

# TRANSITION 2021

POLICY NOTES FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

## Defining a Mature, Balanced Relationship with Saudi Arabia: An Urgent Task for the Biden Administration

DENNIS ROSS AND  
ROBERT SATLOFF

February 2021

Every administration struggles to balance American interests and American values in foreign policy. Historically, when it comes to Saudi Arabia, there was little balance in the U.S. approach. Democratic and Republican administrations alike adopted an interests-oriented, not values-oriented, posture toward the kingdom. The basic bargain was one in which the United States provided security to Saudi Arabia and the kingdom provided oil and, with a few exceptions, a stable oil market, as well as support against anti-American, anti-Western forces, from Arab nationalists to Iranian revolutionaries to the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. For decades, administrations of both parties largely turned a blind eye both to the kingdom's domestic governance and to its export of an intolerant, xenophobic brand of Islam through religious institutions around the world. After 9/11, Washington began to pay more attention to the role Saudi-supported religious institutions played in spreading the very ideology that produced the attacks on the Twin Towers, and the U.S.-Saudi relationship came under more congressional scrutiny, but that did not generate significant political pressures to shift the fundamental policy. That is no longer the case.



As the United States emerged as the world's leading producer of oil and its dependence on Middle East sources shrank, calls for Washington to adopt a more distant, critical policy toward Riyadh grew louder and more numerous. In autumn 2016, these were manifested in the lone congressional override of the Obama administration—a vote to approve the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, which permitted continuation of civil lawsuits against Saudi Arabia for its alleged role in the September 11 attacks. Then, during the Trump administration, a number of Saudi governmental actions—responsibility for which is generally ascribed to King Salman's son and crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, known as MbS—gave those voices calling for change to the U.S.-Saudi relationship even greater political weight: the heinous murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the lack of transparent judicial proceedings against its perpetrators; the apparent indiscriminate Saudi bombing of targets in Yemen, which resulted in terrible civilian casualties; the detention and forced resignation of then Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri; the embargo of Qatar; intemperate feuds with Canada and Germany over human rights criticisms; the domestic imprisonment of women's rights and free speech activists; and a torture-laden anti-corruption campaign seemingly designed only to shake down or weaken possible opponents.

These two trends—diminished U.S. reliance on Middle East energy and this series of perceived outrages by Riyadh—combined to produce more intense focus on the need for a wholesale change in U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia than ever before. This included congressional resolutions condemning the killing of Khashoggi and calling for an accounting of it as well as legislation requiring “the removal of United States Armed Forces from hostilities in the Republic of Yemen that have not been authorized by Congress.”<sup>1</sup> President Donald Trump, who embraced the U.S.-Saudi relationship from his first overseas trip in 2017, pushed back, vetoing the bill directing the

end of U.S. military support for the Saudi campaign in Yemen. In fact, he blocked all punitive actions against Saudi Arabia, justifying his actions less in terms of broader U.S. national security stakes in Saudi Arabia and more in terms of the economic benefits of jobs produced from arms sales to the kingdom. The Trump vetoes only added to the congressional impulse to punish the Saudis for their perceived transgressions.

During the election campaign, candidate Joe Biden drew a clear contrast with the Trump approach, issuing a statement on the anniversary of Khashoggi's murder, declaring: “Under a Biden-Harris administration, we will reassess our relationship with the Kingdom, end U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, and make sure America does not check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil.”<sup>2</sup> In his first foreign policy speech of the new administration, President Biden followed through on this commitment by announcing the “end [of] all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales” and appointing a special envoy to support UN efforts to bring that conflict to a close.<sup>3</sup>

Yet President Biden also made clear that this shift in policy did not alter U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's legitimate defense needs. As he said, “At the same time, Saudi Arabia faces missile attacks, UAV strikes, and other threats from Iranian-supplied forces in multiple countries. We're going to continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people.”

In other words, reassessing the U.S.-Saudi relationship does not mean ending it. As Biden's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, also observed during the election campaign, the Trump administration seemed to have needlessly given the kingdom a “blank check,” and while that was wrong, policy under a Biden administration would not be “about ending the alliance or the partnership with Saudi Arabia. It [would be about] making sure that the

alliance actually reflects our interests and our values [and] not just Saudi Arabia's."<sup>4</sup> That more nuanced approach was reflected in the State Department's speedy condemnation of rocket attacks on Riyadh on January 24, 2021: "As we work to de-escalate tensions in the region through principled diplomacy, including by bringing an end to the war in Yemen, we will also help our partner Saudi Arabia defend against attacks on its territory and hold those who attempt to undermine stability to account."<sup>5</sup>

---

## America's Interests and Stakes in Saudi Arabia

With a reassessment of U.S.-Saudi ties now underway, it is useful to reexamine U.S. interests in a relationship that remains critical to advancing a range of U.S. objectives.

**OIL AND THE GLOBAL MARKET.** America's historical interest in Saudi Arabia was dominated by oil and its broader economic interest, nationally and globally, in its free flow. As urgent as the transition from fossil fuels to renewables may be, the transition will take years. And even if the United States may no longer be dependent on Saudi oil, the international energy market remains a global one, with essentially one pool for all national consumers. Were instability in Saudi Arabia to affect the supply of oil or if there were a big disruption of oil from the region, it would affect the price of energy and the world's economy. The United States cannot insulate itself from a big price rise—as the price of America's own oil would be bid up as demand chased smaller supplies—nor can it protect against the global recession that would likely result from it.

Moreover, even without conflict or instability, the Saudi role in preserving stability in the oil market remains pivotal. When the Saudis engaged in a price war with the Russians just as the coronavirus

pandemic struck, the lower prices may have been welcomed by consumers, but the result was to make renewables less cost-effective and to devastate the U.S. oil and gas industry. Even as the Biden administration seeks to promote renewables and manage the transition away from oil and gas, it is mindful of the need to preserve jobs and not see a whole industry collapse—meaning the United States retains a stake in the Saudis' managing the oil market responsibly. Ironically, now and in the near future, that actually argues for the Saudis helping to keep oil prices somewhat higher given America's status as an exporter of oil and its interest in having renewables competitive in terms of cost. Fortunately, market stability, not wild price swings, is in both U.S. and Saudi interests. But it is not only oil that gives the United States a stake in a stable and modernizing Saudi Arabia.

**COUNTERING IRAN AND MINIMIZING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXTREMISTS.** Saudi Arabia is essential to any effective coalition to counter Iran and to push back on its destabilizing regional influence. A case in point is Iraq—Iran's neighbor and potential springboard for its power projection. The Saudis can be the spearhead of material support for the Iraqi government and military to offset the Iranians and al-Hashd al-Shabi (the network of Iraqi militias known in English as the Popular Mobilization Forces). Riyadh is the key to unlock the broader Arab support that Iraq's prime minister needs if he is to succeed in gaining greater political space from Iran and greater autonomy in decisionmaking. Indeed, given the economic consequences of Covid-19, Iraq's economic situation is increasingly dire, and help from the Saudis and other Gulf Cooperation Council states will be critical. While low oil prices and the economic consequences of Covid make the Saudis and their Gulf partners less able to provide the scale of material assistance they have in the past, they understand the stakes with Iraq and are likely to be responsive to U.S. requests to provide needed economic help to Iraq's prime minister and government.



The same is true for Jordan. Historically, the Saudis have not always made it easy for the Jordanians, often withholding anything but the bare minimum of aid needed to keep Amman afloat, but they understand that Jordan is a buffer for the Arabian Peninsula (and Israel), and as a senior Saudi official told one of the authors: “If Jordan did not exist, we would need to create it.”

More generally, the Saudis will continue to help countries in the region that are U.S. partners and need loans or transfers of cash to their central banks to shore up their currencies and reserves—and that role will remain important to Washington’s effort to preserve regional stability.

#### **PROMOTING ARAB-ISRAEL NORMALIZATION.**

Many parties are responsible for the serial breakthroughs in Arab-Israel relations signified by the agreements reached between Israel and four Arab states in 2020—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco—but without a consistent green light from Saudi Arabia, it is doubtful any of these would have occurred. Certainly, Saudi rejection would have weighed heavily on all of them and probably would have forestalled such moves. The Saudis not only gave their implicit blessing, but they also took steps to block efforts in the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to condemn these states for normalizing their relations with Israel. This is a sharp contrast to Riyadh’s active opposition to Egypt’s peace with Israel forty years ago, when the Saudis condemned Anwar Sadat, approved the relocation of the Arab League from Cairo, and promised billions of dollars of aid to “confrontation” states that remained on the frontlines against Israel. And it is a significant step for a kingdom whose own late king was the prime mover behind the peace plan endorsed by Arab and other Muslim-majority states that envisions all moves to normalize with Israel as subsequent to, not in advance of, a final resolution of the Palestinian issue.

Indeed, this is a different Middle East today and a different Saudi Arabia. Saudi officials, spokespeople,

and commentators are not bashful in saying they view Israelis as natural partners against their two major strategic threats—Iran and radical Sunni Islamists—and while they have not made open moves toward the Israelis, they now allow Israeli civilian airliners to overfly the kingdom to the Emirates. Whether they take more direct steps to normalize ties with Israel beyond reports of secret meetings with the Israeli prime minister is unclear, but the very fact that the discourse is about potential cooperation, rather than conflict, speaks volumes about the change in regional politics.<sup>6</sup> This hopeful, inclusive approach to the Middle East not only reflects a clear alternative to Iran’s doctrine of resistance, but it also opens opportunities for Saudi-Israel relations to serve as a tool to break the stalemate between Israelis and Palestinians, giving the Biden administration options for potential progress in peace diplomacy its predecessors did not enjoy. (Put simply, the administration may be able to triangulate among the Saudis, Israelis, and Palestinians, brokering Saudi public outreach to Israel, steps by Israel toward Palestinians, and Palestinian steps in response. Washington should also recognize that the Saudis may seek in return for their normalizing moves toward Israel additional security commitments from the United States.)

#### **PREVENTING NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN**

**THE REGION.** Successive presidents, of both parties, have placed the effort to prevent nuclear proliferation in the already combustible Middle East atop the U.S. national security agenda. This is the goal of U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iran, about which the Biden administration should consult Riyadh in a close and ongoing manner befitting a strategic partner.

At the same time, Washington has an interest in ensuring Saudi Arabia itself takes no steps that heighten proliferation concerns. The development of civil nuclear power is part of the National Transformation Program (NTP), which is a core component of the Saudis’ Vision 2030 plan, and the Russians and Chinese are both actively offering to provide the Saudis with nuclear reactors. Leaving

aside the longer-term implication of having Russia or China develop nuclear energy in Saudi Arabia rather than the United States, there are critical questions about safeguards and enrichment that need to be on the U.S.-Saudi agenda.

Specifically, proliferation concerns argue for Saudi Arabia to renounce domestic enrichment and instead agree to rely on external sources of fuel for its reactors. For their part, the Saudis point to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which permitted enrichment in Iran, and have sought less restrictive understandings on civil nuclear cooperation than the 123 Agreement—the “gold standard”—that Washington negotiated with the UAE in 2009, forswearing domestic enrichment. Moreover, MbS has announced that if Iran gets nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will as well. The United States has a major stake in ensuring that negative spiral does not happen, doing everything in its power both to prevent Iran’s development of nuclear weapons and to channel Saudi development of its civil nuclear program to follow the UAE model, in terms of safeguards as well as zero enrichment.

**COUNTERTERRORISM AND DELEGITIMIZING RADICAL ISLAMISM.** Since 2003, when al-Qaeda began targeting Saudi Arabia directly and the kingdom took off the gloves in launching a major campaign to counter violent Sunni Islamist extremism, U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with the Saudis has been an important mutual interest. This has ranged from direct operations against terrorist groups to countering the financing of terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, shared intelligence and close collaboration to disrupt active plots or emerging threats has been and will remain crucial to protecting the U.S. homeland.

Of even greater importance than cooperation on any individual terrorism threat is the fundamental course correction Saudi Arabia has more recently undertaken regarding its support for the intolerant, xenophobic, hate-filled version of Islam that its agents and institutions preached domestically and exported throughout the world for decades. Even

as its counterterrorism officials were cooperating with U.S. counterparts to stymie discrete threats, the state-supported Saudi religious establishment was actively promoting the ideology of radical Sunni Islamism through schools, mosques, and other institutions at home and abroad. Regardless of whether this policy accurately reflected the views of the kingdom’s leadership or was meant as a tactic to coopt the conservative religious hierarchy or blunt the critiques of al-Qaeda and other radicals, Saudi support for the ideology of extremism ran in the face of its counterterrorism commitments and was an affront to the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The good news is that Saudi leaders seem to have made a clear break from this policy, investing in an ideology of Saudi nationalism and modernization in place of an ideology of pan-Muslim exceptionalism and supremacy. Over the past three years, this has meant an unprecedented opening to ideas of religious tolerance and understanding for Christianity and Judaism, a gradual granting of basic rights for women, and an appreciation for the place in society of arts, music, culture, and mass entertainment. And it has meant the promotion to positions of authority and responsibility of officials who are expected to embrace these views with enthusiasm and urgency. This includes, for example, the appointment of Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa as secretary-general of the Muslim World League, an institution that long purveyed hate-filled anti-Semitic ideology but is now actively engaged in discrediting radical Islamists, urging local Muslim communities to be faithful citizens of their countries of residence, and promoting interfaith efforts such as a historic visit by Muslim clerics to Auschwitz.<sup>8</sup>

This ideological shift is not born of Saudi selflessness or magnanimity—rather, it is tied to a dramatic change underway in the kingdom’s conception of socioeconomic development to a more nationalist, more self-reliant model. If successful—even moderately so—this new Saudi approach could provide an ideological antidote to the ideas of the region’s radical secular-nationalists (Gamal Abdul

Nasser, Saddam Hussein) and radical Islamists (Osama bin Laden, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), whose models gave rise to violent extremism that caused massive harm to U.S. interests and allies. It may sound out of step with the times, but a Saudi Arabia that defines itself with a more nationalist and less pan-Islamic identity is profoundly in the U.S. national interest. That fact gives Washington a stake in the success of the Saudi NTP.

---

## Vision 2030 and the Transformation of Saudi Society

Much has been written about Vision 2030, and there is no need to recap that here. But there is value in looking at how much it is changing Saudi Arabia. Any plan designed to change Saudi Arabia from a rentier state based almost exclusively on its oil resources to a country where the natural talents of its people—both women and men—are unleashed for productive work, often in new industries (e.g., tourism, mining, petrochemicals), while the state made major investments in fields as varied as health, education, infrastructure, and recreation, was bound to have a dramatic effect. Its aims were sweeping and the goals and timetables very ambitious.

Even before Covid-19, there was reason to question whether the goals of the National Transformation Program and Vision 2030 could be achieved on anything like the timetable MbS sought, and there is considerable evidence that many of the original, ambitious goals are far from being achieved. That said, key advisors around the crown prince have indicated—in discussions with the authors—that the timetable was less important than the direction, that progress continues on developing the infrastructure and social and financial underpinnings of the plan, and that Covid-19, ironically,

forced a deferral and weeding out of projects that were expensive and probably should not have been priorities in the first place. Moreover, these advisors point out that foreign skeptics of the NTP claimed in 2016 that the Saudis would burn through all their foreign exchange reserves by 2019 and yet those reserves remain at just under \$450 billion.<sup>9</sup> The advisors' larger point is that Vision 2030 and the NTP were always going to require adjustment along the way and adjustments are being made.

One need not accept that view in toto to see how the drive to modernize and diversify the economy has produced far-reaching changes in Saudi society. This is not just about giving women the right to drive cars or preventing the religious police from penalizing socializing between single men and women. It is about recognizing that Saudi Arabia would never realize its potential if half its population—its women—were forever excluded from the labor force, if the educational system continued to reward rote learning, if the clerical establishment continued to propagate extreme, hateful and intolerant narratives, and if the people of the kingdom lacked options for recreation and enjoyment that did not require them either to stay locked in their homes or to travel abroad. Put simply, it is about changing the social, economic, and political life of the country.

Understanding what the transformation is all about also means understanding what it is not about: it is not about making Saudi Arabia into a democracy or giving Saudi citizens the sorts of political rights—to free speech or free media, for example—common in the West but still rare in the Middle East. It is not even about turning the kingdom into a Moroccan or Jordanian form of constitutional monarchy, which has the institutions of representative government, such as parliament, within the context of a near all-powerful throne. Rather, transformation is the means to ensure the continued rule of the al-Saud family, not to change that basic equation. But transformation reflects the recognition that the family's best chance to retain control of the

kingdom is by carrying out a revolution from above to open the country socially in order to transform it economically. In practice, this has meant changes to the legal system that may seem minor to an outsider but are substantial in a Saudi context, from banning flogging as a punishment to introducing the concept of precedent in judicial decisionmaking to ending executions for crimes committed when the perpetrator was a child.<sup>10</sup> And transformation has meant beginning an overhaul of the Saudi education system, including scrubbing textbooks of hate and intolerance. More clearly needs to be done, but the current effort has already led U.S. State Department officials to say they “are encouraged by the positive changes in influential textbooks used throughout Saudi Arabia”<sup>11</sup> and to support a pilot project for training Saudi teachers.

Perhaps most significantly, transformation has meant huge strides toward making women more complete participants in the kingdom’s social and economic life. This is not just about allowing women to drive. It is about removing the guardian laws that prevented women over twenty-one from traveling, opening a bank account, starting a business, or getting a divorce without the approval of a male guardian (husband or male relative). The NTP depends on women playing a much larger role in the economy, especially in the growth of the private sector. According to the Saudi government, women made up more than 30 percent of the workforce in 2020,<sup>12</sup> well above the 25 percent target the NTP originally established for that year.

Any visitor to Saudi Arabia, especially one who has also visited the kingdom in previous decades, will not only see and feel the changes but will also hear the hopeful enthusiasm for them in the voices of many Saudis, especially the younger generation. None of this diminishes the importance of pressing Riyadh for continued progress on many fronts, including the need for political freedom to keep pace with economic and social freedom, but for the first time in the history of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, the

conversation centers more on the pace of change than on its direction. This is huge.

The Biden administration will need to navigate a course that takes account of U.S. interests in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the Middle East more generally; the Saudi interest in enlisting U.S. help to preserve its security and promote its socioeconomic progress; and Washington’s need to establish boundaries designed to temper Saudi actions that Washington opposes. As difficult as it may be, such a balancing act will be needed to limit congressional opposition on the one hand, and on the other, to retain not just the U.S. relationship but also its influence with the kingdom. While there is a role for punitive steps in response to outrageous actions, measures implemented out of appropriate context or imposed in a way to cause public embarrassment have the potential to trigger a backlash within the kingdom that could diminish U.S. influence, slow the pace of reform, or both. The goal is to find the sweet spot that signals U.S. seriousness, including the willingness to impose costs on objectionable behavior, without taking steps that will be interpreted as an effort to humiliate the Saudi leadership—and likely trigger a Saudi impulse to show they can impose a cost on the United States, perhaps by tilting toward China on high-tech investments, telecommunication networks, artificial intelligence, nuclear power plants, and infrastructure development, especially in the Red Sea. That said, the Saudis see neither China nor Russia as a reliable guarantor of their security, and they also understand that transitioning away from U.S. weaponry and logistics support would take decades. Such a strategic shift is clearly not their preference.

For the Biden administration, defining the proper balance in the U.S.-Saudi relationship will require reaching some understandings with the Saudis and with Congress on the nature of mutual goals in the region. What follows are recommendations on the mechanisms to be used to reach those understandings.



## Opening Steps to Build a More Balanced Relationship

First, the Biden administration will need to have a high-level, discreet discussion with MbS, the person empowered by King Salman as the key decisionmaker on virtually all important matters, from those the United States applauds to those it finds objectionable. To be effective, this discussion needs to be confidential, authoritative, and candid. Its purpose is to define the boundaries of the relationship, emphasizing common interests and the importance of protecting and building on them but also clarifying the U.S. determination to criticize and even penalize Riyadh should the Saudis take actions that run counter to U.S. interests. The aim is thus to define mutually beneficial “rules of the road,” neither to exacerbate differences nor to pretend they do not exist. At the core of this discussion will be the need to emphasize the importance of a two-way policy of “no surprises.”

In this regard, the administration should build upon the example of President Biden’s announcement about the end of U.S. support for military operations in the Yemen war, including the suspension of the sale to Saudi Arabia of offensive weaponry, which was paired with a strong declaration about the U.S. commitment to Saudi security and the continued provision of defensive weaponry. Substantively, that announcement projected the sort of balance needed to signal a shift on matters of intense concern, especially in Congress, while underscoring the fundamental element of shared security interests. Operationally, the announcement was appropriately briefed in advance to Saudi officials; indeed, the Saudi foreign minister even responded with a tweet welcoming the president’s remarks.

This initial discussion will also need to address the particular role of MbS in the U.S.-Saudi relationship and the importance of accountability

for the Khashoggi murder, echoing President Biden’s calls. MbS should be left under no illusions that the stigma of responsibility for this heinous act will dissipate soon, allowing for normal interaction with U.S. officials. Given the circumstances, the crown prince’s American interlocutor should explain that accountability will be judged by the extent of transparent restructuring of the Saudi national security, intelligence, and strategic decisionmaking architecture in such a way as to ensure that an outrage like the Khashoggi murder can never happen again. And—without too precisely defining an outer limit of acceptable Saudi behavior—this U.S. official should underscore that a recurrence of a Khashoggi-type incident would call into question Riyadh’s commitment to a strategic partnership with Washington, with profoundly negative consequences for the bilateral relationship. (It may be useful for the U.S. interlocutor to suggest that MbS announce that he is implementing these changes because he was ultimately responsible for those who killed Khashoggi, which would be consistent with his previous statement that he bore responsibility for what those under him carried out.)

Under normal circumstances, the U.S. national security advisor (NSA) might be the best person to conduct this kind of discussion. Unlike the secretary of state, this official can travel discreetly and clearly represents the president. But given other priorities and demands on the NSA, the administration may want to consider an alternative, and if so, a good option would be the incoming director of the Central Intelligence Agency, who has the experience, status, and know-how to conduct such a sensitive discussion. Whoever fills this role, what is most important is that the U.S. interlocutor carry the imprimatur of the president.

Second, there will be a need for a more strategic dialogue on policy that goes beyond defining the boundaries of the relationship and the role of MbS therein. The U.S. side needs to explain how it views an array of regional security issues—including the strategic competition with Iran; the Syrian and

Libyan conflicts; the potential for normalization with Israel; and the Russian and Chinese policies in the region—and how the region fits within the hierarchy of U.S. national security interests. And the U.S. side needs to listen both to the Saudis’ assessments and to their definition of their own national security priorities, including how their National Transformation Program fits with their approach to regional security.

President Biden has already made clear that Yemen is a top priority. Even as they suffer attacks against their own civilians, the Saudis have been signaling they would like to end the war and know they will have to contribute significantly to postwar reconstruction—but they are not going to be humiliated in the process. The task for U.S. policymakers is to create conditions under which the Saudis could quit Yemen or at least shift the onus onto the Houthis and their Iranian patrons for the continuation of this conflict. Without a new, high-profile international initiative that calls for a countrywide ceasefire, the unencumbered delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the launch of a negotiating process, it will be difficult to do that—assuming, of course, the Saudis make clear in advance that they will accept the initiative and implement steps accordingly.

This raises what is bound to come up in this dialogue and the initial discreet discussion on the boundaries of the relationship: the need for MbS to address the damage to his reputation caused by his past recklessness—which extends far beyond the Khashoggi murder—and to show he is a responsible partner. Some longtime observers contend that MbS is a rogue actor, whose impulsiveness and poor judgment cannot but sow instability.<sup>13</sup> Yet his recent actions—ending the rift with Qatar, de facto commuting the sentences of Loujain al-Hathloul (now released) and Dr. Walid Fitaihi, hinting at normalizing relations with Israel, and even signaling an openness to Kuwaiti efforts to mediate between the kingdom and Iran—suggest he appreciates the need to project a more moderate,

conciliatory approach. The Biden administration will want to build on what may be a more constructive, problem-solving impulse and see more practical steps. Specifically, Washington will want MbS to prove that the Gulf rift is substantively, rather than superficially, over; that religious tolerance applies to the Saudi Shia; and that his policy on Hathloul can be applied more broadly to more detainees—to include all the women activists, all the writers and artists detained around the same time, the Ritz-Carlton detainees, and others. But this is a two-way street—MbS will want to know what he will get in return from Washington if he takes steps toward Israel or responds to U.S. requests on Yemen or supports U.S. efforts to bolster Iraq or, notwithstanding Saudi efforts to mend the rift, Qatar responds with provocations, not reciprocation.

Essentially, the initial discreet discussion and this more in-depth strategic dialogue should seek to come up with a package of understandings that will guide the relationship, defining mutual expectations and shaping a series of steps each side would take to build confidence and strengthen bilateral ties. In the past, such a dialogue would probably have been conducted initially by the secretary of state, perhaps with the secretary of defense. Given other priorities and the political sensitivity, it might be more effective and expeditious to conduct this dialogue at the level of the senior Middle East officials at the White House and State Department. They will have a solid understanding of the totality of the issues the United States is facing in the region and the feel for discussing the broader U.S. agenda in the area.

Third, it will be important for the administration to hold early and ongoing discussions with key congressional leaders, including the chairs and ranking members of the Foreign Relations, Intelligence, and Armed Services Committees, on its approach to Saudi Arabia. The administration should explain what it means to end its predecessor’s “see no evil” approach to the Saudis, to define clearer boundaries in the relationship, to implement a “no surprises” policy, and to seek accountability

from MbS for the Khashoggi murder; at the same time, it should discuss with the congressional leadership its view that active partnership with Saudi Arabia remains essential to achieving major U.S. goals in the region.

Ultimately, the United States has an interest in having a mature relationship with Saudi Arabia, one that is driven by genuine partnership founded on shared interests. The reality is that Washington and Riyadh need each other in ways that go far beyond the old formula of “oil for security.” While the kingdom needs the support of the U.S. political leadership for its security, it also needs the confidence of the U.S. private sector to attract investment essential to the success of its

transformation effort, and Saudi leaders—including MbS—need to know they will, over time, only secure that investment if Saudi Arabia is governed under a more stable, predictable, transparent system of rules and laws. At the same time, Washington must realize that it needs the Saudis to achieve U.S. strategic aims in the region, from countering Iran, to normalizing Arab-Israel relations and ultimately resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to discrediting radical Islamist ideologies that target the United States, Americans, and their allies as the “enemy.” Because it is critical to so many of its other objectives in the Middle East, creating and managing this balanced relationship, based on mutuality of interest, is one of the Biden administration’s most urgent challenges. ❖

---

*The coauthors would like to thank their Washington Institute colleagues, including Patrick Clawson, Elana DeLozier, Simon Henderson, and Michael Singh, whose useful comments improved the content of this report. They are each confident that any errors herein are the responsibility of the other author.*

## NOTES

1. “S.J.Res.7—A Joint Resolution to Direct the Removal of United States Armed Forces from Hostilities in the Republic of Yemen That Have Not Been Authorized by Congress,” Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/7/text>.
2. “Anniversary of Jamal Khashoggi’s Murder—Statement by Vice President Joe Biden,” October 2, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/2020/10/02/anniversary-of-jamal-khashoggis-murder-statement-by-vice-president-joe-biden/#>.
3. White House, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.
4. “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/>.
5. U.S. Department of State, “The United States Condemns Attack on Saudi Arabia,” January 24, 2021, <http://bit.ly/37nSk4h>.
6. “Netanyahu, Mossad Chief Fly to Saudi, Hold First Known Meet with Crown Prince,” *Times of Israel*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-mossad-chief-said-to-travel-to-saudi-arabia-meet-with-crown-prince/>.
7. For some of these details, see Daniel L. Byman, “The U.S.-Saudi Counterterrorism Relationship,” Brookings Institution, May 24, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>.
8. As Al-Issa said at Auschwitz: “I would like to express to all of you that myself and my colleagues, the Islamic leaders, are deeply touched and affected by these horrible crimes and pictures we’ve seen throughout these monuments...I believe there is a huge responsibility on the international community to do something to deal with these kinds of horrible crimes and to make sure none of this will happen again.” Yaakov Schwartz, “This Must Never Happen Again, Says Saudi Cleric as Muslim Group Tours Auschwitz,” *Times of Israel*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/this-must-never-happen-again-says-saudi-cleric-as-muslim-group-tours-auschwitz/>.
9. Stephen Kalin, “Saudi Crown Prince Barrels Ahead with Big Projects to Boost Economy,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-crown-prince-barrels-ahead-with-big-projects-to-boost-economy-11598434201>.
10. “Saudi Arabia Ends Death Penalty for Crimes Committed by Minors,” *Guardian*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/saudi-arabia-ends-death-penalty-for-minors>.
11. Sarah Dadouch, “Saudi Arabia Has Been Scrubbing Its Textbooks of Anti-Semitic and Misogynistic Passages,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/saudi-arabia-text-books-education-curriculum/2021/01/30/28ebe632-5a54-11eb-a849-6f9423a75ffd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-arabia-text-books-education-curriculum/2021/01/30/28ebe632-5a54-11eb-a849-6f9423a75ffd_story.html).
12. “Labor Force,” General Authority for Statistics, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/814>.
13. Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Arabia’s Current State of Affairs,” Brookings Institution, September 11, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/saudi-arabias-current-state-of-affairs/>.

## The Authors



DENNIS ROSS, the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, has served as a lead negotiator and diplomat in Democratic and Republican administrations, most recently as a special assistant to President Obama. His books include *Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East* (coauthored with David Makovsky) and *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*.



ROBERT SATLOFF is the executive director of The Washington Institute, where he holds the Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. An expert on Arab and Islamic politics, he has published widely on the Arab-Israel peace process, the challenge of political Islam, and the need to revamp U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East. He authored the best-selling book *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories of the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY  
1111 19TH STREET NW | WASHINGTON, DC 20036  
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG  
©2021 THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY.  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.