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Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations

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SUMMARY

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Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled by the Al Saud family since its founding in 1932, wields considerable global influence through its administration of the birthplace of the Islamic faith and by virtue of its large oil reserves. Close U.S.-Saudi official ties have survived a series of challenges since the 1940s; a transition in the kingdom's leadership and changing U.S. priorities are introducing new dynamics to the bilateral relationship. Since 2015, U.S.-Saudi differences have emerged over Saudi human rights policies and the war in neighboring Yemen, while shared concerns over Sunni Islamist extremist terrorism and Iranian government policies have provided some renewed logic for continued strategic cooperation. Successive U.S. Administrations have referred to the Saudi government as an important partner, and U.S. arms sales and related security cooperation have continued with congressional oversight and some congressional opposition. The Biden Administration has stated that it seeks to recalibrate U.S.-Saudi relations while maintaining U.S. support for the kingdom's security.

Since acceding to the throne in 2015, King Salman bin Abd al Aziz (age 85) has empowered his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (age 36), the king's successor and now the central figure in Saudi policymaking. The Crown Prince has centralized control over security forces, sidelined potential rivals, and implemented economic and social changes. The government has arrested some prominent figures and accused them of corruption and sedition, including some royal family members. Ambitious plans for the transformation of the kingdom's economy under its *Vision 2030* initiatives seek to provide opportunity for young Saudis (~40% under 25) and bolster non-oil revenue. Increased U.S. domestic oil production has contributed to reductions in U.S. imports of Saudi Arabian oil, but the kingdom's energy policies remain of interest to U.S. decision makers in light of enduring Saudi influence over global energy markets and Saudi energy exports to China and U.S. partners in Asia. Abroad, the kingdom pursues a multidirectional foreign policy, and, in 2021, has engaged in talks with Iran.

The war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's military intervention against the Iran-backed Houthi movement there since 2015 have tested U.S.-Saudi ties and remain a focus of U.S.-Saudi engagement. Successive Administrations have gradually reduced U.S. support to Saudi-led coalition military operations in Yemen, but as of July 2021, U.S. forces continue to provide Saudi forces military advice and limited information. Amid missile and drone attacks on the kingdom in recent years attributed by U.S. officials to Iran and Iran-backed armed groups, the United States in 2019 deployed more than 2,700 U.S. military personnel to the kingdom to bolster Saudi air and missile defenses and support deterrence operations by U.S. fighter aircraft. Intermittent attacks on Saudi territory from Yemen and Iraq continue. U.S. officials have stated their support for Saudi efforts to defend their territory, while withdrawing some U.S. military platforms and personnel from the kingdom for use elsewhere.

U.S. government reports note continuing Saudi government restrictions on religious freedom and human rights, including on public expression. With government supporters promoting the Crown Prince's vision for the country and assuming a more nationalist posture, Saudi liberals, moderates, and conservatives continue to advance visions for domestic change that differ in their preferred pace and scope. Saudi leaders in 2018 reversed a long-standing ban on women's right to drive and in 2019 loosened restrictions on some other women's rights, but over the same period arrested a number of women's rights advocates, human rights activists, and conservative critics of social liberalization. Authorities have conditionally released some of those detained, but reject international scrutiny and criticism as interference in Saudi domestic affairs. Demonstrations remain rare, and clashes involving Saudi security forces have not spread beyond certain predominantly Shia areas of the oil-rich Eastern Province.

Some in Congress have grown critical of U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia and the kingdom's leadership in light of Saudi policy in Yemen, the involvement of Saudi officials in the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and other human rights cases. Legislation proposed in the 117th Congress would impose human rights related sanctions and/or condition bilateral defense cooperation (e.g. H.R. 1392, H.R. 1464, H.R. 1511, and H.Res. 175).

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Overview

The Biden Administration seeks to recalibrate long-standing U.S.-Saudi ties amid leadership changes in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and debate in the United States over foreign policy priorities. Successive U.S. Administrations have sought partnership with the ruling Al Saud family since the 1940s in light of their kingdom's large oil reserves and Saudi Arabia's global religious and financial influence.[1] The Al Saud monarchy has sought protection, advice, investment, and armaments from the United States, looking to U.S. partners for assistance in developing their country's natural and human resources and in facing external and internal threats. U.S. leaders have valued Saudi cooperation in security matters and generally have sought to preserve the secure and apolitical flow of the kingdom's energy resources to global markets.

Since 2011, significant shifts in the political and economic landscape of the Middle East have focused international attention on Saudi domestic and foreign policies and driven social and political debates among Saudis (see "Developments in Saudi Arabia" below). These regional shifts, coupled with ongoing economic, social, and political changes in the kingdom, have made sensitive issues such as political reform, human rights, corruption, security cooperation, and arms sales more prominent in U.S.-Saudi relations than during some periods in the past.

Congress has paid increased attention to the kingdom's human rights practices, its assertive foreign policies, and its economic and social reform initiatives since King Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud (85) succeeded to the throne in 2015, and since the king's son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (36), became his designated successor in 2017. Now the central figure in Saudi policymaking, the Crown Prince has centralized control over security forces, sidelined potential rivals, implemented economic and social changes, and detained prominent figures and accused them of corruption and sedition, including some royal family members. The kingdom's *Vision 2030* initiatives seek to increase private sector activity and expand non-oil linked sources of economic growth, employment, and government revenue. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic slowed the kingdom's economy and reduced demand for Saudi oil during 2020, but Saudi leaders have continued to implement reform plans buoyed by economic recovery and higher oil revenues in 2021.

Counterterrorism and defense ties remain robust. Under Presidents Obama and Trump, the executive branch notified Congress of proposed foreign military sales to Saudi Arabia of major defense articles and services with a potential aggregate value of more than $147 billion (**Appendix B**). The United States and Saudi Arabia concluded foreign military sales agreements worth more than $100 billion from FY2009 through FY2020.

U.S. support to Saudi military operations in Yemen since 2015 and Saudi use of U.S.-origin weaponry there has drawn new attention to U.S. arms sales and war powers debates (see "Arms Sales, Security Assistance, and Training" below).[2] Criticism in Congress of Saudi human rights practices also has grown in scope and intensity, especially following the October 2018 murder of Saudi journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi government personnel.

President Trump was explicit about his desire to strengthen U.S. ties to Saudi leaders,[3] which had deteriorated during President George W. Bush's Administration over Saudi nationals'

[1] Saudi Arabia holds the second largest proven oil reserves in the world (16% of global total) and exported the second most crude oil and petroleum products in the world in 2019.

[2] For a summary of debates and congressional initiatives, see, CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2020*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Sarah R. Collins.

[3] The White House, Remarks by President Trump and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia before Bilateral Meeting, March 20, 2018.

involvement in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, some Saudis' support for extremism, and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. During President Obama's tenure, differences over responses to regional unrest and U.S. policy toward Iran further strained relations. 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, even as it 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.

In the wake of Khashoggi's murder, Trump Administration officials signaled U.S. concern on human rights issues, imposed sanctions on some Saudi officials, and pledged continued investigation and advocacy on cases of concern, but resisted calls from some in Congress to do more.[4] The Trump Administration engaged Saudi officials in civil nuclear cooperation talks (see "Potential U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Cooperation") and encouraged the kingdom to forgo acquisition of nuclear fuel cycle technologies that could increase nuclear 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. Press reports also suggest that senior Trump Administration officials, including presidential adviser Jared Kushner, sought to convince Saudi leaders to participate in the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords initiative with Israel.

After a presidential campaign in which President Biden described Saudi Arabia as a "pariah" for its human rights record, the Biden Administration since has stated its intent to recalibrate rather than rupture the U.S.-Saudi relationship.[5] President Biden has engaged King Salman, other U.S. officials have engaged Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and in July 2021, Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman visited the United States. The State Department has identified elevating human rights issues and ending the war in Yemen as "key priorities."[6] President Biden ceased U.S. military support for Saudi "offensive" military operations in Yemen and has directed the withdrawal of some U.S. military personnel and defense systems deployed to the kingdom in 2019. The Biden Administration also reviewed U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia and suspended two unspecified munitions sales. In 2021, U.S. officials have praised some Saudi reforms and committed to supporting the kingdom in defending itself, while seeking a ceasefire in Yemen and imposing some human rights-related sanctions on Saudi personnel.[7]

Some in Congress continue to call for more tangible changes to the relationship and insist on specific consequences for the Crown Prince after the U.S. intelligence community reported to Congress in February 2021 that he "approved an operation in Istanbul, Turkey to capture or kill" Jamal Khashoggi.[8] Saudi officials disputed the report's conclusions. The Biden Administration imposed additional sanctions on Saudi officials, but Administration officials have engaged with senior Saudi leaders, including the Crown Prince, during 2021, indicating that the President and his Administration are prepared to continue to work with the kingdom's current leaders.[9]

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[4] e.g., White House, Statement of Administration Policy on H.J.Res. 37, February 11, 2019.

[5] U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price, Press Briefing, Washington, DC, March 1, 2021.

[6] Readout on Secretary Blinken's Call with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, February 6, 2021.

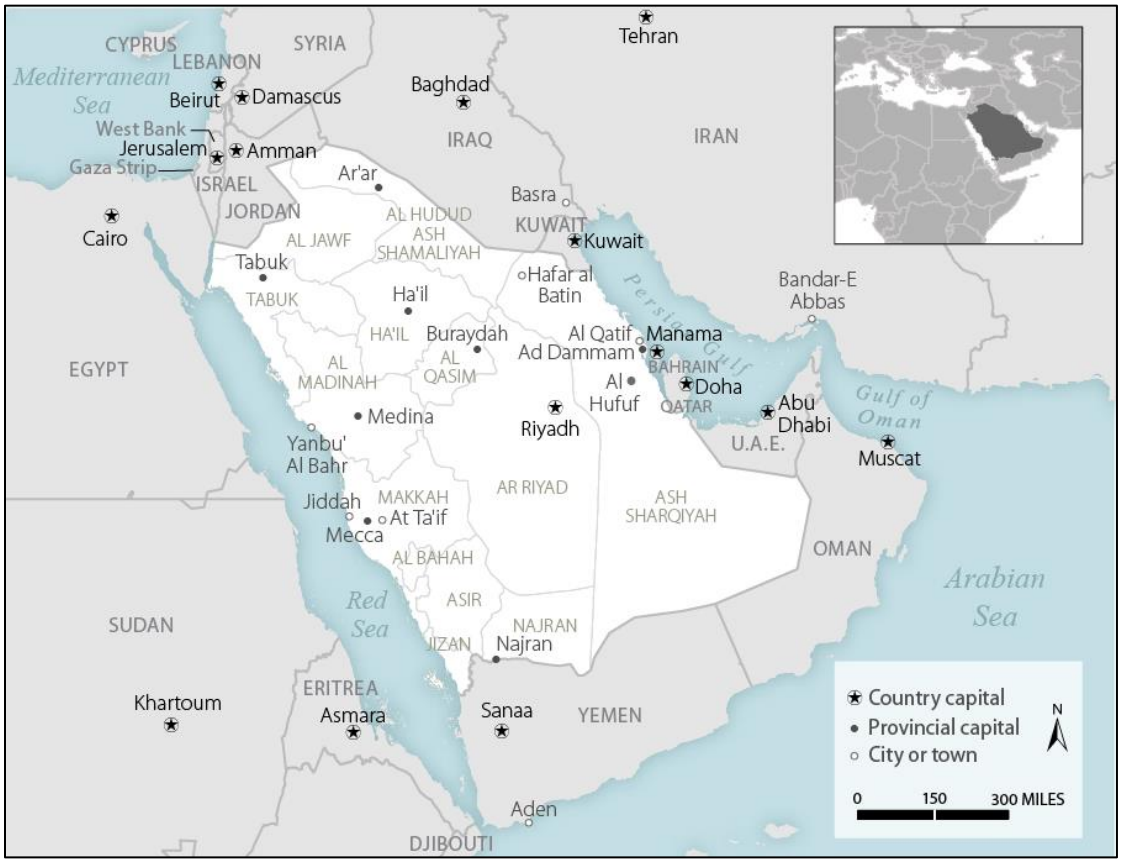
[7] In March 2021, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price called U.S.-Saudi relations "important to U.S. interests" and said the relationship "requires continued progress and reforms." Press Briefing, Washington, DC, March 1, 2021.

[8] Cate Edmonson, "Democrats Push Biden to Take Harder Line on Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, April 6, 2021; and, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing the Saudi Government's Role in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," February 26, 2021.

[9] The Biden Administration added a former Saudi intelligence official to the list of Saudi officials sanctioned by the Trump Administration pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Act and imposed visa sanctions on 76 Saudis individuals involved in the Khashoggi killing or in other acts of extraterritorial repression.

Policy differences notwithstanding, U.S. and Saudi officials have long favored continuity in the bilateral relationship over dramatic strategic shifts, despite some Saudis' and Americans' calls for fundamental changes. U.S. policy initiatives have aimed to help Saudi leaders address economic and security challenges in ways consistent with U.S. interests and values, but these goals, as in the past, remain in tension. Changing U.S. security and energy interests and more independent, ambitious, and nationalist leadership in Saudi Arabia may portend further divergence in priorities.

Table 1. 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: 34,783,757 (July 2021 est., ~38% non-nationals per 2019 U.N. data.); < 25 years of age: 40.2%

GDP (PPP): $1.609 trillion (2019 est.)

GDP per capita, PPP: $46,962 (2019 est.)

Budget (revenues; expenditure; balance): $207.7 billion; $286.9 billion; $79.2 billion deficit (2020)

Proj. Budget (revenues; expenditure; balance): $248.0 billion; $270.7 billion; $22.7 billion deficit (2021 est.)

Unemployment Rates (Saudi nationals): 11.3%, Saudi females 22.3%, Saudi males 6.1% (Q2 2021, among Saudi nationals unemployed, 52.2% are aged 20-34, and 49.6% have at least a Bachelor's degree or equivalent)

Oil and natural gas reserves: 266.2 billion barrels (2018 est.); 8.619 trillion cubic meters (2018 est.)

External Debt: $201 billion (2018 est.), -34.1% GDP (2020)

Net Foreign Exchange Reserves: ~$449 billion (2020)

Sources: CRS using U.S. Department of State, Esri, and Google Maps data (all 2013), CIA *World Factbook* estimates (October 2021), IMF 2021 Article IV Consultation, and Saudi Ministry of Finance and General Authority for Statistics projections and data (September 2021).

Legislation in the 117th Congress

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia's relations with the United States, the country's stability, and its future trajectory are subjects of continuing congressional interest. Saudi Arabia's leaders have at times acted contrary to U.S. preferences in recent years, while diversifying their relationships with other global actors, advancing plans to pursue nuclear power generation, and seeking to bolster their military self-sufficiency. Critics of Saudi decisions have been active in Congress since 2015, but advocates for continued ties also have been vocal, and Congress has not acted to curtail major executive branch initiatives with regard to the bilateral relationship.

In January 2021, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Representative Gregory Meeks introduced two joint resolutions of disapproval (H.J.Res. 15 and H.J.Res. 16) for munitions sales to Saudi Arabia proposed by the Trump Administration. To date, the House has not considered the joint resolutions further. As noted above, the Biden Administration suspended two unspecified munitions sales to the kingdom.

Members of the 117th Congress also have proposed or considered the following legislation related to Saudi Arabia:

- H.R. 4350 – the **National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 –** The bill as amended and passed by the House would require regular reporting to Congress on improvements to the military capabilities of Iran-backed militias, including the Houthis. The bill also includes amendments that would require the suspension of U.S. sustainment and maintenance support to Saudi air force units determined to be responsible for airstrikes resulting in civilian casualties in Yemen with certain exemptions for territorial self-defense, counterterrorism operations, and defense of U.S. government facilities or personnel;[10] would terminate U.S. military logistical support, and the transfer of spare parts to Saudi warplanes conducting aerial strikes against the Houthis in Yemen and permanently end intelligence sharing that enables offensive strikes and any U.S. effort to command, coordinate, participate in the movement of, or accompany Saudi-led coalition forces in the war in Yemen;[11] and would extend the prohibition on in-flight refueling to non-United States aircraft that engage in hostilities in the ongoing civil war in Yemen enacted in Section 1273(a) of the FY2020 NDAA (P.L. 116-92) for two years.[12]
- H.R. 4373 – the **Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Appropriations Act, 2022 –** The bill as amended and passed by the House would prohibit the use of funds made available by the act for International Military Education and Training assistance to Saudi Arabia. It further states 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

[10] See amendment 30 as printed in H.Rept. 117-125, considered as H.Amdt. 114, September 23, 2021. House of Representatives Roll Call vote number 279: https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2021279.

[11] See amendment 28 as printed in H.Rept. 117-125, considered as H.Amdt. 113, September 23, 2021. House of Representatives Roll Call vote number 278: https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2021278.

[12] See amendment 247 as printed in H.Rept. 117-125, considered as part of en bloc amendment H.Amdt. 123, September 23, 2021. House of Representatives Roll Call vote number 288: https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2021288.

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 the language on Saudi Arabia included in the Fiscal Year 2021 SFOPS Appropriations Act [Division K, Section 7041(h), P.L. 116-260]. For information about Saudi Arabia's nuclear energy plans, see "Potential U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Cooperation" below. The House voted to adopt "plus-minus" amendments to the bill "to highlight opposition to U.S. political or diplomatic support for the Saudi blockade of Yemen," and, "to highlight the need for stronger congressional oversight, robust human rights measures, and transparency in U.S. arms sales to countries such as Saudi Arabia."[13]

- H.R. 1392 – the **Protection of Saudi Dissidents Act of 2021** – This bill would prohibit for 120 days the sale of U.S. defense articles and services to "an intelligence, internal security, or law enforcement agency or instrumentality of the Government of Saudi Arabia." During subsequent 120 day periods, such sales would be prohibited if the President does not certify that Saudi Arabia is not involved in the "forced repatriation, intimidation, or killing of dissidents in other countries," the unjust imprisonment of U.S. national or aliens approved for permanent residence in the United States, limitations on the exit from Saudi Arabia of such persons or their family members, and the torture of detainees. Sales for use in the defense of Saudi Arabia from external threats and/or the protection of U.S. personnel or facilities in Saudi Arabia would be exempt from the bill's proposed restrictions. The President could waive the restrictions by determining that such a waiver was in the "vital national security interests" of the United States and submitting a written justification to Congress. The bill additionally would require reports on "whether any official of the Government of Saudi Arabia engaged in a consistent pattern of acts of intimidation or harassment directed against Jamal Khashoggi or any individual in the United States" and "whether and to what extent" any national of Saudi Arabia credentialed to a Saudi diplomatic or consular facility in the United States "used diplomatic credentials, visas, or covered facilities to facilitate monitoring, tracking, surveillance, or harassment of, or harm to, other nationals of Saudi Arabia living in the United States" over the three year period prior to enactment. The bill would require the closure of a Saudi diplomatic or consular facility in the absence of a presidential certification that defined misuse of such facilities is not occurring. Lastly, the bill would require the executive branch to report on "whether and how the intelligence community fulfilled its duty to warn Jamal Khashoggi of threats to his life and liberty," and, if not, why not. The House of Representatives adopted the bill on April 20, 2021. [Agreed to by the Yeas and Nays: (2/3 required): 350 – 71, Roll no. 130]
- H.R. 1464 - **Saudi Arabia Accountability for Gross Violations of Human Rights Act** – The bill would impose visa-blocking sanctions on specified foreign persons determined to have played a role in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and

[13] See amendments 5 and 25 as printed in H.Rept. 117-110, considered as part of en bloc amendment #3 (H.Amdt. 91), July 28, 2021. House of Representatives Roll Call vote number 241: https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2021241. For background on "plus-minus" amendments and their use, see CRS Report R46841, *Changes in the House of Representatives' Initial Consideration of Regular Appropriations Measures, 113th-116th Congresses*, by Kevin P. McNellis.

would require the State Department to report on incidents of arbitrary detention, violence, and state-sanctioned harassment by Saudi Arabia against U.S. citizens and their family members. The bill also would require the State Department to make publicly available a report that describes whether and how State Department concurrence with U.S. security assistance will avoid identifying the United States with governments that deny human rights and fundamental freedoms to their people, in accordance with section 502B the Foreign Assistance Act (22 U.S.C. 2304).

- H.R. 1511 – **MBS Must Be Sanctioned Act** – The bill would require the President to impose property- and visa-blocking sanctions against Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud, until specified actions were taken with respect to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and other human rights concerns.
- H.R. 2506/S. 1146 – **the Stopping Activities Underpinning Development In Weapons of Mass Destruction Act or "SAUDI WMD Act"** – The bills would require the President to report to the congressional foreign affairs and intelligence committees "whether any foreign person knowingly exported, transferred, or engaged in trade of any item designated under Category I of the [Missile Technology Control Regime] MTCR Annex item with Saudi Arabia in the previous three fiscal years" and what sanctions if any the President "has imposed or intends to propose" on such persons. The bill would further prohibit (subject to a waiver) the sale, transfer, or license for export to Saudi Arabia of arms in Category III, IV, VII, or VIII on the United States Munitions List (with the exception of ground-based missile defense systems) if the President finds that Saudi Arabia within the preceding three fiscal years has imported technology for uranium enrichment or nuclear fuel reprocessing or "engaged in nuclear cooperation related to the construction of any nuclear-related fuel cycle facility or activity that has not been notified to the IAEA and would be subject to complementary access if an Additional Protocol were in force." The bills would require an annual report on MTCR compliance and a United States strategy to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and missiles in the Middle East.
- S. 2142 – the **Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act –** would require for ten years an annual report "reviewing educational materials published by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education that are used in schools both inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and at schools throughout the world."
- H.R. 3965 – the **"Standing Against Houthi Aggression Act"** – cites the Yemen-based Ansarallah/Houthi movement's attacks on Saudi territory in directing the executive branch to designate the Houthi movement as a foreign terrorist organization and impose sanctions described in terrorism- and Yemen-related executive orders.
- H.Res. 175 – The resolution would call on the U.S. government to cease all arms transfers to Saudi Arabia until the Saudi government takes additional steps to hold individuals accountable for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, stops any extraterritorial surveillance and harassment, releases individuals detained for political expression, and ends its military operations in Yemen. Further, the resolution calls for (1) human rights-based sanctions against Saudi government officials and certain other individuals, and (2) conditioning U.S. nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia on the kingdom concluding a nuclear agreement

with the United States guaranteeing its nuclear program's strictly civilian purposes and forgoing the enrichment of uranium or reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel within Saudi territory.

For discussion of related legislation considered in the 116th Congress, see "Human Rights" and "Conflict in Yemen" below.

Saudi Arabia and the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic

Saudi authorities imposed border closures, visa restrictions, internal curfews, and travel limits in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government also reduced religious pilgrimage access, including limiting local and foreign participation in the 2020 and 2021 Hajj pilgrimages. As of October 4, 2021, the World Health Organization confirmed official Saudi reporting of more than 547,000 total cases of COVID-19 and more than 8,700 deaths due to COVID-19. The new case rate has declined since June 2020, when the U.S. government cited COVID-19 in allowing the voluntary departure of nonemergency U.S. personnel and dependents from the kingdom. As of October 4, 2021, more than 53% of Saudi nationals reportedly had received full doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, and the kingdom hoped to have 70% of the population fully vaccinated by months end. Saudi authorities are implementing strict vaccination requirements for access to public and some private venues, and recognize as vaccinated individuals who have received vaccines produced by Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson. In August 2021, authorities restored access to the kingdom for tourism and religious pilgrimage for individuals that have received these vaccines. Through October 2020, Saudi authorities had made available at least $60 billion worth of fiscal and monetary resources and incentives to support private enterprises and strengthen the Saudi health sector in response to the pandemic and economic downturn.[14]

Developments in Saudi Arabia

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.

Political Structure and Leadership

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.[15] Since 2011, some court reforms have strengthened the training of judges and have sought to increase the consistency of judicial outcomes. In February 2021, the state announced plans to draft and review a personal status law, civil transactions law, penal code of discretionary sanctions, and law of evidence as part of a codification initiative that the Crown Prince said seeks to "increase the reliability of procedures and oversight mechanisms as cornerstones in achieving the principles of justice, clarifying the lines of accountability."

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

[14] See Annex A, Table A.1 Fiscal and Monetary Responses in the GCC countries in World Bank, *Trading Together: Reviving Middle East and North Africa Regional Integration in the Post-Covid Era*, Middle East and North Africa Economic Update, October 2020.

[15] 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.

fora for public input into local governance. 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 the Islamic State group's anti-Shia terrorism have complicated efforts to improve sectarian relations (see "Shia Minority Issues" below).

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 bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud 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 King Salman's son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abd al Aziz, being placed in line to succeed his father (see **Figure A-1**, **Figure A-2**, and "Leadership and Succession" below). The Crown Prince is a leading member of the generation of grandsons of Ibn Saud; members of this generation are now assuming leadership roles in the kingdom's security sector, politics, and economy. The balances of power, interests, and influence among the rising generation of leaders in the royal family are relatively opaque and appear to be evolving.

Political decision-making in the kingdom long reflected a process of consensus building among a closed elite presided over by senior members of the ruling Al Saud family. In recent years, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has centralized decision-making in security and economic affairs.[16] Members of the conservative Salafist Sunni religious establishment long shaped government decisions on social and legal issues, but there are questions about the extent of their remaining influence. Some representatives of this community have endorsed swift and dramatic changes to some social policies since 2015, while authorities have imprisoned others operating outside state structures for disfavored foreign ties and possibly for opposing change.[17] These shifts are occurring in the midst of what one long-time observer of the kingdom's politics has described as "an aggressive nationalist rebranding"[18] of the state and its vision of citizenship and identity, led by the Crown Prince.

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.[19] From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, rivalry among the sons of the kingdom's founder threatened to destabilize the country, and leaders adopted a closed, consensus-based model for sharing power and managing state affairs. 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,

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

[17] 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. 17:2, pp. 97-101.

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

[19] E.g., Stig Stenslie, "The End of Elite Unity and the Stability of Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly,* Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 61-82, 2018; and, 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.

disgruntled religious conservatives, and other constituencies may harbor resentment over lost influence.

Internal Politics Appear Strained

The internal politics of the ruling Al Saud family remain a subject of international speculation. Relationships among some leading royals have appeared unsettled since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's appointment as heir apparent in 2017. The Crown Prince's elevation was accompanied by the demotion of his elder cousin, long-time counterterrorism official and then-Minister of Interior Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abd al Aziz, and authorities later constrained Prince Mohammed bin Nayef's personal activities before eventually detaining him.[20] In late 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. Most detainees were released after reaching undisclosed financial arrangements with authorities that in total reportedly netted the state more than $100 billion.[21] Authorities deny related allegations of detainee abuse that continue to circulate. Some prominent individuals, including Prince Turki bin Abdullah, the son of the late King Abdullah bin Abd al Aziz, reportedly were kept in detention.[22]Bureaucratic changes and anti-corruption efforts initiated by the Crown Prince appear to have contributed to his centralization of power and control over state finances.[23]

Rumored discontent among other 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.[24] 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.[25] In March 2021, the State Department described the reported arrests in its annual

[20] 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." Video footage of the prince meeting in September 2019 with the family of a slain personal guard of King Salman appeared on social media. See Riedel, "Four years into Salman's reign, Saudi Arabia more unpredictable than ever," *Al Monitor*, January 16, 2019; and Riedel, interview with Martin Smith, *PBS Frontline*, October 1, 2019.

[21] David Kirkpatrick, "Saudis End Purge That Began With Hundreds Locked in the Ritz-Carlton," *New York Times*, January 31, 2019; and, Devon Pendleton and Simone Foxman, "Freed Saudis Resurface Billions Poorer After Prince's Crackdown," *Bloomberg News*, February 2, 2019.

[22] Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Clarify Status of 'Corruption' Detainees," February 18, 2019.

[23] See Justin Scheck and Bradley Hope, "'I Am the Mastermind': Mohammed bin Salman's Guide to Getting Rich," *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2018; and, Devon Pendleton, "Saudi Prince's Rise to Power Turns Him into a Billionaire Boss," *Bloomberg News*, August 10, 2019.

[24] Some members of the royal family reportedly objected to some changes under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in a series of intra-family letters reported after 2015, during meetings of the Allegiance Council, and through other channels. The detention of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Prince Ahmed bin Abd al Aziz in 2020 amid allegations of a coup plot suggested that the current leaders' concerns about discontented family members had grown more severe. 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* (UK) September 28, 2015; Simon Henderson, "Meet the Next Generation of Saudi Rulers," *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2017; Vivian Nereim, "Saudi Prince Addresses Questions of Loyalty After London Video," *Bloomberg News*, September 5, 2018; and, Reuters, "In Saudi Arabia, criticism of Crown Prince grows after attack," October 2, 2019.

[25] See 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.

human rights report on Saudi Arabia for 2020.[26] In June 2021, NBC News reported that Prince Mohammed bin Nayef remains detained and allegedly has suffered physical abuse.[27] Lawyers for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have levied corruption allegations against a high-ranking former colleague of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in court filings.[28] Saudi and U.S. officials have not commented on the record about the reported arrests, detentions, or charges.

Security Issues

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."[29] The king has replaced the leaders of key Saudi military and internal security services, while concentrating powers and influence diffused formerly across several security bureaucracies (and the senior princes who led them) under the new Presidency for State Security that reports to the king and crown prince. As Defense Minister since 2015, the crown prince has outlined goals for unifying the kingdom's military command structure and 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).[30] GAMI intends to host a high profile defense industry expo in the kingdom in March 2022, aimed at attracting additional investment.

Shifts in Saudi foreign policy toward a more assertive posture—exemplified by the kingdom's military operations in neighboring Yemen and a series of regional moves intended to counteract Iranian initiatives—have accompanied the post-2015 leadership changes. The crown prince and his brother, former Saudi Ambassador to the United States and current Deputy Minister of Defense Prince Khalid bin Salman bin Abd al Aziz, have presided over Saudi military operations in Yemen since 2015. The operations have sought to reverse the ouster of Yemen's transitional government by the Zaydi Shia *Ansarallah* (aka Houthi) movement and backers of the late former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh (see "Conflict in Yemen" below).

Related violence has not been confined to Yemen. Cross-border attacks from Yemen and missile, rocket, and drone strikes on infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, including critical energy sector

[26] The State Department 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.

[27] Raf Sanchez and Ken Dilanian, "Saudi intel chief who saved U.S. lives was detained, allegedly mistreated by Saudi government," NBC News, June 30, 2021.

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

[29] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing the Saudi Government's Role in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," February 26, 2021.

[30] 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.

infrastructure, have changed global perceptions of security in Saudi Arabia. U.S. officials have attributed different cross-border incidents to Yemeni, Iraqi, and Iranian actors.[31] A September 2019 drone and cruise missile attack on the oil production facility at Abqaiq significantly, if temporarily, disrupted Saudi oil operations and illustrated the potential global consequences of regional military confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In June 2021, the U.S. State Department warned that

> Missile and drone attacks perpetrated by Iran and Iran-supported militant groups represent a significant threat. The Islamic Republic of Iran has supplied Yemen-based Houthis and other regional proxy groups with weapons to conduct destructive and sometimes lethal attacks using drones, missiles, and rockets against a variety of Saudi sites, including critical infrastructure, civilian airports, military bases, and energy facilities throughout the country, as well as vessels in Red Sea shipping lanes. Recent attacks were aimed at targets throughout Saudi Arabia including Riyadh, Jeddah, Dhahran, Jizan, Khamis Mushayt, the civilian airport in Abha, Al Kharj, military installations in the south, as well as oil and gas facilities. Debris from intercepted drones and missiles represents a significant risk to civilian areas and populations.[32]

In August 2021, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East Dana Stroul described the Iran-backed militia and Houthi cross-border attack threat to Saudi Arabia and U.S. citizens there as follows:

> What we see across the region is Iranian arming, training, and funding of terrorist groups, nonstate actors, and militias across the region, all of which aim to undermine the governments and the partners that we want to work with, terrorize civilians, and prevent them from achieving stability. In the Yemen context, we have seen more attacks from the Houthis launched at Saudi Arabia in the first half of this year than we have for several prior years. Iran is increasing the lethality and complexity of both the equipment and the knowledge it transfers to the Houthis so that they can attack Saudi territory, Saudi civilians, and there's also a very sizable U.S. population in Saudi Arabia that is under risk because of the Iran-backed Houthi attacks.[33]

Leadership and Social Change

In recent years, Saudi leaders have sought to manage vocal demands from the kingdom's relatively young population—67% of the kingdom's 20 million citizens are under 35—for improved economic opportunities, and, from some Saudis, for freer expression, increased political participation, and more open social conditions. The royal family has apparently balanced its efforts to be responsive to popular demands against its desire to retain power, its commitments to preserve conservative Islamic and social traditions, and its need to address a host of regional and domestic security threats.

The king and crown prince have introduced social reforms that have curtailed public powers long enjoyed by religious conservatives, introduced new public entertainment opportunities, and enabled women to participate in society on a more uniform and open basis. Experienced observers of the kingdom emphasize the significance of these changes for the social and

[31] Stephen Kalin, Michael R. Gordon, and Warren P. Strobel, "Aerial Attacks on Saudi Arabia Expose Vulnerability of U.S. Ally," Wall Street Journal, February 19, 2021.

[32] U.S. Department of State, Saudi Arabia Travel Advisory, September 17, 2019.

[33] Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East Dana Stroul, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, August 10, 2021.

economic lives of Saudi citizens.[34] In 2021, announcements of further legal reform plans and changes to state guidance to limit the use of mosque loudspeakers and loosen requirements for closures for daily prayer times have signaled leaders' intention to further move away from standards long championed by some religious conservatives.[35]

Social and economic policy changes—while transformative in some respects—have demonstrated some consideration for the interests and potential objections of domestic constituencies, including religious and social conservatives. Many young Saudis reportedly have embraced the crown prince's leadership and initiatives, while some Saudis, including elites, reportedly have various doubts and concerns.[36] Formal and informal limits on public discourse complicate efforts to measure public and elite opinion authoritatively. More intense state scrutiny since 2017 of the press, social media, and other public channels for expressing dissent in the kingdom may mask (and potentially amplify) some discontent.

Saudi leaders have not initiated comparable liberalizing changes to the kingdom's political system, including to laws and rules that restrict public debate, expression, and association. To the contrary, in recent years, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has acted to centralize authority, resources, and decision making under his control in anticipation of his succession to the throne. Advocacy for constitutional monarchy, power sharing, or democratic governance represents a challenge to the Al Saud family's exclusive control over the state. Various groups have submitted petitions since the 1990s for more accountable governance, but to date the Al Saud family has not made any fundamental institutional concessions to share power. Laws criminalizing criticism of leaders and state policies remain in effect, as do national security laws targeting broadly defined involvement with terrorism and sedition.

Security forces monitor and tightly limit political and social activism within the country and, reportedly, among Saudi expatriates.[37] The government has defined the domestic security environment since the mid-1990s by persistent Al Qaeda and Islamic State terrorist threats and, since uprisings swept the Arab world in 2011, by concern about potential political unrest and economic stagnation. Critics of the regime span the ideological spectrum from secular liberals to conservative theocrats.

Several Saudis human rights activists who have been detained or convicted of various crimes in recent years have had their sentences reduced and/or been conditionally released since December 2020. Some observers attribute these changes to a desire among the kingdom's leadership to reduce points of friction with the new U.S. Administration. Other activists and prominent clerics remain in prison in an environment that one long-time observer of Saudi affairs describes as "in some ways even more authoritarian than it has been in the past."[38]

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[34] For an overview, see Priyanka Boghani, "The Paradox of Saudi Arabia's Social Reforms," PBS Frontline, October 1, 2019. See also comments by Kristen Smith Diwan in Anuj Chopra, "Saudi Arabia wins plaudits for ending ban on women driving," Agence France Presse, September 27, 2017.

[35] Reuters, "Saudi minister defends order to turn down the volume on mosques," May 31, 2021; Reuters, "Saudi shops can stay open during prayer times -business group circular," July 16, 2021.

[36] Reuters, "In Saudi Arabia, criticism of Crown Prince grows after attack," October 2, 2019; and Michael Amon and Donna Abdulaziz, "New Social Rules Leave Saudis Confused About How to Behave," *Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2019.

[37] The 2020 U.S. State Department report on human rights conditions in Saudi Arabia cites "engaging in harassment and intimidation against Saudi dissidents living abroad" among significant human rights issues with the kingdom.

[38] Soli Özel, "Deciphering Saudi Arabia in the Biden Era: Three questions to Francis Gregory Gause III," Institut Montaigne, June 17, 2021.

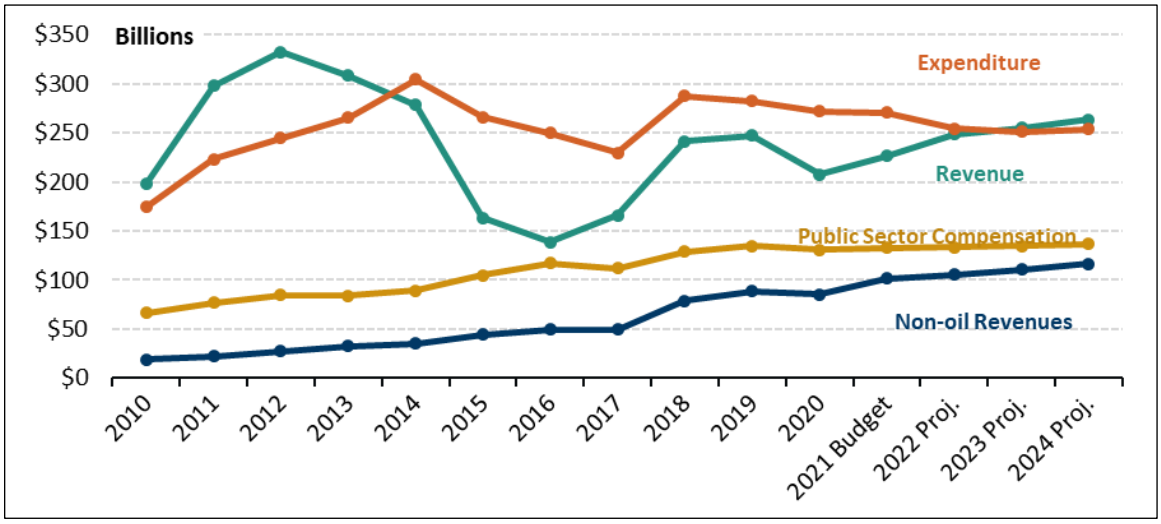
Economic Reform, Fiscal Priorities, and Administrative Changes

Saudi leaders are simultaneously managing ambitious and politically sensitive fiscal consolidation and economic transformation initiatives. High prices in international oil markets amplified oil export earnings for most of the period from 2005 to 2014, generating significant fiscal surpluses and leaving the kingdom with sizeable foreign reserves and low levels of official debt.[39] After 2011, the government expanded spending programs to improve housing and infrastructure, raise public sector wages, expand education, and ease the burdens of unemployment. This spending created new fiscal burdens, even as state oil revenues decreased more than non-oil revenues grew from 2014 through 2017 (**Figure 1**).

Saudi leaders used accumulated financial reserves and borrowed funds domestically and internationally to finance deficit spending, and, in 2015, embarked on new initiatives to reshape the kingdom's economy.[40] Authorities have introduced new taxes, reduced some public subsidies, and taken other fiscal measures to improve state finances, tailoring implementation and in some cases offering temporary financial support to citizens to ease burdens at the household level.

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia: Select Revenues and Expenditures Data

In billions of dollars



Source: International Monetary Fund Article IV reports, 2012-2021. Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance, Pre-budget Statement 2022, September 30, 2021.

Note: The Saudi riyal is pegged to the U.S. dollar at a rate of one USD to 3.75 SAR. The kingdom's September 2021 updates did not include specific projections about oil and non-oil revenues, and the data for those categories in Figure 1 reflects previous projections.

The kingdom's *Vision 2030* plans seek to promote growth in non-oil related sectors of the economy and to generate state revenues from non-oil sources, including from a value added tax

[39] According to the U.S. State Department's 2019 Investment Climate Statement for Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority's (SAMA) foreign reserve holdings "peaked at USD 746 billion in mid-2014." The report states that "SAMA's foreign reserves stood at approximately USD 497 billion at the end of 2018."

[40] From 2014 through 2018, Saudi officials drew more than $234 billion from state reserves, and national government debt increased from 5.8% of GDP to 19.1%, as new domestic and international bonds were issued to help meet revenue needs. IMF Country Report No. 19/290, Staff Report for the 2019 Article IV Consultation, September 9, 2019. Reuters estimated in July 2019 that the kingdom has issued more than $60 billion in bonds since the end of 2016. Davide Barbuscia and Tom Arnold, "Saudi Arabia raises 3 billion with debut euro bond," Reuters, July 2, 2019.

(VAT) that the government introduced in 2018 (and tripled to 15% in July 2020 in response to budget pressures). Non-oil related state revenues have grown more rapidly since 2017 and increased during 2020 and 2021, even as the kingdom waived some taxes, fees, and utility charges as COVID-19-related relief measures on Saudi households and businesses. Saudi officials revised their revenue expectations upward in September 2021 reflecting projected growth in oil and non-oil revenues, along with additional savings in public expenditure (**Figure 1**).

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman presides over the kingdom's national economic transformation initiatives as 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. Under King Salman's auspices, the Crown Prince has directed changes to the leadership of economic and administrative bodies across the Saudi government, and in April 2021 announced plans to centralize decision-making further under a new Budget Bureau and Policies Office.

Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030* initiatives,[41] National Transformation Plan, and Fiscal Balance Plan seek to expand employment opportunities for young Saudis while attracting foreign investment to new sectors and creating new sources of non-oil-based state revenue and private sector activity.[42] Successive Saudi leaders have pursued these goals, but with more narrow and gradual targets than the *Vision 2030* initiative.

Following an assessment of progress toward *Vision 2030* goals in early 2021, the Crown Prince announced plans to direct 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.[43] Saudi leaders have announced that companies seeking 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.[44] The kingdom also is continuing to invest in several "giga-projects" to create new thematic hubs of economic activity, including the NEOM[45] 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.[46]

The International Monetary Fund (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

[41] Vision Realization Plans guide the implementation of *Vision 2030* programs across various sectors.

[42] See, IMF Article IV Reports, 2017-2021 and, "The $2 Trillion Project to Get Saudi Arabia's Economy Off Oil," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, April 25-May 1, 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.

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

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

[45] 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'."

[46] Andrew England and Ahmed al Omran, "Saudi prince powers ahead with futuristic city and sports giga-projects," Financial Times (UK), August 16, 2020.

sources, and improve employment opportunities for young Saudis.[47] 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.

Fluctuations in global oil demand and market prices are another factor shaping decision economic and fiscal decision-making. Global oil demand has recovered from 2020 lows, and market conditions in 2021 are bolstering Saudi oil revenues and relieving related fiscal pressure on state finances. The kingdom's 2021 budget reduced state spending, but projected a substantial deficit until rising oil revenues led the kingdom to revise its deficit projection downward in September 2021.[48] The kingdom's officials are confident they will achieve their goal of balancing the budget by 2023, but the IMF expects the budget to reach balance in 2026.[49]

In October 2020, the World Bank projected that the forecast recovery level for the region's economies "is not V-shaped,"[50] but IMF staff concluded in July 2021 that the Saudi economy is "recovering well," and expect the non-oil sectors to continue growing in spite of cuts in state spending.[51] IMF officials also stated their view that "remaining pandemic-related policy support should be carefully withdrawn to continue supporting the ongoing recovery, while the Vision 2030 reform agenda should continue to be implemented to promote strong, sustained, diversified, inclusive, and greener growth."[52] Saudi authorities may reevaluate some reform targets and initiatives when deciding about the timing and extent of further rollbacks of economic support measures instituted during the pandemic.[53]

Human Rights, Gender Issues, and Minority Relations

Human Rights

According to the U.S. State Department's 2020 report on human rights in Saudi Arabia, Saudi law provides that "the State shall protect human rights in accordance with Islamic sharia."[54] 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.[55] Critics of the kingdom's record on human issues have highlighted the fact that since the 1990s, authorities have periodically detained, fined, or arrested individuals associated with protests or public advocacy.

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Jadwa Investment, Saudi Chartbook – July 2021, "Key Data", p. 14, and Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance, Pre-budget Statement 2022, September 30, 2021.

[49] International Monetary Fund (IMF), IMF Executive Board Concludes 2021 Article IV Consultation with Saudi Arabia, July 8, 2021. The Saudi government's fiscal consolidation plans seek to balance the kingdom's budget by 2023, an adjustment from earlier plans to achieve balance by 2020.

[50] World Bank, *Trading Together: Reviving Middle East and North Africa Regional Integration in the Post-Covid Era*, Middle East and North Africa Economic Update, October 2020, p. 9.

[51] IMF, IMF Executive Board Concludes 2021 Article IV Consultation with Saudi Arabia, July 8, 2021.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid, and IMF, Economic Prospects and Policy Challenges for the GCC Countries, October 25, 2020.

[54] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020, Saudi Arabia, March 30, 2021.

[55] In September 2020, a group largely made up of Saudi expatriates launched the National Assembly Party, which "aims to institute democracy as a form of government in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." See https://the-naas.com/en. See also, Reuters, "Saudi dissidents form pro-democracy political group," September 23, 2020.

The State Department reports that in 2020, the judiciary, the public prosecutor's office, and the State Security Presidency (the top security and intelligence directorate) "were not independent entities, as they were required to coordinate their decisions with executive authorities, with the king and crown prince as arbiters." This remains the case. A Specialized Criminal Court presides over trials in terrorism cases, including cases involving individuals accused of violating restrictions on political activity and public expression contained in counterterrorism and cybercrimes laws adopted since 2008.[56]

Since 2017, Saudi authorities have changed some gender-related policies (see "Women's Rights" below) and altered regulations and practices to allow some new social and public entertainment activities. They also have moved, however, to further restrict the activities of groups and individuals advocating for political and social change and/or campaigning on behalf of individuals detained for political or security reasons, including advocates for the rights of terrorism suspects. According to the State Department, in recent years dozens of individuals have been detained because of their "activism, criticism of government leaders, impugning Islam or religious leaders, or 'offensive' internet postings,"[57] or for "associations and views deemed to be supportive of groups the government declared illegal or extremist (including the Muslim Brotherhood),"[58] which the kingdom considers to be a terrorist organization.

Those detained and charged include prominent women's rights activists, as well as religious and tribal figures presumed to be critical of the government or its recent social reforms, and, in some cases, who Saudi authorities accuse of linkages with the Muslim Brotherhood.[59] Public backlash in the kingdom and beyond to potential executions in some cases could be considerable in light of the transnational media visibility that several of the accused clerics have long enjoyed and their large, global social media followings.[60] An online "Prisoners of Conscience" campaign monitors and provides updates on reported details about the detention of activists, clerics, and other citizens.[61]

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[56] See American Bar Association Center for Human Rights, *Saudi Arabia: Counterterror Court Targets Activists*, April 2019. In the context of the United Nations (U.N.) Human Rights Council's 2018 Universal Periodic Review, the U.N. Committee Against Torture expressed concern that Saudi Arabia's "2014 counter-terrorism law contained an extremely broad definition of terrorism, which would enable the criminalization of some acts of peaceful expression." U.N. Human Rights Council, Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Compilation on Saudi Arabia, U.N. Document A/HRC/WG.6/31/SAU/2, August 30, 2018, p.3.

[57] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020, March 30, 2021. In 2018, Saudi prosecutors announced their intent to prosecute for cybercrime individuals who produce or distribute content that "mocks, provokes or disrupts public order, religious values and public morals." *Arab News* (Jeddah), "Saudi Arabia to penalize individuals who create or promote social media content that disrupts public order," September 5, 2018.

[58] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019, Saudi Arabia, March 11, 2020.

[59] Those detained include prominent conservative religious figures such as Salman al Awda, Safar al Hawali, Ali al Omari, Nasir al Umar, Awad al Qarni, and Abd al Aziz al Fawzan. Several have been harsh critics of U.S. policy in the past, and in some cases signed letters calling for armed resistance to the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Some, like Awda and Hawali, were associated with the Islamist "awakening" (*sahwa*) movement of the 1990s and faced lengthy detentions followed by conditional release. Saudi prosecutors have announced their intention to seek the death penalty against some of the detained religious figures for their involvement with the International Union of Muslim Scholars, which the kingdom considers to be a terrorist organization. See Lacroix, op cit.; Reuters, "Saudi clerics detained in apparent bid to silence dissent," September 10, 2017; Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Prince, Asserting Power, Brings Clerics to Heel," *New York Times*, November 5, 2017; and, Reuters, "Saudi Arabia arrests prominent cleric Safar al-Hawali – activists," July 12, 2018.

[60] For a critical account, see Yasmine Farouk, "The Penalties of a Death," Carnegie Middle East Center, *Diwan*, September 17, 2018.

[61] Available in English at https://twitter.com/m3takl_en?lang=en, and Arabic at https://twitter.com/m3takl.

The Murder of Jamal Khashoggi

On October 2, 2018, Saudi government officials murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.[62] They allegedly subdued and dismembered him and then left the country.[63] Khashoggi, a prominent media figure and former official diplomatic advisor, openly and pointedly had criticized decisions taken by King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, both before and after Khashoggi moved to the United States in 2017. According to personal acquaintances, Khashoggi had sought but not received lawful permanent resident status in the United States.

Khashoggi's killing led some in Congress to question the responsibility of senior Saudi leaders for the incident and their competence, reliability, and rectitude as partners of the United States. The Trump and Biden Administrations have sanctioned some Saudi officials implicated in the murder (see below). Saudi authorities prosecuted some suspects; a trial of 11 defendants began in January 2019. Saudi authorities restricted access to the proceedings, but allowed observers from some Saudi NGOs and from the embassies of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Turkey to attend. Amid press reporting on the pace and limited reach of the trial, the State Department said in June 2019 that, "the Saudi prosecutor has taken important steps toward accountability for the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, but more needs to be done," and called for "a fair and transparent judicial process without undue delay."[64]

In December 2019, eight of those accused were convicted, with five receiving death sentences and three receiving prison sentences. The names of those convicted were not publicly released. In September 2020, Saudi courts reduced the death sentences to prison terms of varying lengths. The crown prince's adviser Saud al Qahtani and Saudi intelligence official Major General Ahmed al Asiri were investigated and cleared by Saudi prosecutors of wrongdoing.

As the anniversary of Khashoggi's death approached in 2019, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman denied ordering Khashoggi's murder and said, "When a crime is committed against a Saudi citizen by officials working for the Saudi government, as a leader I must take responsibility. This was a mistake. And I must take all actions to avoid such a thing in the future."[65] Calling the killing "a heinous crime," he dismissed reported U.S. intelligence community conclusions[66] about his knowledge and role and said, "If there is any such information that charges me, I hope it is brought forward publicly."[67]

In February 2021, U.S. Director for National Intelligence Avril Haines released a declassified report to Congress assessing that "Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman approved an operation in Istanbul, Turkey to capture or kill Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi."[68] The Saudi Foreign Ministry released a statement noting the U.S. government report and saying that "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia completely rejects the negative, false and unacceptable assessment in the report pertaining to the Kingdom's leadership, and notes that the report contained inaccurate information and conclusions."[69]

The State Department in 2020 cited "reports of disappearances carried out by or on behalf of government authorities," and reports that while Saudi law prohibits torture, in 2020, "multiple

[62] According to Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al Jubeir, "He was murdered by agents of the Saudi government without authorization, without permission." Remarks of Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al Jubeir, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, NY, September 24, 2019.

[63] U.N. Document A/HRC/41/CRP.1, June 19, 2019.

[64] Summer Said, Michael Amon, and Dion Nissenbaum, "In Khashoggi Murder Trial, Absence of Crown Prince Mohammad's Aide Stands Out," *Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2019.

[65] Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman interview with Norah O'Donnell, CBS 60 Minutes, September 30, 2019.

[66] "CIA Intercepts Underpin Assessment Saudi Crown Prince Targeted Khashoggi," *Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 2018.

[67] Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman interview with Norah O'Donnell, CBS 60 Minutes, September 30, 2019.

[68] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing the Saudi Government's Role in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," February 26, 2021.

[69] Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@KSAmofaEN), Twitter, February 26, 2021, 4:23 PM (EST).

human rights organizations, the United Nations, and independent third parties noted numerous reports of torture and mistreatment of detainees by law enforcement officers."[70]

In 2020, a co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), Abdullah al Hamid, died in prison, where he was serving a lengthy sentence for questioning the integrity of government officials and "breaking allegiance to the ruler," among other charges.[71] ACPRA, founded in 2009 and shuttered in 2013, had pressed the state to respect human rights and called for transition to a constitutional monarchy. Other ACPRA members remain imprisoned.

Saudi courts and prosecutors have reviewed several high profile non-ACPRA cases since early 2020, including some involving U.S.-Saudi dual citizens, and have commuted death sentences and reduced prison terms for some detainees.

Religious Freedom and Trafficking in Persons Status

In 2020, the State Department listed Saudi Arabia as a Tier 2 Watch List country pursuant to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA, 22 U.S.C. Ch. 78). The new designation as a Tier 2 Watch List country indicates that the U.S. government considers the kingdom to be a country whose government does not fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards but is now making "significant efforts" to do so. The State Department previously had listed Saudi Arabia as a Tier 3 Watch List country. [72] In October 2019, President Trump had partially waived the previous applicability of TVPA penalties to Saudi Arabia as a Tier 3 country to allow for U.S. defense sales to Saudi Arabia under the Foreign Military Sales program to continue.[73]

Saudi Responses and Initiatives

In general, Saudi authorities broadly reject most international calls for action on specific human rights-related cases, which they describe as attempts to subvert Saudi sovereignty or undermine the kingdom's judicial procedures.[74] In November 2018, Saudi authorities formally described the kingdom's human rights laws and practices and responded to assessments of the kingdom's human rights record in the context of the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review.[75]

Some human rights concerns have gained greater prominence in Saudi state entities' domestic and international messaging. A government-appointed Human Rights Commission (HRC) is

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[70] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020, Saudi Arabia, March 30, 2021.

[71] Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Prominent Saudi rights activist dies in prison, sources say," Reuters, April 24, 2020.

[72] U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Saudi Arabia, June 2020. According to the State Department, "key achievements" supporting the upgrade "included enactment of the country's first-ever national referral mechanism (NRM), developed in close partnership with international organizations. The government transparently reported comprehensive datasets, which included significantly increased numbers of prosecutions and convictions under the anti-trafficking law (including of Saudi nationals and forced labor crimes), in addition to numbers of victims identified and referred for care. Authorities also criminally convicted and sentenced to stringent imprisonment terms two Saudi officials complicit in trafficking crimes during the year."

[73] U.S. President (Trump), "Presidential Determination with Respect to the Efforts of Foreign Governments Regarding Trafficking in Persons," Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents, 2019 DCPD no. 201900739, October 18, 2019, pp. 6-7.

[74] For example, in November 2020, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al Jubeir said "our judiciary is independent and we do not allow people to lecture us or dictate to us what we should and shouldn't do." BBC News, "Saudi minister Adel al-Jubeir plays down G20 summit boycott calls," November 21, 2020.

[75] See U.N. Documents A/HRC/40/4, December 26, 2018; and A/HRC/40/2, June 3, 2019.

responsible for monitoring human rights conditions, providing information about human rights standards to state entities, fielding complaints, referring cases of violations for criminal investigation, and interacting with foreign third parties on human rights issues. Statements by government and HRC officials in 2021 committed the kingdom to "eliminating racism, xenophobia, and discrimination for all" and guaranteeing the "equal right to work without any discrimination on the basis of gender or any other forms of discrimination."[76] Limitations on Saudi citizens' rights to free expression may limit outsiders' ability to assess progress toward these goals objectively.

Women's Rights

Women's rights issues in Saudi Arabia remain subject to international scrutiny and are a matter of debate in the kingdom. Saudi women have long faced enforced gender segregation and comprehensive legal and de facto restrictions in family and personal matters, travel, employment, and interaction with public bureaucracies. These restrictions are based on conservative interpretations of Islam and social practices that were adapted and enforced by state authorities and to varying degrees by family and social networks amidst urbanization and dramatic socioeconomic changes in the kingdom during the 20th century.[77]

Recent policy changes have removed some official restrictions, though in some sectors and cases, rules empowering women's male "guardians" (husbands or designated male relatives) continue to apply. In April 2017, King Salman ordered government agencies to review guardianship rules that restrict women's access to government services and to remove those rules that lack a basis in Islamic law, as interpreted by the kingdom's judicial establishment.[78] In September 2017, the government directed ministries to prepare regulations to recognize women's rights to drive, and in June 2018, Saudi women began driving with state approval. In August 2019, the government announced amendments to regulations and to civil status and labor laws that now enable Saudi women to obtain travel documents, assert civil status in dealing with the government, have custody of their children, and work without a guardian's permission. A planned personal status law and recently enacted changes meant to ensure more standard judicial procedures and rulings could reduce judicial discretion and provide more consistent rulings regardless of gender.[79]

Informally, societal and family practices also restrict many women's social and personal autonomy.[80] The 2020 State Department report on human rights in the kingdom noted changes

[76] Saudi Human Rights Commission (@HRCSaudi_EN), Twitter, February 26, 2021, 2:40 PM (EST); and, *Saudi Gazette* (Jeddah), "Citizens have equal right to work; 'men only' ad is a violation: Ministry," February 22, 2021.

[77] As the Saudi state and economy developed, the state embraced and promoted religious and social views common to conservative interior areas allied to the Al Saud family and favored these views in developing rules requiring gender segregation. In other areas of the kingdom, "previously customs, social conventions, and judicial principles were flexible, changing, and highly diversified across regions and social groups, each marked by a different history and diverse influences, and following different Islamic judicial schools." Amélie Le Renard "'Only for Women:' Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Autumn, 2008), pp. 610-629, p. 613. See also Madawi al Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, UK), 2013.

[78] Human Rights Watch, *Saudi Arabia: 'Unofficial' Guardianship Rules Banned,* May 9, 2017.

[79] Nora Jaber, "The New Saudi Personal Status Law: An Opportunity for Meaningful Gender Reform?" London School of Economics Middle East Centre Blog, February 15, 2021; and, Rawan Radwan, "Saudi legal reforms 'to speed access to justice'" *Arab News* (Jeddah), February 8, 2021.

[80] For background on the guardianship system and related activism, see Human Rights Watch, *Boxed In: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System*, July 2016; Nora Doaiji, "Saudi Women's Online Activism: One Year of the 'I Am My Own Guardian' Campaign," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), October 2017; and, Margaret Coker, "How Guardianship Laws Still Control Saudi Women," *New York Times*, June 22, 2018.

that "granted women many of the same rights enjoyed by men pertaining to travel abroad, civil status, and employment" but stated that women "continued to face discrimination under law and custom," including "primarily in rural areas" where there were reports that "government and nongovernment entities continued to require women to obtain guardian permission prior to providing services."[81] Saudi Arabia ranked the lowest globally for its legal discrimination against women in the 2019/2020 Women, Peace and Security Index.[82]

Changes implemented and proposed since 2017 nevertheless have been accompanied by the detention and trial of some prominent female proponents.[83] The State Department reported that in 2020, "authorities arrested and abused women's rights activists perceived as critical or independent of the government." Saudi authorities allege that some of those detained have had illegal ties to foreign entities. In February 2021, authorities released activists Loujain Hathloul and Maya'a al Zahrani conditionally following December 2020 sentencing hearings. A court upheld Hathloul's reduced sentence on appeal in March 2021. Authorities also released fellow activists Nouf Abdulaziz and Samar Badawi conditionally in 2021.[84]

The kingdom has increased its recognition of women's political rights and its inclusion of women in state bureaucracies in recent years, but the State Department reported that as of 2020, "societal and institutional gender discrimination continued to exclude women from some aspects of public life." The late King Abdullah (d. 2015) expanded the size of the national advisory Shura Council to include 30 women,[85] and he recognized women's right to vote and stand as candidates in the country's third municipal council election in December 2015. Authorities did not grant female candidates quota or list preferences. Women won 21 of the 2,106 seats, and the Minister for Municipal and Rural Affairs appointed 17 other women to seats.[86] Subsequent changes to state policies regarding gender interactions in public may increase female candidates' ability to campaign in future elections and organize through public and private associations.

"Religious Police" and Gender Segregation

King Salman, like the late King Abdullah, has moved to limit and redefine some of the responsibilities and powers of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), often referred to by non-Saudis as "religious police," in response to some public concerns. A government-endorsed entity, the CPVPV held a prominent public role in enforcing standards of religious observance and gender segregation norms for decades. In 2016, the government stripped the CPVPV of certain arrest powers, required its personnel to meet certain educational standards, and instructed them to improve their treatment of citizens. While the CPVPV remains operational, the State Department reported that in 2020, its "authorities were greatly curtailed compared with past years." Mixing between genders has become more common at some public events, and the government has loosened regulations that required some businesses to provide for gender segregation on their premises.

[81] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019, Saudi Arabia, March 11, 2020.

[82] These findings pre-date legal and administrative changes undertaken by Saudi Arabia in 2019 regarding guardianship laws. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*, October 2019.

[83] See Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive," *New York Times*, September 26, 2017; Kareem Fahim and Loveday Morris, "Saudi Arabia Detains Women's Rights Advocates Who Challenged Driving Ban," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2018; and, Margherita Stancati, "Saudi Arabia Detains More Women's Rights Activists," *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2018.

[84] Aya Batrawy, "Two Saudi women's rights activists released from prison," Associated Press, June 27, 2021.

[85] See Hala Aldosari, "All the King's Women: New Shura Council Members Stir Gender Debate," AGSIW, May 11, 2017.

[86] George Sadek, "FALQs: Saudi Arabia Municipal Elections – Women Participate for the First Time," Law Library of Congress, December 22, 2015; National Public Radio (NPR), "Saudi Women React to Election Results," December 20, 2015; and, NPR, "After Historic Elections in Saudi Arabia, What's The Future for Women?" December 22, 2015.

Periodic incidents involving the CPVPV or private security personnel and the government's changes to rules governing public morality continue to shape related debates among Saudis. While many Saudis have embraced social changes introduced since 2015, others have been outspoken in their criticism of changes to rules concerning public dress, public performances, and gender segregation.[87] Some Saudi social media users explicitly call for the re-empowerment of the CPVPV.

Shia Minority Issues

Saudi Arabia's Shia Muslim minority communities have historically faced discrimination and periodic violence, although more recent outreach by government authorities and attempts at integration and inclusion have improved intercommunal relations somewhat.[88] Since 2014, Islamic State terrorist attacks against Shia communities, low-level unrest in some Eastern Province Shia communities, and certain protests by students and families of Shia detainees have created strains on order and stability. Some members of Saudi Shia communities look to Iranian, Iraqi, or other clerics outside the kingdom for religious guidance, and Saudi authorities remain particularly sensitive about Shia Saudis potential ties to Iran.

Some domestic clashes intensified in the wake of the 2016 execution of outspoken Shia cleric Nimr al Nimr: Shia protestors conducted arson attacks against public buildings and shooting attacks killed and injured Saudi security personnel. A court convicted Nimr of incitement to treason and involvement with individuals responsible for attacks on security forces. Explosions and gunfire have periodically killed and injured Saudi security officers in and around Nimr's home village Al Awamiya and nearby Qatif since mid-2017. Saudi security operations and clashes with armed locals resulted in the destruction of areas of Al Awamiya in August 2017. The Saudi government completed reconstruction of Al Awamiya's town center in February 2019.[89] U.S. travel advisories state that U.S. government personnel remain restricted from travel to Al Awamiya and Qatif because the U.S. government "has limited ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens" in those areas.[90]

Saudi courts also have handed down lengthy jail terms and travel bans for Shia protestors and individuals accused of attacking security force personnel. Several Shia individuals suspected of involvement in violence have been killed in clashes with security forces, and other individuals convicted of crimes related to such confrontations have been executed. In April 2019, Saudi authorities executed 33 Shia individuals convicted of involvement in related unrest, attacks, or espionage.[91] In 2021, Saudi authorities commuted the death sentences of Al Nimr's nephew and two other Saudi Shia men who were all convicted as minors of related crimes.[92]

[87] Michael Amon and Donna Abdulaziz, "New Social Rules Leave Saudis Confused About How to Behave," *Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2019.

[88] Kristin Smith Diwan, "Saudi Nationalism Raises Hopes of Greater Shia Inclusion," AGSIW, May 3, 2018.

[89] BBC, "Awamiya: Inside Saudi Shia town devastated by demolitions and fighting," August 16, 2017; Saudi Gazette, "Work on Awamiya development in full swing," August 4, 2018; and, Al Arabiya, "The 'Center of al-Awamiyah' injects fresh hope in Saudi Arabia's al-Qatif," February 1, 2019.

[90] U.S. Department of State, Saudi Arabia Travel Advisory, June 16, 2021.

[91] Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Mass Execution of 37 Men," April 24, 2019.

[92] Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: Withdrawal of death sentences for three Shi'a activists arrested as teenagers a welcome move," February 8, 2021.

Terrorism Threats and Bilateral Cooperation

The Saudi Arabian government states that it views Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda affiliates, the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL or the Arabic acronym *Da'esh)*, other Salafist-jihadist groups, and their supporters as direct threats to Saudi national security.

From 2014 through 2017, the aggressive expansion of the Islamic State in neighboring Iraq and in Syria and the group's attacks inside Saudi Arabia created alarm in the kingdom. At the height of their power, Islamic State leaders declared war against the Saudi royal family, condemning official Saudi clerics, and urging attacks inside the kingdom. Islamic State affiliates claimed responsibility for a series of deadly attacks against Saudi security forces and members of the kingdom's Shia minority across the country along with a failed suicide bombing in 2016 against the U.S. Consulate General in Jeddah. A similar campaign of violence by Al Qaeda supporters shook the kingdom in the mid-2000s.

Saudi counterterrorism operations appear to have succeeded in reducing the threats posed by IS and AQ sympathizers, and the pace of attacks by and reported arrests of IS and AQ supporters has declined. Nevertheless, June 2021 U.S. State Department travel advisory for Saudi Arabia cautioned, "terrorist groups continue plotting possible attacks" and said that "terrorists may attack with little or no warning."[93]

Saudi and U.S. officials agree that the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—based in Yemen and led by Saudi nationals—pose continuing terrorist threats to the kingdom. Following the January 2016 execution by the Saudi government of dozens of convicted AQAP suspects, including some prominent ideologues, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri released a statement condemning the kingdom and calling for revenge. Some observers, including some Members of Congress, have expressed concern about the apparent strengthening of AQAP during the course of the ongoing conflict in Yemen.[94]

In December 2019, a member of the Royal Saudi Air Force killed three people and wounded eight at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida: AQAP claimed credit for the attack and the gunman coordinated with AQAP personnel in advance. According to the State Department, "the Government of Saudi Arabia continues to work closely with the United States on the investigation."[95]

Saudi leaders also seek support from their regional neighbors and from the United States to confront efforts by Iran and their Hezbollah allies to destabilize Yemen through support for the *Ansarallah*/Houthi movement (see "Conflict in Yemen" below).

Terrorist Financing and Material Support: Concerns and Responses

Official U.S. views of Saudi counterterrorism policy have evolved since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (see **Appendix C**). Through 2018, U.S. government reports indicated that financial support for terrorism from Saudi individuals remained a threat to the kingdom and the international community, even though the Saudi government had "reaffirmed its commitment to countering terrorist financing in the Kingdom and the Gulf region."[96] The U.S. government now

[93] U.S. Department of State, Saudi Arabia Travel Advisory, June 16, 2021.

[94] See, for example, Letter from 55 House Members to President Donald Trump, April 10, 2017.

[95] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, June 2020.

[96] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2017, September 2018. The report included nearly identical

credits the kingdom with taking terrorism threats seriously and described the Saudi government in December 2020 as "a strong partner in regional security and counterterrorism efforts."[97] Saudi Arabia co-chairs the Counter-ISIS Finance Group of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS alongside Italy and the United States.

Overall, according to the State Department's 2019 *Country Reports on Terrorism* coverage of Saudi Arabia,

> Saudi authorities worked closely with the United States to implement counterterrorism commitments and to develop new capabilities to "monitor and counter extremist messaging."... In 2019, Saudi Arabian government officials continued to work closely with their U.S. counterparts to deploy a comprehensive and well-resourced CT strategy that included vigilant security measures, regional and international cooperation, and measures to counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment. ... As in previous years, Saudi Arabia was a full partner and active participant in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and provided significant operational and logistical support for Coalition activities in Syria and Iraq. ... The government reported that it continued to work to constrain the discriminatory content of its education, satellite, and religious advocacy output both overseas and domestically. Nevertheless, its decades-long support for organizations that propagated intolerant interpretations of Islam overseas remained a concern, as did uneven implementation of educational content reform.[98]

Saudi authorities forbade Saudi citizens from travelling to Syria to fight and have taken steps to limit the flow of privately raised funds from Saudis to armed Sunni groups and charitable organizations in Syria.[99] In January 2014, the kingdom issued a decree setting prison sentences for Saudis found to have travelled abroad to fight with extremist groups, including tougher sentences for any members of the military found to have done so. The decree was followed by the release in March 2014 of new counterterrorism regulations under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior outlawing support for terrorist organizations including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.[100] The regulations drew scrutiny and criticism from human rights advocates concerned about further restrictions of civil liberties. The 2019 State Department terrorism report observed, "Some international human rights and press groups continued to assert that the Kingdom has misused counterterrorism laws to prosecute religious and political dissidents, women's rights activists, and prominent Saudi clerics."[101]

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language from the 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 reports. See also U.S. Department of State, 2016 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)—Volume II: Money Laundering and Financial Crimes Country Database, July 2016.

[97] U.S. Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia, Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, December 15, 2020.

[98] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, June 2020. The 2016 report had stated that "Despite serious and effective efforts to counter the funding of terrorism within the Kingdom, some individuals and entities in Saudi Arabia probably continued to serve as sources of financial support for terrorist groups."

[99] In 2016, the Saudi Ministry of Interior reported that there were then "2,093 Saudis fighting with terrorist organizations in conflict zones, including ISIS, with more than 70 percent of them in Syria." U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2016, August 2017. A report by the private consultancy The Soufan Group cites a 2016 Saudi Ministry of Interior estimate that more than 3,200 Saudi foreign fighters had travelled abroad, with 760 having returned home, and more than 7,000 Saudi nationals had been "stop listed" by Turkish interior security officials. See, Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Group, October 2017.

[100] Saudi Ministry of Interior, List of the Security and Intellectual Prohibitions for the Citizens and Residents, Saudi Press Agency, March 7, 2014.

[101] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, June 2020.

U.S. Foreign Assistance to Saudi Arabia

U.S. training and security support to Saudi Arabia is overwhelmingly Saudi funded 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. 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.[102] 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.[103]

President Trump's FY2018 budget request sought $10,000 in IMET for Saudi Arabia, but the requests for FY2019 and in latter years have not specifically asked for the funds. The FY2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2020 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, and FY2021 Omnibus and COVID Relief and Response Act prohibit the use of funds made available by the acts for IMET assistance for the kingdom (Section 7077 of Division F, P.L. 116-6; Section 7041(h) of Division G, P.L. 116-94; and Section 7041(h) of Division K, P.L. 116-260, respectively).

The FY2020 and FY2021 appropriations acts also state 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.

Arms Sales, Security Assistance, and Training

Arms Sales and U.S. Military Presence

Saudi Arabia's armed forces have relied on U.S. arms sales, training, and maintenance support for decades. Congress has historically supported U.S. arms sales to the kingdom, while seeking to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge (QME) over potential Arab adversaries and expressing concern about the merits or terms of individual sales cases in some instances. Some Members of Congress have at times expressed concern about the potential for U.S. arms sales to contribute to or help drive arms races in the Gulf region and broader Middle East and, since 2015, about Saudi use of U.S.-origin weaponry in Yemen.

[102] 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 Saudi Arabia and other IMET recipient countries through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program.

[103] 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.

Congressional majorities long backed continued arms sales to U.S. partners in the Gulf region, including Saudi Arabia, as a means of improving interoperability, reducing the need for U.S. deployments, deterring Iran, and supporting U.S. industry. Since 2009, a series of high-value U.S. proposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia have been announced, including the 2010 announcement that the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) would reconstitute and expand its main fighter forces with advanced U.S. F-15 aircraft (see **Table B-1**). In May 2017, President Trump signaled a continuation and deepening of bilateral defense cooperation, announcing completed and proposed defense sales during his visit to Riyadh with a potential value of more than $110 billion. The sales include cases that the Obama Administration had proposed and notified to Congress, cases developed under the Obama Administration on which Congress had been preliminarily consulted, and new sales that remain under development.

Ongoing and proposed sale cases are set to considerably improve Saudi military potential, and executives in both countries have referred to them as symbolic commitments to cooperation during a period of regional turmoil and leadership change. As with past sales, Saudi investments in maintenance and training and decisions about force posture and command arrangements will shape the net effect new acquisitions have on Saudi military readiness and capabilities.

Since 2015, Saudi and Emirati use of U.S. weaponry in Yemen has prompted additional congressional scrutiny of new sales to those countries, although, to date, Congress has not acted to finally block any proposed sales. In the 116th Congress, majorities in the House and Senate rejected the Trump Administration's May 2019 use of emergency arms sales authority to expedite sales of air-to-ground munitions and other defense systems to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. However, Congress did not vote to overcome presidential vetoes of related resolutions of disapproval (S.J.Res. 36, S.J.Res. 37, and S.J.Res. 38). In April 2019, Congress also directed the President "to remove United States Armed Forces from hostilities in or affecting the Republic of Yemen, except United States Armed Forces engaged in operations directed at al Qaeda or associated forces," but the Senate did not vote to overcome President Trump's veto of S.J.Res. 7. (See CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2020* and **Table B-2** below).

The United States Military Training Mission (USMTM) in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program (PM-SANG) oversee U.S. defense cooperation with the kingdom. They have been active under special bilateral agreements and funded by Saudi purchases since the 1950s and 1970s, respectively. Hundreds of U.S. military personnel are deployed to Saudi Arabia in support of these programs and parallel programs for Saudi Ministry of Interior and other security forces (see below).[104] Saudi military, national guard, and interior security forces had, until 2017, been under the leadership of three different senior members of the royal family. Post-2017 leadership changes and Saudi plans to increase self-sufficiency in defense production may affect future acquisition of U.S. weapons and training among these forces.[105]

As noted above, President Trump deployed additional U.S. military personnel and platforms to Saudi Arabia following the September 2019 drone and missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities.[106] In

[104] As of March 2021, the Department of Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) reported that there were 804 U.S. military personnel (including 597 active duty forces) in Saudi Arabia.

[105] Katie Paul, "Saudi prince, relieved from National Guard, once seen as throne contender," Reuters, November 4, 2017; and, Glen Carey and Zaid Sabah, "Saudi King Replaces Military Commanders as Yemen War Lingers On, *Bloomberg*, February 26, 2018.

[106] In October 2019, the Department of Defense announced that since September 2019, it had extended or authorized deployments to the kingdom for an additional 3,000 U.S. personnel "to assure and enhance the defense of Saudi Arabia." The deployments included two fighter squadrons, one air expeditionary wing, two Patriot missile defense

June 2021, President Biden reported to Congress that there were approximately 2,700 U.S. military forces in the kingdom, deployed "to protect United States forces and interests in the region against hostile action by Iran or Iran-backed groups."[107] President Biden confirmed that these U.S. troops, "operating in coordination with the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, provide air and missile defense capabilities and support the operation of United States fighter aircraft."

Press reports citing unnamed U.S. officials indicate the Administration is withdrawing some U.S. military personnel and missile defense and air defense platforms from the kingdom as part of a broader reallocation of resources in the Gulf region.[108] This withdrawal has been coordinated with Saudi officials, who have said it has been "carried out through common understanding and realignment of defense strategies."[109] Saudi defense officials have stated that Saudi military capabilities are sufficient to defend the kingdom's territory, and they have welcomed additional missile defense support from U.S.-ally Greece.[110] In August 2021, a State Department official said in testimony before Congress that the Biden Administration "recognizes that Saudi Arabia faces significant threats to its territory, and we are committed to working together to help Riyadh strengthen its defenses."[111]

President Trump stated that Saudi Arabia agreed to finance the additional costs of U.S. deployment and operations undertaken in 2019, and the Department of Defense has reported to Congress on related Saudi contributions.[112] Saudi Arabia pays for the incremental costs of regular U.S. military training and advisory activities through Foreign Military Sales cases. In the past, the kingdom contributed billions of dollars to offset the incremental costs of U.S. military operations during the 1991 Gulf War.[113] Current law provides for acceptance of burden sharing contributions by designated countries and regional organizations (see 10 U.S.C. 2609 and 10 U.S.C. 2350j).

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batteries, and one Terminal High Altitude Areas Defense System (THAAD). Department of Defense Statement on Deployment of Additional U.S. Forces and Equipment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, October 11, 2019. In a November 2019 letter to Congress, President Trump said, "These personnel will remain deployed as long as their presence is required" to fulfill missions described in the letter. These include "to improve defenses against air and missile threats in the region," "to support the operation of United States fighter aircraft from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," and, "to assure our partners, deter further Iranian provocative behavior, and bolster regional defensive capabilities." Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, November 19, 2019.

[107] Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, June 8, 2021.

[108] Gordon Lubold, Nancy A. Youssef, and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Military to Withdraw Hundreds of Troops, Aircraft, Antimissile Batteries From Middle East," *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2021.

[109] Associated Press, "U.S. removes advanced missile defense system from Saudi Arabia," September 11, 2021.

[110] Ibid, and, Saudi-U.S. Trade Group, "After U.S. Withdrawal of Patriot Missiles, Greece Delivers System to Saudi," September 15, 2021.

[111] Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Regional Affairs (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs) Mira Resnick before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, August 10, 2021.

[112] President Trump remarks at joint news conference with Italian President Sergio Mattarella, October 16, 2019.

[113] Contributions were made via the Defense Cooperation Account authority (10 U.S.C. 2608) established by Congress at the executive branch's request in October 1990 following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (P.L. 101-403). Congress established additional terms for the reimbursement of costs and oversight reporting in the March 1991 supplemental appropriations act (P.L. 102-25). See United States Costs in the Persian Gulf Conflict and Foreign Contributions to Offset such Costs, Report #21, October 15, 1992; and, Conduct of the Persian Gulf War, Final Report to Congress Pursuant to Title V of P.L. 102-25, April 1992.

Support to Saudi Military Operations in Yemen

Saudi Arabia established a coalition in March 2015 to engage in military operations in Yemen against the *Ansarallah*/Houthi movement and loyalists of the previous president of Yemen, the late Ali Abdullah Saleh (see "Conflict in Yemen").[114] The Houthi-Saleh alliance ousted the internationally recognized interim government of Yemen in January 2015. The war in Yemen has continued since then, leading, according to the United Nations, to one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden have expressed U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition's operations in Yemen as a bulwark against Iranian regional interference. They also have implored the Saudis, their partners, and the Houthis to improve humanitarian access, pursue a settlement to the conflict, and take measures to prevent civilian casualties. Saudi leaders frequently state that the coalition military campaign is an act of legitimate self-defense because of their Yemeni adversaries' repeated and, at times, deadly, cross-border missile and drone attacks. After an August 2021 Houthi attack on Saudi Arabia damaged a civilian airliner and injured civilians, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said, "The fact is that our partner, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, does face a threat from Yemen. We are standing with our partner."[115]

The United States' role in supporting the Saudi-led coalition's military operations in Yemen has evolved over time.[116] As noted above, concerns about Yemeni civilian deaths in Saudi airstrikes, the operation's contribution to grave humanitarian conditions, and gains by Al Qaeda and Islamic State supporters have led some Members of Congress and U.S. officials to urge all parties to seek a settlement. In the 114th Congress, some Members scrutinized and attempted to halt proposed sales of thousands of guided air-to-ground munitions and tanks to Saudi Arabia in the context of concerns about the Saudi military's conduct in Yemen. President Obama maintained U.S. logistical support for Saudi operations in Yemen but decided in 2016 to reduce U.S. personnel support and limit certain U.S. arms transfers, including planned air-to-ground munitions sales.

In the 115th Congress, debate over arms sales continued, and Congress passed legislation prohibiting the obligation or expenditure of U.S. funds for in-flight refueling operations of Saudi and Saudi-led coalition aircraft that were not conducting select types of operations if certain certifications could not be made and maintained (Section 1290 of the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act, P.L. 115-232).[117] The Trump Administration issued required certifications in

[114] In early December 2017, the Houthi-Saleh alliance unraveled, culminating in the killing of former President Saleh on December 4, 2017.

[115] U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price, Press Briefing, Washington, DC, September 2, 2021.

[116] For background on the evolution of U.S. military support to Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, see CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2020*.

[117] Until November 2018, U.S. in-flight refueling to the militaries of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was conducted pursuant to the terms of bilateral Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSAs) between the Department of Defense and the respective ministries of each country. Some retransfers of fuel services were provided to Saudi-led coalition members, and in 2015, Saudi Arabia received general purpose bombs retransferred by the United Arab Emirates. ACSA agreements are governed by 10 U.S.C. 2341-2350. The U.S. agreement with Saudi Arabia was signed in May 2016. Prior to May 2016, a "Joint Staff Execute Order signed on March 27, 2015, directed DOD to provide aerial refueling support to the SLC [Saudi-led coalition], if requested, and stated that the support would be provided on a reimbursable basis either through foreign military sales (FMS) or an ACSA." U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Defense Logistics Agreements: DOD Should Improve Oversight and Seek Payment from Foreign Partners for Thousands of Orders It Identifies as Overdue*, GAO-20-309, March 20, 2020, Appendix IV.

September 2018 but announced an end to U.S. refueling support weeks later.[118] Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates agreed to reimburse the United States for the costs of refueling.[119]

President Trump chose to proceed with precision guided munition technology sales that the Obama Administration had deferred, and, as discussed above, in May 2019 invoked emergency authority under the Arms Export Control Act to proceed with proposed sales that simple majorities in both chambers in Congress opposed. The decision followed President Trump's April 2019 veto of S.J.Res. 7, through which Congress sought to direct an end to U.S. military involvement with non-counterterrorism missions in Yemen (see CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2020*).[120]

President Biden has "directed an end to United States support for the Saudi-led Coalition's offensive military operations against the Houthis in Yemen."[121] According to his June 2021 consolidated war powers report to Congress, "United States Armed Forces, in a non-combat role, continue to provide military advice and limited information to regional forces for defensive and training purposes only as they relate to the Saudi-led Coalition's campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. Such support does not involve United States Armed Forces in hostilities with the Houthis for the purposes of the War Powers Resolution." U.S. forces reportedly have deployed to Saudi Arabia on a periodic basis for these and other purposes, including advisers for border security and anti-missile purposes.[122]

The Biden Administration paused the implementation of some arms sales approved by President Trump, and an Administration review reportedly has recommended not proceeding with previously approved sales of air-to-ground munitions and related technologies to the kingdom.[123] Other sales and deliveries of defense articles and services continue pursuant to the Foreign Military Sales and Direct Commercial Sales procedures established in the Arms Export Control Act, including maintenance and service contracts.

The 117th Congress continues to consider proposals that would place conditions on or direct an end to U.S. military support to coalition operations in Yemen. In July 2021, the House voted to adopt "plus-minus" amendments to the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2022 "to highlight opposition to U.S. political or diplomatic support for the Saudi blockade of Yemen," and, "to highlight the need for stronger congressional oversight, robust human rights measures, and transparency in U.S. arms sales to countries such as

[118] In September 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo certified to Congress that the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were "undertaking demonstrable actions to reduce the risk of harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure resulting from military operations" pursuant to Section 1290 of the FY2019 John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-91). Some Members of Congress criticized the certification.

[119] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Defense Logistics Agreements: DOD Should Improve Oversight and Seek Payment from Foreign Partners for Thousands of Orders It Identifies as Overdue*, GAO-20-309, March 20, 2020, Appendix IV.

[120] President Donald Trump, Presidential Veto Message to the Senate to Accompany S.J.Res. 7, April 16, 2019.

[121] Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, June 8, 2021.

[122] Ibid. Press reports also have included unconfirmed details about U.S. border security and counter-missile operations. Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, "Army Special Forces Secretly Help Saudis Combat Threat From Yemen Rebels," *New York Times*, May 18, 2018.

[123] In April 2021, the New York Times cited unnamed U.S. officials as saying the Administration "plans to suspend the sale of air-to-ground offensive weapons used by fixed-wing aircraft" to Saudi Arabia, including "systems that can turn regular bombs into precision-guided munitions." Michael Crowley and Edward Wong, "U.S. Is Expected to Approve Some Arms Sales to U.A.E. and Saudis," *New York Times*, April 14, 2021.

Saudi Arabia."[124] Several amendments adopted in the House version of the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act also would limit certain U.S. support to Saudi Arabia based on its operations in Yemen (see "Legislation in the 117th Congress").

Assistance to the Saudi Ministry of Interior

U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism and internal security cooperation expanded after 2008, when a bilateral technical cooperation agreement established a U.S.-interagency critical infrastructure protection advisory mission to the kingdom. The agreement was extended in 2013 through 2023.[125] U.S. government Country Reports on Terrorism entries for Saudi Arabia report that security and counterterrorism cooperation programs are ongoing and productive, suggesting that 2017 changes of leadership in the Ministry of Interior (MOI), the creation of the Presidency for State Security, and the consolidation of security authority under the crown prince have not disrupted U.S.-Saudi security cooperation.[126]

The Office of the Program Manager-Ministry of Interior (OPM-MOI) is a Saudi-funded, U.S.-staffed senior advisory mission that embeds U.S. advisors into key security, industrial, energy, maritime, and cybersecurity offices within the Saudi government, including with the Ministry of Interior and Presidency for State Security. In 2018, the State Department Office of Inspector General said the program "facilitates the transfer of technical knowledge, advice, skills, and resources from the United States to Saudi Arabia in the areas of critical infrastructure protection and public security."[127] According to a 2016 State Department report, the OPM-MOI program seeks to help Saudi Arabia "improve its ability to thwart terrorists before they act and to defend against terrorist attacks if they occur."[128]

In coordination with these advisory efforts, the U.S. Army Material Command-Security Assistance Command (USASAC) oversees a Saudi-funded Ministry of Interior Military Assistance Group (MOI-MAG). In 2019, USASAC described the MOI-MAG program as "the only U.S. military organization that advises and trains another country's Ministry of Interior security forces."[129] Under MOI-MAG programs, U.S. Army personnel "provide security assistance training to include marksmanship, patrolling perimeters, setting up security checkpoints, vehicle searches at entry control point, rules of engagement toward possible threats and personnel screening" as well as "courses similar to standard Army courses to include the Army Basic Instructors' Course, basic officers' course, airborne training, flight training and military police training."[130]

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[124] See amendments 5 and 25 as printed in H.Rept. 117-110 on H.R. 4373, considered as part of en bloc amendment #3 to H.R. 4373, July 28, 2021. House of Representatives Roll Call vote number 241: https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2021241. For background on "plus-minus" amendments and their use, see H.R. 4373 CRS Report R46841, *Changes in the House of Representatives' Initial Consideration of Regular Appropriations Measures, 113th-116th Congresses*, by Kevin P. McNellis.

[125] Adriane Elliot, "Security assistance growth prompts restructuring," U.S. Army, September 2, 2015.

[126] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2018, November 2019.

[127] U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General, "Inspection of Embassy Riyadh and Constituent Posts, Saudi Arabia," ISP-I-18-17, May 2018.

[128] "Counterterrorism Coordination with Saudi Arabia" in U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2015, April 2016. The program is modeled loosely on embedded advisory and technology transfer programs of the U.S.-Saudi Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation, established in the 1970s.

[129] USASAC Public Affairs, "MOI-MAG advise and train in Saudi Arabia," November 6, 2019.

[130] Ibid.

According to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, from FY2009 through FY2017, the U.S. government had reached and/or implemented sales agreements worth $287 million in support of Saudi Ministry of Interior programs.[131] An additional $52 million in sales were implemented from FY2018 to FY2020.[132]

U.S.-Saudi Trade and Investment

Saudi Arabia was the second largest U.S. trading partner in the Middle East by overall value in 2020.[133] According to the U.S. International Trade Administration, U.S. imports from Saudi Arabia in 2019 were worth $13.4 billion and in 2020 were worth $8.9 billion (down from $24.1 billion in 2018). In 2019, U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia were valued at $14.3 billion (up from more than $13.6 billion in 2018). U.S. exports to the kingdom were worth $11.1 billion in 2020.

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 of U.S.-Saudi oil trade account for corresponding changes in the value of U.S. imports from Saudi Arabia in recent years. The value of U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia has fluctuated relatively less.

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 May 2021, Saudi Arabia was the fourth-largest source of U.S. crude oil imports, providing an average of 395 thousand barrels per day of the 8.5 million barrels per day (mbd) in gross U.S. crude oil imports, behind Canada, Mexico, and Russia.[134]

According to the State Department's 2021 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 the conversion of the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority into the Ministry of Investment and the Saudi-government led domestic investment initiative announced in 2021.[135] The report also observes "pressure to generate non-oil revenue and provide more jobs for Saudi citizens... may weaken the country's investment climate going forward." The report notes that "investor concerns persist ...over the rule of law, business predictability, and political risk."

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, intellectual property rights (IPR) policies, and limits on foreign investment.[136] The U.S. government has praised the Saudi government's creation of a dedicated

[131] Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) Fiscal Year Series Data, September 30, 2018. From FY2015 onward, DSCA tracked the implementation of sales in the fiscal year of implementation, rather than agreements reached.

[132] DSCA response to CRS inquiry, August 31, 2021.

[133] Based on U.S. Department of Commerce International Trade Administration Global Patterns of U.S. Merchandise Trade, July 2021. Comparable 2020 figures for Israel, the top U.S. trading partner in the Middle East, were more than $10.1 billion in U.S. exports and more than $15.2 billion in U.S. imports from Israel. U.S. exports to the United Arab Emirates in 2019 were worth more than $20 billion, and in 2020 were worth more than $14.7 billion.

[134] Based on EIA data, "Weekly Imports & Exports: Crude" and "Weekly Preliminary Crude Imports by Country of Origin," Four Week Averages, January 31, 2020.

[135] U.S. Department of State, Investment Climate Statement, Saudi Arabia, July 21, 2021.

[136] U.S. Trade Representative, National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers, March 2021, pp. 451-457.

intellectual property protection agency but reports that "continued lack of effective protection of IPR in the pharmaceutical sector remains a significant concern."[137] USTR placed Saudi Arabia on its Priority Watch List in its 2021 Special 301 report on IPR.[138]

Events 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 seeking to participate in and profit from new investment and expanded business opportunities in the kingdom have had to navigate political and security developments that have created uncertainty. Foreign government actors seeking to support Saudi Arabia's transformation plans as a hedge against political instability that could result from the initiatives' failure have faced related challenges in convincing investors to make long-term commitments. The kingdom's adversaries have leveraged relatively low cost, high impact attacks to amplify investors' doubts.

Energy Issues

Global Energy Trends and Saudi Policy

Saudi Arabia holds the second largest proven oil reserves in the world (17.2% of global total) and produced 12.5% of the oil produced by volume globally in 2020, second to the United States.[139] Saudi Arabia is also the largest exporter of crude oil. A September 2019 missile and drone attack on critical oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais and an attempted attack on export facilities in March 2021 highlight ongoing security threats to the kingdom's energy infrastructure and, by extension, to its energy exports and world economies.[140] In 2020, Asian economies remained the leading importers of Saudi crude oil exports, with Japan, China, South Korea, and India as the top buyers.[141] Saudi officials have ordered the expansion of Saudi Aramco's oil production capacity to 13 million barrels per day (mbd) from its current maximum capacity of approximately 12 mbd.[142] In 2020, Saudi Arabia consumed 3.5 mbd of its 11 mbd production; historically Saudi oil

[137] U.S. Department of State, Investment Climate Statement, Saudi Arabia, July 21, 2021.

[138] The Special 301 Report (Report) is the result of an annual review of the state of intellectual property (IP) protection and enforcement in U.S. trading partners around the world, which the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) conducts pursuant to Section 182 of the Trade Act of 1974, as amended (the Trade Act, 19 U.S.C. § 2242). USTR, "USTR releases Annual Special 301 Report on Intellectual Property Protection," April 30, 2021.

[139] BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021.

[140] Katie McQue and Herman Wang, "Saudi Aramco facilities reportedly targeted by Houthi missile bombardment," *S&P Global Platts*, March 7, 2021.

[141] Sambit Mohanty and Gawoon Phil Vahn, "Asia's fragile recovery path can ill afford oil upheaval, price gyrations," *S&P Global Platts*, March 10, 2021; Sharon Cho and Serene Cheong, "Saudi Oil-Price Hike May Be Too Much for Delta-Ravaged Asia," *Bloomberg News*, July 29, 2021; and "Oil: Inter-area movements" in BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021.

[142] According to Saudi Aramco, "The Government determines the Kingdom's maximum level of crude oil production in the exercise of its sovereign prerogative and requires Aramco to maintain maximum sustainable capacity (MSC). As at December 31, 2020, Aramco's MSC was maintained at 12.0 mmbpd of crude oil. On March 11, 2020, the Government mandated Aramco to increase its MSC to 13.0 mmbpd. Aramco is proceeding with detailed engineering and implementing the Government's directive to increase MSC." Saudi Aramco Annual Report, 2020. According to Bloomberg, "Aramco defines its maximum sustainable capacity as the amount of crude it can bring into production within three months and sustain for at least a year." Julian Lee, "Saudi Recovery from Oil Attack Isn't All It Seems," *Bloomberg News*, September 27, 2019.

consumption, which has declined since 2015, has been mainly for transportation and electricity generation.[143]

The Saudi government receives a dividend from the state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco that finances most of the state budget. A trend of lower oil prices from 2014 through mid-2017 caused some public and official financial concern in the kingdom. To meet related fiscal challenges, Saudi authorities devised a three-track strategy:

1. Negotiation of agreements with certain oil producers to reduce and control global oil output,
2. Increases in domestic electricity and gasoline prices to reduce oil consumption in the kingdom, and
3. A plan to offer public shares in Saudi Aramco and reinvest proceeds in the kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF) and thereby help finance the development of non-oil economic sectors and revenue sources.

Negotiations with OPEN Members and Certain Non-OPEC Producers. Mutual reliance on oil export revenues creates parallel interests and competition for market share among Saudi Arabia, Russia, and other countries that depend on oil export revenues. Generally speaking, members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) have sought to keep oil markets adequately balanced by adjusting production levels with the stated goal of maintaining oil market and price stability**.** As a high volume oil producer with large-scale, flexible production and export capacity, Saudi Arabia has played an influential role in oil markets for decades.[144]

In recent years, Saudi authorities have managed their production levels amid increasing output and exports from U.S. tight (aka "shale") oil producers and changing demand conditions in global oil markets. To mitigate the price-lowering effects of surplus supply, Saudi Arabia in 2016 convinced fellow members of OPEC to embrace shared productions cuts and reached an agreement with the "OPEC+" group (Russia and 10 other non-OPEC countries) to support a production cut arrangement. Some market observers credit this arrangement with broadly stabilizing prices after its announcement.[145] Officials from Saudi Arabia and the OPEC+ countries since have agreed serially to extend their joint production cuts, with some iterative revisions to country production levels to accommodate market and producer nation conditions. Saudi officials periodically have instituted additional voluntary cuts to shape market conditions and preserve OPEC+ member countries' commitment to the deal.

Saudi-Russian negotiations have been central to the duration of the OPEC+ arrangement. In June 2018, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a bilateral energy cooperation agreement that Saudi and Russian Energy Ministers said would seek "a balanced market that is supported by a reliable and sufficient supply."[146] At times, however, reported Saudi-Russian disagreements have led to divergent approaches, such as in March 2020, when disagreement about the appropriate response to the onset of COVID-19 led Saudi Arabia to

[143] BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021; and, Jim Krane, "Energy Governance in Saudi Arabia: An Assessment of the Kingdom's Resources, Policies, And Climate Approach," January 2019.

[144] Anjli Raval, "Saudi Arabia loses oil market share to rivals in key nations," *Financial Times* (UK), March 28, 2016; and, Grant Smith, "Saudis Take Iran's Oil-Market Share, Keeping OPEC Supply Steady," *Bloomberg News*, June 3, 2019.

[145] See the "Declaration of Cooperation" here: https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/publications/4580.htm.

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

announce plans to increase oil production and reduce their official selling price. Benchmark oil prices plummeted, setting off one of the most volatile oil price periods on record.[147]

In April 2020, OPEC+ countries agreed to continue managing their production levels in a bid to bolster prices against the effects of declines in oil demand stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts led to historically large oil production cuts. As petroleum demand has increased and inventory levels have declined, OPEC+ is now in the process of unwinding production cuts and adding more supply. The current agreement is in effect until the end of 2022, but can be adjusted as market conditions warrant.[148]

Domestic Energy Policy and Consumption. Saudi Arabia consumes the most oil by volume in the Middle East.[149] Oil consumption for electricity generation was estimated in 2018 at an average of 400,000 barrels per day (bpd), down from a record high near 900,000 bpd in 2015.[150] As of 2017, oil and natural gas generated 40% and nearly 60% of the kingdom's electricity, respectively. The use of domestically produced oil and petroleum products for power generation imposes a fiscal tradeoff, with opportunities lost for export revenue in an environment where market trends have strained Saudi state finances in some recent years. Saudi Arabia is the 8th largest producer of natural gas, but does not export any of it.

Plans for electricity generation to meet projected consumption growth reflect an intent to increase the role of natural gas, renewables, and, possibly, nuclear power. The National Renewable Energy Program's current targets call for the kingdom to develop 27.3 gigawatts (GW) of renewable energy generation capacity by 2024 and 58.7 GW by 2030. Thirty percent of the target is to be met through tendered projects managed by the Renewable Energy Project Development Office of the *Vision 2030* initiative, with Public Investment Fund partnerships with international investors making up the balance.[151]

Saudi oil consumption has declined since 2015, partly because of government-imposed domestic price increases to curb demand.[152] Prior to increases on prices of subsidized domestic oil products, some reports warned that the volume of oil consumed in Saudi Arabia could exceed oil exports by 2030 if domestic energy consumption patterns did not change.[153] In July 2021, the IMF reported that "investments in renewable energy are expected to reach $50 billion by 2023 and meet 49 percent of domestically needed electricity in 2030 (0.2 percent in 2019)."[154]

Saudi Aramco IPO. Saudi officials delayed plans for a global public offering of shares in Saudi Aramco but proceeded with a domestic offering in December 2019.[155] Corresponding proceeds of the offering netted the PIF more than $29 billion, less than previous possible estimates of $100

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

[148] Rania Gamal, Olesya Astakhova, and Ahmad Ghaddar, "OPEC+ agrees oil supply boost after UAE, Saudi reach compromise" Reuters, July 19, 2021.

[149] "Oil: Consumption – Tonnes" in BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021.

[150] U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Saudi Arabia used less crude oil for power generation in 2018," June 3, 2019.

[151] *Middle East Economic Digest*, "Saudi Arabia resets renewable energy goals," January 22, 2019.

[152] BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021; and, IMF Country Report No. 21/149, July 8, 2021.

[153] Glada Lahn and Paul Stevens, *Burning Oil to Keep Cool: The Hidden Energy Crisis in Saudi Arabia*, Chatham House (UK), December 2011; and, John Sfakianakis, "Saudi Arabia's Essential Oil," *Foreign Affairs*, January 8, 2014.

[154] IMF Country Report No. 21/149, July 8, 2021.

[155] Matthew Campbell and Glen Carey, "Aramco's Stalled IPO Tarnishes Saudi Prince's Grand Vision," Bloomberg, August 23, 2018; Arash Massoudi, Anjli Raval, and Simeon Kerr, "Saudi Aramco abandons international roadshow for IPO," *Financial Times* (UK), November 18, 2019.

billion.[156] The PIF continues to invest the proceeds to support Saudi economic transformation initiatives, and the Crown Prince has indicated that a further share offering is contemplated in the future.[157] Market analysts vigorously debated the potential value of the share offering prior to its announcement, with Saudi officials reportedly hoping for a valuation of $2 trillion and share offering plans suggesting a valuation of $1.6 trillion to $1.7 trillion.[158] In connection with the offering, Saudi Aramco pledged to deliver a $75 billion annual dividend to investors, most of which accrues to the Saudi government as the company's main shareholder. Saudi Aramco continues to pay income tax and royalties to the Saudi government as well. Saudi Aramco has borrowed funds to meet its dividend requirements thus far, and has taken some cost-cutting measures.[159] The company's profits recovered in 2021 as global oil prices rebounded.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions and Climate Policy. Domestic carbon dioxide emissions in Saudi Arabia increased rapidly from the 1960s onward as the kingdom used proceeds from oil exports to develop its economy and raise the standard of living of its population, which grew from 4 million in 1960 to more than 30 million in 2019 (including foreign nationals). Saudi domestic emissions have declined since 2016.[160] Saudi Arabia's net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per capita are among the highest in the world, at about 19 metric tons per capita (t/c, compared with the United States at 18 t/c and the world average at 6.5 t/c).[161]

Global consumption of Saudi oil contributes to global carbon dioxide emissions. Saudi representatives have taken positions in international climate policy negotiations that appear to reflect the kingdom's preferences and prerogatives as a major producer, exporter, and consumer of fossil fuels and as a recently developed, if relatively wealthy, country. The kingdom's representatives argue that the interests and needs of developing countries should be given more consideration when it comes to reductions in fossil fuel-derived carbon emissions and financial transfers to meet agreed diversification targets.[162]

Saudi representatives suggest that major carbon consumers, particularly legacy consumers in developed industrialized economies, should bear more of the burden for emissions reductions and energy transition financing than developing countries or more recently developed countries. In this context, officials have also taken strong positions in international climate change negotiations to seek compensation for "Loss and Damage" from policies of other countries that might reduce demand for fossil fuels, as well as compensation for damages due to the effects of climate change. (The United States limits negotiations on this topic).

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[156] Summer Said, "Potential Saudi Aramco IPO Wouldn't Include Oil Reserves," *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2016; Alan Livsey, "Lex in depth: The $2tn Saudi Aramco question," *Financial Times* (UK), April 3, 2017; Simeon Kerr and Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Aramco IPO sparks fears of loss of cash cow," *Financial Times* (UK), May 10, 2017; and Simeon Kerr, Anjli Raval, and Arash Massoudi, "Saudi Aramco pares back IPO on weak foreign demand," *Financial Times* (UK), November 17, 2019.

[157] Katie McQue, "FEATURE: Plans for second Aramco share sale increase oil price pressure on Saudi Arabia," *S&P Global Platts*, February 16, 2021.

[158] Dinesh Nair, Matthew Martin, and Javier Blas, "Aramco IPO Hangs on Same Old Question: Is It Worth $2 Trillion?" *Bloomberg News*, October 18, 2019.

[159] Summer Said and Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Aramco Borrows Again to Fund Dividend Pledge Despite Oil Recovery," *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2021.

[160] See Box 4 in IMF Country Report No. 21/149, July 8, 2021, p. 25.

[161] ClimateWatch, Historical GHG Emissions, available at: https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions?calculation=PER_CAPITA&end_year=2018&regions=SAU%2CUSA&sectors=total-including-lucf&start_year=1990.

[162] Leo Hickman, "The Carbon Brief Interview: Saudi Arabia's Ayman Shasly," CarbonBrief, December 12, 2018.

In June 2021, U.S. Climate Envoy John Kerry visited Saudi Arabia and met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss climate change and related issues. The meeting marked the first senior Biden Administration official meeting with the Crown Prince. A joint statement following the visit said both countries "affirm the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and taking adaptation actions during the 2020s to avoid the worst consequences of climate change."[163] Saudi officials highlighted the kingdom's plans under the Saudi Green Initiative to generate half of national energy needs from renewable sources by 2030 and to invest in so-called clean hydrocarbon technologies.[164] Still, Saudi Arabia's influence on GHG is largely by producing and exporting petroleum to be combusted elsewhere, and not its emissions within its borders. The kingdom used its presidency of the G20 during 2020 to promote the concept of a circular carbon economy where carbon dioxide reductions, reuse, recycling, and removal would be pursued.[165]

A rapid global transition away from use of petroleum-derived fuels would likely directly challenge the kingdom's fiscal stability and disrupt its society and political economy. Current Saudi officials view this prospect as highly unlikely and have signaled the kingdom also will continue to invest in its oil and gas production infrastructure to meet expected global demand over coming decades.[166]

Potential U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Cooperation

Saudi Nuclear Plans

In July 2017, the Saudi cabinet approved a National Project for Atomic Energy, including plans to build large and small nuclear reactors for electricity production and seawater desalination. The decision comes amid a larger effort to diversify the economy and expand renewable energy use. Originally, Saudi officials at the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KA CARE) stated that the kingdom might seek to develop as many as 16 nuclear power reactors by 2040 in order to reduce the domestic consumption of oil and natural gas for electricity production.[167] The Saudi Ministry of Energy, Industry, and Mineral Resources and KA CARE envisioned these reactors generating up to 17.6 GW of nuclear energy, which would have provided 15-20% of Saudi Arabia's projected electricity needs.

Those plans were subsequently scaled back, and Saudi leaders are now considering plans for the construction of two nuclear power reactors, for a total capacity between 2 GW and 3.2 GW. Original plans called for contracts to be signed for reactor construction in 2018, for delivery by 2027.[168] This schedule was then delayed to 2020, with no decisions announced to date. Firms in Russia, the United States, France, China, and South Korea reportedly remain under consideration for the construction partnership. Project management, financial advisory services, and site survey and safety contracts have been issued, with a site south of the Saudi-Qatari border selected as the

[163] Office of the U.S. State Department Spokesperson, U.S.-Saudi Arabia Joint Statement Addressing the Climate Challenge, June 16, 2021.

[164] See https://www.saudigreeninitiative.org/.

[165] See G20 Energy Ministerial Meeting Communique, September 28, 2020; and, https://www.cceguide.org/guide/.

[166] Sam Meredith, "Russia and Saudi Arabia reject calls to end oil and gas spending, call IEA's net-zero plan 'unrealistic'," CNBC, June 4 2021.

[167] KA CARE 2011 statement cited in World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power in Saudi Arabia," October 2017.

[168] Reuters, "Saudi Arabia aims to prequalify firms by April or May for first nuclear plant," January 15, 2018.

proposed location for the kingdom's first reactor.[169] A separate process with South Korean partners to study the use of relatively small SMART reactors to generate electricity in remote areas also is underway.

Saudi Arabia has entered into a range of agreements since 2015 concerning possible civil nuclear cooperation with several countries (**Table 2**).

Saudi nuclear facilities would be subject to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards under the terms of the country's comprehensive safeguards agreement, which has been in force since 2009. Such safeguards present a significant hurdle to the development of nuclear weapons. The IAEA completed an Integrated Nuclear Infrastructure Review (INIR) in Saudi Arabia at the kingdom's invitation in July 2018.[170] Saudi Arabia has not agreed to an Additional Protocol to its safeguards agreement. The country has a Small Quantities Protocol (SQP) to its safeguards agreement, which suspends certain verification provisions for states with comprehensive safeguards agreements and small quantities of nuclear materials. The agency's Board of Governors in 2005 approved changes to the SQP designed to increase verification obligations and Saudi Arabia has not accepted the modified text. Saudi Arabia would need to rescind its SQP to build nuclear reactors.

Table 2. Select Nuclear Cooperation Developments Involving Saudi Arabia

March 2015	Argentine-Saudi joint nuclear R&D venture agreed. Saudi-South Korean mutual nuclear cooperation agreements signed, including an MOU on building two small reactors for Saudi water desalination.
June 2015	KA CARE officials sign a nuclear energy cooperation agreement with Russia's Rosatom. Agreements signed with France on cooperation, including EPR reactor feasibility studies.
January 2016	Saudi Arabia and China memorandum of understanding signed regarding cooperation in the possible future construction of a high-temperature gas-cooled reactor (HTGR) in the kingdom.
October 2016	Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan sign a nuclear cooperation agreement focused on nuclear fuel.
March 2017	Agreement signed for Chinese-Saudi feasibility study of HTGR construction in Saudi Arabia.
March-August 2017	KA CARE officials visit China to begin HTGR study implementation planning. China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) and the Saudi Geological Survey sign agreements on uranium exploration cooperation.
December 2017	Russia's Rosatom and KA CARE sign implementing agreement related to small and medium reactors, personnel and fuel management.
March 2019	Saudi trainees begin uranium exploration and mining training in Jordan.
September 2019	KA CARE and South Korean officials sign MoU on comprehensive cooperation in nuclear research and development, with emphasis on SMART Reactor design and construction.

Source: Official statements and media reports.

U.S. Civil Nuclear Cooperation with Saudi Arabia

In 2008, the United States under the George W. Bush Administration and Saudi Arabia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which stated the intention to cooperate on a variety of nuclear activities in the fields of medicine, industry, and electricity production. Previous U.S.

[169] Informa PLC (UK), "Saudi Arabia receives bids for nuclear power project advisory role," July 28, 2021.

[170] IAEA, "IAEA Reviews Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Power Infrastructure Development," 35/2018, July 31, 2018.

Administrations had explored a civil nuclear energy agreement with Saudi Arabia but had not finalized an agreement.

In 2017, the Trump Administration expedited consideration of required regulatory approvals for U.S. firms to provide marketing information to Saudi officials, and U.S. companies have provided proposals to Saudi authorities in relation to the planned tender for nuclear reactor construction. In September 2018, Secretary of Energy Rick Perry and Minister of Energy, Industry, and Mineral Resources Khalid al Falih met in Washington, DC, and discussed, inter alia, "the potential for U.S.-Saudi civil nuclear engagement and new technologies such as Small Modular Reactors."[171]

In September 2019, Secretary Perry wrote to then-Minister Al Falih addressing requirements for a nuclear cooperation agreements under Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, as amended (AEA, 22 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.), and stating that, "The terms of the 123 Agreement must also contain a commitment by the kingdom to forgo any enrichment and reprocessing for the term of the agreement."[172] So-called 123 Agreements are required for significant nuclear cooperation, such as the transfer of certain U.S.-origin nuclear material subject to licensing for commercial, medical, and industrial purposes; the export of reactors and critical reactor components; and the export of other commodities under Nuclear Regulatory Commission export licensing authority. A "123 agreement" is required for any covered nuclear exports but appears to be unnecessary for U.S. companies to conclude contracts for nuclear reactors. In September 2019, Deputy Secretary of Energy Dan Brouillette said, "we're going to pursue a 123 agreement" with Saudi Arabia.

An April 2020 Government Accountability Office investigation concluded that U.S.-Saudi negotiations were "stalled over nonproliferation conditions" and recommended that the State Department and Energy Department "commit to regularly scheduled, substantive briefings for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on all initiatives and negotiations related to nuclear cooperation in order to enhance transparency and establish greater confidence with Congress on nuclear cooperation matters."[173] As of July 2021, the recommendation remained open, pending input from the new Administration.

The Biden Administration has not announced any change to U.S. views on the requirements for U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation under a 123 agreement. In January 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in his confirmation hearing that "We want to make sure that to the best of our ability all of our partners and allies are living up to their obligations under various nonproliferation and arms control agreements and, certainly, in the case of Saudi Arabia that is something we will want to look at."[174]

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[171] U.S. Department of Energy, "Secretary Perry Meets with Khalid Al-Falih, Minister of Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," September 10, 2018.

[172] Ari Natter, "U.S. Says Saudis Must Forgo Enrichment for Nuclear Sharing Deal," Bloomberg, September 18, 2019. Trump Administration officials had previous indicated they were seeking such commitments in discussions with Saudi authorities. In May 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in Senate testimony, "we want a gold-standard Section 123 Agreement from them, which would not permit them to enrich." Secretary of Energy Rick Perry also told a House committee that if Saudi Arabia does not reach an agreement with the United States, "the message will be clear to the rest of the world that the kingdom is not as concerned about being leaders when it comes to nonproliferation in the Middle East."

[173] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Cooperation: Progress Is Stalled over Nonproliferation Conditions and Agency Management of Negotiations Is Unclear*, GAO-20-343, April 3, 2020.

[174] Antony Blinken, Secretary of State-designate, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 19, 2021.

Congressional Views, Legislation, and Administration Perspectives

It remains to be seen whether terms requiring Saudi Arabia to forgo fuel cycle technologies will be acceptable to the kingdom. Congress could debate a U.S.-Saudi 123 agreement within prescribed timelines or enact legislation to approve an agreement notwithstanding the AEA congressional review requirements.[175] An agreement meeting AEA requirements would take effect after the congressional review period unless a resolution blocking it were enacted.

Some Members of Congress have criticized the potential for U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation in the absence of a firm Saudi commitment to forgo uranium enrichment and fuel reprocessing technologies. Members considered resolutions and bills in the 115th Congress that would have addressed potential Saudi enrichment and reprocessing or have amended the procedures for consideration of 123 agreements to require congressional approval of any agreement not containing, inter alia, commitments by cooperating countries to forgo enrichment and reprocessing (H.R. 5357 and S.Res. 541).

In the 116th Congress, Members proposed several bills and resolutions to address the subject of possible U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation, Saudi Arabia's nuclear energy program, and related proliferations concerns (e.g., S. 612, S. 2338, S.Con.Res. 2, H.Con.Res. 23, H.R. 1471, and, H.R. 1541). As noted above, the FY2020 and FY2021 foreign operations appropriations acts placed restrictions on the use of export promotion funds related to nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia (see "U.S. Foreign Assistance to Saudi Arabia" above).

Some Trump Administration officials and nuclear industry advocates have warned that Saudi Arabia may pursue nuclear cooperation with other countries, including Russia or China, if the United States insists on including enrichment and reprocessing commitments in a bilateral agreement.[176]

Saudi Views on Fuel Cycle Technologies

Analysts have examined Saudi nuclear plans and proposals for decades in light of the kingdom's economic profile, energy resources, and security dilemmas. Saudi state policy maintains that the kingdom's nuclear energy pursuits are limited to peaceful purposes, but senior officials, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, also have stated that if Iran pursues or obtains a nuclear weapon, then the kingdom also would work to do so. In March 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said, "Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible."[177]

The 2008 U.S.-Saudi MOU on nuclear cooperation, which is a statement of intent and is not legally binding, described the Saudi government's intent "to rely on existing international markets for nuclear fuel services as an alternative to the pursuit of enrichment and reprocessing." Saudi Arabian officials have not publicly stated that they will reject prohibitions on uranium enrichment and fuel reprocessing if such prohibitions are required to enter into a bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States. However, Saudi officials also have not forsworn

[175] Such legislation has been proposed in the past; bills introduced in the House and Senate in 2010 would have approved the 123 agreement between the United States and Australia. See CRS Report R41312, *U.S.-Australia Civilian Nuclear Cooperation: Issues for Congress*, by Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Bruce Vaughn.

[176] Jennifer A. Dlouhy, Ari Natter, and Jennifer Jacobs, "CEOs Ask Trump to Help Them Sell Nuclear Power Plants Abroad," Bloomberg News, February 12, 2019; and, Testimony of Secretary of Energy Rick Perry before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, March 28, 2019.

[177] Reuters, "Saudi crown prince says will develop nuclear bomb if Iran does: CBS TV," March 15, 2018.

enrichment or reprocessing and have stated their intent to use and develop domestic resources and capabilities to support their nuclear program.

Saudi official statements since late 2017 have implied that the country seeks, at a minimum, to preserve the option to pursue uranium enrichment. KA CARE officials have said that the Saudi program may use indigenous uranium resources for fuel,[178] and, in December 2017, then-Energy Minister Khalid al Falih said, "We intend to localize the entire value chain with nuclear energy.... Whatever we do is going to be under strict compliance with international agreements. But we will not deprive ourselves of accessing our natural resources and localizing an industry that we intend to be with us for the long term."[179] In February 2018, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir said, "we want to have the same rights as other countries."[180]

Energy Minister Prince Abd al Aziz bin Salman, the king's son, said in September 2019 that the kingdom is proceeding with plans to pursue nuclear fuel cycle technology "cautiously."[181] Prince Abd al Aziz further said, "We want to make sure that even if we scale up [nuclear power], we scale up to the notion that we want to go to the full cycle, to producing the uranium, enriching the uranium, using the uranium."[182]

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.[183] 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.[184] Other press reporting described a separate possible undeclared site.[185]

Saudi Foreign Policy

King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman have actively pursued Saudi interests across the Middle East since 2015, challenging Iran, reopening dialogue with Iraq, seeking to isolate Qatar, and fighting an ongoing war in Yemen. This Saudi activism in regional affairs has created new questions for successive Administrations and Congress to consider, including with regard to defense cooperation, U.S. security commitments, and the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. Close U.S.-Saudi security cooperation continues in parallel with efforts to overcome U.S.-Saudi differences of opinion on some regional security threats. The Biden Administration has welcomed Saudi decisions to reengage with neighboring Qatar and Iraq and to engage in

[178] Ibid.

[179] Rania El Gamal and Katie Paul, "Saudi Arabia hopes to start nuclear pact talks with U.S. in weeks – minister," Reuters, December 20, 2017.

[180] CNBC, Interview with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir, Munich, Germany, February 19, 2018.

[181] Rania El Gamal and Alexander Cornwell, "Saudi Arabia flags plan to enrich uranium as U.S. seeks nuclear pact," Reuters, September 9, 2019.

[182] Herman Wang and Andrea Jennetta, "Saudi Arabia wants option to enrich uranium, says new energy minister," *Platts Nucleonics Week*, September 12, 2019.

[183] 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.

[184] 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.

[185] 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.

dialogue with Iran and parties to the Yemen conflict in pursuit of a diplomatic solution to the conflict there.

Iran, Iraq, and the Levant

Iran

Saudi policies toward Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon continue to reflect the kingdom's overarching concerns about Iran and Iran's ties to state and non-state actors in these countries. Statements by Saudi leaders suggest that they see Iran's policies as part of an expansionist, sectarian agenda aimed at empowering Shia Muslims in the Middle East at the expense of Sunnis.[186] Iranian leaders attribute similarly sectarian motives to their Saudi counterparts and remain critical of Saudi cooperation with the United States.[187] 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.[188]

The Saudi government has engaged Iranian counterparts in four rounds "exploratory talks" during 2021 about better managing their disagreements, but officials from the two countries have not announced any formal results or new accords.[189] In August 2021, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud described Iran as "emboldened" and criticized continuing Iranian support to armed groups and attacks on regional shipping.[190] In September, he said, "We hope these talks will resolve the issues stuck between the two countries and we are seeking to attain it."[191]

Reflecting continuing Saudi concerns about Iran's nuclear activities, the Foreign Minister has said, "We certainly support a deal with Iran, as long as that deal ensures that Iran will not now or ever gain access to nuclear weapons technology." Summarizing Saudi Arabia's current approach, he stated:

> It's not that we think Iran should forever be a pariah. ... We would very much welcome Iran as a productive part of the region; it could actually be a significant contributor to regional stability and economic prosperity. But that would require engaging in the region as a state actor in a normal way … not supporting militias, not sending weapons to armed groups and, most importantly, giving up a nuclear program which might be used … to develop nuclear weapons.[192]

Previously, the kingdom scrutinized but then accepted the 2015 Iran-P5+1 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), later calling for its rigorous enforcement and reconsideration. In May 2018, the kingdom welcomed President Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the

[186] "Saudi FM to Asharq Al-Awsat: We Reject Iran's Sectarian Strife, Support for Terrorism," July 11, 2018.

[187] Reuters, "Iran's leader accuses Saudis of 'treason' against Muslims," January 16, 2018.

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

[189] Ghaida Ghantous, "Saudi Arabia wants to see "verifiable deeds" from talks with Iran, says official," Reuters, May 7, 2021; AFP, "Saudi foreign minister 'hopeful' over exploratory Iran talks," May 19, 2021; and, Reema Alothman and Matthew Martin "Saudi Arabia Says Talks With Iran Are at 'Exploratory Stage'" *Bloomberg News*, October 3, 2021.

[190] Arab News, "'Emboldened' Iran 'extremely active' in region, says Saudi foreign minister," August 4, 2021.

[191] Reema Alothman and Matthew Martin "Saudi Arabia Says Talks With Iran Are at 'Exploratory Stage'" *Bloomberg News*, October 3, 2021.

[192] Arab News, "'Emboldened' Iran 'extremely active' in region, says Saudi foreign minister," August 4, 2021.

JCPOA and announced its support for the re-imposition of economic sanctions on Iran and efforts to curtail Iranian support to the Syrian government and various non-state actors in the region.[193]

Saudi officials have not expressed opposition to renewed U.S. talks with Iran over Iran's nuclear program, but stated that they "want to make sure at a minimum that any financial resources made available to Iran via the nuclear deal are not used ... to destabilize the region."[194] Saudi Arabia seeks follow-on negotiations aimed at Iranian missile programs and Iran's support for regional armed groups.

Iraq

In December 2015, Saudi officials reopened the kingdom's diplomatic offices in Iraq after a 25-year absence that began after Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The reopening marked a milestone in a relative normalization of Saudi-Iraqi relations that occurred after the 2014 change in Iraqi leadership from the government of former prime minister Nouri al Maliki (who had close ties to Iran) to that of Hayder al Abadi (who positioned Iraq more neutrally among its neighbors). Successive U.S. Administrations have praised exchanges of official visits between senior Saudis and Iraqis as important in strengthening Saudi and Gulf Arab ties with Iraq's government.

High-level Saudi-Iraqi contacts continued under the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abd al Mahdi, including in the wake of 2019 attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure that reportedly were carried out from Iraqi territory. Exchanges have continued under the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi, who visited the kingdom in March 2021 to sign a series of bilateral agreements and receive Saudi investment pledges. According to U.S. officials, Prime Minister al Kadhimi "has helped facilitate direct talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Baghdad,"[195] and in August 2021, he hosted Saudi, Iranian, and regional leaders at a summit in Baghdad.

Syria and Lebanon

Saudi authorities back the U.N. Security Council's call for a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Syria in accordance with Resolution 2254.[196] In June 2021, the kingdom reiterated its support for a peaceful solution and called for an end to "Iranian interference" in Syria. According to a news report citing an unnamed Saudi official, a Saudi delegation travelled to Syria in May 2021 to discuss reopening the Saudi embassy there.[197] Saudi Arabia has made efforts in recent years to consolidate and align the views of Syrian opposition actors and armed groups, and made some financial contributions to U.S.-implemented stabilization programs following the Trump Administration's 2018 decision to reduce some U.S. spending on stabilization efforts in areas of Syria liberated from the Islamic State.

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[193] Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington, DC, Statement on the United States Withdrawal from the JCPOA, May 8, 2018.

[194] Ghaida Ghantous, "Saudi official: Expanded talks should follow any Iran nuclear deal," Reuters, April 14, 2021.

[195] U.S. Department of State, "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official Previewing the Visit of Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi of the Republic of Iraq," July 26, 2021.

[196] U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254, adopted in 2015, endorsed a "road map" for a political settlement in Syria, including the drafting of a new constitution and the administration of U.N.-supervised elections.

[197] Martin Chulov, "Meeting between Saudi and Syrian intelligence chiefs hints at détente," *Guardian* (UK), May 4, 2021.

Saudi Arabia hosted U.S. and French officials in July 2021 to discuss common approaches to assisting Lebanon in overcoming its overlapping financial and political crises. Saudi Arabia historically has acted as a patron of Lebanese Sunni parties and leaders, and has opposed the influence of Iran-backed groups in Lebanon. Ties between the kingdom and some Lebanese figures appear to have become strained in recent years, a trend reflected in then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri's 2017 forced resignation in Riyadh and subsequent decisions that have limited formerly robust Saudi economic engagement in Lebanon.[198]

Conflict in Yemen[199]

Conflict Status

In general, Saudi officials have approached the Houthis (see textbox below) as a hostile minority movement that many other Yemenis oppose and that continues to benefit from Iranian support to the detriment of the kingdom's security.[200] Nevertheless, the Houthis dominate many areas of northern Yemen and control the capital, Sana'a. At present, prospects for a military reversal of their control over northern Yemen appear limited. In August 2021, Hans Grundberg of Sweden succeeded Martin Griffiths of the United Kingdom as the U.N. Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Yemen. President Biden has said that the conflict in Yemen "has to end" and in February 2021 appointed Ambassador Timothy Lenderking as U.S. Special Envoy to Yemen, who continues to support U.N.-led peace-making efforts through shuttle diplomacy.

With U.S. support, in late March 2021, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan proposed a new peace initiative aimed at ending Saudi involvement in the Yemen conflict. The Saudi Foreign Minister proposed that, if the Houthis agree to a nationwide ceasefire under U.N. supervision, Saudi Arabia would: (1) adhere to a U.N.-supervised ceasefire, (2) reopen Sana'a International Airport to direct flights, (3) allow fuel into Hudaydah port with revenues deposited in a joint Houthi-ROYG bank account, and (4) restart political negotiations for a permanent settlement to the conflict. The Houthis almost immediately dismissed the Saudi proposal as "nothing new" and reiterated their demands for the Saudis unilaterally to lift their blockade of Sana'a airport and Hudaydah port.[201] They continue to demand that the coalition agree to lift restrictions on access to airports and ports in northern Yemen prior to any ceasefire agreement.[202]

Without regard for U.S. and international efforts to advance ceasefire talks, Houthi fighters also are attempting to seize Marib, the last city in northern Yemen held by Hadi government-aligned forces.[203] The Saudi-led coalition is assisting Yemeni partner forces in resisting the Houthi

[198] See Anne Barnard and Maria Abi-Habib, "Why Saad Hariri Had That Strange Sojourn in Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, December 24, 2017; David Kenner, "Why Saudi Arabia can't win in Lebanon," Institute of Current World Affairs, June 16, 2020; and, Julie Kebbi, "Lebanon–Saudi Arabia: The story of a family rupture," *L'Orient-Le Jour* (Lebanon), May 17, 2021.

[199] For more information, see CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

[200] Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel Al Jubeir, Remarks at Council on Foreign Relations, September 26, 2018; and, Arab News, "'Emboldened' Iran 'extremely active' in region, says Saudi foreign minister," August 4, 2021.

[201] Reuters, "Houthis say nothing new in Saudi peace offer, will keep talking," March 22, 2021.

[202] On August 8, Oman-based Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam said via Twitter, "There is no use in having any dialogue before airports and ports are opened as a humanitarian necessity and priority." Reuters, "Top Houthi negotiator says no point in meeting new U.N. envoy now," August 8, 2021.

[203] Siobhán O'Grady and Ali Al-Mujahed, "Battle for the badlands," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2021; and, Agence France Presse, "Key to conflict: How battle for Marib is crucial to Yemen war," September 28, 2021.

offensive against Marib. In some other areas of Yemen, anti-Houthi forces have made some gains in 2021.

U.S. officials have called for restrictions on fuel imports through Hudaydah port to be "lifted immediately" and for Sanaa airport to be "opened and operational."[204] In August 2021, Special Envoy Lenderking stated the Biden Administration's view that "there should be no preconditions to dialogue on peace. Such preconditions only prolong war and suffering and obstruct the kind of durable peace agreement that will bring true relief to Yemenis. The Houthis' single-minded focus on the offensive in Marib has undermined UN efforts to reach a comprehensive ceasefire."[205]

Yemen's Houthi Movement and Saudi Arabia

The *Ansarallah*/Houthi movement is a predominantly Zaydi Shia revivalist political and insurgent movement that formed in the northern province of Sa'da in 2004 under the leadership of members of the Al Houthi family. It originally sought an end to what it viewed as efforts to marginalize Zaydi Shia communities and beliefs, but its goals grew in scope and ambition as it embraced a populist, antiestablishment message following the 2011 uprising in Yemen. Members of its Zaydi Shia base of support are closer in their beliefs to Sunni Muslims than most other Shia, and some Yemeni observers argue that the motives of the Houthi movement are evolving to include new political and social goals that cannot be explained strictly in sectarian terms. Skeptics highlight the movement's ideological roots, its alleged cooperation with Iran, and the slogans prominently displayed on its banners: "God is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory to Islam!"

Saudi air, ground, and border forces fought Houthi militia members in 2009 in a campaign that ejected Houthi fighters who had crossed the Saudi border, but Saudi Arabia failed to defeat the movement or end the potential threat it posed to southern Saudi Arabia and Saudi interests in Yemen. Saudi officials expressed increasing concern about developments in Yemen over the course of 2014, as the Saudi- and GCC-backed transition process there stalled. An alliance between the Houthis and forces loyal to the now deceased former president Ali Abdullah Saleh took control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, and, in September 2014, they continued military operations in contravention of an agreed power-sharing arrangement with the interim government led by President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Houthi forces' unwillingness to withdraw from the capital and unilateral moves by Houthi leaders and Saleh supporters to circumvent Hadi's authority precipitated a crisis that culminated in the outbreak of renewed conflict and Hadi's resignation and de facto house arrest in January 2015. Houthi leaders announced a new governance plan in February 2015 and in March launched an offensive against pro-Hadi forces in central and southern Yemen.

In response, the Saudi Foreign Minister decried what the kingdom considered a "serious escalation… carried out by an Al Houthi militia coup against constitutional legitimacy."[206] Days later, as Houthi forces advanced on the southern city of Aden, Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition launched air strikes in response to a specific request from President Hadi.[207] Saudi Arabia has led a military coalition of mostly Arab states since March 2015 in efforts to reinstate the Hadi government.[208]

The development and increased sophistication of Houthi military capabilities since 2014 is a source of significant concern to Saudi Arabia, especially the group's demonstrated ability to conduct cross-border missile attacks against targets inside the kingdom.[209] U.S. officials express concern not only about Houthi threats to Saudi Arabia, but also about the potential for ties between the Houthi movement, Iran, and Iranian-supported groups such as Hezbollah to develop to an extent that Houthi forces could pose a durable, Iranian-linked threat in the southern Arabian Peninsula and Red Sea region.

[204] U.S. Department of State, Briefing on Yemen with Timothy Lenderking, U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen; and Sarah Charles, USAID Assistant Administrator for Humanitarian Assistance, August 9, 2021.

[205] Ibid.

[206] Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Foreign Affairs Stresses Depth of Historical and Strong Relations Between Saudi Arabia and Britain, March 24, 2015.

[207] Text of Hadi request letter in "GCC statement: Gulf countries respond to Yemen developments," *The National* (UAE), March 26, 2015.

[208] See CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

[209] For a detailed discussion, see Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center, *Sentinel*, Volume 11, Issue 8, September 2018.

Civilian Casualties, Houthi Cross-border Attacks, and Humanitarian Concerns

As the conflict and Saudi-led coalition's military campaign have unfolded, reports of civilian casualties and displacement; food, medicine, and water shortages; advances by AQAP forces; Islamic State attacks; and persistence by the Houthis and their allies fueled international criticism of Saudi policy. Civilian casualties were highest in 2015, but continue to occur in connection with coalition airstrikes and indiscriminate fire by Houthi forces. Saudi officials have acknowledged some shortcomings in their operations, while placing most of the blame for reported civilian deaths and for difficult humanitarian conditions on the activities of and threats posed by their adversaries. Independent observers cite public reporting to attribute most civilian casualties to coalition airstrikes, particularly strikes that occurred in 2015.[210]

The difficulty of accessing certain areas of Yemen has made it hard for governments and aid agencies to count the war's casualties. As of June 2020, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights had documented at least 7,825 civilians killed and 12,416 civilians injured as a direct result of armed conflict since March 2015.[211] Reports issued by the U.N. Human Rights Council-organized Group of International and Regional Eminent Experts on Yemen have described potential violations of international law by Houthi forces, their allies, and the Saudi-led coalition.[212]

In August 2021, USAID Assistant Administrator for Humanitarian Assistance Sarah Charles described the situation in Yemen as "one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world" adding that, "Two-thirds of the country needs humanitarian assistance. That's more than 20 million Yemenis who struggle every day to survive without basic necessities including more than 2 million young children facing deadly malnutrition this year alone."[213] U.N. and U.S. officials describe steps taken both by the Houthis and by the Yemeni government and its coalition partners that cause humanitarian harm and impede flows of commercial and humanitarian goods.[214] In September 2021, Acting U.S. Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Richard Mills said, "the violence in Yemen must stop. A broad and inclusive political process must resume, and we need to alleviate the humanitarian crisis."[215]

The United Nations 2021 humanitarian appeal for Yemen seeks more than $3.85 billion in international donor support. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres called the outcome of a

[210] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), "Over 100,000 Reported Killed in Yemen War," October 31, 2019. Data collected by the U.S. and European-funded ACLED estimates that targeted airstrikes and drone attacks reportedly killed 8,478 civilians in Yemen from March 2015 to September 10, 2021, out of more than 14,280 civilians reported killed overall. Data available at: https://www.acleddata.com.

[211] U.N. Document A/HRC/45/6, Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014, September 28, 2020. According to the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as of June 2018, coalition airstrikes had killed at least 4,300 civilians. See Annex 4, U.N. Document A/HRC/39/43, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights containing the findings of the Group of Independent Eminent International and Regional Experts, August 17, 2018.

[212] U.N. Document A/HRC/45/6, Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014, September 28, 2020; and U.N. Document A/HRC/48/20, Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014, September 13, 2021.

[213] U.S. Department of State, Briefing on Yemen with Timothy Lenderking, U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen; and Sarah Charles, USAID Assistant Administrator for Humanitarian Assistance, August 9, 2021.

[214] Briefing by U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock to the U.N. Security Council, June 15, 2021; and, U.S. Department of State, Briefing on Yemen with Timothy Lenderking, U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen; and Sarah Charles, USAID Assistant Administrator for Humanitarian Assistance, August 9, 2021.

[215] U.N. Document S/PV.8854, U.N. Security Council Meeting, September 10, 2021.

March 2021 pledging conference for Yemen "disappointing" after donors pledged $1.7 billion. Saudi Arabia pledged $430 million.

Successive U.S. Administrations have expressed varying degrees of criticism of some coalition and Houthi actions while emphasizing a consistent view that strictly military solutions to the Yemen conflict are not possible. Over time, Saudi and coalition officials have taken some steps to improve humanitarian access and implement more effective military targeting, amid rising concern among some Members of Congress and consideration of several legislative proposals to condition, reduce, or eliminate related U.S. assistance.[216] Humanitarian actors continue to call for additional aid and fewer restrictions on their operations by all parties, citing the needs of Yemeni civilians.

Qatar and Intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Tensions

Saudi-Qatari disputes have flared periodically over the last 20-plus years and soured significantly in 2017.[217] Saudi Arabia has taken issue with the independent foreign policies pursued by Qatar's leaders, which the kingdom views as pro-Islamist, and has opposed Qatar's ties to Iran, with which Qatar shares lucrative natural gas reserves. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have both sought to shape the outcome of regional uprisings and conflicts since 2011, in some cases using their own military forces, such as in Libya and Yemen, and, in other cases, such as Syria, supporting different non-state armed groups.

In January 2021, Saudi Arabia lifted closures of its land and sea borders and airspace with Qatar along with diplomatic isolation measures that it had imposed in 2017.[218] Mirroring the resolution of a previous confrontation in 2014,[219] an agreement reached between the parties provides for an end to the isolation measures in exchange for an end to Qatar's pursuit of legal damages and new understandings about state-backed media coverage. Saudi and Qatari leaders have met since reaching the agreement, but deeper differences have not been fully resolved.[220]

At the height of the dispute, Saudi Arabia accused Qatar's government of supporting terrorism, interfering in the internal affairs of fellow Arab states, and facilitating Iranian efforts to destabilize Saudi Arabia and its neighbors.[221] Qatar rejected the charges and described Saudi Arabia as seeking to violate Qatari sovereignty and impose its will on the country's leaders and

[216] See also CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2020*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Sarah R. Collins.

[217] For background, see Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar: The Gulf's Problem Child," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 5, 2017, and, CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[218] On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia abruptly severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, closed the land border between the two countries, closed its air space and waters to Qatari vessels, prohibited Saudi nationals from visiting or transiting Qatar, and gave Qatari nationals 14 days to leave the kingdom. The moves followed a period of escalation in official Saudi-Qatari confrontation marked by mutual recriminations and accusations. A long period of diplomatic and commercial isolation followed.

[219] In March 2014, Saudi-Qatari differences—including over the 2013 military overthrow of an elected Muslim Brotherhood-linked president of Egypt—widened to the point where Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. The ambassadors returned in November 2014 in exchange for mutual pledges not to interfere in each other's affairs.

[220] See Jon Alterman, GCC Rift over Qatar Comes to an End, January 5, 2021.

[221] Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement, June 5, 2017.

population.[222] Qatar rejected some demands presented by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain, but sought to resolve the confrontation through negotiation.

Both sides of the dispute sought to influence the United States to support their position. The United States maintains close defense cooperation, including arms sales, with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar and continues to operate from military bases in both countries. U.S. officials called for reconciliation and offered to facilitate dialogue among the parties, and continue to support dialogue aimed at improving ties among U.S. partners in the Gulf.

Israeli-Palestinian Affairs

For decades, official Saudi statements have been routinely critical of Israeli policies, and some Saudi clerics, including leading official clerics, for years appeared implacably hostile to Israel. Nevertheless, Saudi leaders have outlined parameters of an Israeli-Arab agreement on the Palestinian question that they would accept, and speculation has increased about potential warming in Israeli-Saudi relations based on shared antipathy to the Iranian government's policies, parallel cooperation with the United States, and shared terrorism concerns.[223] This speculation has been amplified by some new, overt contacts that have occurred between Saudis and Israeli government officials, and ecumenical statements from some Saudi officials and state-affiliated Saudi clerics about relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews.[224]

Apart from any potential alignment of views or interests with Israel on some regional threats, Saudi leaders and government officials have historically been vocal advocates for the Palestinians in the context of Israeli-Arab disputes. Saudi Arabia supports the international recognition of a Palestinian state and full Palestinian membership at the United Nations. King Salman has remained committed to the terms of the peace initiative his predecessor (the late King Abdullah) put forward under the auspices of the Arab League in 2002. The initiative calls for normalization of Arab relations with Israel if Israel were to

1. withdraw fully from the territories it occupied in 1967,
2. agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem, and
3. provide for the "[a]chievement of a just solution to the Palestinian Refugee problem in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194."[225]

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[222] Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement, June 5, 2017.

[223] Jonathan Marcus, "Israel and Saudi Arabia: The relationship emerging into the open," BBC News, April 3, 2018; Yoel Guzansky and Daniel B. Shapiro, "Friends With Caveats: Will Israel and the Gulf States Form a United Front Against Iran?" *Foreign Affairs*, August 5, 2019. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speculated in January 2016 that "Saudi Arabia recognizes that Israel is an ally rather than an enemy because of the two [principal] threats that threaten them, Iran and Daesh [the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State]." i24 News, "Netanyahu urges EU to adopt policy of moderate Arab states on Israel," January 22, 2016.

[224] Raphael Ahren, "US-Israeli Christian leader discusses peace process with Saudi crown prince," *Times of Israel*, September 11, 2019; "In first, Saudi envoy in Washington sends Rosh Hashanah greeting to US Jews," *Times of Israel*, October 2, 2019.

[225] Adopted in December 1948, General Assembly Resolution 194 states that "the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible." This resolution is often cited by advocates for the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their former homes in what is now Israel. In April 2013, representatives of the Arab League agreed that land swaps could be an element of a conflict-ending agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. In September 2015, King Salman and

In January 2018, King Salman reiterated the kingdom's "firm position on the Palestinian cause and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital and on continuing efforts to find a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian cause in accordance with relevant international resolutions."[226] In April 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said, "I believe that each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land. But we have to have a peace agreement to assure the stability for everyone and to have normal relations."[227]

In September 2019, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al Jubeir argued that the United States' and Saudi Arabia's views of the conflict are aligned, "in the sense of wanting to bring an end to this conflict that is just, that leads to a two-state solution, that leads to '67 borders, with minor agreed-to adjustments, that basically reflects the Arab peace initiative."[228] Saudi leaders welcomed the Trump Administration's efforts in developing its "Peace to Prosperity" plan, and encouraged the start of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to resolve differences.[229]

Saudi authorities did not reach an agreement for formal recognition of Israel as part of the Trump Administration's Abraham Accords initiative. Rather, Saudi officials continue to condition Saudi normalization with Israel on terms outlined in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Formal recognition of Israel by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain in late 2020 fueled some speculation that some Saudi officials welcomed the UAE and Bahraini moves—given Saudi ties with those countries—as a means of evaluating future Saudi diplomatic options.[230]

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said in December 2020 that Saudi Arabia is "completely open to full normalization with Israel. ... But in order for that to happen and for that to be sustainable, we do need the Palestinians to get their state and we do need to settle that situation." In late 2020, Saudi Arabia granted Israel flyover rights within its airspace to facilitate direct Israeli airline travel to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

In a May 2021 phone call with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, King Salman reportedly condemned what he characterized as "Israeli attacks and measures" in Jerusalem and "Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip." The Saudi Foreign Minister later pledged "the continuation

President Obama "underscored the enduring importance of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, and underlined the necessity of reaching a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement to the conflict based on two states living side-by-side in peace and security." Joint Statement on the Meeting between President Barack Obama and King Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud, September 4, 2015.

[226] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement on Phone Conversation between King Salman and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, January 9, 2018.

[227] Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'" *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018.

[228] Remarks of Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al Jubeir, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, NY, September 24, 2019.

[229] After the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) rejected the U.S. plan, the Saudi cabinet "emphasized the centrality of the Palestinian cause to the Arab and Islamic nation" and stated "the need to adhere to the peace process as a strategic option for the conflict, based on the two-state solution, in accordance with legitimate international resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and adopted international references."

[230] See, e.g., "After UAE and Bahrain deals, is Saudi Arabia softening its stance on Israel?" Reuters, September 15, 2020. In November 2020, some media reports claimed that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu met secretly with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the northwest corner of Saudi Arabia. Felicia Schwartz and Summer Said, "Israel's Netanyahu, Saudi Crown Prince Hold First Known Meeting," *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2020.

of our endeavors to fulfill the aspirations of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state."[231]

Saudi Arabia long provided regular financial support to the Palestinian Authority's budget, and increased its contributions through 2019 as U.S. assistance and Israeli transfers declined.[232] Palestinian Authority data suggests Saudi contributions declined significantly in 2020.[233] Saudi Arabia also provides support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)—which has fluctuated in recent years as UNRWA lost and regained U.S. financial support—and other U.N. entities working with Palestinians.

Saudi relations with Hamas have evolved over time and have grown strained since 2017, amid the deteriorating relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Saudi confrontation with Qatar. In June 2017, Foreign Minister Al Jubeir called on Qatar to end its support to groups like Hamas.[234] In September 2019, Hamas figures complained that Saudi Arabia had arrested its senior representative and a network of more than 60 of its supporters in the kingdom.[235] A Hamas figure was quoted as saying, "The arrests were carried out under American pressure. Saudi Arabia is trying to force Hamas to abandon its resistance against the Israeli occupation."[236] Saudi courts sentenced many of those arrested to varying prison terms in August 2021, with some being acquitted.[237]

Outlook

With Saudi leadership in transition, and the Middle East region beset by turbulence and conflict, the Biden Administration and some Members of Congress may continue to debate how best to navigate this contentious period in U.S.-Saudi relations. Saudi decision makers have changed tactics with regard to some issues of concern to the United States—releasing some human rights advocates, reiterating their peace parameters for Yemen, and quietly engaging Iran—but their decisions may reflect an acceptance of setbacks and limits and a reconsideration of self-interest as much as any embrace of U.S. priorities or values. If past patterns in the bilateral relationship prevail, leaders on both sides may seek to maintain U.S.-Saudi solidarity, while managing points of friction and resisting calls from some parties on both sides for a more fundamental reevaluation of a productive, if imperfect, partnership.

In recent years, U.S. policymakers have engaged with an emerging class of Saudi leaders during a particularly challenging and tumultuous period for the kingdom and its neighbors. Islamic State attacks, leadership transition and consolidation in the kingdom, the collapse of the Saudi-backed transitional government in neighboring Yemen, oil market volatility, Russian military intervention in Syria, and Iranian nuclear policy and regional activism all have created pressure on Saudi leaders and have tested U.S.-Saudi relations. Human rights concerns, especially the murder of

[231] Ismaeel Naar, "King Salman assures Palestinian President Abbas of Saudi Arabia's support," Al Arabiya English, May 21, 2021.

[232] Rami Ayyub, "As Trump team prepares Mideast plan, Palestinians face financial crisis," Reuters, May 1, 2019.

[233] Adnan Abu Amer, "Why has Gulf aid to PA declined in recent years?" Al Monitor, March 11, 2021.

[234] John Irish, "Saudi minister says Qatar must end support for Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood," Reuters, June 6, 2017.

[235] Khaled Abu Toameh, "Hamas: Saudi Arabia arresting our men under U.S. pressure," *Jerusalem Post,* September 12, 2019.

[236] Ibid. Comment attributed to Wasfi Qabaha, reportedly "a senior Hamas representative in the West Bank."

[237] Al Jazeera, "Saudi Arabia sentences dozens of Palestinians, Jordanians," August 9, 2021. A Hamas representative statement said "We were shocked … by the rulings issued by the Saudi judiciary against a large number of Palestinians and Jordanians residing in the kingdom."

Jamal Khashoggi, similarly strained bilateral ties. Saudi Arabia's pursuit of an independent and assertive course on regional security issues and its leaders' ambitious plans to transform the kingdom's economy and fiscal base offer new opportunities for U.S.-Saudi partnership and shared risks.

As described above, Saudi Arabia has close defense and security ties with the United States anchored for decades by long-standing military training programs and supplemented by high-value weapons sales, critical infrastructure security cooperation, and counterterrorism initiatives. While Saudi and U.S. officials have taken steps to maintain and deepen security ties, differences in preferred tactics and methods may continue to complicate bilateral coordination on regional security issues, including on Iran and Yemen. The redeployment of U.S. military personnel, aircraft, and air defense systems to the kingdom since 2019 may suggest a deepening of those ties in the immediate term, even if fundamental questions about the future of the security partnership continue to be debated.

Continued U.S. willingness to arm and train Saudi security forces may reduce potential burdens on U.S. forces if they enable Saudi Arabia to provide for its own defense, but may also more deeply entangle the United States in dilemmas or disputes in cases where U.S.-equipped or -trained Saudi forces are deployed. The deployment and use of U.S. military forces to protect Saudi Arabia may better deter common adversaries and enhance the security of the kingdom, its people, and globally significant infrastructure, but may more directly involve U.S. personnel and assets, increasing potential direct threats to both. An enduring U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia also may rekindle religious and nationalist opposition inside the kingdom and beyond.

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 bipartisan 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 contributed to closer 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 strategic defense ties while more fully embracing economic and cultural partnership at a time when a new generation of Saudi leaders are seeking to transform the kingdom. More specifically, parties on both sides are considering whether differences over human rights, foreign and defense policy, and energy issues will limit the potential for deeper ties. U.S. officials and observers have noted recent liberalization of some Saudi policies that limit women's rights, along with ongoing legal restrictions on the public activities of women's rights advocates. U.S. programs continue to promote increased engagement by U.S. commercial and cultural entities with Saudi counterparts, including Saudi women.

Changes to succession arrangements have elevated Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and raise the prospect that, while still in his 30s, he could succeed his father and potentially remain as monarch for decades. That outcome might eliminate some uncertainty about the consolidation of power among the next generation of Saudi leaders, but consolidated control also could alter the dynamics of U.S.-Saudi cooperation, particularly with regard to Saudi purchases of military equipment and the opportunities available to U.S. defense firms and in other sectors. Saudi Arabia maintains diverse defense supply relationships, and has acquired systems such as armed

unmanned aircraft[238] and, reportedly, new ballistic missiles systems from China.[239] In August 2021, Saudi Arabia and Russia signed a defense cooperation agreement "aimed at developing joint military cooperation between the two countries."[240] As the kingdom repositions itself as a hub for global investment and pursues increased military self-sufficiency and diversified acquisition, U.S. firms may not enjoy the privileged role they once held in an increasingly open Saudi market.

U.S. leaders also may seek to rearticulate and define U.S. interests with regard to Saudi Arabia and determine whether U.S. policy approaches afford the United States sufficient input in and leverage over outcomes in issues involving the kingdom. U.S. ties to the kingdom are uniquely close from Saudi Arabia's perspective and domestically sensitive. No other state enjoys comparably cooperative relations with the Saudi security establishment, and decades of close security, diplomatic, and commercial contacts afford the United States a broad network of interlocutors and a deep well of experience. Nevertheless, it is not certain that the United States can easily use its partnerships with the kingdom and its relationships with individual Saudis to predict or shape developments in Saudi foreign and domestic policy. Past and recent instances of congressional scrutiny or rejection of arms sales have achieved discrete objectives (e.g., conditioning the location of deployment or sensitivity of transferred U.S. defense systems and delaying transfers of precision guided munitions), but there is little evidence that U.S. pressure has fundamentally altered core Saudi domestic or foreign policy approaches.

Overall, long-term U.S. concerns about avoiding instability in the Gulf region and denying influence to geopolitical rivals may remain in tension with U.S. desires to convince or compel the kingdom's evolving leadership to change or act in accordance with U.S. preferences. U.S. decision-makers may applaud steps taken by Saudi leaders to change long-standing practices and policies, but they continue to face uncertainty about the strength and limits of U.S. influence, and about the kingdom's stability and trajectory. Critics of Saudi leadership argue that the United States cannot afford to embrace top-down rule that stifles all dissent both for strategic and moral reasons.[241] Advocates for continued partnership cite the kingdom's potential, its influence, and its recent 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 security cooperation and its engagement on regional economic and diplomatic policy issues. Lawmakers and officials also may seek to 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 Russia and China, and the views of Saudi leaders and citizens about their country's future and its ties with the United States.

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

[239] 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.

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

[241] 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.

Appendix A. Historical Background and Leadership

Overview

The modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the third state established in the Arabian Peninsula since the end of the 18th century based on the hereditary rule of members of the Al Saud family. In the mid-18th century, a local alliance developed between the Al Saud and the members of a puritanical Sunni Islamic religious movement led by a cleric named Mohammed ibn Abd Al Wahhab. Alliances between the Al Saud family and supporters of Abd Al Wahhab (referred to by some as Wahhabis) built two states in the Arabian Peninsula during the next century. Each eventually collapsed under pressure from outside powers and inter- and intra-family rivalries.

During the first quarter of the 20th century, an Al Saud chieftain named Abd al Aziz ibn Abd al Rahman Al Saud (commonly referred to as Ibn Saud) used force to unify much of the Arabian Peninsula under a restored Al Saud state. Ibn Saud's forces overcame numerous tribal rivals with the support of an armed Wahhabi contingent known as the Ikhwan (or brotherhood), and, at times, with the financial and military backing of the British government. By 1932, King Abd al Aziz and his armies had crushed an Ikhwan revolt, consolidated control over most of the Arabian Peninsula, and declared the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Six of Ibn Saud's sons—Kings Saud, Faisal, Khaled, Fahd, Abdullah, and Salman—have succeeded him as rulers of the Saudi kingdom during the subsequent eight decades. This era has been dominated by the development and export of the kingdom's massive oil resources, the resulting socioeconomic transformation of the country, and accompanying religious and cultural debates spurred by rapid change. During this period, Al Saud rulers have managed a complex consensus-based system of governance, balancing the various interests of tribal, religious, regional, political, and economic constituencies.

A series of agreements, statements by successive U.S. Administrations, arms sales, military training arrangements, and military deployments have demonstrated a strong U.S. security commitment to the Saudi monarchy since the 1940s. That security commitment was built on shared economic interests and antipathy to Communism and was tested by regional conflict during the Cold War. It has survived the terrorism-induced strains of the post-Cold War era relatively intact, and has continued as new arms sales to Saudi Arabia—the largest in U.S. history—are implemented. Transition to a new generation of leadership in the Al Saud family, evolution in the Saudi economy, and instability in the regional security environment may continue to create challenges and opportunities for the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Leadership and Succession

King Salman and other Saudi leaders are likely to continue to face complex questions about political consent, economic performance, and social reform as they push ahead with ambitious economic and social initiatives, and as power is transferred from the sons of the kingdom's founder, King Abd al Aziz bin Abd al Rahman al Saud (aka Ibn Saud), to his grandsons. The willingness and ability of the monarchy's leaders to successfully manage their relationships with each other and with competing domestic interest groups is among the factors that will determine the country's future stability. Succession questions and intra-family politics may have direct implications for regional stability and for U.S. national security interests.

Most sources suggest that the Al Saud family has managed a recent series of leadership transition decisions without a paralyzing degree of disruptive internal dissent. Formal announcements of

major changes in succession have stated that a preponderance of members of an Allegiance Council made up of senior family members has considered and endorsed transition decisions taken since its establishment during the late King Abdullah's reign. This includes decisions made prior to and in the wake of King Abdullah's death in January 2015, and in conjunction with succession changes announced in April 2015 and June 2017 (see **Figure A-1** and **Figure A-2** below).

King Salman first placed two members of the next generation of the Al Saud family in line to rule. This generation—grandsons of the kingdom's founder—is more numerous and has more complex intra-family ties than those of its predecessors, making answers to current and future questions of governance and succession less certain. There exists potential for competition among members of this generation, as positions of influence in government have been distributed and redistributed among them.

Changes undertaken in 2015 (**Figure A-1**) elevated Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and the king's son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to the line of succession at the expense of senior members of their fathers' generation. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who became Crown Prince, retained his duties as Minister of Interior and assumed leadership of a newly created Council for Political and Security Affairs. Then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman became Defense Minister and the head of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs.

In June 2017 (**Figure A-2**), Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was replaced as Crown Prince by Mohammed bin Salman and relieved of his position as Minister of Interior. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's elevation puts him next in line for the throne. Given his age, he could rule for decades upon succession. In conjunction with the change, which was approved by the Allegiance Council, the kingdom's Basic Law was amended to prohibit kings from the generation of the grandsons of the founder from choosing successors from the same maternal line of the Al Saud family. This amendment presumably was agreed to in order to assuage concern among members of the family about the further consolidation of power among the branch of the family from which King Salman and the new Crown Prince hail.[242]

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is asserting a public national leadership role on a range of topics, generating considerable international speculation about the potential for reported rivalry or competition to harden between him and other family members. Such potential exists, and has precedent in the family's recent past, but intra-family dynamics historically have remained largely shielded from public view until disputes have deepened to the point that consensus breaks down.

To date there has been no clear indication to suggest that leading members of the royal family have reverted to the level of overt tension and public competition that characterized intra-family

[242] King Salman and the late Crown Prince Nayef were full brothers: their sons are full first cousins. Their "Sudayri" branch of the Al Saud family is named for their grandmother Hassa bint Ahmad al Sudayri—among the best known of the late King Abd al Aziz's late wives and one of three drawn from the Al Sudayri family. She was the mother of the late King Fahd bin Abd al Aziz, the late Crown Prince Sultan bin Abd al Aziz, the late Crown Prince Nayef bin Abd al Aziz, King Salman bin Abd al Aziz, Prince Ahmad bin Abd al Aziz, two other senior princes, and four daughters. Analysts of Saudi affairs have often referred to King Fahd and his younger full brothers as the "Sudayri Seven," because of their propensity to support one another. In the future, analysis of relationships and potential competition within this branch may be of more interest than analysis that presumes Sudayri solidarity in competition with other wings of the family. For background on Saudi succession issues, see Joseph Kéchichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001. For analysis of recent succession changes and Saudi law, see Chibli Mallat, "'Riyadhology' and Muhammad bin Salman's Telltale Succession," Lawfare, June 8, 2018.

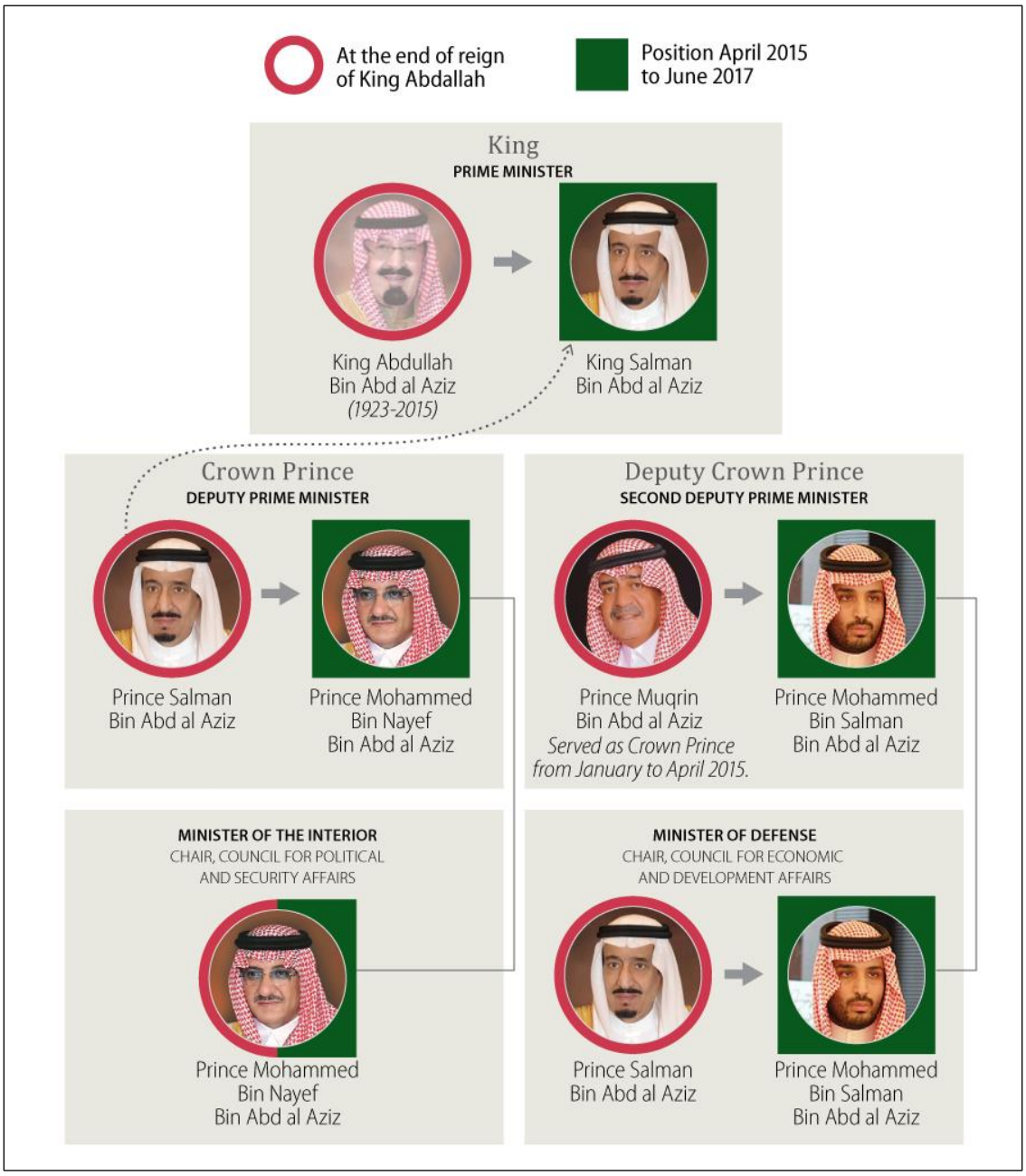
relations in the mid-20th century.[243] Private confrontation is strongly implied by some recent developments, but leading royal family members have not described related disagreements in detail. In particular, some observers expressed concern and uncertainty about Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's November 2017 decision to detain and investigate some royal family members on corruption charges and remove the late King Abdullah's son, Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, from his position as Minister of the National Guard.[244] Similar concerns have accompanied reports of the March 2020 detention of former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Prince Ahmed bin Abd al Aziz on sedition charges. These developments appear to signal a stark end to the consensus-based approach that reportedly had prevailed among senior royal family members for decades. Taken in conjunction with the Crown Prince's bold social, economic, and foreign policy agendas, these steps may meet with different responses from various family members and components of Saudi society.

[243] From 1958 to 1964, supporters of King Saud (the first son to succeed King Abd al Aziz) struggled for influence with supporters of Saud's brother Faisal (the following successor). Disputes over Saudi foreign policy and the management of government finances contributed to the family's decision to force King Saud from power in favor of Faisal, who served as king until he was assassinated by his nephew in 1975.

[244] See Simon Henderson, "Meet the Next Generation of Saudi Rulers," *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 10, 2017; and, Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Shifts Policy From Risk Averse to Downright Dangerous," YaleGlobal Online, Nov. 28, 2017.

Figure A-1. Saudi Leadership and Succession Changes, 2015

Changes Effective January and April 2015

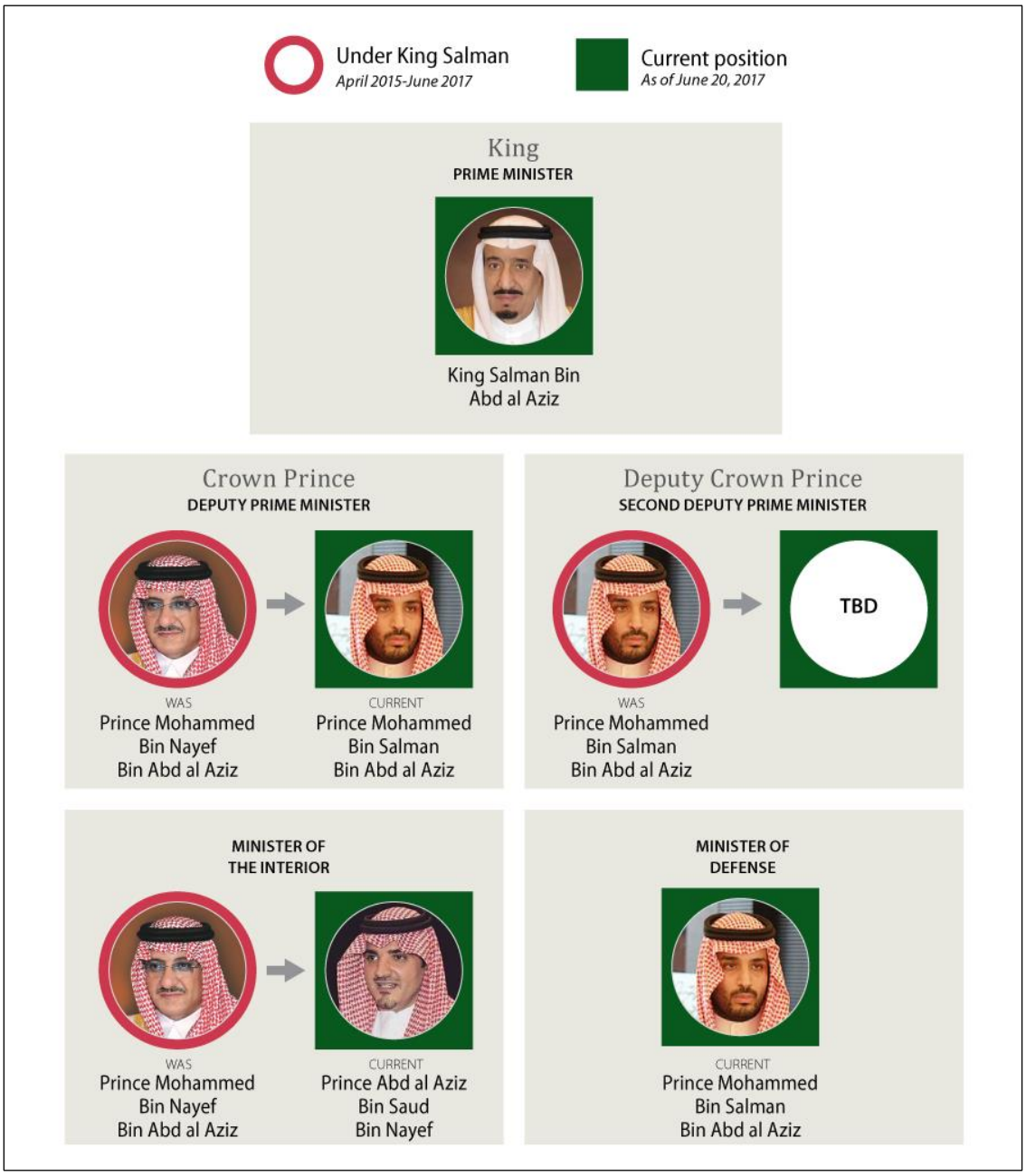


Source: CRS. Official photos adapted from Saudi Arabian government sources.

Notes: Succession changes in April 2015 reversed a key decision taken by King Abdullah before his death—King Abdullah had named his half-brother Prince Muqrin as Deputy Crown Prince in March 2014, and Prince Muqrin briefly served as Crown Prince after King Abdullah's death. In April 2015, Saudi authorities stated that Prince Muqrin stepped down as Crown Prince at his own choosing and credited then-new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef with selecting King Salman's son Mohammed bin Salman to serve as Deputy Crown Prince, with the approval of a majority of the Allegiance Council.

Figure A-2. Saudi Leadership and Succession Changes, 2017

Changes Effective June 2017



Source: CRS. Official photos adapted from Saudi Arabian government sources.

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

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

January 2009 to December 2020; 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
Total Possible Value			**$147.290**

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.

Table B-2. Emergency Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia

As Notified to Congress, May 24, 2019

Transmittal Number	Item	Possible Value: USD, billions	Other Countries Involved
DDTC 17-094	Coproduction, manufacture, assembly, development, integration, installation, operation, testing, maintenance, repair, and demilitarization of the Paveway and Enhanced Paveway Weapon System for the Royal Saudi Air Force F-15, Tornado, and Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft	$1.571	United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy
DDTC 17-112	The manufacture of the Aurora Fuzing System for the Paveway IV Precision Guided Bomb Program for end use by the UK Ministry of Defense and the Royal Saudi Air Force.	$0.209	United Kingdom
DDTC 17-128	To provide technically qualified personnel to advise and assist the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) in maintenance and training for the RSAF F-15 fleet of aircraft.	$0.176	
DDTC 18-029	To support the performance of maintenance and repair services of F 110 engines for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Defense	$0.549	
DDTC 18-050	Export of 15,000 120mm M933Al 120mm mortar bombs to the Saudi Arabian Royal Land Forces.	$0.051	
DDTC 18-110	KSA Ministry of Defense Transformation Project	$0.071	United Arab Emirates
DDTC 18-109	To support the manufacture, production, test, inspection, modification, enhancement, rework, and repair of F/A-18E/F and derivative series aircraft panels.	$0.076	South Korea, India, Israel
DSCA 18-21	Aircraft Follow On and Support Services	$0.800	
DSCA 18-31	Continued Tactical Air Surveillance Support System	$0.136	
DSCA 19-01	Aircraft Follow On and Support Services	$1.800	
Total Possible Value		**$5.439**	

Source: U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense notifications to Congress, May 2019.

Notes: DDTC = U.S. Department of State Directorate of Defense Trade Controls and denotes a Direct Commercial Sale proposed pursuant to Section 36 (c) or (d) of the Arms Export Control Act, as amended (22 U.S.C. 2776). DSCA = U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency and denotes a Foreign Military Sale proposed pursuant to Section 36 (b) of the Arms Export Control Act, as amended (22 U.S.C. 2776).

Appendix C. Saudi Arabia and Inquiries into the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001

The report of the congressional Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001, released in December 2002, brought attention to the alleged role of Saudi Arabia in supporting terrorism.[245] In the 900-page report, a chapter on alleged foreign support for the September 11 hijackers was redacted virtually in its entirety—Part Four of the report, often referred to as "the 28 pages" (actually 29)—because executive branch officials determined at the time that its public release was contrary to U.S. national security interests.

The congressional Joint Inquiry's report stated that the committee had "made no final determinations as to the reliability or sufficiency of the information regarding these issues [alleged foreign support for the hijackers] that was found contained in FBI and CIA documents. It was not the task of this Joint Inquiry to conduct the kind of extensive investigation that would be required to determine the true significance of such alleged support to the hijackers." U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies subsequently investigated information in the redacted portion of the report further. Some information reportedly remains under investigation.

In the years since, speculation and periodic media reporting focused on the degree to which the redacted pages may have addressed the question of whether or not there was some degree of official Saudi complicity in the September 11 attacks. For years, some people who claimed to have read the formerly classified sections of the report said it addressed some Saudi nationals' links with individuals involved in the attacks.[246] In 2003, the Saudi government appealed to U.S. authorities to publish the redacted pages to enable Saudi Arabia to rebut related allegations.[247] On April 19, 2016, President Barack Obama stated that he had asked Director of National Intelligence James Clapper to review the redacted pages of the congressional Joint Inquiry's report for potential release.[248]

On July 15, 2016, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released a declassified version of Part Four of the congressional Joint Inquiry as well as two declassified pages from the executive summary of the September 2005 Joint FBI-CIA Intelligence Report Assessing the Nature and Extent of Saudi Government Support of Terrorism.[249] The latter report focused in part on investigating information discussed in the 2002 Joint Inquiry and was originally submitted as required by the classified annex of the Intelligence Authorization Act for FY2004.

The "28 pages" of the congressional Joint Inquiry released in 2016 address a number of reports that individual Saudi nationals had contact with and may have provided assistance to some of the September 11, 2001, hijackers. Specifically, the pages discuss information that suggested (*emphasis* added)

> while in the United States, some of the September 11 hijackers were in contact with, and received support or assistance from, individuals who *may be* connected to the Saudi

[245] Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001, S.Rept. 107-351/H.Rept. 107-792.

[246] CBS News 60 Minutes, "Top secret '28 pages' may hold clues about Saudi support for 9/11 hijackers," April 8, 2016.

[247] Josh Meyer, "Saudis to Seek Release of Classified Parts of 9/11 Report," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 2003.

[248] President Barack Obama interviewed by Charlie Rose, PBS, April 19, 2016.

[249] Both documents are available on the website of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

> Government. There is information, primarily from FBI sources, that at least two of those individuals were *alleged by some* to be Saudi intelligence officers. The Joint Inquiry's review confirmed that the Intelligence Community also has information, much of it which has *yet be independently verified*, indicating that individuals associated with the Saudi Government in the United States *may have* other ties to al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups.

As noted above, the pages of the 2002 report discuss allegations that were then under consideration and not investigatory conclusions of law enforcement or intelligence officials. The FBI since has closed some related investigations, and U.S. plaintiffs seeking access to related information are engaged in ongoing legal proceedings.[250]

On September 3, 2021, President Joseph Biden directed the U.S. Department of Justice and other agencies to complete declassification reviews of documents related to FBI investigations into the September 11, 2011, terrorist attacks, including closed investigations into the involvement of Saudi nationals in the attacks.[251] In a statement, the President said, "the executive order requires the Attorney General to release the declassified documents publicly over the next six months." Documents released in September 2021 described findings of a November 2015 interview conducted pursuant to FBI investigations into the interactions of some of the September 11 hijackers with some Saudi nationals, including one government employee.[252]

The declassified pages from the September 2005 FBI-CIA report state that, "There is no evidence that either the Saudi government or members of the Saudi royal family knowingly provided support for the attacks of 11 September 2001 or that they had foreknowledge of terrorist operations in the Kingdom or elsewhere." The executive summary of the joint FBI-CIA report further states that "there is evidence that official Saudi entities, [redacted portion], and associated nongovernmental organizations provide financial and logistical support to individuals in the United States and around the world, some of whom are associated with terrorism-related activity. The Saudi Government and many of its agencies have been infiltrated and exploited by individuals associated with or sympathetic to al-Qa'ida."

The 2004 final report of the bipartisan National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (aka "The 9/11 Commission") states that the commission "found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded [Al Qaeda]."[253] The report also states that Saudi Arabia "was a place where Al Qaeda raised money

[250] Tim Golden and Sebastian Rotella, "The Saudi Connection: Inside the 9/11 Case That Divided the F.B.I.," New York Times Magazine, January 23, 2020; and, Michael Isikoff, "FBI tried to flip Saudi official in 9/11 investigation," Yahoo News, July 15, 2021.

[251] The White House, Statement by President Joe Biden on the Executive Order [Executive Order 14040] Directing Declassification Review of Documents Related to the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks, September 3, 2021.

[252] See Release of FBI Electronic Communication dated April 4, 2016 Pursuant to Executive Order 14040 § 2(a) (Sept. 3, 2021) in U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *9/11 Material Released in Response to Executive Order 14040*, available at: https://vault.fbi.gov/9-11-attacks-investigation-and-related-materials/9-11-material-released-in-response-to-executive-order-14040/.

[253] Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, July 22, 2004.

directly from individuals and through charities," and indicates that "charities with significant Saudi government sponsorship" may have diverted funding to Al Qaeda.

In July 2016, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al Jubeir argued that the 28 pages' release exonerated the Saudi government with regard to allegations that it supported or had foreknowledge of the September 11 attacks, saying that "when the appropriate agencies, the 9/11 Commission and the FBI and CIA investigated those leads and came out with their conclusions they said that 'there's no there there.'"[254] The Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC, has consistently responded to news reports about the so-called 28 pages' contents and other allegations of official Saudi involvement in the attacks by citing some of the findings of later investigations and noting the dismissal of some lawsuits against the kingdom.[255]

Following President Biden's September 2021 executive order directing the declassification of investigatory materials, the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC, released a statement calling for "the full declassification of any documents and materials relating to the United States' investigation of the terrorist attacks."[256]

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[254] Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Information Office, "Saudi Foreign Minister: '28 Pages' Were Misleading," July 16, 2016.

[255] Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Information Office, "Saudi Arabia Responds to 60 Minutes Report," April 10, 2016.

[256] Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia (@SaudiEmbassyUSA), Twitter, 12:38 PM, September 8, 2021.