

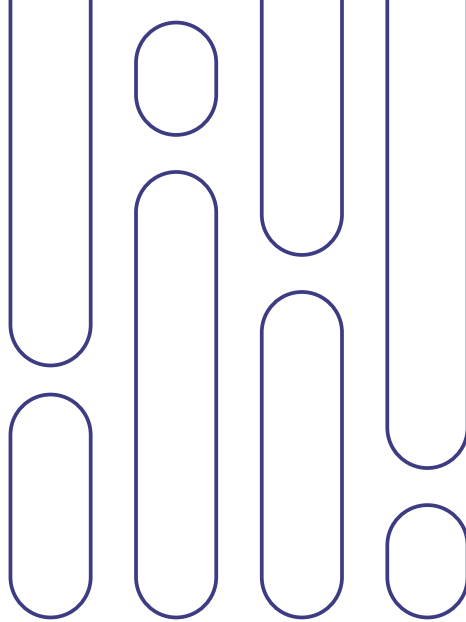
REPORT

# US Efforts to Recalibrate Its Relations With Arab Actors: Evolution and Outcomes

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Indications of positive US efforts to recalibrate its policies toward the Arab and Gulf actors in the Middle East have been unfolding. These include US policies and positions toward its traditional and strategic allies in the region such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This was evident through constructive statements, initiatives and visits as US decision-makers have come to realize the dangers of withdrawing from the region in light of growing Arab-Chinese ties against the backdrop of Washington's declining role in the region. The US administration is also aware of the weight and position of Saudi Arabia because it is a central state in the Arab and Islamic world and plays an active role in regional and international issues, particularly following the major transformations caused by the Russia-Ukraine war.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visited Riyadh on May 7, 2023, and met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss bilateral relations and regional files, signifying further prominent signs of US efforts toward greater coordination with Saudi Arabia. He also held discussions with Saudi officials on a project to establish a railway to link Arab and Gulf countries to India via shipping lanes from the region's ports and invited Saudi Arabia to join the I2U2 alliance. Sullivan's visit to Riyadh was part of US efforts to recalibrate its ties with its Gulf allies. These efforts raise questions about the nature of US-Arab ties and their outcomes amid the current regional and international transformations.

## **US Efforts to Recalibrate Its Ties With Saudi Arabia**

### **US Realization of Saudi Arabia's Regional and International Roles**

The recalibration of US policies toward Saudi Arabia has been

ongoing since President Joe Biden's visit in July 2022 and his reaffirmation of US-Arab ties, primarily with Riyadh in all critical spheres: political, economic and military.

Prior to the visit, the Washington Post published President Biden's article entitled: "Why I Am Going to Saudi Arabia." In this article, he emphasized the importance of the partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia and stressed that his visit aims to recalibrate ties with Saudi Arabia. Finally, he highlighted Saudi Arabia's vital ties with the United States, particularly in addressing contentious regional and international files.

Following President Biden's positive remarks, US officials and advisors made many positive statements, reflecting the amicable relations between the United States and Arab actors, especially with Saudi Arabia. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that relations with Saudi Arabia are important and that both countries have a partnership and common interests to tackle many issues, [especially terrorism](#).

Despite OPEC+ production cuts in early October 2022, Blinken stated that in light of accusations of Saudi Arabia siding with Russia, Riyadh had sent positive signals to Washington when it condemned the Russian invasion and provided \$400 million in humanitarian aid to [Ukraine](#).

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin also stated that US-Saudi ties are strong and his country is committed to this relationship. He also stressed that the United States welcomed Saudi Arabia's efforts in concluding the truce in Yemen and he shared the Saudi Arabia's concerns over the [destabilizing activities in the region](#). National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that he intended to the strained relations with Riyadh at the start of his visit to Saudi Arabia on May 7.

President Biden had spoken openly in October 2022 that the

United States would reevaluate its relations with Saudi Arabia in light of OPEC + announcing production cuts. However, observers of US policy in the region believe that the new US efforts toward Saudi Arabia reflect Washington's policy of appeasement and its shift from some past extreme positions as witnessed when the Biden administration ascended to power in early 2021. This comes in the context of US efforts to realign and win the active Arab and Gulf states to its side in the major battle with international actors over global leadership.

### **Saudi Arabia's Transformation Into a Destination for Senior US Officials**

The Biden administration did not only make positive remarks about Saudi Arabia's regional and international roles, but it has also emerged as a popular destination for senior officials. This reflects a US desire to seek rapprochement and break the deadlock and apathy between Washington and Riyadh.

Following President Biden's two day visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2022 — which commenced by holding Saudi, Gulf and Arab summits through coordination with Saudi officials — US Republican Senator [Lindsey Graham](#), one of Saudi Arabia's fiercest critics, visited the country. He stated that his talks with the Saudi Crown Prince were “very fruitful,” calling on the US Congress to help in improving US-Saudi relations.

White House Senior Coordinator for the Middle East and Special Presidential Coordinator for Global Energy Security Amos Hochstein also visited Saudi Arabia and held talks with officials. The visits occurred one month after the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Beijing to resume their diplomatic ties.

US National Security Advisor [Jake Sullivan](#) met with the Saudi crown prince on May 7, 2023. The two sides reviewed peace efforts in Yemen. The White House said that the peace efforts

had witnessed great progress. Informed sources told that Blinken plans to visit Saudi Arabia once again in June to attend the meeting of The Global Coalition Against Daesh. The foreign ministries of both countries neither confirmed nor denied this planned visit. However, the sequence of the mentioned visits, which were described as “high-level,” reflected US efforts to regain the trust of its active partners in the region by taking their interests into consideration and bridging the gap between alternative perspectives on complex issues and crises.

### The US-Saudi Ceasefire Initiative in Sudan

Based on Saudi Arabia’s leadership and pivotal regional role as well as the US desire to restore its declining role in the region, Washington and Riyadh presented a joint ceasefire initiative to end the armed clashes between the warring Sudanese sides: the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. They called on the two parties to engage in talks in Jeddah to end the conflict in Sudan. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan received a phone call from his US counterpart . During the call they stressed on the importance of stopping the military escalation and ending the violence in Sudan that broke out on April 15, 2023. US-Saudi cooperation in Sudan could represent a new start for Washington’s role in coordinating between regional allied states.

## **Motivations for US Efforts to Recalibrate Its Ties With Saudi Arabia**

### **China’s Growing Role Across the Middle East and the World**

Many observers believe that the US withdrawal from the Middle East disadvantaged Washington and would trigger a detrimental change in the balance of power equation. In light of this re-

treat, international powers such as China and Russia would not stand idle but take advantage of the vacuum left by the United States in the region. The Biden administration, which embraces the Obama doctrine, believes that US interests in the Middle East are no longer as critical as they were over the past four decades. This is because the vital US interest is to shift to the East and deal with the threat posed by China which is rapidly ascending through developing a greater international role via trade and economic partnerships.

Regional states, led by Saudi Arabia, are pursuing ambitious development programs, such as Vision 2030, in accordance with their own interests. China-Arab interests converged after Washington retreated and relinquished its security role, hence creating a security vacuum and vulnerability for regional states. China has started to play a greater role with regional states. The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Riyadh in December 2022, and his three summits with Arab leaders, namely the Saudi-Chinese summit, the Gulf-Chinese summit, and the Arab-Chinese summit, helped in cementing Beijing's role in the region.

At the three summits, China signed dozens of military and economic deals worth **billions of dollars**. These summits and deals, which occurred after the visit of the Chinese president, were expected to raise the ire of the United States, especially as it believes that Beijing threatens its long-term influence. This was demonstrated in President Biden's assertion during his visit to Riyadh that his country would not leave a vacuum in the region to be filled by

### **China-brokered Deal Between Riyadh and Tehran**

Beijing managed to bring about an important shift when it acted as a mediator to restore diplomatic relations between the two major regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, hence restoring



their relationship which had been severed since 2016. Many observers described the outcomes of the agreement as extremely significant to manage the crises in the region, the most important since the end of the Cold War and beyond the scope of US supervision. According to the US point of view, the agreement represents a success for Chinese diplomacy, as Beijing hosted the talks and reconciliation process beyond the corridors of Western capitals and will be an international guarantor. This poses a serious threat to Washington. In addition, this agreement reflects Beijing's readiness to manage international crises and play an active role, importantly in the Middle East, a traditional sphere of US influence.

The White House welcomed the Saudi-Iran detente, however, Coordinator for Strategic Communication at the National Security Council tried to downplay the Chinese role. He said that Washington had previously played an important role to de-escalate tensions between the two regional rivals by using a mix of deterrence and diplomacy. In addition, he said that the Chinese roadmap is similar to the negotiated plans discussed in Muscat and Baghdad in 2021 and 2022.

The restoration of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and de-escalation in the region represent serious beginnings to resolving outstanding issues and a step toward the forging of a new regional security agreement based on the non-interference of international actors. The resumption of Saudi-Iran ties will leave a positive imprint on regional states, especially those that have turned into hotbeds of terrorism, drug trafficking and sectarianism.

## **A Growing Arab Desire to Achieve Independence in Foreign Policy**

Regional states have gone through many crises and are used to



relying on the United States to solve them. However, the United States has not always been readily available, especially since the so-called Arab Spring. In addition, it has been perceived as playing a negative role in crises and showing complacency toward the attacks on Saudi refineries in [Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019](#). The United States has insisted on a deal with Iran without considering the interests of its regional partners or involving them in the talks. This is in addition to the procrastination in the signing of military deals without taking into account the economic interests of its partners. It has also gradually withdrawn from the region, changed its strategic priorities and removed equipment and air defense systems from the region, in addition, it has abandoned its traditional commitments toward its partners.

All of the aforementioned deepened and entrenched the US-Arab gap. Therefore, regional states, led by Saudi Arabia, began to prioritize their interests. They diversified their foreign alliances, particularly establishing partnerships with China and Russia. After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Washington found itself in need of support to reduce the price of oil, particularly of Arab states given their key role in OPEC+. In addition, Washington fully supported and aligned itself with Europe against Russia. This position ran counter to Arab interests, as Arab states consider both Russia and the United States to be friends. Consequently, Saudi Arabia, at the OPEC + meeting in October 2022, and the Arab member states took an independent decision away from the intervention of the United States and to prevent the politicization of oil production. By doing so, Saudi Arabia safeguarded its interests and stabilized global oil markets.

## **Reconciliation Dimensions to Settle Intra-Arab Disputes**

Regional states aspire for stability and are unable to endure

new clashes and conflicts that will hamper their development and advancement toward prosperity. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative, based on its standing as a regional and international player, as well as because of its leading role in the Muslim world, to bring Arab and non-Arab states in the region together in order to achieve the vision of Mohammed bin Salman; the Middle East will be the new Europe.

To make this vision a reality, Saudi Arabia signed a deal with Iran. This deal prepared the ground for a series of reconciliation and rapprochement steps with other Arab countries that revolve around Iranian influence. Saudi Arabia started from Yemen by holding official talks with the Houthis in Sana'a. Meanwhile, it also made significant efforts to reintegrate Syria into the Arab fold after the visit of its foreign minister to Damascus for the first time since the Syrian crisis broke out and his meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Riyadh also presented a plan to restore Syria's membership in the Arab League and sent an invitation to President Bashar al-Assad to attend the 32<sup>nd</sup> Arab League summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. However, these efforts were not welcomed by the United States. [The US State Department](#) spokesperson stated that the United States does not support the decision of the Arab states to normalize ties with Syria, and that it will not follow suit. However, the United States will have to keep up with the unprecedented transformations but it does not have a clear strategy to regain control over events or to manage them.

## **Evaluation of US Efforts to Recalibrate Its Ties With Saudi Arabia**

When evaluating US efforts, it is clear that the Biden administration's realization of the need to recalibrate its policy toward Arab states has come too late, after it became estranged in the

region and failed to consider the interests of traditional and strategic allies. This awareness was reflected in the extensive visits of US officials to Saudi Arabia in an attempt to restore warmth between the two countries. However, the trust of Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, toward the United States has greatly declined in recent times. Therefore, these countries have worked to reorient their foreign policies and alliances toward other international powers such as China and Russia while maintaining balanced relations with the United States. Regional developments and conditions enabled the regional states, led by Saudi Arabia, to play important roles in protecting their interests and security.

Many factors have motivated several Arab states to maintain balanced relations with the United States, as it continues to be an important international pole and influential in the trajectory of international affairs:

- The need for coordination and cooperation to fight terrorism. This poses a common threat to the international and regional landscapes. Successive US administrations praised the unified security cooperation and coordination with the Gulf states to fight terrorism. Former US President stated that the GCC played a crucial role in defeating terrorism and promoting stability in the region. He also stated that several Arab states are members of the Global Coalition Against Daesh, led by the United States. The joint military operations of this coalition targeted ISIS elements in Iraq and Syria. Therefore, fighting terrorism is the strongest file that brings together Arab states and the United States.
- The US arming of Arab states. The structure and arming of most Arab military institutions, specifically in the Gulf states, are reflective of US excellence in terms of the quality of weapons and equipment as well as in terms of the nature of military drills and US offensive and defensive tactics. Advice, security arrangements and intelligence information are also part of the

US-Arab defense contracting relationship, which has played a significant role both in the fight against terrorism and in the targeting of militias in the region. On the other hand, the United States plays a key role in arming Arab states. The defense sector in the United States is one of the most important sources of tax and employment. The reason for Arab dependence on US arms is because they are of higher quality than those of other major powers like Russia and China.

- US-Arab economic interests. Several Arab countries play a pivotal role in [the energy market](#), and both the United States and the Middle East are deeply integrated with the global economy. Although related to the military field, US arms sales have a major impact on the US economy. The US stock market is also attractive to rich Gulf investors. Gulf investors are attracted to US firms whether in the technological, tourism or aviation sectors which represent lucrative investment opportunities and can be exploited for the sake of mutual interests.

In addition to the historical and political relations with the United States, Saudi Arabia has a significant economic and commercial presence in the US economy, most recently it signed a major deal with Boeing to manufacture 121 aircraft worth \$37 billion.

- Saudi economic interests with the United States. One of the goals of Vision 2030 is to diversify the Saudi economy, hence creating a post-oil economy. Vision 2030 targets the domestic and regional fronts, adopts creative industrial projects and aims to initiate projects and build industrial cities in different parts of the country. Therefore, Saudi Arabia in the near future will emerge as a unique investment and tourist destination through Neom, Oxagon, The Line and other projects across the country. However, these mega projects still need US technology firms, particularly in the spheres of contracting, consulting and infrastructure development and cooperation with prestigious US

universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and others. Regarding trade relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States, the flow of goods in 2019 was estimated at **\$38.7 billion**. Although it was limited to defense contracts for oil trading, US-Arab economic relations are growing, particularly to access advanced technologies that will spur growth trajectories.

## **Challenges to US-Arab Relations**

The factors that are driving the Arab states to balance their relations with the United States face some obstacles and challenges. They clash with some US goals, such as the following:

- The United States aims to persuade some Arab states to join some alliances and security and economic arrangements that thwart Chinese influence in the region. One of these alliances is I2U2 which includes India and Israel. However, this US desire faces some challenges and obstacles that may hinder the participation of Arab states in such arrangements or alliances. For example, Arab states do not get along with Israel. Some of these states like Saudi Arabia have not normalized ties with Israel and some others do not trust Israel enough to enter into alliances with it. Therefore, Arab states joining I2U2 is enormously difficult. Arab states no longer trust US intentions because of their recent experiences, particularly the frustrating US attitudes toward them.
- US contradictions in its orientations. The United States often talks about shifting to the East rather than focusing on the Middle East, while at other times US officials talk about not wanting to leave a security vacuum in the region that will be filled by China and Russia. This contradiction has left a strong impression on regional states, leading them to distrust the United States. As a result, they have been motivated to diversify alliances and find foreign policy alternatives. However, they have tried to maintain



good and balanced relations with the United States but at the same time have established cordial relations with China and Russia.

- Arab states see Russian missile capabilities as an option to diversify their weapons and military systems. Russia seeks to transfer technology, unlike the United States, which sells arms without transferring technological know-how. The same is true for China. Arab-Chinese relations are growing rapidly and focus on investments and signing extended contracts with Chinese firms worth billions of dollars to strengthen Arab infrastructure. In the military field, China shows greater flexibility to sell arms and in military deals in general. However, the United States is hesitant about concluding arms deals with Arab states, and connects them to other issues, such as normalization with Israel or the blocking of arms deals by the US Congress.

## **Conclusion**

Arab states are aware that the present radical transformations may lead to a multipolar system in light of geopolitical crises, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the rapidly unfolding developments thereafter, draining the West and Russia. Arab states realize that they are in a position to play an influential role when it comes to regional and international issues. Saudi Arabia is playing a prominent political and diplomatic role, helping to establish ties and forming relations with several international powers. In addition, Saudi Arabia has made great efforts to settle crises and burning issues in the region. These Saudi steps have forced the United States to deal seriously with Arab interests if it wants to return to the region. Furthermore, it must take practical steps to establish trust with Arab states which will enhance trust in US intentions to address crises that seem to be beyond its remit.

