

## STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND POWER BALANCES: A REALIST ANALYSIS OF THE US-SAUDI ALLIANCE AMIDST NEW GLOBAL RIVALRIES

Shakar Mehdi<sup>1\*</sup>, Muntazir Mehdi<sup>2</sup>, Fathi F Elsieid Elfaghri<sup>3</sup>, Saleem Arshad Chheena<sup>4</sup>,  
Arbaz Raza<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>MS Scholar Department of Political Science and International Relation, Istanbul Aydin University,  
Turkey

<sup>2</sup>MA Political Science

<sup>3</sup>MS Scholar Department of Political Science and International Relation

<sup>4</sup>Visiting lecturer In Thal University Bhakkar

<sup>5</sup>Major Political Science & Mass Communication, Forman Christian College Chartered University Lahore

<sup>1\*</sup>[shahkarbhutta@gmail.com](mailto:shahkarbhutta@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[m.malikmahdi714@gmail.com](mailto:m.malikmahdi714@gmail.com), <sup>3</sup>[fathielsseid1207@gmail.com](mailto:fathielsseid1207@gmail.com),  
<sup>4</sup>[saleemchheena@gmail.com](mailto:saleemchheena@gmail.com), <sup>5</sup>[260710273@formanite.fccollege.edu.pk](mailto:260710273@formanite.fccollege.edu.pk)

Corresponding Author: \*

Received: June 22, 2024

Revised: July 31, 2024

Accepted: August 15, 2024

Published: August 27, 2024

### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the stable strategic alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States through the lens of Realist framework, amid the evolving global power dynamics. It explores the historical context of the alliance, emphasizing the mutual interests that have sustained it over years. The research employs qualitative methodology, considering state-level interactions and its implications for regional rivalries and global shifts in power dynamics. The findings reveal that despite new challenges, the alliance remains a keystone of geopolitical strategy, driven by confluence of security, economic, and political factors. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy makers in both states, suggesting adaptive strategies to direct the complexities of current international relations.

**Key Words:** realist theory, US-Saudi Alliance, strategic interests, power balances, global rivalries, geopolitical rivalries, geopolitical strategy.

### INTRODUCTION

The alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States has long been a cornerstone of international relations, particularly in the perspective of Middle East geopolitics. The stable partnership has been designed by a complex interplay of security, economic and political interests that have been adapted to and influenced the shifting sand of global power dynamics. As new global rivalries develop, the international order undergoes a significant change; a realist analysis of the alliance is more suitable than ever. This paper pursues to examine the US-Saudi relationship through the realist lens, which postulates that states act primarily in pursuit of their own security and power. By studying the

historical trajectory of this alliance, we will explore the shared strategic interests that have bound these two nations together in changing regional and global backdrop.

Using a qualitative methodology, the study will look into state-level analysis and evaluate the broader implications for regional conflicts and developing architecture of global power. In the epoch of new challenges, including the emergence of alternative power centers and reconfiguration of traditional alliances, this research aims to understand the spirit of the US-Saudi partnership.

The findings will place light on the factors that continue to reinforce this alliance, present insight

into its role as an essential element of geopolitical strategy. The paper will conclude with targeted recommendations for policy makers in both states suggesting strategies examine the intricacies of current international relations. The analysis aims to contribute the understanding of the strategic imperatives that will outline the future trajectories of US-Saudi alliance in an increasingly multipolar world.

### **Literature Review:**

Abdel Aziz (2023) in his work “The Saudi-US Alliance Challenges and Resilience 2011-2019” argues that the alliance endured various challenges over the past decade. He identifies factors that contributed to its resilience. John Hoffman (2019) in his book “Power and Security: Realist Theory and the Middle East in the Post-Arab Spring Era,” attempts to apply realist theory, particularly structural realism, to understand the Middle East after Arab Spring provides a relevant insight into power dynamics of the region that impact the alliance. Rich, B. (2019) in his study “From Defense to Offense: Realist Shifts in Saudi Foreign Policy. Middle East Policy” avers that Saudi foreign policy shifts from a defensive posture to an offensive one. The author does not focus on the US-Saudi Alliance exclusively but explores realist considerations that have influenced Saudi decision-making. McNamara, E.M (2016) in his article “US Alliance Policy and the Challenges of Regional Security in the Middle East and East Asia.” The alliance faced challenges in EA and ME. These regions experience important changes in US strategic attention over the past decade. The region is infested with rivalries and nuclear proliferation threats, thus, Saudi-US alliance serves as a linchpin to avoid further destabilization. In the meanwhile, East Asia is experiencing more stable security order. Cordesman, A.H. (2014) in his seminal work “The Need for a New “Realism” in the US-Saudi Alliance,” argues that US-Saudi Arabia must change and create a new partnership functional based on changing realities of the Middle East. Both states share common interests, such as securing a stable flow of energy exports and combating international terrorism. Duan, X., & Aldamer, S. (2022) in their study “The Saudi Arabia-China Relationship at a Crossroad: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis,” are of the view

that Saudi Arabia-China Relations are at a critical juncture. The former is fostering strategic economic partnership with the latter, while simultaneously, strengthening its security alliance with the US. It contends that the systemic structure shapes the overall direction of state's foreign policies but takes effect by unit-level factor. However, it is unlikely that KSA steers a rapid foreign policy shift in the face of systemic pressure. Hedging rather than balancing or bandwagoning will lead to economic pragmatism continue to characterize Saudi-China Relations. The historical context is very important to understand the present trajectory of state relations. Robert Lacy (1981) in his classical composition provides an in-depth historical account of Saudi Arabia and its ruling family. While not exclusively focusing on the US-Saudi Alliance, it offers important context for understanding the dynamics of the relationship.

The research employs a qualitative approach using historical, comparative, and realist analysis. The researcher collects data from primary sources such as archival documents from the US and Saudi official websites, official statements, declassified documents (if available), and speeches by key leaders from both states. From secondary sources, take into consideration such as scholarly books and articles, on power dynamics of the Middle East, Saudi-US relations and realism in international relations. Research reports from reputable think tanks provide the bedrock of the argument.

### **DATA Analysis:**

- a) Examine historical papers and scholarly works to comprehend the evolution of the US-Saudi alliance over time. This involves outlining key events, agreements, and turning points that formed the alliance in reaction to altering geopolitical dynamics and global power swings.
- b) Relate and compare the strategic interests of the US and Saudi Arabia. Examine official statements, policy documents, and scholarly works to recognize their key concerns for maintaining the alliance. Find points of convergence and divergence in their interests.
- c) Assess the power dynamics inside the alliance through a realist paradigm. Study military abilities, economic dependences, and regional influences of both states. Measure how power asymmetries might influence the strength

and effectiveness of the alliance in the face of new global rivals.

d) Verification of the sources to ensure reliability and validity.

### **Theoretical Framework: Realism**

The realism in International Relations avers that world politics is an enduring competition among self-centered states competing for power within an anarchical global system. Following are the key tenets of realism may be applied to US-Saudi alliance; a) State-Centric approach that state is the primary actor in international relations. It acts in their own interest, power maximizer, and survival as the core concern. National interest steers state behavior leads to conflict and cooperation. Realists are of the view that international system is anarchic due to lack of centralized authority, therefore states seek self-help relying on their capabilities to survive. The approach originates from human nature that is selfish and rational. Realists support balance of power to prevent any state from dictating the system. Balance of power promotes stability and prevent aggression.

### **Limitations:**

Despite its strong past, the US-Saudi strategic partnership has a number of drawbacks in the current geopolitical environment. A major obstacle is the two countries' conflicting interests, especially when it comes to democratic principles and human rights (Department of State, 2023). With decreasing reliance on Saudi oil, the US is moving towards energy independence, which might reduce the alliances strategic worth (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018). Relations have been strained by differences in regional politics, particularly with reference to Iran and the Yemen war (Jeddah Communique, 2022). The US public's growing disapproval of Saudi Arabia's human rights record may have an effect on the alliance's viability (Department of State, 2023). Furthermore, fresh complexity is introduced by the growth of global powers like China and Russia, which challenges the US-Saudi supremacy and calls for a reevaluation of the alliance's strategic calculations (Department of State, 2023).

### **Historical Evolution of the Alliance:**

The Saudi-US alliance emerged in Cold war compelled by a common fear of Soviet communism. The United States wanted a trustworthy oil supplier and a regional partner to counter Soviet influence (Cordesman, 2014). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, in turn, wanted US military protection against regional rivals. (Abdel Aziz et al, 2018) The Saudi-US alliance emerged in Cold war compelled by a common fear of Soviet communism. The United States wanted a trustworthy oil supplier and a regional partner to counter Soviet influence (Cordesman, 2014). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, in turn, wanted US military protection against regional rivals. (Abdel Aziz et al, 2018) The US and Saudi Arabia have been friends for a long time, since 1933. Their friendship is based on a simple idea: oil for security (Cordesman, 2014). The US gets cheap oil from Saudi Arabia, and in return, the US promises to protect Saudi Arabia from any threats. This friendship became official in 1951 with a signed agreement. The agreement allowed the US to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia and train their soldiers. Even though the US and Saudi Arabia have not always agreed on everything (like the wars between Israel and Arab countries), they have stayed friends. Their friendship became even stronger when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. The US sent a huge army to Saudi Arabia to help defend them, and Saudi Arabia joined the fight to kick Iraq out of Kuwait. The events of 9/11, where some of the attackers were from Saudi Arabia, caused some tension between the US and Saudi Arabia. However, they worked together to fight terrorism, and their friendship continued. The US and Saudi Arabia are still close allies, but there are some new challenges to their friendship that we will explore next.

### **Regional Rivalries and the alliance:**

The US-Saudi alliance based on security cooperation and robust business ties, mainly driven by the United States' interest in Saudi oil (McNamara, 2016). Despite glaring differences in values, such as Saudi Arabia's Islamic conservatism, monarchical rule, and human rights issues, the alliance has sustained. The relationship faced challenges during the 1973 oil ban and the aftershock of the 9/11 attacks, where fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi

citizens. Nevertheless, consecutive US governments have constantly viewed Saudi Arabia as a critical strategic partner in the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).

In current years, the alliance has grown deeper. Both leaders have strengthened efforts to counter Iran, Saudi Arabia's main regional rival. However, actions taken during Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's tenure, including the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, have tense the alliance. US Congressmen have called for reconsidering the relationship and holding Riyadh answerable (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).

The Middle East and East Asia are two vital yet problematic regions for US foreign policy. Achieving stability in the Middle East has long been a precedence, but over the past 15 years, security-managing efforts there have seen partial triumph. The region continues to face worsening security conditions. In contrast, East Asia, which has grown economically, enjoys a more firm security order. However, the US faces a delicate balancing act between accommodating China's "peaceful rise" and assuring its nervous allies—Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea (McNamara, 2016).

One prominent focus within the Middle East is the US-Saudi alliance. This arrangement serves as a delicate regional hub, averting further nuclear proliferation and regional destabilization. The threat of regional enmities, related to broader nuclear proliferation, looms over both the Middle East and East Asia. While East Asia remains more stable, the Middle East's challenges persist, and the US must direct these difficulties to uphold stability and security in both regions (McNamara, 2016).

### **The Alliance amidst Shifting Global Power Dynamics:**

The basis of US-Saudi alliance principle "Oil for Security," is facing new challenges due to the shift in global power balance (Cordesman, 2014). The emergence of China disrupts traditional power balance. Its growing economic influence in Middle East offers Saudi Arabia an alternative option for economic partnership along with military equipment (Duan & Aldamer, 2022). Moreover, US is getting energy independence due to shale revolution that fades its dependence

on Saudi oil, potentially altering the principle of "Oil for Security" (Klare, 2016). These developments compel both nations to re-evaluate their strategic priorities and potentially redefine the future of their alliance. Moreover, a multipolar world with multiple centers of power could further obscure the US-Saudi relationship (Ghanem, 2019). Saudi Arabia might pursue closer links with other regional powers to decrease its dependence on the US. This could lead to a more split Middle East with rival regional blocs, potentially pulling the US-Saudi partnership. The alliance must adjust to these unstable dynamics to continue related and direct the uncertainties of a multipolar world. Despite the decline in the criticality of Saudi oil for the US, Saudi Arabia retains significant influence in the global oil market due to its vast oil reserves (proven and potential). This influence allows Saudi Arabia to play a prominent role in shaping global oil prices (Cordesman, 2014). Therefore, the US maintains a strategic interest in a stable and cooperative relationship with Saudi Arabia, even as the energy landscape evolves.

The "security" portion of the US-Saudi partnership has seen an evolution in recent years. The US "pivot to Asia," initiated under President Obama and continued under President Trump, reflects a strategic shift towards Asia (Moawad, 2017). This has involved a partial troop redeployment from the Gulf region to the Asia-Pacific. However, this realignment has not significantly affected several aspects of the US-Saudi military relationship. Saudi Arabia remains one of the largest purchasers of US weaponry, and collaboration continues in areas like maritime security and cybersecurity.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is no longer solely reliant on the US security umbrella. This can be attributed to two factors. First, US policy now encourages allied nations to strengthen their own militaries, reducing their dependence on direct American intervention. This aligns with the US strategy of "offshore balancing," aiming to deter threats without direct military involvement for non-vital interests (Moawad, 2017).

### **Contemporary Challenges and the Future of the Alliance:**

The US-Saudi alliance faces several contemporary challenges that could affect its

future trajectory (Hertog & Phillips, 2019). The rise of China along with the emergence of multipolar order may challenge the traditional dominance of US-Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. (Duan & Aldamer, 2022; Ghanem, 2019). Shale revolution might create a misalignment with Saudi Arabian security concerns (Klare, 2016; Moawad, 2017). The Human rights and democracy as the western core values can create tensions within the alliance (Hoffman, 2022). Both state's domestic politics can influence the alliance stability (Lake, 2017). The future of the alliance depends on the ability to adapt to these emerging challenges. There is a need for redefining of its terms and adapting to new challenges (Cordesman, 2014). They must focus on new shared interests particularly counterterrorism and regional stability. (Rich, 2019) they have to maintain functional partnership with the development of strategies to address disagreement (Cordesman, 2014). By admitting these challenges and working towards equally useful solutions, the US and Saudi Arabia can direct an uncertain future and potentially strengthen their long-standing alliance.

#### **Findings:**

- i. The shared common national interests provide the foundation of the alliance shared values of ideology and democracy. The interests are consistent oil supplies with reasonable oil prices in the global market, countering terrorism and limiting Iranian influence. President Trump's emphasis on economic deals and Saudi Arabia's role in moderating global oil prices contributed to the alliance's resilience.
- ii. Saudi Arabia seeks to sustain its alliance with the United States to achieve regional balance against threats and enhance its status in the face of adversaries.
- iii. Despite challenges such as the 9/11 attacks and divergences over the Arab Spring, the alliance endured due to its solid foundation of mutual interests.
- iv. The US pivot to Asia, driven by the rise of China and increased energy self-sufficiency from shale oil, poses a significant challenge to US commitments in the Middle East. President Trump's

transactional approach to allies complicates relationships, including with Saudi Arabia.

#### **Recommendations for Future Research:**

Future studies on the strategic alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia should look at how domestic politics affect foreign policy, the geopolitical ramifications of the global energy transition, the intricate power dynamics in the Middle East, the alliance's shaping by non-state actors, and the impact of a multipolar world order on US-Saudi relations. These domains have paramount significance in comprehending the alliance's course and guaranteeing its flexibility amongst evolving worldwide circumstances (Department of State, 2018, Council on Foreign Relations, 2022, Jeddah Communique, 2023).

#### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia has long been a pillar of geopolitical strategy, supported by shared interests in oil stability and regional security. The relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is still crucial in spite of the changing global environment that is characterized by rising powers and rearranging alliances. The long-lasting alliance is adjusting to new circumstances, such the demand for innovation in renewable energy and the handling of regional disputes. There are difficulties facing the alliance, especially in light of the resurgence of great power politics and the creation of new international rivalries. The US is trying to strike a balance between preserving long-standing relationships and countering the assertive actions of other powerful nations like China and Russia. Consequently, the US-Saudi relationship is a microcosm of the Strategic Interests and Power Balances: A Realist Analysis of the US-Saudi Alliance amidst New Global Rivalries more extensive strategic recalibrations taking place globally.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Abdel Aziz, G. A. (2019). The Saudi-US Alliance challenges and resilience, 2011: 2019. *Review of Economics and Political Science*, 8(3), 208-2251
- Cordesman, A. H. (2014). *The Need for a New*

- “Realism” in the US-Saudi Alliance. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Council on Foreign Relations. “U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations.” (2018) <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-saudi-arabia-relations>
- Duan, X., & Aldamer, S. (2022). The Saudi Arabia–China relationship at a crossroad: A neoclassical realist analysis. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 14(1), 114-128. DOI:10.1111/aspp.12619
- Ghanem, E. R. (2019). The Decline of American Hegemony and the Rise of New Regional Powers in the Middle East. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42(2), 221-245. doi: 10.1080/09643025.2018.1522332
- Hertog, S. A., & Phillips, C. (2019). 10-1108\_REPS-04-2019-0057.pdf (Unpublished manuscript).
- Hoffman, B. E. (2022). The Moral Costs of Realism: The Case of the US-Saudi Alliance and the Yemen War. *International Security*, 47(1), 7-43. doi: 10.1093/isr/viac008
- Klare, M. T. (2016). The Impact of the Shale Revolution on US-Saudi Relations. *International Affairs*, 92(2), 381-398. doi: 10.3751/70.3.14
- Lake, D. A. (2017). The Limits of Realism in Understanding the US-Saudi Alliance. *Security Studies*, 26(2), 213-242. doi: 10.1177/0047117816670204
- McNamara, E. M. (2016). Restraining Rivalries? US Alliance Policy and the Challenges of Regional Security in the Middle East and East Asia. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 27(1), 201-222.
- McNamara, Eoin Micheál. “Promoting Stability in the Middle East? The American Alliance with Saudi Arabia after the ‘Rebalance’.” *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 27 (2016), 201-222.
- Moawad, H. (2017). US Security Policy in the Middle East: From Interventionism to Offshore Balancing. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(2), 9-19. doi: 10.1515/mjss-2017-0002
- Moawad, J.A. (2017), “Unstable alliances: the complexities of managing allied relations at the regional and international levels”, *Future for Advanced Research and Studies*, Vol. 22, pp. 9-19. July August, available at: <https://futureuae.com/ar-AE/Release/ReleaseArticle/430/>
- Rich, B. (2019). From Defense to Offense: Realist Shifts in Saudi Foreign Policy. *Middle East Policy*, XXVI(3), August 2019. DOI:10.1111/mepo.12438.
- United States-Saudi Arabia Relationship: Eight Decades of Partnership  
U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations” - A backgrounder by the Council on Foreign Relations  
The Jeddah Communique: A Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia