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Biden's Retreat from Saudi Arabia Accountability

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*President Joe Biden addresses the nation at his inauguration ceremony in Washington, January 20, 2021. Photo: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff/Flickr*

## INTRODUCTION

On the campaign trail, then-presidential candidate Joe Biden drew a clear distinction between himself and President Donald Trump on U.S. foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia. During a November 2019 primary debate, Biden said that if he were elected president, he would make Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) “the pariah that they are.”<sup>1</sup> His campaign pledged to “reassess the [U.S.-Saudi] relationship,” defend the rights of Saudis “to speak their minds freely without fear of persecution and violence,” and to end the Trump administration’s “blank check [for Saudi Arabia] to pursue a disastrous set of policies.”<sup>2</sup>

More than four years later, however, President Biden is leaving the White House with a Saudi policy that starkly contradicts his campaign promises, returning to an approach established under the Trump administration. This paper, the first of two, examines the evolution of U.S.-Saudi relations during Biden’s term, analyzing key inflection points and strategic considerations that shaped policy.

The first half of this paper tracks the relationship’s trajectory, highlighting critical moments such as the release of the U.S. intelligence report on the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and Biden’s July 2022 trip to Jeddah to meet with MBS. The second half takes a deeper look at the relationship through the lens of five strategic interests: 1) great power competition, 2) regional integration

1. “2019: Biden Calls Saudi Arabia ‘Pariah’ in Democratic Debate,” Politico, November 17, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/video/2023/11/17/2019-biden-calls-saudi-arabia-pariah-in-democratic-debate-1141767>

2. Joe Biden, “Statement by Vice President Joe Biden on the Anniversary of Jamal Khashoggi’s Murder,” The American Presidency Project, October 2, 2020, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-vice-president-joe-biden-the-anniversary-jamal-khashoggis-murder>; Joe Biden, “Fact Sheet: Joe Biden and the Arab American Community: A Plan for Partnership,” The American Presidency Project, August 29, 2020, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/biden-campaign-press-release-fact-sheet-joe-biden-and-the-arab-american-community-plan-for>

and countering Iran, 3) security cooperation, 4) economic cooperation, and 5) human rights.

The paper concludes that the Biden administration, despite rhetorical commitments to holding MBS accountable, repeatedly chose policies fundamentally mirroring its predecessor's approach. Ultimately, the Biden administration abandoned its opportunity to reshape the U.S.-Saudi relationship to better advance U.S. interests, while fully rehabilitating the reputation of the crown prince.

## PART ONE: THE U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP UNDER THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Biden's presidential victory in November 2020, coupled with the campaign's tough rhetoric and congressional animosity toward MBS in the wake of Jamal Khashoggi's brutal murder, intensified MBS's fears that the United States was wavering in its willingness to continue as Saudi Arabia's security guarantor. This insecurity had already been heightened the year before when the Trump administration chose not to intervene militarily on behalf of the kingdom following the Abqaiq–Khurais attack on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities.<sup>3</sup> As a result, during the post-election transition period, MBS reportedly met with his advisers to develop an approach to the incoming administration, deciding on a series of concessions in an attempt to win favor.<sup>4</sup> In January 2021, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states agreed to lift their nearly four-year blockade on Qatar.<sup>5</sup> The

following month, Saudi Arabia released unjustly detained U.S. citizens Salah al-Haidar and Bader al-Ibrahim, as well as prominent women's rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul, a political prisoner whose release Biden had explicitly prioritized.<sup>6</sup>

“During the post-election transition period, MBS reportedly met with his advisers to develop an approach to the incoming administration, deciding on a series of concessions in an attempt to win favor.”

Once in office, the Biden administration took steps to fulfill many of its campaign pledges. It ended U.S. support for offensive operations in Yemen and suspended some arms sales to Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> It revoked the previous administration's designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization and prioritized diplomacy to wind down the conflict.<sup>8</sup> It announced the administration was working to “recalibrate” the U.S.-Saudi relationship.<sup>9</sup> It released—as U.S. law required—the widely reported U.S. intelligence assessment that MBS was responsible for Khashoggi's murder, and sanctioned one more individual and the

3. Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz, and Stanley Reed, “Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike, and U.S. Blames Iran,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>; MEDC Interview with Saudi Expert, November 12, 2024.

4. Stephen Kalin, Summer Said, and Dion Nissenbaum, “U.S.-Saudi Relations Buckle, Driven by Animosity Between Biden and Mohammed bin Salman,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-saudi-relations-biden-mbs-animosity-11666623661>

5. Aya Batrawy and Amr Nabil, “Gulf Arab Leaders Sign Declaration to Ease Rift with Qatar,” Associated Press, January 5, 2021, <https://ap-news.com/article/bahrain-qatar-iran-saudi-arabia-united-arab-emirates-8f18052ac759900cfb20b19f89baf369>

6. Aziz El Yaakoubi, “Saudi Arabia Frees Two Jailed Activists with U.S. Citizenship on Bail,” Reuters, February 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-rights-int/saudi-arabia-frees-two-jailed-activists-with-u-s-citizenship-on-bail-idUSKBN2A511Z/>; “Saudi Activist Loujain Al-Hathloul Released from Prison,” Al Jazeera, February 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/10/saudi-activist-loujain-al-hathloul-released-from-prison>

7. Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World,” The White House, February 5, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>

8. Antony Blinken, “Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah,” U.S. Department of State, February 12, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/revocation-of-the-terrorist-designations-of-ansarallah/>

9. Nicole Gaouette, “Biden Calls Saudi King Before Expected Release of Khashoggi Report,” CNN, February 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/25/politics/biden-us-saudi-recalibrate-khashoggi/index.html>





A photo of Jamal Khashoggi at an event marking the one year anniversary of his death, October 2019. Photo: April Brady/Project on Middle East Democracy

military unit implicated in the murder.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, it launched a visa restriction policy derived from existing law called the “Khashoggi Ban” and prohibited 76 Saudis involved in perpetrating transnational repression from entering the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these initial strong steps, the administration fell far short of the accountability promised on the campaign trail. When the Biden administration refused to sanction the crown prince for his role in the killing of Khashoggi,

it sent a critical signal to the Saudi regime that it had no intention of thoroughly recalibrating the relationship.<sup>12</sup> A few weeks later, Saudi authorities sentenced humanitarian aid worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan to a shocking 20-year prison term followed by a 20-year travel ban for anonymous, satirical tweets.<sup>13</sup> The administration’s modest response, especially given al-Sadhan’s U.S. connections, reinforced this message and served as a harbinger of the unprecedented crackdown to come.<sup>14</sup>

10. Office of Ron Wyden, “Wyden Praises Release of Unclassified Khashoggi Report; Naming Mohammed Bin Salman Marks Beginning of Justice for Jamal Khashoggi,” press release, February 26, 2021, <https://www.wyden.senate.gov/news/press-releases/wyden-praises-release-of-unclassified-khashoggi-report-naming-mohammed-bin-salman-marks-beginning-of-justice-for-jamal-khashoggi>; “Assessing the Saudi Government’s Role in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 11, 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Assessment-Saudi-Gov-Role-in-JK-Death-20210226v2.pdf>; “Treasury Sanctions the Saudi Rapid Intervention Force and Former Deputy Head of Saudi Arabia’s General Intelligence Presidency for Roles in the Murder of Journalist Jamal Khashoggi,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 26, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0038>

11. Antony Blinken, “Accountability for the Murder of Jamal Khashoggi,” U.S. Department of State, February 26, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/accountability-for-the-murder-of-jamal-khashoggi/>

12. Vivian Salama, Alex Marquardt, and Kylie Atwood, “Biden Administration Never Considered MBS Sanctions a Viable Option in Response to Khashoggi Report,” CNN, March 3, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/03/politics/biden-administration-MBS-sanction-never-a-viable-option/index.html>

13. Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “Saudi Arabia Jails Alleged Satirist ‘Identified in Twitter Infiltration,’” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/09/saudi-arabia-jails-alleged-satirist-identified-in-twitter-infiltration>

14. Ned Price, “The Sentencing of Saudi Humanitarian Aid Worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan,” U.S. Department of State, April 6, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/the-sentencing-of-saudi-humanitarian-aid-worker-abdulrahman-al-sadhan/>

By summer 2021, U.S. concerns over inflation driven by the COVID-19 pandemic had overtaken other priorities, and the administration was focused on convincing Saudi Arabia to increase oil production.<sup>15</sup> The sense of urgency for greater oil production was only heightened after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Following the invasion, the administration intensely sought increased oil production from OPEC+ (via Saudi Arabia) in order to help achieve three main goals: consolidate global opposition to Russia's invasion; limit Russia's energy-driven economic resilience amid international sanctions; and reduce oil prices ahead of the U.S. midterm elections.<sup>16</sup>

In response to the overtures made by the United States, MBS leveraged the administration's perceived weakness to strengthen his position in the bilateral relationship and protect Saudi interests.<sup>17</sup> First, he rebuffed administration requests to increase oil production in November 2021, and again in February 2022, with MBS apparently refusing to even take a phone call with Biden to discuss the topic.<sup>18</sup> Second, he played on the administration's fears of growing Russian and Chinese influence in Saudi Arabia, even floating the possibility of oil sales in Chinese yuan.<sup>19</sup>

“MBS leveraged the administration's perceived weakness to strengthen his position in the bilateral relationship and protect Saudi interests.”

The Biden administration, in an effort to improve the relationship and achieve its goals with respect to Russia, responded by laying the groundwork for President Biden to visit Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup> By early June, it appeared that this effort was beginning to pay off when OPEC+ agreed to an increase in oil supply for July and August above its initial plan.<sup>21</sup> A few days later, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price claimed that the U.S.-Saudi partnership was “now on steady footing.”<sup>22</sup>

Against this backdrop of seemingly improved relations, President Biden traveled to Saudi Arabia to meet with MBS in July 2022 largely to push for further increases in oil production.

15. “12-Month Percentage Change, Consumer Price Index, Selected Categories” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/charts/consumer-price-index/consumer-price-index-by-category-line-chart.htm>; Trevor Hunnicutt and Jeff Mason, “U.S. Calls on OPEC and Its Allies to Pump More Oil,” Reuters, August 11, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-call-opec-its-allies-increase-oil-production-cnbc-2021-08-11/>

16. “Ukraine Conflict: Petrol at Fresh Record as Oil and Gas Prices Soar,” BBC News, March 7, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60642786>; David Sanger and Peter Baker, “As Biden Reaches out to Mideast Dictators, His Eyes Are on China and Russia,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/16/world/middleeast/biden-saudi-arabia-china-russia.html>; Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia and U.S. Trade Accusations over Oil Cuts,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/world/middleeast/us-saudi-oil-production.html>

17. Karen Young, “How Saudi Arabia Sees the World: MBS's Vision of a New Nonaligned Movement,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/saudi-arabia/how-saudi-arabia-sees-world>

18. Natasha Turak, “OPEC+ Agrees to Stick to Oil Production Plan, Defying U.S. Pressure,” CNBC, November 4, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/04/opec-agrees-to-stick-to-oil-production-plan-defying-us-pressure.html>; Dion Nissenbaum, Stephen Kalin, and David Cloud, “Saudi, Emirati Leaders Decline Calls With Biden During Ukraine Crisis,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-emirati-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-during-ukraine-crisis-11646779430>

19. Summer Said and Stephen Kalin, “Saudi Arabia Considers Accepting Yuan Instead of Dollars for Chinese Oil Sales,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-considers-accepting-yuan-instead-of-dollars-for-chinese-oil-sales-11647351541>; Stephen Kalin, Summer Said, and David Cloud, “How U.S.-Saudi Relations Reached the Breaking Point,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-u-s-saudi-relations-reached-the-breaking-point-11650383578>

20. Barak Ravid, “Biden Officials in Saudi Arabia for Talks on Oil, Planned Visit,” *Axios*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/25/biden-officials-saudi-arabia-talks-oil-visit-israel-egypt>

21. Stanley Reed, “OPEC Plus Agrees to a Bigger Increase in Oil Supply. But Prices Keep Rising,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/02/business/opec-oil-saudi.html>

22. Ned Price, “Department Press Briefing,” U.S. Department of State, June 6, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-june-6-2022/#post-350087-SAUDI>

This sparked intense pushback from human rights groups and members of Congress against the Biden administration for appearing to abandon human rights commitments and assisting in the international whitewashing of MBS's image.<sup>23</sup> Criticism was so strong that Biden published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* to justify the visit.<sup>24</sup> Despite raising Khashoggi's murder during the visit, which notably upset the Crown Prince, the infamous fist bump between Biden and MBS symbolized the administration's rehabilitation of the Saudi leader.<sup>25</sup>

The administration had expended significant diplomatic effort—and given up a prized presidential visit—to repair the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Yet, in early October, just weeks ahead of the U.S. midterm elections and after Saudi Arabia had assured the United States it would not do so, OPEC+ significantly cut oil production.<sup>26</sup> In response, Biden threatened Saudi Arabia with “consequences,” the White House announced it would again reassess the relationship, and Congress drafted punitive measures.<sup>27</sup>

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Human rights groups, who had warned that MBS would be emboldened by Biden's visit, were proven correct when the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia deteriorated significantly following the trip.<sup>28</sup> From August through October 2022, the kingdom issued unprecedentedly lengthy prison sentences and travel bans for free expression on social media: among them, Salma al-Shehab received 34 years, Nourah al-Qahtani 45 years, and U.S. citizen Saad Almadi 16 years in prison.<sup>29</sup> Prominent

23. Jackie Northam, “Biden Will Visit Saudi Arabia to Ask for an Increase in Oil Production,” NPR, June 25, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/25/1107628743/biden-will-visit-saudi-arabia-to-ask-for-an-increase-in-oil-production>; “Joint Letter – President Biden Must Set Preconditions for Meeting with Saudi Crown Prince,” Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC), et al., June 9, 2022, <https://mideastdc.org/publication/joint-letter-president-biden-must-set-preconditions-for-meeting-with-saudi-crown-prince/>; Adam Schiff (@RepAdamSchiff), “The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia ordered the brutal murder of an American resident and journalist, Jamal Khashoggi. For that — and many other human rights violations — he should be shunned. I would not meet with him or shake his hand. President Biden shouldn't either,” Twitter (now X), June 5, 2022, <https://x.com/RepAdamSchiff/status/1533524056955269120>; Andy Levin (@RepAndyLevin), “@POTUS should NOT meet w/ MBS. MBS approved journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder—according to his own admin! MBS is responsible for human rights violations at home & abroad. This sends a terrible signal to the global community & undermines US credibility,” Twitter (now X), June 3, 2022, <https://x.com/RepAndyLevin/status/1532893642423140353>

24. Joe Biden, “What I Hope to Accomplish in Saudi Arabia and Israel,” *Washington Post*, July 9, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/09/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-israel-visit/>

25. “Saudi Arabia: Biden Raised Khashoggi Murder with Crown Prince,” BBC News, July 15, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-62186332>; Barak Ravid, “Biden Lands in Saudi Arabia, Fist Bumps MBS,” *Axios*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/07/15/biden-visit-saudi-arabia-mohammed-bin-salman-photo>; Kalin, Said, and Nissenbaum, “U.S.-Saudi Relations Buckle.”

26. Mark Mazzetti, Edward Wong, and Adam Entous, “U.S. Officials Had a Secret Oil Deal With the Saudis. Or So They Thought,” *New York Times*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/25/us/politics/us-saudi-oil-deal.html>

27. Natasha Turak, “Biden Threatens ‘Consequences’ for Saudi Arabia After OPEC Cut, but his Options Are Limited,” CNBC, October 12, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/10/12/biden-threatens-consequences-for-saudi-arabia-after-opec-cut.html>; Kalin, Said, and Nissenbaum, “U.S.-Saudi Relations Buckle”; Office of Rep. Sean Casten, “Representatives Casten, Malinowski and Wild Introduce Bill to Remove U.S. Troops from Saudi Arabia and UAE amid OPEC's Drastic Cut in Oil Production,” press release, October 6, 2022, <https://casten.house.gov/media/press-releases/representatives-casten-malinowski-and-wild-introduce-bill-remove-us-troops>

28. MEDC, “Biden Must Set Preconditions for Meeting.”

29. Salma al-Shehab's sentence was later reduced to 27 years in January 2023; Saad Almadi was released in March 2023, but remains trapped in Saudi Arabia on travel ban.; “Salma al-Shehab,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, accessed December 6, 2024, <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/salma-al-shehab/>; “Saudi Arabia: Government Sentences Woman to 45 Years for Her Tweets,” DAWN, August 30, 2022, <https://dawnmena.org/saudi-arabia-government-sentences-woman-to-45-years-for-her-tweets/>; Josh Rogin, “Saudi Arabia Sentences U.S. Citizen to 16 Years in Prison for Tweets,” *Washington Post*, October 17, 2022; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/17/almadi-sentenced-tweets-saudi-arabia/>; Marita Moloney, “Saad Ibrahim Almadi: Saudi Arabia Releases U.S. Man Jailed over Tweets,” BBC, March 21, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65022370>





Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrives in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and is greeted by Saudi Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Waleed Al-Khuraiji, on June 7, 2023. Photo: U.S. Department of State

human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani was also forcibly disappeared shortly before the completion of his unjust 10-year prison sentence.<sup>30</sup> The administration's failure to respond beyond a couple of concerns raised at State Department press briefings was a signal that human rights were no longer a consideration in U.S.-Saudi relations.<sup>31</sup>

With the administration reeling from the embarrassing OPEC+ decision and MBS enraged by Biden raising Khashoggi's murder, the U.S.-Saudi relationship reached another serious low point. But in late 2022, several events helped change the trajectory

of the relationship, including the kingdom warning the United States about an imminent Iranian attack in the region and a better-than-anticipated Democratic midterm performance.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, Track II diplomacy concerning normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia publicly demonstrated the kingdom's interest in the initiative.<sup>33</sup>

The Biden administration had initially been hesitant to embrace the Trump-era "Abraham Accords," a set of normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and later Morocco and Sudan.<sup>34</sup> But in its effort to repair the strained relationship

30. "Saudi Arabia: Further Information: Human Rights Defender Forcibly Disappeared: Mohammed Al-Qahtani," Amnesty International, November 4, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/6180/2022/en/>

31. Ned Price, "Department Press Briefing," U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-17-2022/>; Ned Price, "Department Press Briefing," U.S. Department of State, August 22, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-22-2022/>

32. Leila Fadel and Domenico Montanaro, "How Democrats Were Able to Perform Better than Expected in Midterm Elections," NPR, November 14, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/14/1136423401/how-democrats-were-able-to-perform-better-than-expected-in-midterm-elections>; Dion Nissenbaum, "Saudi Arabia, U.S. on High Alert After Warning of Imminent Iranian Attack," *Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-u-s-on-high-alert-after-warning-of-imminent-iranian-attack-11667319274>

33. Robert Satloff and David Schenker, "Inside Saudi Arabia: A Trip Report," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-saudi-arabia-trip-report>; John Hannah, "Israel Can Normalize Ties with Saudi Arabia - With Biden's Help," *Jerusalem Post*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-726558>

34. Jen Psaki, "Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jen Psaki Aboard Air Force One En Route Detroit, MI," The White House, May 18, 2021, <https://il.usembassy.gov/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki/>

and amid sustained bipartisan congressional support for the accords, the Biden administration adopted Trump's plan.<sup>35</sup> In June 2022, it was reported that administration officials were working on a plan for normalization, and by November, the Saudi government had articulated to administration officials and pro-Israeli think tanks its concrete demands in exchange for normalization. These demands included a Senate-ratified agreement committing the United States to come to Saudi Arabia's defense, which would be unprecedented for the region, and an agreement to partner with the kingdom to develop a civilian nuclear program.<sup>36</sup>

By January 2023, the relationship had improved enough that the administration was no longer planning to "punish" the kingdom for refusing to further increase oil production.<sup>37</sup> To the contrary, the administration recommended MBS receive legal immunity in a lawsuit related to Jamal Khashoggi's murder and reportedly worked to stymie a bill in Congress that was perceived as threatening the relationship.<sup>38</sup>

Trying to capitalize on this improved terrain, the administration sent Republican Senator Lindsey Graham to the kingdom in April 2023 to explore further the Saudi regime's seriousness in normalizing relations with Israel.<sup>39</sup> This visit, following recently re-elected Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's declaration that normalization would be a top priority for his government, marked the Biden administration's full embrace of the Trump-era policy and kick-started an intensified diplomatic push.<sup>40</sup> U.S. policymakers began to publicly argue normalization was a U.S. national security interest and conveyed a sense of urgency to the Saudi government, noting that Democrats in Congress would be much more likely to approve a formal security pact with a Democrat in the White House.<sup>41</sup>

“By January 2023, the relationship had improved enough that the administration was no longer planning to “punish” the kingdom for refusing to further increase oil production.”

By September 2023, signs of progress appeared to emerge, with MBS remarking that the parties “every day . . . get closer to a deal.”<sup>42</sup> On October 4, as momentum was picking up, 20 Democratic

35. Office of Jacky Rosen, “Rosen, Colleagues Launch Bipartisan Senate Abraham Accords Caucus,” press release, January 10, 2022, <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/2022/01/10/rosen-colleagues-launch-bipartisan-senate-abraham-accords-caucus/>

36. Barak Ravid, “Scoop: U.S. Working On Normalization ‘Road Map’ for Saudi Arabia and Israel,” *Axios*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/06/22/israel-saudi-arabia-normalization-biden-administration>; Satloff and Schenker, “Inside Saudi Arabia”; Hannah, “Israel Can Normalize Ties with Saudi Arabia.”

37. Missy Ryan, “Biden Vowed to Punish Saudis over Oil Cut. That’s No Longer the Plan.” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/01/26/biden-saudis-consequences-oil-cut/>

38. Oliver Slow and Alys Davies, “Mohammed Bin Salman: Saudi Leader Given US Immunity over Khashoggi Killing,” *BBC*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63671947>; Dion Nissenbaum, Stephen Kalin, and Nancy Youssef, “U.S.-Saudi Tensions Ease as Concerns About Iran Grow,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-saudi-tensions-ease-as-concerns-about-iran-grow-11672927633>

39. Jacob Magid, “GOP Senator: Window for Israel-Saudi Normalization Deal Could Close Within a Year,” *Times of Israel*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-senator-window-for-israel-saudi-normalization-deal-could-close-within-a-year/>

40. “Netanyahu Takes to Saudi Television to Push for Normalisation with Israel,” *Middle East Eye*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-netanyahu-saudi-arabia-push-normalisation-state-television>; Barak Ravid, “Biden Admin Pushing for Saudi-Israeli Peace Deal by End of Year, Officials Say,” *Axios*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/05/17/saudi-arabia-israel-peace-normalization-deal-biden-admin>

41. Jacob Magid, “Top Biden Aide Says Israeli-Saudi Normalization a US National Security Interest,” *Times of Israel*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-biden-aide-says-israeli-saudi-normalization-a-us-national-security-interest/>; Ravid, “Biden Admin Pushing for Saudi-Israeli Peace Deal.”

42. Rebecca Falconer, “Mbs on Saudi Arabia Normalizing Ties with Israel: ‘Every Day We Get Closer,’” *Axios*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/09/21/saudi-crown-prince-mbs-fox-news-interview>



Senators raised concern in a letter to Biden about the parameters of the normalization deal, including the “treaty-backed security guarantee” and civilian nuclear program, and the letter identified elements they deemed necessary to preserve a two-state solution between the Palestinians and Israelis that should be included in the deal.<sup>43</sup>

The administration’s hopes for a grand deal were upended by the October 7 Hamas-led attack on Israel and Israel’s ensuing assault on Gaza. Saudi Arabia quickly paused normalization negotiations, recognizing the political risks of normalization during Israel’s war on Gaza.<sup>44</sup> In response, the Biden administration focused on rekindling talks by packaging normalization as a silver bullet that could end the war on Gaza, stabilize the region, deter Iran, pave the way to Palestinian self-governance, and secure Saudi Arabia’s alignment with the United States against China and Russia.<sup>45</sup> Despite Netanyahu’s increasingly hardline opposition to a Palestinian state and Saudi officials’ strengthened demands for a future Palestinian state, the administration doubled down on normalization.<sup>46</sup>

As the end of Biden’s term approached, the administration remained undeterred, focusing on finalizing the bilateral security package with the kingdom in the hopes that it would incentivize Israel

to then make the concessions necessary to reach a normalization agreement.<sup>47</sup> In spring 2024, U.S. officials said they were optimistic and were reportedly finalizing the details of such an agreement.<sup>48</sup> In the weeks and months following, the administration, alongside Senators Lindsey Graham and Richard Blumenthal, continued an unrealistic push for normalization despite immense hurdles in the region and the United States, which Senator Chris Coons noted would make ratification of a security treaty “exceptionally difficult.”<sup>49</sup> Although unable to secure a larger agreement, the administration remained firm in its effort to keep the possibility open, reversing its prohibition on offensive arms sales and notifying Congress of more than \$4.6 billion in arms sales in 2024, including the air-to-ground precision guided munitions the administration had suspended in 2021.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, Biden will leave office having rehabilitated MBS on the global stage and having failed to achieve his grand design to reshape the Middle East. He not only neglected to secure accountability for the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, but he also looked the other way as the human rights situation in the kingdom turned markedly worse. MBS repeatedly outplayed the Biden administration at pivotal moments, preventing Biden from achieving key U.S. goals.

43. Office of Senator Peter Welch, “Murphy, Van Hollen, Durbin, Welch Lead 16 Senators In Letter To President Biden On U.S. Role In Potential Normalization Agreement Between Saudi Arabia And Israel,” press release, October 4, 2023, <https://www.welch.senate.gov/murphy-van-hollen-durbin-welch-lead-16-senators-in-letter-to-president-biden-on-u-s-role-in-potential-normalization-agreement-between-saudi-arabia-and-israel/>

44. “Saudi Arabia Pauses Normalisation Talks with Israel amid Ongoing War with Hamas,” France 24, October 14, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231014-saudi-arabia-pauses-normalisation-talks-with-israel-amid-ongoing-war-with-hamas>

45. Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Jacobs, and Peter Martin, “US and Saudis Near Defense Pact Meant to Reshape Middle East,” Bloomberg, May 1, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-01/us-and-saudis-near-defense-pact-aimed-at-reshaping-middle-east>

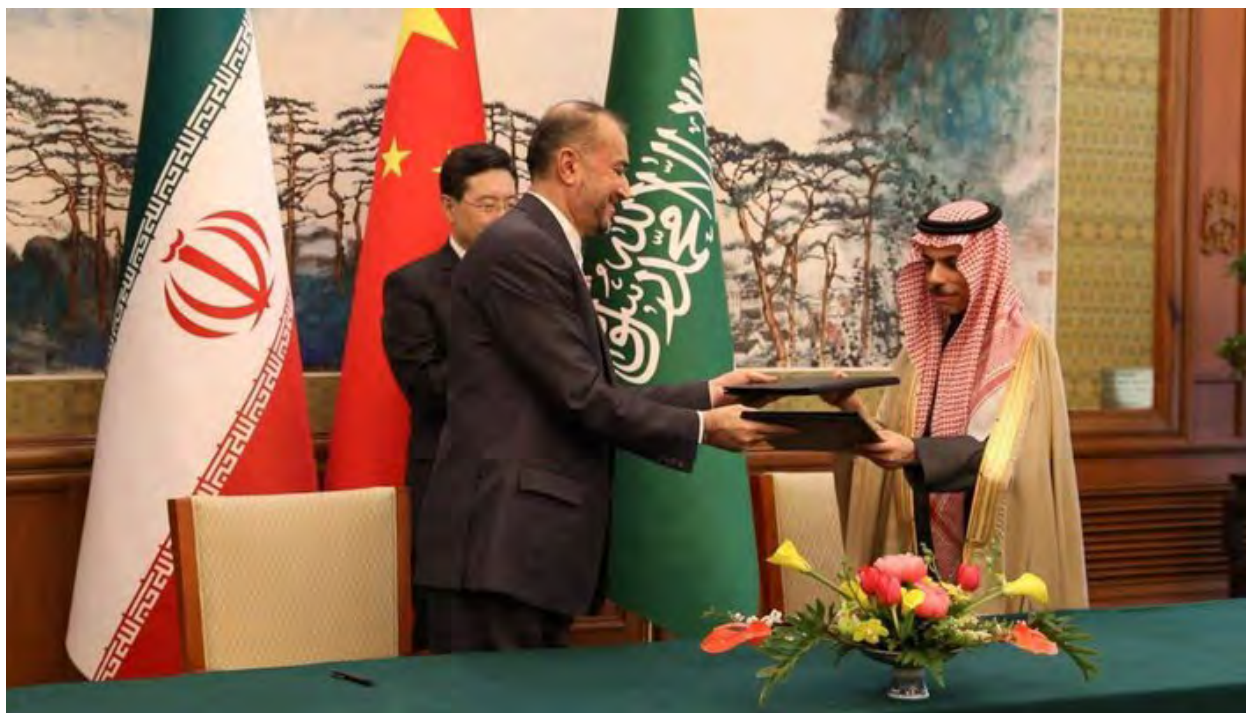
46. Ishaan Tharoor, “What Netanyahu Sees from the River to the Sea,” *Washington Post*, January 22, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/01/22/netanyahu-biden-two-state-solution-palestine-river-to-sea/>; “Saudi Arabia Won’t Normalize Israel Relations Without Palestinian State Plan, Top Diplomat Says,” PBS News, January 22, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/saudi-arabia-wont-normalize-israel-relations-without-palestinian-state-plan-top-diplomat-says>; Adam Cancryn, “White House Adviser Jake Sullivan and Saudi Crown Prince Mbs Meet over Gaza Crisis,” *Politico*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/12/13/white-house-adviser-jake-sullivan-and-saudi-crown-prince-mbs-meet-over-gaza-crisis-00131640>

47. Shaun Tandon, “Blinken Says US Almost Ready with Saudi Rewards for Israel Normalisation,” *Al-Monitor*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/blinken-says-us-almost-ready-saudi-rewards-israel-normalisation>

48. Nardelli, Jacobs, and Martin, “US and Saudis Near Defense Pact”; Becky Anderson, Mostafa Salem, and Jennifer Hansler, “None Go Forward Without the Others: US Mega-Deal Would Tie Together the Futures of Saudi Arabia, Israel and Gaza,” CNN, May 3, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/02/middleeast/us-saudi-treaty-israel-palestinian-statehood-intl/index.html>

49. “Senior Senators Warn Israel-Saudi Normalisation is Slipping Away From US,” *Middle East Eye*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/senior-us-senators-warn-israel-saudi-normalisation-slipping-away>; Itamar Eichner, “US Senators in Jerusalem Say No Saudi Normalization Is ‘Victory’ for Iran,” Reuters, October 8, 2024, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/h1xodhgykl>

50. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.dscs.mil/tags/Kingdom-saudi-arabia>



*Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Saudi counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, sign a joint statement on the restoration of diplomatic relations, with Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang in the background on April 6, 2023. Photo: Mehr News Agency*

## PART TWO: KEY POLICY DRIVERS IN THE U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP

Understanding why President Biden executed a policy starkly opposed to his campaign promises requires examining key strategic interests in the U.S.-Saudi relationship in further detail. The second part of this paper explores great power competition, which became the central foreign policy priority of the administration; regional integration and countering Iran, a focus of successive bipartisan administrations; security cooperation, which has long been a linchpin of the U.S.-Saudi relationship; economic cooperation, which MBS was able to leverage to rehabilitate his image on the international stage; and human rights, which the Biden administration quickly abandoned due to the preceding interests which were deemed more important.

### Great Power Competition

The administration's overarching concern about its strategic competition with China, as well as Russia, meant that more often than not disagreements with Saudi Arabia were papered over and human rights concerns were sidelined.<sup>51</sup> The administration tried to use initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, and negotiate a security pact to secure Saudi Arabia's alignment with the United States. This strategy, however, was rife with contradictions. The Biden administration framed the world as being mired in an existential "battle between democracy and autocracy," but pursued Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy with a horrific human rights record, as a key partner in its struggle against China and Russia.<sup>52</sup> The result was a quick retreat from his

51. Jake Sullivan, "The Sources of American Power: A Foreign Policy for a Changed World," *Foreign Affairs*, October 24, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/sources-american-power-biden-jake-sullivan>

52. Joe Biden, "Remarks of President Joe Biden – State of the Union Address As Prepared for Delivery," The White House, March 1, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/01/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-delivered/>; Peter Baker, "Biden Takes His Battle for Democracy Case by Case," *New York Times*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/25/us/politics/biden-democracy-autocracy.html>

campaign promise to center human rights. The administration also sought to initially reduce the U.S. security presence in the region. Yet, as President Biden himself candidly stated to an audience of Middle Eastern autocrats, he would not “leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran.”<sup>53</sup>

MBS's ambitions to solidify Saudi Arabia's role as a regional and global power meant that fostering multi-polar relationships would be inherently beneficial and a useful tool of leverage to extract concessions from the United States.<sup>54</sup> At key moments, Saudi Arabia rebuffed the United States or flaunted its closeness with China and Russia. When the Biden administration in August 2021 publicly requested that OPEC+ boost oil production, for example, Saudi Arabia instead signed a military cooperation deal with Russia.<sup>55</sup> When President Biden again requested an oil production boost in early 2022, MBS refused to speak with President Biden and instead spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and also suggested the possibility of using the yuan for oil sales instead of the dollar.<sup>56</sup> Crucially, in response to these snubs, the Biden administration took steps to further embrace and rehabilitate MBS, confirming the crown prince could manipulate U.S. fears over great power competition.

While U.S. fears over certain aspects of its competition with China and Russia are reasonable, particularly over advanced dual-use technology, it is highly doubtful that any other country is capable of, let alone interested in, supplanting the U.S.

“Even if Saudi Arabia wanted or needed to turn to China or Russia for its arms, this would be a decades-long process due to financial, procurement, and integration complexities.”

security role in the region. China, for example, has little interest in acting as a security guarantor for Arab states, given the human, political, and economic burdens of such a role.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, even if Saudi Arabia wanted or needed to turn to China or Russia for its arms, this would be a decades-long process due to financial, procurement, and integration complexities.<sup>58</sup> Despite the low likelihood of this shift, the United States engaged with Saudi Arabia from a position of weakness, as if at any moment Saudi Arabia would “rupture” its relationship with the United States and turn towards its strategic competitors.<sup>59</sup>

### Regional Integration and Countering Iran

The Biden administration also sought to counter Iran, and one key pillar of this goal was pursuing regional integration.<sup>60</sup> The administration hoped that if partners in the region were able to defend themselves and each other, Iran would successfully

53. David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, “As Biden Reaches Out to Mideast Dictators, His Eyes Are on China and Russia,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/16/world/middleeast/biden-saudi-arabia-china-russia.html>

54. Kalin, Said, and Cloud, “How U.S.-Saudi Relations Reached the Breaking Point.”

55. Hunnicutt and Mason, “U.S. Calls on OPEC and Its Allies to Pump More Oil”; Chyrine Mezher, “Russia, KSA Strengthen Military Ties In Signal To Washington; UAVs, Helos Potentially On Table,” *Breaking Defense*, September 1, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/09/russia-ksa-strengthen-military-ties-in-signal-to-washington-uavs-helos-potentially-on-table/>

56. Nissenbaum, Kalin, and Cloud, “Saudi, Emirati Leaders Decline Calls With Biden”; Said and Kalin, “Saudi Arabia Considers Accepting Yuan.”

57. Christopher Preble and Will A. Smith, “Great Power Competition Shouldn't Drive US Policy in the Middle East,” *Stimson Center*, October 31, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/great-power-competition-shouldnt-drive-us-policy-in-the-middle-east/>; MEDC interview with former U.S. government official, November 7, 2024

58. MEDC interview with civil society activist, November 19, 2024; MEDC interview with former U.S. government official, November 7, 2024.

59. “Reorient... Not Rupture: Biden Defends Saudi Visit in Column,” *Al Jazeera*, July 10, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/10/reorient-not-rupture-biden-defends-saudi-visit-in-column>

60. “U.S. Central Command Theater Strategy, 2023,” U.S. Central Command, June 8, 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/THEATER-STRATEGY/>



be deterred, the region would be more stable, and Israel more secure.<sup>61</sup> Undergirding the pursuit of regional integration was the belief that this would free up U.S. resources for its competition with China and Russia by making partners increasingly responsible for their own defense. This fantastical premise, however, was belied by decades of security cooperation that had completely failed to build sufficient and effective capabilities for partners to defend themselves.

Previous administrations pursued similar efforts but to little avail: President Barack Obama secured an agreement among the Gulf Cooperation Council states to develop a “region-wide ballistic missile defense capability;” President Trump pushed for an “Arab NATO” and eventually the Abraham Accords; and President Biden supported the Middle East Air Defense Initiative and Saudi-Israel normalization.<sup>62</sup> Congress has also been highly invested in regional integration among U.S. partners in the region; it created a bipartisan Abraham Accords Caucus in both the House and Senate and advanced legislation to support the advancement of integration.<sup>63</sup>

Yet for Saudi Arabia, who feared U.S. abandonment, participating in a regional anti-Iran coalition risked actualizing that fear. Greater regional integration would also force the kingdom to tie its security to other states, including Israel, and

put Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states on the front lines of any potential Iranian-led attack.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, instead of subscribing to the administration’s vision, bin Salman sought to normalize relations with Iran and seek a bilateral, Senate-ratified security guarantee.<sup>65</sup>

For MBS, Saudi-Israel normalization was a convenient vehicle to get the security guarantee he desperately wanted from the United States. For the United States, it was envisioned as a silver bullet to counter Iran, enhance Israel’s security by integrating it more into the region, align the kingdom with the United States, end the war in Gaza, and put the Palestinians on a path towards their own state.

### Security Cooperation

The United States has a long history of security cooperation with the Saudi government, with most attention paid to the arms sold to Saudi Arabia over the years. Since 2008, for example, successive administrations have proposed \$150 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2019 and 2023 nearly 80 percent of the arms the kingdom imported were from the United States.<sup>66</sup> In the first few months of his term, Biden used that leverage as a tool to extract concessions from Saudi Arabia, particularly regarding its war in Yemen.<sup>67</sup>

61. MEDC interview with former U.S. government official, November 7, 2024.

62. Office of the Press Secretary, “Annex to U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement,” The White House, May 14, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>; Yara Bayoumy, Jonathan Landay and Warren Strobel, “Trump seeks to revive ‘Arab NATO’ to confront Iran,” Reuters, July 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/trump-seeks-to-revive-arab-nato-to-confront-iran-idUSKBN1KH2IJ/>; Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, “Biden Wants a Middle East Air Defense ‘Alliance.’ But It’s a Long Way Off,” *Politico*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/07/12/biden-middle-east-air-defense-alliance-00045423>

63. Office of Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, “Supporting Peace With The Abraham Accords Caucus,” press release, January 10, 2022, <https://mcmorris.house.gov/posts/supporting-peace-with-the-abraham-accords-caucus>; Adam Kozloski, “What Congress Has in Mind for the Future of the Abraham Accords,” Atlantic Council, November 27, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/ndaa-abraham-accords-congress/>

64. Interview with former U.S. government official, November 7, 2024.

65. “Great Expectations: The Future of Iranian-Saudi Détente,” International Crisis Group, June 13, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/b92-great-expectations-future>; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Difficulties Facing a US-Saudi Security Agreement,” Arab Center Washington DC, June 25, 2024, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/difficulties-facing-a-us-saudi-security-agreement/>

66. Christopher M. Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, October 2, 2023, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>; Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain, Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2024, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs\\_2403\\_at\\_2023.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf)

67. Elizabeth Dent, Grant Rumley, “How the U.S. Used Arms Sales to Shift Saudi Behavior,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 4, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-us-used-arms-sales-shift-saudi-behavior>



*A U.S. Army Soldier with 541st Division Sustainment Support Battalion briefs the members of the Royal Saudi Armed Forces during exercise Native Fury 24 at a Logistics Support Area established in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, May 7, 2024. Photo: U.S. Marine Corps photo by 2nd Marine Logistics Group*

Nevertheless, despite moments of heightened tensions during Biden's term, the security partnership proved strong enough to avoid significant disruption. For example, in the fall of 2022, when tensions between the countries erupted after OPEC+ announced that it would not boost oil production, Saudi authorities still warned the United States of an "imminent attack" from Iran which never materialized.<sup>68</sup> This is in no small part due to the decades-long partnership that extends beyond arms sales. It includes counterterrorism cooperation; approximately 2,700 U.S. troops stationed in the country; maritime security cooperation; bilateral and multilateral military exercises; and, since 1977, a U.S. military training mission in Saudi Arabia that trains, advises, and assists the Saudi armed forces.<sup>69</sup>

From MBS's perspective, though, this level of security cooperation was insufficient to assuage his fears of U.S. abandonment, which was reignited when the United States pulled anti-missile defense systems from Saudi Arabia in 2021.<sup>70</sup> MBS wanted a more permanent commitment, such as a bilateral security pact, that could not be overturned by the whims of the next president. The Biden administration pursued this agreement, with growing congressional support, but never publicly addressed the major risks with such a deal that were obvious on its face — namely, whether it would be in the U.S. interest to send U.S. forces to defend a brutal authoritarian regime. After years of partnership — and the associated increased capabilities afforded the Saudi armed forces — the administration never reconciled with the fact that

68. Nissenbaum, "Saudi Arabia, U.S. on High Alert."

69. Joe Biden, "Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate on War Powers Report," The White House, June 8, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/08/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-on-war-powers-report/>; "USMTM Mission, Vision, and Commander's Intent," U.S. Central Command, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.centcom.mil/OPERATIONS-AND-EXERCISES/USMTM/>

70. Oren Liebermann, "Pentagon Pulls Missile Defense, Other Systems from Saudi Arabia and Other Middle East Countries," CNN, June 18, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/18/politics/pentagon-remove-missile-defense-saudi-arabia-middle-east/index.html>

U.S. security cooperation has not resulted in an effective fighting force or one better committed to international law.<sup>71</sup> And with no demonstrable record of accountability or reform, it is hard to see how the United States could expect different outcomes in the future.

### Economic Cooperation

One of the major outcomes that occurred during Biden's presidency was the complete global rehabilitation of MBS, which was a crucial factor in eliminating concerns for businesses and private investors. Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2022 solidified MBS's full exoneration and unencumbered return to the world stage. Many in the business community who largely shied away from Saudi Arabia following the global outcry over the murder of Khashoggi eventually re-embraced MBS with the Biden administration's support, including a Saudi minister-hosted forum attended by business leaders in Washington highlighting the kingdom's regulatory reforms.<sup>72</sup>

The Biden administration embraced MBS's Vision 2030, and during Biden's visit to Jeddah, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed eighteen economic deals.<sup>73</sup> The administration hoped to limit the encroachment of China, Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner and top oil purchaser, particularly into key sectors such as advanced semiconductors, artificial intelligence,

“Many in the business community who largely shied away from Saudi Arabia following the global outcry over the murder of Khashoggi eventually re-embraced MBS with the Biden administration's support.”

telecommunications, and other dual-use technology.<sup>74</sup> It also sought to integrate Saudi Arabia into several global and regional economic efforts to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative, such as the U.S. Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, in which Saudi Arabia promised to partner with the United States to “mobilize hundreds of billions of dollars.”<sup>75</sup>

Although the United States imports far less oil from Saudi Arabia than it did in past decades, the kingdom's critical role in influencing the price of oil in global markets has meant that oil still plays a significant role in the U.S.-Saudi relationship.<sup>76</sup> Biden's repeated failures to sway Saudi Arabia on

71. Andrew Exum, “What's Really at Stake for America in Yemen's Conflict,” *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/yemen-trump-aqap/522957/>; “They Fired on Us Like Rain: Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border,” Human Rights Watch, August 21, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/08/21/they-fired-us-rain/saudi-arabian-mass-killings-ethiopian-migrants-yemen-saudi>

72. Jonathan Guyer, “How Saudi Money Returned to Silicon Valley,” *Vox*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/technology/2023/5/1/23702451/silicon-valley-saudi-money-khashoggi>; Elise Labott, “How Biden Came Around to MBS' Plan for a New U.S.-Saudi Partnership,” *Politico*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/15/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-trip-bin-salman-00039679>

73. Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia,” U.S. Department of State, November 1, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-saudi-arabia/>; Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, “18 Saudi-US Agreements Covering Space, Investment, Energy, Communications and Health Concluded,” July 15, 2022, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/18-saudi-us-agreements-covering-space-investment-energy-communications-and-health-concluded>

74. Natasha Turak, “Saudi Arabia and China are Part of a Multipolar World Order, and Their Mutual Interests are ‘Strong and Rising,’ Minister Says,” *CNBC*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.cbc.com/2023/06/14/china-and-saudi-arabia-are-part-of-a-multipolar-world-order-minister.html>; Keith Bradsher, “China's Economic Stake in the Middle East: Its Thirst for Oil,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/business/china-oil-saudi-arabia-iran.html>; Adam Satariano and Paul Mozur, “‘To the Future’: Saudi Arabia Spends Big to Become an A.I. Superpower,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/25/technology/saudi-arabia-ai.html>; Noah Berman, Lindsay Maizland, and Andrew Chatzky, “Is China's Huawei a Threat to U.S. National Security?” Council on Foreign Relations, February 8, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-huawei-threat-us-national-security>

75. “Fact Sheet: Results of Bilateral Meeting Between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” The White House, July 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/15/fact-sheet-results-of-bilateral-meeting-between-the-united-states-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>

76. Said and Kalin, “Saudi Arabia Considers Accepting Yuan.”



oil production was a recurring source of tension between the countries. But by early 2023, much of the public feuding had ceased as the United States began diligently pursuing Saudi-Israeli normalization and inflation stabilized.

For MBS, the shunning by investors was particularly threatening to his goals of asserting Saudi Arabia as a regional power and advancing Vision 2030. His successful rehabilitation on the world stage and the omnipresence of investments from Saudi Arabia's \$925 billion sovereign wealth fund has meant that pressure on MBS and the Saudi government — especially from the United States — for ongoing human rights violations has dramatically diminished.<sup>77</sup>

### Human Rights

The early progress the Biden administration secured on human rights — such as high profile political prisoner releases and a shifted Saudi approach in Yemen — were largely attributable to Biden's rhetoric on the campaign trail and his policies in the first two months of his presidency.<sup>78</sup> After four years, however, the environment for fundamental freedoms in Saudi Arabia is quantitatively and qualitatively worse than before the Biden administration took office.<sup>79</sup> The kingdom, among other

things, had a higher number of executions in 2024 than in the previous three decades; issued an unprecedented death sentence against retired teacher Mohammad al-Ghamdi for exercising his right to free expression (his sentence was later reduced to 30 years); expanded its crackdown on innocuous social media posts by handing an untold number of individuals unconscionable, decades-long sentences; forcibly expelled the Huwaitat tribe in order to construct its megaproject Neom and detained and sentenced to death members of the tribe; and refused to release many of the family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents that are unjustly detained in the kingdom.<sup>80</sup>

The administration justified sidelining human rights issues in an attempt to avoid friction in an already tense relationship and advance other interests it deemed more important. Even in embracing Saudi Arabia's promised economic reforms, the United States sidelined concerns around corruption, personal privacy protections, and good governance that could have led to more equitable growth for Saudis and protection for international businesses. After Biden did not sanction him for Khashoggi's murder, MBS quickly learned that the Biden administration was unwilling to substantively challenge the regime on issues of Saudi domestic repression.

77. Rohan Goswami, "Lucid, Activision, EA, Uber: Here's Where Saudi Arabia's Sovereign Wealth Fund Has Invested," CNBC, July 11, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/07/11/activision-ea-uber-heres-where-saudi-arabias-pif-has-invested.html>; Public Investment Fund, "Our Portfolio," Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/our-investments/our-portfolio/>; "The Man Who Bought The World: Rights Abuses Linked to Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and Its Chairman, Mohammed bin Salman," Human Rights Watch, November 20, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/11/20/man-who-bought-world/rights-abuses-linked-saudi-arabias-public-investment-fund>; MEDC interview with professional at human rights organization, November 8, 2024.

78. Kalin, Said, and Nissenbaum, "U.S.-Saudi Relations Buckle"; "Release of Saudi-American Political Prisoners Dr. Bader al-Ibrahim and Salah al-Haidar," The Freedom Initiative (now the Middle East Democracy Center), February 4, 2021, <https://mideastdc.org/publication/release-of-saudi-american-political-prisoners-dr-bader-al-ibrahim-and-salah-al-haidar/>; Dent and Rumley, "U.S. Used Arms Sales to Shift Saudi Behavior"; Alex Emmons, Aída Chávez, and Akela Lacy, "Joe Biden, in Departure From Obama Policy, Says He Would Make Saudi Arabia a 'Pariah,'" The Intercept, November 21, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/21/democratic-debate-joe-biden-saudi-arabia/>

79. MEDC interview with professional at human rights organization, November 8, 2024.

80. "Saudi Arabia: Highest Execution Toll in Decades as Authorities Put to Death 198 People," Amnesty International, September 28, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/saudi-arabia-highest-execution-toll-in-decades-as-authorities-put-to-death-198-people/>; Benjamin Barthe, "Saudi Arabia Sentences Teacher to Death for Criticizing Government on Social Media," Le Monde, August 30, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/08/30/saudi-arabia-sentences-teacher-to-death-for-criticizing-government-on-social-media\\_6116443\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/08/30/saudi-arabia-sentences-teacher-to-death-for-criticizing-government-on-social-media_6116443_4.html); "Tweets or 'Terrorism?': Saudi's Jailed Online Activists," Agence France-Presse, May 1, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/05/tweets-or-terrorism-saudis-jailed-online-activists#ixzz8Z03gcNYx>; "The Dark Side of Neom: Expropriation, Expulsion and Prosecution of the Region's Inhabitants," ALQST, <https://alqst.org/uploads/the-dark-side-of-neom-expropriation-expulsion-and-prosecution-en.pdf>, 5, 10; "Abdulrahman Al-Sadhan," U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/abdulrahman-al-sadhan>; "Salman al-Ouda," U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/salman-al-ouda>; Umar Farooq, "'Where's My Father?': Prominent Saudi Activist's Family Plead with US to Secure his Freedom," Middle East Eye, April 3, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/wheres-my-father-prominent-saudi-activists-family-plead-us-secure-his-freedom>; "Saudi Arabia: Death Sentence for Social Media Posts Commuted," Amnesty International, November 14, 2024, <https://amnesty.ca/urgent-actions/saudi-arabia-death-sentence-for-social-media-posts-commuted/>



Saudi human rights defenders protest outside the Saudi embassy in Washington, May 3, 2024. Photo: Saudi People's Vision

MBS also recognized that creating interpersonal conflict with administration officials when human rights issues were raised would further discourage U.S. pressure. In September 2021, the crown prince reportedly yelled at National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan when he raised the murder of Khashoggi and told him he could forget about the U.S. request to increase oil production.<sup>81</sup> This dynamic was replicated when Biden visited the kingdom and again publicly raised the case, reportedly upsetting MBS, who once again cut oil production in the months following.<sup>82</sup> After Biden's return from Jeddah, the administration effectively stopped publicly pressing Saudi Arabia about its human rights record.

Biden turning a blind eye to Saudi abuses has had dire costs for the Saudi activists, journalists, and dissidents (and their families) that President Biden entered office promising to

defend.<sup>83</sup> These dynamics have also given further credence to the longstanding argument that U.S. concerns about human rights and governance are merely a toothless talking point or a politicized weapon deployed against adversaries, especially as this administration repeatedly emphasized that human rights would be at the center of its foreign policy. This has come at the expense of the people in U.S. partner and adversary countries alike in their struggle for more rights and freedoms.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past four years, the Biden administration weighed many competing national security interests, and made a series of decisions amid emerging global crises. High inflation, already a challenge for the United States prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, meant that the

81. Kalin, Said, and Cloud, "How U.S.-Saudi Relations Reached the Breaking Point."

82. Said, Faucon, Nissenbaum, and Kalin, "Saudi Arabia Defied U.S. Warnings."

83. "Setting a New Tone: The Biden Team on Saudi Arabia," Project on Middle East Democracy, December 2020, [https://mideastdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020\\_12\\_SaudiFactSheet\\_Final.pdf](https://mideastdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020_12_SaudiFactSheet_Final.pdf)

Biden administration viewed Saudi Arabia as an indispensable country to help bring down skyrocketing energy prices.

Ultimately, the administration quickly demonstrated to MBS that it was not interested in pressing for human rights reforms when it proved inconvenient, or in ensuring that “the alliance actually reflects our interests and our values,” as Antony Blinken suggested was necessary in 2019.<sup>84</sup> The Biden administration quickly returned to a decades-long pattern of bolstering the Saudi regime in an attempt to advance interests it prioritized over human rights. The administration never truly tested the proposition that it could both uphold its commitment to recalibrate the U.S.-Saudi relationship, a process

that would take significant time and effort, and simultaneously advance its other priorities, such as warding off China’s encroachment into the region. Instead, the Biden administration sought to achieve Saudi-Israel normalization with an almost single-minded focus, ignored a key tenet of its National Security Strategy that warned against “grand designs,” rehabilitated the crown prince, and extended the Trump administration’s personalistic and transactional relationship with the kingdom.<sup>85</sup>

A forthcoming companion paper will examine the prospects for future U.S.-Saudi relations and recommend potential policy changes to better align U.S. interests and democratic values.

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84. Antony Blinken, interview by Michael Morell, “Transcript: Antony Blinken Talks with Michael Morell on “Intelligence Matters,” CBS News, January 9, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-antony-blinken-talks-with-michael-morell-on-intelligence-matters/>

85. The White House, “National Security Strategy,” October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>, 42



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