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Bin Salman's Washington Visit:

US Saudi Relations in an Age of Great Power Competition

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

- Background 1
- The Major Deals 2
 - F-35 and Tank Sales 2
 - Critical Minerals 3
 - Nuclear Energy 4
 - Artificial Intelligence 4
 - Strategic Defence Agreement 5
- Conclusion 5

On 18 November, US President Donald Trump welcomed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the White House with a markedly elaborate display of grandeur. During the visit, the Crown Prince announced that Saudi Arabia intended to raise its investments in the United States from the 600 billion dollars pledged during Trump's visit to Riyadh last May to one trillion dollars. In return, Trump designated Saudi Arabia a "major non-NATO ally" and signalled his approval for the sale of advanced F-35 aircraft to the kingdom, in a clear indication of Washington's desire to strengthen its strategic alliance with Riyadh amid intensifying competition with China and Russia.¹

Background

The Saudi Crown Prince's visit to the White House, the first since 2018 when Trump was serving his first presidential term (2017–2021), demonstrates improving bilateral relations after a period of relative coolness during Joe Biden's presidency (2021–2025). Early into Biden's tenure marked tensions followed the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Kingdom's Istanbul consulate in October 2018, for which the US Central Intelligence Agency held the Saudi government responsible. The case sparked extensive media and political campaigns in the US, further inflamed by Biden's 2019 remarks as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate that he would treat the Kingdom as a "pariah" state because of the Khashoggi affair.²

However, once Biden assumed office in early 2021, he prioritized US interests in the Middle East, of which the partnership with Saudi Arabia is a central pillar, over his human rights-related campaign commitments.³ Against the backdrop of intense geopolitical competition with China and Russia for influence in the Gulf region, Washington's efforts to reduce oil prices and contain Iran, and its desire to bring Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords with Israel, Biden travelled to Jeddah in July 2022, where he met King Salman bin Abdulaziz and the Crown Prince. While the reception in Jeddah was notably cool, the visit resulted in the signing of several commercial agreements. Relations, however, soon deteriorated again. Just three months later, OPEC+ decided to cut oil production despite Washington's objections, prompting Biden to warn that there would be "consequences" for US–Saudi relations.⁴

With Trump's return to the White House in early 2025, relations between Washington and Riyadh underwent a marked improvement. Trump reverted to his earlier approach of making Saudi Arabia his first foreign destination, where he concluded major commercial deals with the Kingdom, followed by Qatar and the UAE. Despite Trump's attempts to project a strong personal dimension to his relationship with the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman was keen to emphasize the long-term

¹ Kevin Doyle and News Agencies, "Saudi Arabia designated major non-NATO ally of US, gets F-35 warplanes deal", Al Jazeera, 19/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPgf>

² Conor Finnegan, "As Biden Reviews US-Saudi Relations, Pressure Rises to Remake Ties over Khashoggi Killing, Yemen War," *ABC News*, 28/1/2021, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPH2>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Steve Holland, "Biden Vows Consequences for Saudi Arabia after OPEC+ Decision," *Reuters*, 12/10/2022, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPqB>

institutional nature of US–Saudi relations, portraying them as transcending partisan considerations and domestic political alignments in the US.⁵ The Crown Prince avoided highlighting his close personal ties with Trump, preferring instead to foreground the strategic partnership between the two countries as a stable pillar of regional and international security. This reflected his recognition of the importance of preserving the Kingdom’s image as a strategic US ally, regardless of who occupies the White House.

It appears that bin Salman succeeded in persuading Trump to abandon the condition of full normalization with Israel that Washington had long insisted on prior to concluding major defence and commercial agreements with Riyadh.⁶ At the same time, he sought to project his country as a force for regional stability. Notably, he urged Trump to intervene to end the war in Sudan, a call to which the US president responded positively. In the same vein, bin Salman used Trump’s remarks on Iran’s desire to reach a nuclear agreement to reaffirm that Riyadh would make every effort to help achieve it. The official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) had earlier reported that bin Salman had received a handwritten letter from the Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian, prior to his trip to Washington, without disclosing its contents.⁷

The Major Deals

The two parties signed multiple major trade, investment, energy, and mineral agreements, most notably:

F-35 and Tank Sales

The White House announced that Trump had approved, in principle, the future delivery of F-35 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia, in addition to concluding an agreement for the purchase of 300 American tanks.⁸ The deal is particularly sensitive, given that Israel has historically been the only state in the region to possess the advanced Lockheed Martin manufactured aircraft and is keen to maintain its exclusivity. Washington’s intention to supply Riyadh with these aircraft prompted questions among Israeli and US officials regarding whether this would undermine Israel’s so-called “Qualitative Military Edge” (QME), a privilege that the US Congress committed to preserving under a law passed in 2008.⁹ Nevertheless, Trump’s approval represents only an preliminary step: implementing the deal

5 Vivian Nereim & Ismaeel Naar, “Trump Meeting with Saudi Prince Showcased Prince’s Makeover, and America’s,” *The New York Times*, 20/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP6f>

6 Abbas Al Lawati and Becky Anderson, “Jets, chips and a clean slate: Saudi Arabia’s crown prince got almost everything he wanted from Trump,” *CNN*, 20/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOYv>

7 Amir Daftari, “Trump Says Iran Wants Nuclear Deal ‘Badly,’” *Newsweek*, 19/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPKM>

8 “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Solidifies Economic and Defense Partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” The White House, 18/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP8d>

9 Ryan Mancini, “Netanyahu Says Israel will Keep ‘Qualitative Advantage’ Despite F-35 Sale to Saudi Arabia,” *The Hill*, 20/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPkH/>

will require years of complex negotiations, which must also secure congressional approval. In the meantime, Israel will likely have received additional capabilities that preserve its qualitative edge in air power, as guaranteed by explicit American commitments.

In this context, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made statements stressing that the US had ensured his country's "qualitative edge" in the Middle East. He noted that he had spoken with Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who assured him that "Mohammed Bin Salman did not receive ... everything he wanted."¹⁰ These statements prompted calculations that Saudi Arabia, if the deal proceeds, may receive a less advanced variant of the aircraft than that operated by Israel, although Trump explicitly denied this, telling the Saudi Crown Prince: "I know they [the Israelis] want you to get planes of reduced caliber. I don't think that makes you too happy", continuing, "They are both at a level that they should get top of the line".¹¹ Axios suggests that Israeli officials informed their US counterparts that they prefer to link the F-35 deal to the Saudi-Israeli normalization process, while not directly opposing the deal.¹²

Critical Minerals

The US and Saudi Arabia have signed a framework agreement for cooperation on critical minerals, deepening their collaboration and aligning their national strategies to diversify their respective supply chains¹³. This agreement comes within the context of geopolitical competition, with the US-China trade exposing the extent of global dependence on China in this sector.¹⁴ The Trump administration concluded similar agreements with Japan and Australia, recognizing the strategic importance of these resources. Critical minerals and the magnets derived from them are integral to advanced industries, including electric vehicles and cutting-edge fighter jets such as the F-35. China currently dominates the production and processing of heavy rare earths, undertaking about 90% of global processing and producing 93% of the earth magnets essential for advanced manufacturing. A recent study indicates that the West will remain dependent on China for up to 90% of these minerals even beyond 2030 – a reflection of the severity of the strategic gap in this field.¹⁵

Saudi Arabia asserts that it holds the world's fourth-largest reserves of rare earth minerals. This has prompted the agreement with Washington, under which the US firm MP Materials will own half of a rare earth refinery in the Kingdom. The minerals will be extracted, processed, and then supplied to the US, Saudi Arabia, and their partners for the production of magnets required in advanced industries. Saudi officials argue that rare earth minerals could become "the new oil", echoing the role

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barak Ravid, "MBS Tells Trump he Wants to Join Abraham Accords Subject to Path for Palestinian State," *Axios*, 18/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOVG>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Solidifies Economic and Defense Partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

¹⁴ "US Secures \$1 trillion Saudi Spending Commitments Spanning Nuclear Energy to F-35s," *Reuters*, 19/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP3I>

¹⁵ Nick Schiffrin & Sonia Kopelev, "Trump and MBS Unveil U.S.-Saudi Ventures on Rare Earth Minerals and Nuclear Energy," *PBS*, 19/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPtn>

once played by Aramco in the energy sector.¹⁶ Riyadh believes that its substantial reserves of heavy rare earths, combined with the infrastructure developed by Aramco, position it to become a major power in mineral production and processing. As the US–Saudi relationship was historically built on the formula of “oil for security”, the current phase may see a shift to a new era defined by “minerals for strategic partnership”.¹⁷

Nuclear Energy

The two parties released a joint statement announcing the completion of negotiations on cooperation in the field of civil nuclear energy. In this context, Aramco signed seventeen memoranda of understanding and agreements with major US companies, with a potential value exceeding \$30 billion, reflecting Saudi Arabia’s ambition to diversify its energy sources and expand its strategic partnerships with the US.¹⁸ Riyadh maintains that it possesses around 7% of global uranium reserves, providing a solid foundation for launching a large nuclear power plant using US technology and companies, as part of its economic turn and efforts to reduce dependence on oil revenues.¹⁹ However, the principal point of contention between the two sides lies in Saudi insistence on enriching uranium and producing nuclear fuel on its own territory, which Washington rejects on the grounds of non-proliferation. The Kingdom affirms that its nuclear programme will be civilian, and that it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the White House remains resolute, particularly amid strong Israeli pressure opposing any Saudi domestic uranium enrichment.

Artificial Intelligence

The United States and Saudi Arabia signed a memorandum of understanding that “grants the Kingdom access to world-leading American systems while ensuring the protection of US technology from foreign influence.”²⁰ Under this memorandum, Washington approved the sale of advanced chips produced by NVidia to the Saudi company Humain and the UAE-based G42, allowing them to purchase approximately 35,000 chips valued at an estimated \$1 billion.²¹

This decision marks a significant shift in the US position; Washington had previously rejected the idea of direct exports to state-backed AI firms in the Gulf, fearing that advanced US technology could reach China through these countries. The Biden administration had imposed a final round of restrictions on the export of advanced AI chips as part of a policy aimed at preventing cutting-edge US intellectual property from reaching strategic competitors. However, Trump is now seeking to expand the reach of this advanced technology in order to “promote continued American AI dominance and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “US Secures \$1 Trillion Saudi Spending Commitments Spanning Nuclear Energy to F-35s.”

¹⁹ Schiffrin & Kopelev.

²⁰ “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Solidifies Economic and Defense Partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

²¹ Emma Graham, “U.S. Greenlights AI Chip Exports to Gulf Tech Giants after Saudi Crown Prince’s Washington Visit,” *CNBC*, 20/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPU3>

global technological leadership”.²² His administration approved these exports on the condition that state-backed Gulf companies comply with “rigorous security and reporting requirements,” overseen by the US Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security.

Strategic Defence Agreement

The two parties also signed the *U.S.-Saudi Strategic Defense Agreement* (SDA). US security guarantees for Saudi Arabia were among the key objectives Riyadh sought to achieve from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to Washington; it had hoped for a permanent agreement extending beyond Trump’s term in office, akin to Article 5 of the NATO Charter, which stipulates a collective commitment to defend any member subjected to attack. The last time Washington provided such a commitment was in 1969, in its security treaty with Japan.²³ However, what Riyadh secured fell short of a binding defence treaty, as such an agreement would not pass the Senate given the political and legal complexities involved. Instead, Trump announced the designation of Saudi Arabia as a “Major Non-NATO Ally” – a status that grants countries significant military and economic privileges, including facilitated access to US defence equipment, enhanced security and intelligence cooperation, and the broadening of the bilateral strategic partnership.

Conclusion

The US–Saudi relationship has become increasingly shaped by great-power competition and is no longer driven solely by the question of normalization with Israel, as demonstrated by the outcomes of bin Salman’s visit to Washington. It is also influenced by Trump’s personal view of relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf more broadly, seeing them as among Washington’s largest trade partners and foreign investors. Nevertheless, Washington’s reluctance to offer Riyadh deep, binding and long-term security commitments is pushing the Kingdom to seek alternative defence partners, such as Pakistan, with which it signed a strategic defence agreement in September 2025.

Regarding the Palestine question, the Trump administration expressed a desire to make progress during the visit on Saudi Arabia’s potential accession to the Abraham Accords and the full normalization of relations with Israel. However, the Crown Prince was hesitant. Trump stated that he had received a “positive response” from him concerning normalization, but clarified that there was no “commitment”. For his part, bin Salman affirmed Saudi Arabia’s readiness to normalize relations with Israel, but conditioned this on the existence of a “clear pathway to a two-state solution”. Netanyahu responded by asserting that “there won’t be a Palestinian state,” although he noted that he remained “cautiously optimistic” about the possibility of normalizing relations between the two countries.²⁴ On the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, Trump stressed that Saudi Arabia would contribute a “significant sum” to reconstruction efforts, while the Crown Prince indicated that no specific amount had yet been agreed.

²² “Statement on UAE and Saudi Chip Exports,” U.S. Department of Commerce, 19/11/2025, accessed on 25/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP0m>

²³ Al Lawati & Anderson.

²⁴ Mancini