

Facing Reality?

**An Evaluation of Saudi-American Relations
and the Upcoming Presidential Visit**

Szembenézés a valósággal?

A szaúd-amerikai kapcsolatok értékelése
és a közelgő elnöki látogatás értelmezése

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Abstract: The analysis evaluates the current state of bilateral relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States and interprets President Joe Biden's upcoming visit to Saudi Arabia. While Riyadh and Washington continue to be vital partners for each other, several strategic and personal factors undermine cooperation between them. Although the Russian-Ukrainian war and its political and economic consequences have made the United States rethink its approach to the Kingdom, serious challenges remain. For the summit to succeed, the two countries' leaders must overcome mistrust, political and personal grievances, and diverging interests.

Keywords: United States, Saudi Arabia, American-Saudi relations, Mohamed bin Salman, Russian-Ukrainian war

Összefoglalás: Az elemzés célja a Szaúd-Arábiai Királyság és az Egyesült Államok közötti bilaterális kapcsolatok jelenlegi állapotának értékelése, valamint a Joe Biden elnök júliusra kitűzött szaúdi látogatásának értelmezése. Miközben Washington és Rijád továbbra is kulcsfontosságú partnerei egymásnak, számos stratégiai és személyi kérdés aláássa az együttműködés lehetőségét. Ugyan az orosz-ukrán háború és annak politikai és gazdasági következményei következtében az Egyesült Államok újraértékelte a Királysághoz való hozzáállását, számos további kihívás azonosítható. Annak érdekében, hogy a találkozó sikeres legyen, a két ország vezetőinek túl kell lépnie a kölcsönös bizalmatlanságon, a politikai és személyes sérelmeken, valamint eltérő érdekeken.

Kulcsszavak: Egyesült Államok, Szaúd-Arábia, amerikai-szaúdi kapcsolatok, Mohamed bin Szalmán, orosz-ukrán háború

After a tense period of almost two years, the United States and Saudi Arabia are trying to renew their bilateral relations. In June 2022, [both the Saudi Royal Court](#) and the [White House officially announced](#) that (after travelling to Israel and Palestine) President Joe Biden would visit Saudi Arabia in the framework of his first official presidential trip to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, scheduled from 13-16 July. In the coastal city of Jeddah, he will meet representatives of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. While not confirmed, the summit will probably include a personal meeting between President Biden and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

In general, it should not come as a surprise that the leaders of two states whose cooperation has been one of the defining pillars of the Middle Eastern security environment for decades meet face-to-face. Nevertheless, in the current situation, the announcement has caused huge waves in the international public and academic discourse and received criticism from domestic and international

observers alike. Under the Biden administration, several factors have undermined Saudi-American relations, many of which are of strategic importance for both states. Nevertheless, the Russian-Ukrainian war and its economic consequences have changed the American calculus and incentivised the Biden administration to rethink its approach, a process described by many observers as a “[bow to realpolitik](#)” or facing “[objective reality](#)”.

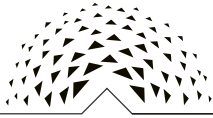
In such circumstances, the meeting is simultaneously celebrated and criticised, and the possible outcomes are highly debated. This analysis interprets President Biden’s upcoming visit to Saudi Arabia and presents its political context. After presenting an overview of each state’s perspective, the study elaborates on the effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war, concluding by enlisting the factors that shape the effectiveness of the meeting the most.

AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST POLICY UNDER THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

In the first 17 months of the Biden presidency, the MENA region has broadly been neglected in American foreign policy for three reasons. First of all, domestic issues were meant to dominate the political agenda of the Democratic government, focusing on only a few foreign policy issues, among which the withdrawal from Afghanistan, competition with China, and, in 2022, the war in Ukraine were at the top of the list. The only priority for the Biden administration connected to the MENA region has been reviving the nuclear deal with Iran, a slow and cumbersome process. Second, in its foreign policy vision, the new American administration pursuing global American interests would require more attention to the Indo-Pacific region and containing China than to managing Middle Eastern affairs. Therefore, the Biden administration tries [to minimize the political and economic resources](#) devoted to the MENA region.

Third, the rhetoric adopted by the Democratic President disincentivises any substantial initiatives by Washington. President Biden wants to distance himself from Trump’s foreign policy by replacing his predecessor’s transactional approach and “America First” doctrine with an [emphasis on human rights and democracy](#). Since most American allies in the region are usually not viewed as democratic countries, visible cooperation would contradict this approach.

This neglect is observable in many respects. President Biden has not visited the MENA region so far (his planned visit in July would be the first), which is in striking contrast with President Trump, whose first official foreign travel destination was Riyadh. In the virtual Summit for Democracy, a flagship project of the administration organised in 2021, [only two out of the 111 participants](#) were from the MENA region (Iraq and Israel). More importantly, filling diplomatic positions in the region has been sluggish. President Biden has been slow in appointing ambassadors in



general (in the first 200 days, [only one ambassador got confirmed](#), compared to 19 in the same period for President Trump or 59 for President Obama). Still, the Middle East is at the bottom of the list. Several [ambassadorial positions](#) were only confirmed in late 2021 or early 2022 (like Bahrain, Iraq, and Israel), while others in crucial partner countries remain vacant, including Qatar, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the UAE.

Saudi-American relations have been among the most visible casualties of the Biden administration's foreign policy. From a strategic perspective, the view that Saudi-American relations are losing their value has [been prevalent in Washington DC](#), which has recently been exacerbated by other developments. On the one hand, bilateral relations were overly politicised in American domestic discourse in the last years of the Trump administration for two reasons. The Republican President and his advisors publicly enjoyed close relations with Mohamed bin Salman and the Saudi leadership. Moreover, the humanitarian consequences of the Yemeni intervention since 2015 and the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi forces in 2018 caused a public outcry both internationally and in the United States, putting moral pressure on the American government to "punish" Riyadh in some way.

While the Trump administration refused to do so, the Democratic foreign policy elite used harsh rhetoric against Saudi Arabia and Mohamad bin Salman in particular. As a presidential nominee, [Biden called](#) the Kingdom a "pariah" while also referring to the "very little social redeeming value in the present government in Saudi Arabia". After his inauguration, he also published an intelligence report that called Mohamad bin Salman responsible for the killing. On a more practical note, weapon [sales](#) were frozen to Saudi Arabia, and in February 2021, the so-called "[Khashoggi ban](#)" was introduced, restricting the issuing of visas to individuals who "are believed to have been directly engaged in serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activities".

On the other hand, the tense rhetoric was coupled with Washington's general lack of interest in deepening bilateral ties, which can be partly attributed to the general neglect of the region. One clear example of this phenomenon is that there is no confirmed American ambassador to the Kingdom yet. Between June 2019 and January 2021, retired general John Abizaid worked as the Chief Representative to Riyadh, who had been the Commander of CENTCOM before. After his successful tenure, there has been no appointed American ambassador to Riyadh, [although in April](#) the President nominated Michael Ratney, who currently serves as Chargé d'Affaires in Jerusalem. Ratney would be the first career diplomat sent to Saudi Arabia in three decades, if accepted by the Senate.

THE SAUDI PERSPECTIVE

Strategic and personal grievances have undermined the Saudi attitude towards bilateral relations with the United States and the importance of this alliance. From the strategic perspective, [three major issues cause tension](#) in Saudi-American

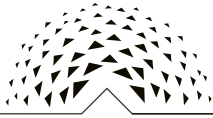
relations. First, Riyadh has wanted more political and military support for its intervention in Yemen that started in 2015. From a Saudi perspective, the coalition organised to help the official Yemeni government in its struggle against the Houthi rebellion serves defensive purposes. The rise of the Iranian-backed militia is considered to threaten the security and vital interests of Saudi Arabia, therefore, the shrinking American willingness to provide substantial help in Yemen translates into a lack of American willingness to protect the Kingdom.

Second, the Biden administration's efforts to resurrect the Iranian nuclear deal are also considered problematic. Similarly to the Obama administration in the 2010s, Washington once again excludes Riyadh from the negotiating tables and neglects Saudi security concerns in an issue that directly impacts the regional stance of the Kingdom. Third, Democrats and President Biden himself were very critical of the Saudi government and Mohamad bin Salman in particular after the scandal revolving around the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, publicly condemning the Crown Prince as the one responsible for the killing. The intense criticism in itself is causing harm in relations, but the situation has been worsened by some lawsuits before the American courts against Mohamad bin Salman personally.

In a personalised political system like the Saudi one, personal resentments arguably play a role as important as strategic considerations. While one cannot read the mind of the members of the Saudi elite, a few observations can be made. A representative view could be the one [expressed by an unnamed Saudi diplomat](#), who said to well-known Middle East analyst Stephen Cook that "nobody was surprised" by the cold approach of the Biden Administration, "but there will come a day when President Biden needs Saudi Arabia, and he will have to call [the Crown Prince]".

Some recent sources can be directly used to understand the Saudi perspective. In an interview with Mohamed bin Salman [published by The Atlantic](#) in March 2022, the Crown Prince elaborated on his stance regarding American-Saudi relations. In this, Mohamad bin Salman criticised the foreign policy of the Biden administration for being overly moralistic, neglecting American national interests, and being recriminatory towards Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it seems that the Crown Prince feels personally disrespected by President Biden refusing to meet him as an equal, considering only King Salman as his peer. This attitude, according to him, is not shared by China, for instance, questioning the mutual respect between the leaders.

In [another interview from May 2022](#), Turki al-Feisal, the former head of Saudi intelligence and a former ambassador to both London and Washington, echoed similar sentiments. Beside the policy differences regarding Yemen, al-Feisal mentioned the lack of recognition of Riyadh as an equal partner as a source of tensions. "We are not schoolchildren to be treated with a carrot and stick", he argues, "we are a sovereign country, and when we are dealt with fairly and squarely, we respond likewise".



From this perspective, Ratney's appointment [has probably been regarded](#) as an unfavourable decision by the Saudi leadership. For Riyadh, the American relationship is still the most important one from both political and security perspectives. Therefore, the Saudi ambassador to Washington has usually been very close to Saudi leadership. During the seven-year reign of the current monarch, King Salman, three ambassadors have been appointed to Washington so far (Abdullah bin Feisal, Khalid bin Salman, and Reema bint Bandar), all of whom are grandchildren of Abdulaziz bin Saud, and one of them, Khalid is the current monarch's son. In parallel, most American ambassadors to the Kingdom have been high-profile diplomats, either coming from or having deep ties in the military sector, representing the importance of security policy cooperation between the two states. While Ratney's knowledge and experience are beyond question, his late appointment and professional career diplomat status can be perceived as a message that the relationship is not considered as crucial as it used to be in Washington.

THE EFFECTS OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

The Russian-Ukrainian war has transformed the context of American foreign policy to a great extent. Amidst growing tensions between Russia and the United States (and, to some extent, China and the United States), political pressure has been put on smaller states and middle powers to pick a side or provide some support. Saudi Arabia has hedged between the two sides – while it [supported the condemnation of the Russian attack](#) on Ukraine by the UN General Assembly, it [abstained from voting on the suspension](#) of the Russian membership in the Human Rights Council. In practice, it did not support Ukraine, continued its cooperation with Russia on the energy market, and [hosted Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov](#) in Riyadh three months after the invasion.

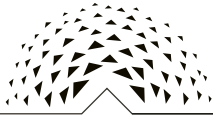
From an American perspective, Saudi Arabia's importance has grown tangibly in this new environment, mainly for two reasons. First, in oil politics, Riyadh is one of the most dominant players. In the last few years, production and supply on the market has been set in the so-called OPEC+ format, which includes the members of the Organisation of Petroleum-Exporting Countries (chief among which is Saudi Arabia) and a group of non-OPEC producers led by Russia. As the war in Ukraine pushes up oil prices, any changes in production or decisions made by the OPEC+ group are watched closely by every government. Riyadh plays an important role not just because of its weight in the forum but also due to the fact that Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries that have additional production capacity. As mid-term elections are coming up in the United States, [soaring energy prices and inflation](#) are at the top of President Biden's agenda.

Second, the Kingdom is becoming more important [from a political and security perspective, too](#). As a Middle Eastern middle power, Saudi Arabia's stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war can have regional and global consequences. The conflict

erupted during a period when Riyadh has been working on diversifying its relations and deepening cooperation with non-Western superpowers like Russia or China. Consequently, how the conflict affects Russian-Saudi ties might be a good indicator of how regional powers tend to react to Western pressure in such a situation. Also, smaller but equally important states (including the United Arab Emirates) might use the leverage provided by the Saudi actions to keep their relations with Russia. Beside the Russian-Ukrainian war, [several other factors](#) have prompted Washington to reconsider keeping its distance from Saudi Arabia. First, succession might be around the corner in the Kingdom, where the de jure ruler, King Salman, is currently 85 years old. Without a visible competitor, it is all but certain that Crown Prince (and de facto leader) Mohamed bin Salman would follow. Mending ties between the Crown Prince and the American government before that would make strategic sense, to put it mildly. This consideration has been recently strengthened by the Emirati experience, where Mohamed bin Zayed, the de facto foreign policy leader and the long-time Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, assumed the office of the presidency in May 2022, after the death of Khalifa bin Zayed. Mohamed bin Zayed is a less controversial figure than Mohamad bin Salman, and American-Emirati relations are much calmer than American-Saudi ones. Nevertheless, similar problems have threatened bilateral cooperation, especially since the UAE is also heavily involved in the Yemeni conflict and, similarly to Saudi Arabia, its territory [has been directly attacked](#) by missiles fired by the Houthi movement. The Biden administration missed the opportunity to ease tensions by 2022, which has [resulted in a lack of openness](#) on the Emirati side to direct consultations in the last few months.

Second, regional political dynamics have also strengthened the role of Saudi Arabia. Although Riyadh is yet to recognise Israel, it is all but certain that the rapprochement between the Gulf states, most notably Bahrain and the UAE, and the Jewish state was endorsed by the Saudi leadership. Deepening Israeli-Gulf ties has the potential to reshape power dynamics in the region, contributing to the emergence of a quasi-pro-status quo block in the Middle East. In parallel, lacking progress in (and the [possible collapse](#) of) negotiations between Iran and global powers increases the importance of regional geopolitics, especially in terms [of the Saudi-Iranian dialogue](#) currently taking place under Iraqi mediation, where a breakthrough is yet to emerge. In connection with this, Riyadh is [supporting a fragile truce](#) in Yemen for the moment, possibly paving the way for substantial advancements towards peace.

As a result, the Biden administration has reached out to Gulf leaders and, reportedly, personally to Mohamed bin Salman and Mohamed bin Zayed to discuss the situation, an endeavour that first [resulted in failure](#). Taking into account the Saudi and Emirati grievances towards the United States, it is not surprising that neither Riyadh nor Abu Dhabi was keen on helping Washington out instantly. President Biden's inability to reach out to Gulf partners was especially astonishing given the [evident communication](#) between Gulf leaders and Russian President Vladimir Putin.



Naturally, from an outside perspective, it is difficult to judge if honest grievances made it impossible for Gulf states to be more flexible towards Washington or if they instead perceived the current crisis as an opportunity to make the United States more responsive to their concerns. In practice, it can be assumed that a mixture of both has shaped Saudi and Emirati stances towards the American attempts at mending ties.

Since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, [second-tier diplomacy has intensified](#) between Saudi Arabia and the United States. In late February, two important members of the Biden administration visited Riyadh: Brett McGurk, the Regional Advisor of the National Security Council, and Amos Hochstein, the Energy Envoy of the State Department. One message they wanted to convey is that Washington is keen on assisting in improving the missile defence systems of the Gulf states. A little bit later, on 17 and 18 May, a meeting of the US-Saudi Strategic Joint Planning Committee took place with the participation of the Deputy Defence Minister and the Crown Prince's brother, Prince Khalid Bin Salman. In Washington DC, he met Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, US Special Envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, and Under-secretary of Defence Colin Kahl, among others. In parallel, the tone of governmental rhetoric has also changed – President Biden has recently called the Saudi support for the Yemeni truce “[courageous leadership](#)”.

THE PLANNED VISIT

It was in this political and diplomatic context that the White House officially confirmed Biden's visit. While both the agenda and the outcome of the meeting are still subject to speculation, several factors can be observed that could undermine the success of the meeting. First, due to the above-described developments, there is currently [grave mistrust between the Saudi and the American leadership](#). In such an environment, reaching tangible results is problematic, and implementing them or following up on them seems even less feasible.

Second, the two sides [have different priorities](#) to discuss as well as [mismatched expectations](#) to align. For President Biden, the primary topic is energy politics ([even if they deny it](#)), as he probably wants to incentivise Saudi Arabia to raise production levels and thus ease the pressure on oil prices. In addition, [strengthening the cooperation](#) between American-friendly (and anti-Iranian) states, especially between the Gulf and Israel, will probably be on the agenda. For Mohamed bin Salman, the most important aspiration is to rebuild his recognition internationally and achieve [advancements in security issues](#), securing more American support for the Kingdom. This is especially crucial given the recent news that the United States is reportedly [working with the UAE on a new security agreement](#) that would entail explicit defensive guarantees provided by the US. Beside the general framework of cooperation, Yemen is also on the agenda for both parties, although from different

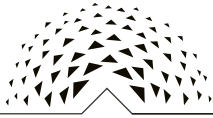
perspectives: for Riyadh, security considerations play the primary role, while for the United States, the over-politicised nature of the conflict makes humanitarian concerns more critical.

Third, President Biden will probably keep human rights on the agenda to minimize domestic political costs. The administration [has already received criticism](#) from Democratic [members of Congress](#) (e.g. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin or former VP-nominee Tim Kaine), as well as prestigious NGOs, regarding the visit. In a joint letter signed by Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and POMED, among others, [advocates call for significant pre-conditions](#) before meeting with the Crown Prince, mostly related to the domestic legal and social system of the Kingdom. Therefore, the American side will probably push Riyadh on some human rights issues to deflect criticism. President Biden will have to balance between creating a suitable environment for bilateral discussions and continuing his moral rhetoric by not letting go of its focus on human rights. Fourth, the fact that the meeting is probably happening does indicate that Saudi Arabia will be open to compromise or cooperation, but they will definitely ask their price for it. In the current political atmosphere, American diplomats will probably face offended but confident Saudi leaders. Any kind of step towards the United States would necessitate something in return, the same kind of transactional approach that worked well during the Trump administration. The big question is the other side of the quid pro quo – what could and would be offered by the Biden government in exchange for an oil production surge or moving closer to Israel. Like the UAE, Saudi Arabia wants more explicit security guarantees and defence cooperation, something that would definitely be a sensitive issue for Washington.

CONCLUSION

In such circumstances, the success of the Biden visit to Saudi Arabia should not be taken for granted. While the complete breakdown of the summit is not likely, it may be concluded [without any tangible outcome](#) beside a photo opportunity, or it would only count as the first of many steps. The strategic trends are unlikely to change – the United States and Saudi Arabia will continue to be vital partners for each other, but the relationship will be undermined by personal distrust among the leaders and diverging interests. Moreover, as [one researcher points out](#), the Ukrainian crisis has shown not just that the pro-American attitude of Saudi Arabia has been replaced by a strategy of hedging between global powers but also that the Russian narrative about the insincerity and hypocrisy of the West actually has a breeding ground in the Gulf states.

Given the loosening American-Saudi ties, there is at least a theoretical opportunity for the European Union and its members to enlarge their footprint in the Persian Gulf region. In this spirit, the Council of the European Union approved its first Gulf strategy, called [Strategic Partnership with the Gulf](#) on 20 June, 2022.



The document enlists a series of initiatives and common interests along which cooperation can be deepened, with particular emphasis on prosperity, green transition, global security, humanitarian aid, social contacts, and institutional relations. While the document in itself [does not work as a blueprint](#) for the future or a plan of action (as it does not set specific goals or targets), it serves as a starting point for more European engagement.