar Al Asad.

Reports in July 2023 alleged that a rivalry has developed between the Saudi Crown Prince and United Arab Emirates President Shaykh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and said that the Crown Prince had privately threatened to isolate the UAE as it once did Qatar.⁹⁶ UAE and Saudi officials reportedly have differed over oil production decisions and policy toward Yemen and Sudan in 2023, but denied the reports of a rift. An unnamed senior Biden Administration official told the *Wall Street Journal* in response to the reported tensions that, "it's not helpful to us for them to be at each other's throats."⁹⁷

Yemen

In July 2023, the Biden Administration welcomed the 16-month mark in a period of calm in the conflict that has gripped Yemen since 2015; the continuing truce has halted both cross-border Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen.⁹⁸ In April 2023, Saudi negotiators engaged the Houthis directly in Sanaa, Yemen, after lifting restrictions on the entry of goods to non-Houthi controlled ports. Houthi officials made a reciprocal visit to Riyadh in September 2023. Outstanding issues between the Saudi-backed Presidential Leadership Council and the Houthi-controlled National Salvation Government reportedly include continuing air and sea access restrictions, the payment of salaries to state employees in Houthi-controlled areas, and terms for an enduring ceasefire and for initiating broader political settlement talks. Houthi officials displayed missiles presumably acquired from Iran in a September 2023 military parade.

Saudi Arabia appears to be shaping politics in areas of southern Yemen controlled or influenced by the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), which supports reestablishing an independent state in southern Yemen. Some political and tribal leaders from the easternmost Yemeni governorate of Hadramout announced the formation of a Hadramout National Council following June 2023 consultations in Riyadh.⁹⁹ Rivalry between the STC, Islamists, local groups, and anti-secession figures across southern Yemen may affect Yemen's future stability and the context in which the United States pursues counterterrorism objectives in southern Yemen and peace in Yemen more broadly.¹⁰⁰ In June 2023, the Biden Administration reported to Congress, consistent with the War Powers Resolution, that "a small number" of U.S. military personnel "are deployed to Yemen to conduct operations against al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS."¹⁰¹

January 5, 2021, available at <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/No%20Volume/56786/Part/I-56786-08000002805b2870.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Charles W. Dunne, "The UAE-Saudi Arabia Rivalry Becomes a Rift," Arab Center Washington, DC, July 6, 2023; and, Summer Said, Dion Nissenbaum, Stephen Kalin, and Saleh al-Batati, "The Best of Frenemies: Saudi Crown Prince Clashes With U.A.E. President," *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2023.

⁹⁷ Said et al., "The Best of Frenemies..." *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2023.

⁹⁸ The White House, "Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Trip to Saudi Arabia," July 27, 2023.

⁹⁹ Yasser Ezzi, "Hadramawt National Council: A new player in Yemen's political landscape," *The New Arab*, June 26, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ See Gregory D. Johnsen, "The Growing Battle for South Yemen," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 18, 2023.

¹⁰¹ The White House, Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report, June 8, 2023

In September 2023, Secretary of State Blinken met with the Saudi and UAE foreign ministers to discuss Yemen and other issues; a U.S. readout said “The Secretary and the Foreign Ministers agreed that cooperation among the three governments and Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council is essential to advancing UN-led peace efforts.”¹⁰²

Syria

Though UAE officials were first to prominently reengage the Asad government, in early 2023, Saudi Arabia worked to build consensus on collective Arab reengagement. Saudi Arabia and several other Arab League member governments had closed their embassies in Syria and isolated the Asad government in protest of its conduct in the Syrian civil war. In May 2023, the Arab League, with Saudi support, readmitted Syria; Saudi Arabia and Syria resumed operations at their respective embassies; and the kingdom invited President Asad to the May 19 League summit in Jeddah. The Biden Administration and some in Congress oppose normalization with the Asad regime.¹⁰³

In conjunction with Syria’s invitation to return to the Arab League, the Syrian government committed to strengthening cooperation with neighboring states and countries affected by drug trafficking across the Syrian border.¹⁰⁴ Since May 2023, Saudi customs and border authorities have continued to announce disruptions of large shipments of the amphetamine Captagon, which authorities say is produced in Syria and transits Lebanon or other regional states.

Sudan

The Saudi government has issued calls to leaders of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) “for calm and stopping military escalation, and returning to the framework agreement outlining the transition to a civilian-led government.”¹⁰⁵ In May and June 2023, the kingdom hosted SAF-RSF talks on a ceasefire, and U.S. and Saudi officials reported they were engaged in “intensive collaboration” on related diplomatic efforts.¹⁰⁶ The Sudanese parties’ unwillingness to observe ceasefire terms led Saudi Arabia and the United States to suspend talks in June, but U.S. officials returned to Jeddah in July 2023 to resume consultations with Saudi and Sudanese counterparts.

Both SAF and RSF forces participated in Saudi-led coalition military operations in Yemen, in which RSF fighters played a prominent role and gained resources and experience. The Saudi government has continued investing in stabilizing Sudan’s public finances since Sudan’s 2019 revolution and has remained engaged with SAF, RSF, and civilian Sudanese leaders. Saudi policy in Sudan appears to prioritize the prevention of political change, unrest, or instability in that country from jeopardizing regional security, including Red Sea commerce and development projects on Saudi Arabia’s Red Sea under the *Vision 2030* initiative. According to Saudi government sources, the kingdom evacuated nearly 8,500 people (mostly foreign nationals) from

¹⁰² U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Participation in the U.S.-KSA-UAE Trilateral Meeting on Peace in Yemen and Other Regional Priorities,” September 19, 2023.

¹⁰³ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Safadi,” May 4, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Saudi Press Agency, “Final Communiqué of Ministerial Contact Group Meeting on Syria,” May 1, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Al Arabiya, “Saudi FM urges halt to military escalation in Sudan in calls with Burhan, RSF leader,” April 16, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan,” May 5, 2023.

Sudan by ship to the Red Sea port of Jeddah and via flight. On May 5, 2023, Secretary of State Blinken called Saudi evacuation assistance “invaluable.”¹⁰⁷

U.S.-Saudi Relations

Security Cooperation and Arms Sales

U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism and defense ties remain robust. Since 2008, successive U.S. presidential administrations have proposed foreign military sales to Saudi Arabia of major defense articles and services with a potential aggregate value of more than \$151.01 billion (**Appendix A**).¹⁰⁸ The United States and Saudi Arabia concluded foreign military sales agreements worth more than \$100 billion from FY2009 through FY2020. As Defense Minister from 2015 to 2022, the Crown Prince outlined goals for increasing the domestic production of military hardware overseen by the new General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI) and its implementing arm, Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI).¹⁰⁹ Saudi Arabia has set a goal for making 50% of its defense procurement domestically by 2030.

The stated emphasis and goals of some U.S.-Saudi security cooperation efforts have shifted in response to emergent threats and changing U.S. and Saudi priorities. Whereas pre-2001 cooperation focused on building conventional military capacity and post-2001 engagement created new partnerships for sensitive counterterrorism and critical infrastructure protection efforts, current security cooperation programs address but extend beyond these concerns. U.S. officials have pledged to support the kingdom’s efforts to transform its security sector, defense ministry, and military services, and they have realigned U.S. efforts in Saudi Arabia to acknowledge and contribute to U.S. competition with Russia and the PRC.¹¹⁰ The 2022 Integrated Country Strategy for Saudi Arabia states the Biden Administration’s view that “aggressive engagement by strategic competitors China and Russia could distract Saudi focus from the U.S. security relationship. This can be tempered through strengthening existing relationships and enhanced public messaging promoting the U.S.-Saudi security partnership and countering Russian and Chinese narratives.”¹¹¹

On a bilateral and multilateral basis, current U.S. security cooperation engagement with Saudi Arabia and neighboring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states emphasizes integration and the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ CRS calculation using DSCA Foreign Military Sales notifications to Congress. This figure does not include Direct Commercial Sales. The actual value of agreed sales may differ.

¹⁰⁹ GAMI is now the focal point for all major security sector procurement, and SAMI is the entity responsible for contracting and ensuring that *Vision 2030* goals are met for local procurement and production, technology transfer, and local employment. The broad *Vision 2030* goals for SAMI are to localize 50% of the kingdom’s defense spending by 2030 (currently ~2%), to export goods and services worth 5 billion Saudi riyals, create 40,000 jobs, and contribute 14 billion Saudi riyals (\$3.7 billion) to GDP. See also, Neil Partrick, “Saudi Defense and Security Reform,” *Carnegie-Sada*, March 31, 2018; and, Yezid Sayegh, “The Warrior Prince,” *Carnegie - Diwan*, October 24, 2018.

¹¹⁰ At the May 2022 U.S.-Saudi Strategic Joint Planning Committee meeting, U.S. officials conveyed, “full support for Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Defense transformation process, a top priority for Saudi Arabia and for the United States.” The U.S. Military Training Mission in Saudi Arabia, the longest standing U.S. security cooperation organization in the kingdom, states it will “realign externally to support Saudi Vision 2030 (Transformation),” and will “reaffirm” its bilateral obligations so that the United States “will continue to remain the Kingdom’s Partner of choice in the Great (Strategic) Power Competition vis-a-vis China and Russia.” U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), “Readout of U.S. - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) Strategic Joint Planning Committee (SJPC) May 17-18, 2022,” May 19, 2022; and USMTM, at <https://www.centcom.mil/OPERATIONS-AND-EXERCISES/USMTM/>.

¹¹¹ U.S. Department of State, Saudi Arabia Integrated Country Strategy, July 2022.

use of new technologies, including unmanned systems, to jointly monitor and respond to air, maritime, and counterterrorism threats.¹¹² These efforts align with the Biden Administration’s national security strategy, which appears designed to reduce direct demands on the United States by empowering local partners to assume a greater role in the defense and stability of the region.

The Saudi Ministries of Defense and Interior and the Saudi National Guard were long led by high-profile princes thought to be contenders for the throne, and successive U.S. presidential administrations established and pursued unique and complementary security cooperation programs with these entities. The Crown Prince has centralized control over previously discretely led elements of the Saudi security apparatus:¹¹³ in its February 2021 report to Congress on the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the Office of the Director for National Intelligence stated, “since 2017, the Crown Prince has had absolute control of the Kingdom’s security and intelligence organizations.”¹¹⁴ The Crown Prince directed military “transformation” efforts in his capacity as Minister of Defense through September 2022, when his brother, Prince Khalid bin Salman was elevated to lead the Defense Ministry. The State Security Presidency (SSP), created in 2017 as an overarching domestic intelligence and counterterrorism agency, operates at the direction of the Crown Prince. Entities such as the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and National Guard (SANG) remain active and relevant, but are no longer led by senior princes.¹¹⁵

Several civilian and military U.S. security cooperation organizations continue to engage corresponding elements of the Saudi security sector pursuant to bilateral agreements. Saudi Arabia pays for U.S. government facilitated training, advising, and equipment for its internal security forces with its national funds through the Foreign Military Sales program and pursuant to authorities under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended.¹¹⁶ In 2022, the U.S. military advisory group for the Ministry of Interior realigned and rebranded itself as the U.S. Army Military Advisory Group (USA-MAG), and supports the SSP, the MOI, and other security forces pursuant to an Agreement for Technical Cooperation first reached in 2008 and renewed in 2023.¹¹⁷ The U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM) oversees U.S. cooperation with the kingdom’s conventional military forces, while the Office of the Program Manager-Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) supports the SANG’s mission. In support of the Crown Prince’s transformation initiative, Saudi Arabia has sought U.S. advice on institutional reorganizations and changes to their training, force management, and acquisition processes.

¹¹² See U.S. Department of Defense, “Dana Stroul, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, and Senior Department of Defense Leaders Participating in the United States-Gulf Cooperation Council Working Group Meetings, Hold an Off-Camera, On-The-Record Briefing From Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,” transcript, February 13, 2023.

¹¹³ For background on Saudi transformation efforts, see Neil Partrick, “Saudi Defense and Security Reform,” Sada, May 31, 2018; Partrick, “Saudi Arabia’s Elusive Defense Reform,” Sada, November 14, 2019; and, Bilal Saab, “The Other Saudi Transformation,” *Middle East Policy*, Volume 29, Issue 2, Summer 2022.

¹¹⁴ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Assessing the Saudi Government’s Role in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi,” February 26, 2021.

¹¹⁵ The SANG was long led by former King Abdullah bin Abd al Aziz. His son Prince Miteb bin Abdullah was removed as SANG Commander in 2017. Prince Abdullah bin Bandar bin Abd al Aziz now serves as SANG First Officer.

¹¹⁶ The program is administered pursuant to authorities in 22 USC § 2357 (furnishing of services and commodities on an advance-of-funds or reimbursement basis to friendly countries); 22 USC § 2349aa-2 (anti-terrorism assistance); and 22 USC § 2751, et seq. (the Arms Export Control Act, as amended).

¹¹⁷ Elements receiving U.S. assistance under USA-MAG include the SSP, MOI, Border Guard, Facilities Security Forces, and MOI Special Security Force.

Yemen, Iran, Threats to the Kingdom, and Civilian Harm Mitigation

Some tangible changes to U.S. support and the U.S. military presence in the kingdom followed the onset of the war in Yemen in 2015 and the deterioration in Saudi-Iran relations after 2016. The United States and Saudi Arabia concluded an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement that provided for U.S. refueling of Saudi aircraft until the Trump Administration ended the practice amid congressional concern in 2018. Iran and Iran-backed armed groups in Yemen and Iraq have demonstrated a capacity to target Saudi infrastructure and population centers across the kingdom through persistent cross-border missile and drone threats. Following a missile and drone attack on major Saudi oil facilities at Abqiq and Khurais in 2019, President Trump deployed thousands of additional U.S. military personnel to Saudi Arabia for deterrence purposes. As of June 2023, nearly 2,700 U.S. military personnel were deployed to the kingdom to continue these missions.¹¹⁸ Other U.S. advisors have supported efforts to improve Saudi air and missile defenses, improve Saudi target selection, and locate and respond to cross-border strikes. The Biden Administration transferred Patriot antimissile interceptors to Saudi Arabia in March 2022,¹¹⁹ and in August 2022 proposed a \$3 billion sale of PATRIOT MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced Missile-Tactical Ballistic Missiles (GEM-T) to replace the kingdom’s “dwindling stock.”¹²⁰

From 2015 to 2022, some Saudi military operations in Yemen resulted in civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, which led to greater congressional scrutiny of U.S.-Saudi military ties and U.S. arms sales to the kingdom. Successive U.S. presidential administrations have provided Saudi counterparts with advice on target development and evaluation and provided training to Saudi officers and officials on the law of armed conflict. Questions persist about the extent to which Saudi Arabia used U.S.-provided systems in attacks that killed civilians or struck civilian targets. The effectiveness of U.S.-provided advice and training is also uncertain.

In June 2022, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported the Defense Department (DOD) and State Department had then “not fully determined the extent to which U.S. military support has contributed to civilian harm in Yemen.”¹²¹ GAO recommended that among other steps the executive branch develop guidance “clarifying DOD roles and responsibilities, for reporting any indications that U.S.-origin defense articles were used in Yemen by Saudi Arabia ... against anything other than legitimate military targets or for other unauthorized purposes.”¹²² In August 2023, the Administration distributed Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance (CHIRG) to U.S. diplomatic personnel abroad, providing instructions on how U.S. personnel should investigate allegations that U.S.-origin arms have been used in operations resulting in civilian harm.¹²³

¹¹⁸ The White House, Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report, June 8, 2023.

¹¹⁹ “U.S. Sends Patriot Missiles to Saudi Arabia, Fulfilling Urgent Request,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2022.

¹²⁰ U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Saudi Arabia – PATRIOT MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced Missile-Tactical Ballistic Missiles (GEM-T),” Transmittal 22-26, August 2, 2022.

¹²¹ Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Yemen: State and DOD Need Better Information on Civilian Impacts of U.S. Military Support to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates,” GAO-22-105988, June 15, 2022.

¹²² As of September 19, 2023, GAO considered this recommendation “Open.”

¹²³ Missy Ryan, “Biden administration will track civilian deaths from U.S.-supplied arms,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2023.

U.S. Foreign Assistance to Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government funds U.S. training and security support to the kingdom via Foreign Military Sales and other contracts, reflecting Saudi ability to pay for costly programs (and limiting opportunities for Congress to affect cooperation directly through appropriations legislation). From 2002 through 2018, Saudi Arabia received roughly \$10,000 - \$25,000 per year in International Military Education and Training (IMET) assistance authorized by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.¹²⁴ This nominal amount made the kingdom eligible for a discount on training that it purchased through the Foreign Military Sales program for training initiatives overseen by the U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM) and other U.S. entities.¹²⁵ Successive administrations waived congressionally enacted restrictions on the provision of this assistance and argued that the aid and related discount supported continued Saudi participation in U.S. training programs, which in turn supported the maintenance of important military-to-military relationships and improved Saudi capabilities.¹²⁶ President Trump's FY2018 budget request sought \$10,000 in IMET for Saudi Arabia, but requests since FY2019 have not specifically asked for the funds. Since FY2019, Congress has prohibited the use of funds made available in annual appropriations acts for IMET for the kingdom.¹²⁷

Since FY2020, annual appropriations acts also have stated that no funds appropriated by the acts and prior acts "should be obligated or expended" by the Export-Import Bank to support nuclear exports to Saudi Arabia until Saudi Arabia has an agreement in effect pursuant to Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, as amended (AEA, 22 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.); commits to renouncing uranium enrichment and reprocessing; and has signed an Additional Protocol to its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency.¹²⁸

U.S.-Saudi Trade and Investment

After Israel, Saudi Arabia was the second-largest U.S. trading partner in the Middle East by overall value in 2022.¹²⁹ According to the U.S. International Trade Administration, in 2022, U.S. imports from Saudi Arabia were valued at more than \$23.2 billion (up from more than \$18.8 billion in 2017), and U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia were valued at \$11.4 billion (down from more than \$16.3 billion in 2017).¹³⁰ To a considerable extent, U.S. imports of hydrocarbons from Saudi Arabia and U.S. exports of commercially sold weapons, machinery, and vehicles to Saudi Arabia have dictated the annual value of U.S.-Saudi trade. Fluctuations in the volume and value

¹²⁴ U.S. Department of State Congressional Budget Justification documents, 2003-2019.

¹²⁵ Section 21(c) of P.L.90-629, the Arms Export Control Act (AECA), states that IMET recipient countries are eligible to purchase non-IMET training at reduced cost. Section 108(a) of P.L. 99-83 amended the AECA to provide this reduced cost benefit to IMET recipients. The U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) implements the authority provided in P.L. 99-83 to apply a lower cost to U.S. military training purchased by IMET recipient countries through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program.

¹²⁶ From 2004 to 2009, Congress adopted several legislative proposals to prohibit the extension of U.S. foreign assistance to Saudi Arabia. The George W. Bush and Obama Administrations subsequently issued national security waivers enabling the assistance to continue.

¹²⁷ See Section 7077 of Division F, P.L. 116-6, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019; Section 7041(h) of Division G, P.L. 116-94, Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020; Section 7041(h) of Division K, P.L. 116-260, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021; Section 7041(i) of Division K, P.L. 117-103, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022; and, Section 7041(i) of Division K, P.L. 117-328, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Based on U.S. Department of Commerce International Trade Administration Global Patterns of U.S. Merchandise Trade, August 2023.

¹³⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce using U.S. Census Bureau Data, TradeStatsExpress, September 2023.

of U.S.-Saudi oil trade account for corresponding changes in the value of U.S. imports from Saudi Arabia in recent years.

Increases in U.S. domestic oil production since 2010 have contributed to reductions in the volume of U.S. oil imports from Saudi Arabia. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), as of July 2023, Saudi Arabia was the third-largest source of U.S. crude oil imports, providing an average of 356 thousand of the 6.3 million barrels per day in gross U.S. crude oil imports, behind Canada and Mexico.¹³¹

According to the State Department’s 2023 Investment Climate Statement on Saudi Arabia, the kingdom continues to facilitate increased foreign participation in the kingdom’s private sector in connection with its *Vision 2030* initiatives. The report highlights opportunities in “burgeoning sectors such as infrastructure, tourism, entertainment, health and science, technology, and renewable energy.”¹³² The report discusses how “pressure to generate non-oil revenue and provide increased employment opportunities for Saudi citizens” has resulted in increased fees for expatriate labor, employment quotas for Saudi nationals, and requirements that multinational companies establish headquarters in the kingdom. The report observes that “investor concerns persist regarding business predictability, transparency, and political risk” and notes the “continued detention and prosecution of activists and individuals for their social media commentary.”

The U.S. Trade Representative’s (USTR) 2021 National Trade Estimate Report notes progress and cooperation in certain areas and discusses some trade barriers, including U.S. concerns with some Saudi regulations, government procurement requirements, intellectual property rights (IPR) policies, and limits on foreign investment.¹³³ USTR removed Saudi Arabia from its IPR Priority Watch List in 2022.¹³⁴

In March 2023, the Biden Administration welcomed Saudi Arabia’s announcement that it intends to purchase 121 Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft for its new Riyadh Air and legacy Saudia Airlines in an agreement estimated to be worth nearly \$37 billion.¹³⁵ Riyadh Air is expected to place additional large orders to complete its fleet.

Legislation in the 118th Congress

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s relations with the United States, the country’s stability, its relations with Russia, China, Iran, and Israel, and its future trajectory are subjects of continuing congressional interest. U.S.-Saudi security cooperation and diplomatic engagement continue in pursuit of shared interests. Since 2015 when King Salman came to power, Saudi Arabia’s leaders have at times acted contrary to U.S. preferences while diversifying and strengthening their relationships with other global actors, advancing plans to pursue nuclear power generation and ambitious clean energy investments, and bolstering their military self-sufficiency. Critics of Saudi decisions since 2015 have been active in Congress, but congressional advocates for

¹³¹ Based on EIA data, “Weekly Imports & Exports: Crude” and “Weekly Preliminary Crude Imports by Country of Origin,” Four Week Averages, July 26, 2023.

¹³² U.S. Department of State, “2023 Investment Climate Statement, Saudi Arabia,” July 26, 2023.

¹³³ U.S. Trade Representative, *2023 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers*, March 2023, pp. 359-66.

¹³⁴ USTR, “USTR Releases 2022 Special 301 Report on Intellectual Property Protection and Enforcement,” April 27, 2022.

¹³⁵ The White House, Statement from White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on Saudi Arabia’s Historic Purchase of Boeing Aircraft, March 14, 2023.

continued ties also have been vocal, and Congress has not acted to foreclose major executive branch initiatives with regard to the bilateral relationship.

Members of the 118th Congress have proposed or considered various legislation related to Saudi Arabia including the following.

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2024 (H.R. 2670, S. 2226)

The Senate version of a FY2024 NDAA adopted in July 2023 includes a provision (Sec. 1399K, as passed by the Senate in S. 2226 and incorporated into a substitute amendment to H.R. 2670 passed by the Senate on July 27, 2023) that would name Saudi Arabia and other countries as Major Security Partners and grant these countries priority treatment under U.S. regulations regarding defense production and foreign military sales.

Several amendments proposed to the House bill were not made in order for consideration pursuant to the closed rule adopted for the bill, including proposals that would have:

- Required the Secretary of State to develop guidance for investigating indications that U.S.-origin defense articles have been used in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition in substantial violation of relevant agreements with countries participating in the coalition and to report to Congress.
- Prohibited the transfer of U.S.-origin nuclear reactors, equipment, or technology to Saudi Arabia until Saudi Arabia signs an Additional Protocol to its nuclear safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and certifies that it is not building or acquiring nuclear enrichment or reprocessing facilities.
- Prohibited U.S. funding from being used for unauthorized U.S. military involvement in the war in Yemen (to include logistical and intelligence support) if the Saudi-led coalition resumes aerial hostilities against the Houthis in Yemen.
- Expressed the sense of Congress on the U.N. Security Council’s approach to Yemen and Saudi-implemented Government of Yemen restrictions on commercial and civilian access to Yemen.

Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Appropriations Act, 2024 (H.R. 4665, S. 2438)

FY2024 House-passed and Senate committee SFOPS appropriations bills as amended and introduced in the respective chambers would state that funds made available by the act for International Military Education and Training (IMET) assistance should not be used for Saudi Arabia. Past congressionally enacted provisions said no such funds “may” be used for that purpose.

The bills would further state that no funds made available by the bill and prior SFOPS acts “should be obligated or expended by the Export-Import Bank of the United States to guarantee, insure, or extend (or participate in the extension of) credit in connection with the export of nuclear technology, equipment, fuel, materials, or other nuclear technology-related goods or services to Saudi Arabia” unless the Saudi government concludes a nuclear agreement with the United State pursuant to Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 (42 U.S.C. 2153); commits to renouncing uranium enrichment and nuclear fuel reprocessing on its territory under that agreement; and has signed and implemented an Additional Protocol to its Comprehensive

Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency. The proposed provisions mirror language related to Saudi Arabia and civil nuclear cooperation included in SFOPS Appropriations Acts since FY2021.

An amendment proposed to the House bill but not made in order for consideration pursuant to the closed rule adopted for the bill would have prohibited the use of funds appropriated by the bill “to provide authorization to transfer any nuclear reactor, equipment, or technology to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by a foreign government or foreign person unless Saudi Arabia has signed and implemented an Additional Protocol to its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency.” This amendment appeared to respond to reports analyzing whether the United States could approve the transfer of South Korean nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia in the absence of a U.S.-Saudi nuclear agreement under Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 (42 U.S.C. 2153).

Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2024 (H.R. 4365)

Some House Members proposed amendments to the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2024 that were not made in order for consideration under the closed rule adopted for the bill. These amendments would have:

- Prohibited any funding from being used to support or facilitate offensive military operations by the Saudi-led coalition in the war in Yemen.
- Prohibited firearms and explosive weapons from being transferred to Saudi border guards.
- Prohibited U.S. funding from being used for unauthorized U.S. military involvement in the war in Yemen if the Saudi-led coalition resumes aerial hostilities against the Houthis in Yemen.

The version of the bill introduced in the Senate does not contain Saudi Arabia-related provisions.

A resolution requesting information on Saudi Arabia's human rights practices pursuant to section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 (S.Res. 109)

Section 502B(c)(1) of the FAA (22 U.S.C. 2304(c)(1)) provides mechanisms for Congress to request a report, due within 30 days, from the Secretary of State concerning human rights in a particular country. Pursuant to Section 502B(c)(4)(A) of the FAA (22 U.S.C. 2304(c)(4)(A)), Congress may, at any time after receiving such a report, “adopt a joint resolution terminating, restricting, or continuing security assistance for such country.”

This Senate resolution would direct the State Department to provide to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs a report within 30 days of adoption on a host of human rights, civilian protection, religious freedom, transnational repression, and law enforcement issues related to Saudi Arabia. The specified elements of the report the resolution would require include requests for information related to Yemen, Saudi use of U.S. weapons, women’s rights, and the actions of Saudi officials in the United States.

Outlook

U.S.-Saudi relations could be poised to deepen substantively, following closely on a period of profound strain and mutual disquiet. After years of congressional-executive branch debate over

the nature, content, and wisdom of U.S.-Saudi cooperation, the Biden Administration reportedly is exploring possible security, diplomatic, and civil nuclear agreements with Saudi Arabia that could elevate the U.S.-Saudi partnership to a level previously reserved for U.S. treaty allies in Europe and East Asia.¹³⁶ Unresolved questions about the durability and success of the kingdom's social and economic transformation efforts, its political leadership and human rights practices, and its openness in some areas to cooperation with Russia and China provide a backdrop to congressional consideration of these possible agreements.

Saudi decisionmakers have changed tactics with regard to some issues of concern to the United States—releasing some human rights advocates, engaging adversaries in Iran and Yemen, and openly discussing the possibility of normalization with Israel. It remains to be seen whether these decisions reflect Saudi leaders' acceptance of past setbacks, recognition of enduring limits, and reconsideration of self-interest and whether they indicate the type of lasting alignment with U.S. priorities and values that might be expected of a treaty ally. Comments by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman suggest the kingdom is engaged in U.S.-initiated negotiations with the Biden Administration and that the kingdom could pursue its interests in other ways if U.S.-preferred options are not possible or viable.

Over time, Saudi and U.S. officials have periodically attempted to articulate a shared “strategic vision” that includes, but extends beyond, defense and counterterrorism partnership. In 2004, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (aka “the 9/11 Commission”) challenged both governments to confront problems in the bilateral relationship openly and urged them to “build a relationship that political leaders on both sides are prepared to publicly defend.” In that era, problems identified in the relationship centered on U.S. concerns about Saudi ties to extremism and financial support for armed extremist groups. Deeper counterterrorism partnership and a range of Saudi efforts to combat extremism have aided bilateral ties in the years since.

Today, principal questions in the relationship relate to whether or not leaders and citizens in both countries are willing to maintain and deepen ties while more fully embracing strategic, economic, and cultural partnership. A new generation of Saudi leaders is working to transform the kingdom, and Saudi leaders' bid to create a more globally interconnected and open society and economy offers opportunities for U.S. officials and the U.S. private sector. Parties on both sides have considered whether differences over human rights, foreign and defense policy, and energy issues should limit the potential for closer ties or whether new understandings in these areas can provide a basis for a deeper and enduring alliance.

Whether or not proposed agreements are reached, long-term U.S. concerns about avoiding instability in the Gulf region and denying influence to geopolitical rivals there may remain in tension with U.S. desires to convince or compel the kingdom's evolving leadership to act in accordance with U.S. preferences. U.S. decisionmakers may applaud steps taken by Saudi leaders to change disfavored practices and policies, but they continue to face uncertainty about the strength and limits of U.S. influence and about the kingdom's leadership and trajectory. A number of observers critical of Saudi leadership argue that, both for strategic and moral reasons, the United States cannot afford to embrace top-down rule that stifles all dissent.¹³⁷ Some

¹³⁶ Edward Wong and Mark Mazzetti, “Biden Aides and Saudis Explore Defense Treaty Modeled After Asian Pacts,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2023; and, Dion Nissenbaum and Dov Lieber, “Saudi Uranium Enrichment Floated Under Possible Israel Deal,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2023.

¹³⁷ For an overview of this debate, see Uri Friedman and Yara Bayoumy, “The U.S.-Saudi Alliance Is on the Brink,” *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2019.

advocates for continued or deeper partnership cite the kingdom's potential, its influence, and its social and fiscal reforms to argue for a principled, but non-confrontational approach.

Congress may continue to shape bilateral relations through its oversight of U.S.-Saudi cooperation, its authorization of mechanisms for U.S.-Saudi security cooperation, and its engagement on regional economic and diplomatic policy issues. Lawmakers and officials may explore alternative policy approaches or better understand the sources of Saudi government behavior, the potential for changes in Saudi ties with U.S. rivals like China and Russia, and the views of Saudi leaders and citizens about their country's future and its ties with the United States. Members and staff may also review procedural precedents related to congressional consideration of treaties, arms sales, and civil nuclear cooperation agreements in relation to possible U.S.-Saudi agreements, especially those that would require congressional review and/or the advice and consent of the Senate.

Appendix A. Proposed Major U.S. Foreign Military Sales to Saudi Arabia

Table A-1. Proposed Major U.S. Foreign Military Sales to Saudi Arabia

January 2009 to September 2023; Possible values in billions of dollars

Formal Notification Date	System	Recipient Force	Pos. Value
August 2009	CNS-ATM	RSAF	\$1.500
August 2009	TASS	RSAF	\$0.530
December 2009	SANG Modernization	SANG	\$0.177
September 2010	Blanket Order Training Program	RSAF	\$0.350
October 2010	F-15 Sales, Upgrades, Weaponry and Training	RSAF	\$29.400
October 2010	APACHE, BLACKHAWK, AH-6i, and MD-530F Helicopters	SANG	\$25.600
October 2010	APACHE Longbow Helicopters	RSLF	\$3.300
October 2010	APACHE Longbow Helicopters	RG	\$2.200
November 2010	JAVELIN Missiles and Launch Units	—	\$0.071
May 2011	Night Vision and Thermal Weapons Sights	RSLF	\$0.330
June 2011	CBU-105D/B Sensor Fuzed Weapons	RSAF	\$0.355
June 2011	Light Armored Vehicles	—	\$0.263
June 2011	Light Armored Vehicles	SANG	\$0.350
September 2011	Howitzers, Fire Finder Radar, Ammunition, HMMWVs	—	\$0.886
October 2011	Up-Armored HMMWVs	RSLF	\$0.033
December 2011	PATRIOT Systems Engineering Services	—	\$0.120
August 2012	RSAF Follow-on Support	RSAF	\$0.850
August 2012	Link-16 Systems and ISR Equipment and Training	RSAF	\$0.257
November 2012	C-130J-30 Aircraft and KC-130J Air Refueling Aircraft	RSAF	\$6.700
November 2012	RSLF Parts, Equipment, and Support	RSLF	\$0.300
November 2012	PATRIOT (PAC-2) Missiles Recertification	RSADF	\$0.130
June 2013	SANG Modernization Program Extension	SANG	\$4.000
July 2013	Mark V Patrol Boats	RSNF	\$1.200
August 2013	RSAF Follow-on Support	RSAF	\$1.200
October 2013	U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM) Program Support Services	MOD	\$0.090
October 2013	SLAM-ER, JSOW, Harpoon Block II, GBU-39/B Munitions	RSAF	\$6.800
November 2013	C4I System Upgrades and Maintenance	RSNF	\$1.100
December 2013	TOW 2A and 2B Missiles	RSLF	\$0.170
December 2013	TOW 2A and 2B RF Missiles	SANG	\$0.900

Formal Notification Date	System	Recipient Force	Pos. Value
April 2014	Facilities Security Forces- Training and Advisory Group (FSF-TAG) Support	MOI	\$0.080
August 2014	AWACS Modernization	RSAF	\$2.000
October 2014	Patriot Air Defense System with PAC-3 enhancement	—	\$1.750
May 2015	MH-60R Multi-Mission Helicopters	—	\$1.900
July 2015	Ammunition	RSLF	\$0.500
July 2015	Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) Missiles	—	\$5.400
October 2015	UH-60M Black Hawk Utility Helicopters	RSLFAC	\$0.495
October 2015	Multi-Mission Surface Combatant Ships	RSNF	\$11.250
November 2015	Air-to-Ground Munitions	RSAF	\$1.290
February 2016	MK 15 Phalanx Close-In Weapons System (CIWS) Block 1B Baseline 2 Kits	RSNF	\$0.154
February 2016	USMTM Technical Assistance Field Teams and other Support	—	\$0.200
August 2016	M1A2S Tanks and Related Equipment	RSLF	\$1.150
December 2016	CH-47F Chinook Cargo Helicopters	RSLFAC	\$3.510
January 2017	Persistent Threat Detection System (PTDS) Aerostats	RSLF	\$0.525
May 2017	Naval Training Blanket Order	RSNF	\$0.250
June 2017	Air Force Training Blanket Order	RSAF	\$0.750
June 2017	AN/TPQ 53-V Radar and Support (Counter Indirect Fire)	RSLF	\$0.662
October 2017	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)	RSADF	\$15.000
January 2018	Missile Support Services	—	\$0.500
March 2018	TOW 2B (BGM-71F-Series) Missiles	—	\$0.670
March 2018	RSLF Ordnance Corps FMS Order II	RSLF	\$0.300
March 2018	Maintenance Support Services	RSLFAC	\$0.106
April 2018	155mm M109A6 Paladin Howitzer System	RSLF	\$1.310
May 2019	Aircraft Follow On and Support Services	RSAF	\$0.800
May 2019	Continued Tactical Air Surveillance Support System	RSAF	\$0.136
May 2019	Aircraft Follow On and Support Services	RSAF	\$1.800
December 2020	Security Assistance Office (SAO) Support Services U.S. Training Mission to Saudi Arabia (USMTM)	MOD	\$0.350
December 2020	GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb I (SDB I) Munitions	—	\$0.290
September 2021	Continuation of Maintenance Support Services	RSLFAC	\$0.500
November 2021	AIM-120C Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM)	RSAF	\$0.650
February 2022	Multifunctional Information Distribution System-Low Volume Terminals (MIDS-LVT)	—	\$0.023

August 2022	PATRIOT MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced Missile-Tactical Ballistic Missiles (GEM-T)	—	\$3.050
September 2023	Cooperative Logistics Supply Support Arrangement (CLSSA) Program, Foreign Military Sales Order (FMSO) II	RSLF	\$0.500
Total Possible Value (\$, billion)			\$151.513

Source: U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).

Notes: Possible values noted in sale proposals may not match actual values of concluded contract sales. Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) not included. Table includes proposed sales to Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF), Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) and RSLF Aviation Command (RSLFAC), Royal Guard (RG), Royal Saudi Air Defense Force (RSADF), Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF), Ministry of Interior (MOI), and Ministry of Defense (MOD). Dashes indicate unspecified recipient force.

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