

# The Saudi–US Alliance challenges and resilience, 2011: 2019

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore to what extent can the Saudi–US alliance endure, given the several challenges it has faced over the past decade. Using a conceptual framework from the alliance theory, the paper will trace the historical evolution of the alliance between the two countries, then will identify some of the challenges that have faced the alliance on both the regional and bilateral levels, and finally will assess the impact of these challenges on the resilience of the Saudi–US alliance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper will use the alliance theory literature to analyze the challenges and the resilience of the Saudi–US relations.

**Findings** – The Saudi–US alliance has encountered several challenges in the past decade such as the Arab spring, the Iranian nuclear deal and the Civil War in Syria and Yemen. However, this alliance proved to be resilient, and the strategic partnership between the two countries managed to overcome these challenges.

**Originality/value** – The importance of this paper stems from the fact that the USA and the Saudi Arabia are two pivotal countries, and their relationship affects regional and international dynamics. The paper contributes to the literature on the Saudi–US bilateral relations as well as their views on recent regional issues such as the Arab Spring, the civil war in Yemen and Syria. Assessing the limits and potentials of the alliance between the two countries could also help us understand the future of regional developments in the Middle East.

**Keywords** Saudi Arabia, Alliance, Economic cooperation, Khashoggi, Security and military cooperation, The United States

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The meeting between President Franklin Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz al-Saud in 1945 laid the foundations of the Saudi–US alliance which was based on “oil for security” formula. However, this alliance has witnessed various challenges in the last decade due to different views on some regional issues. For instance, both countries did not see eye to eye on the Iranian nuclear deal, the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Yemeni crisis. In addition, the US Congress passed “Justice against Sponsors of Terrorism Act” (JASTA) which further complicated the bilateral relations between the two countries. Moreover, President Obama publicly doubted the value of Saudi Arabia as an ally. However, common security, and economic interests have created areas for agreement and mutual cooperation between both parties, and have contributed to the resilience of this alliance.



The paper will cover the following points:

- The Conceptual Framework of the US–Saudi Alliance.
- The origins and evolution of the US–Saudi alliance.
- The challenges of the Saudi–US alliance.
- The Resilience of the US–Saudi alliance.
- The Khashoggi case.
- The change in the formula of the Saudi–US alliance.
- Research findings.

## 2. The conceptual framework

Alliances have been subject to debate in the theory of international relations. Realism has focused on analyzing alliances in terms of balance of power and balance of threats. According to Stephen M. Walt, “an Alliance is a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states. It assumes some level of commitment and an exchange of benefits for both parties” (Walt, 1994, p. 12). Glenn Snyder defines the Alliances as:

Formal associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, intended for either the security or the aggrandizement of their members, against specific other states, whether or not these others are explicitly identified. (Snyder, 1990, pp. 103-123).

According to Sangi Dwivedi, Strong and weak nations alike feel the need to form alliances. Weak states enter into alliance when they need protection against strong states i.e. they enter into alliances to defend themselves. Strong states enter into alliances to counter other strong states i.e. they enter into alliance to maintain balance of power. States expect their allies to help militarily and diplomatically during the time of conflict (Dwivedi, 2012).

Walt added that alliances form in the context of the following; balancing in response to a threat, Bandwagoning in response to a threat (Walt, 1994, p. 17), common ideology (Walt, 1994, p. 33), foreign aid, or as a result of transnational penetration (Walt, 1994, p. 46). On the other hand, Ken booth identified several factors which strengthen alliances such as governance and administrative mechanisms, partner type, institutional support, innovation type, and complementarity of partner competencies (Booth, 1987, pp. 268-270). George Liska and William Riker argue that in forming alliances decision makers weigh the costs and rewards of alignment. A decision to join an alliance is based on perception of rewards in excess of costs. Each country considers the marginal utility from alliance membership, as contrasted with unilateral action. (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1997, pp. 447-448).

Neoliberal institutionalism argues that both politics and economics are deeply interconnected. Cooperation is thus “essential in a world of economic interdependence [.]” In contrast to realists, Keohane argues that cooperation in an anarchic system is possible, and is achieved through international institutions, but only if the “states have significant common interests” (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 39)

While realists believe that alliances/institutions will end once the set objective has been achieved, neoliberal institutionalism argues that the opposite occurs. Furthermore, institutions are not static; they adapt and can serve other purposes, but if ultimately an institution ceases to be useful, then it must desist. (Narine, 1998)

The literature also identifies three different types of alliances: tactical, historical and natural alliances (Ghez, 2010 In Ghez, 2011, p. 6). The primary purpose of a tactical alliance

is to counter an immediate threat or adversary that has the potential to challenge a state's most vital interests. Tactical alliances are instrumental and often opportunistic in nature as they allow states to address a pressing and urgent issue. The Tactical alliances are often the result of pragmatic reflections by leaders who are seeking to achieve short term objective (Ghaz, 2011, pp. 6-7). Historical alliances are enduring partnerships that sustain in spite of significant ruptures or changes in the international system. The structural features of such an alliance, which outlast time- or threat-specific contingencies, empower allies to sustain cooperation, relying on past successes as focal points to justify additional partnerships (Ghaz, 2011, pp. 8-9). Finally, The concept of natural alliances goes beyond partners' shared sense of history by additionally hypothesizing commonalities in political culture and in narratives about how the world works or should work. A natural alliance is therefore resilient and is likely to better resist exogenous shocks. It does not exclude disagreements and tensions, but reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings in the long run (Ghaz, 2011, pp. 9-10).

### 3. The origins and evolution of the US–Saudi alliance

The USA recognized Saudi Arabia in 1931, and diplomatic relations were established between them in 1933. President Roosevelt's meeting with King Abdul Aziz al-Saud on the American Aircraft Carrier the USS Quincy, in 1945 strengthened the relations between the two countries, and established a decades- long alliance that was based on "oil for security". According to this formula, the USA pledged to ensure Saudi Arabia security against any internal or external risks in return for the commitment of Saudi Arabia to secure cheap oil to the USA (Morse and Richard, 2002, pp. 16-31). The bilateral relations evolved into a broader security alliance on January 17, 1951 when they signed the first formal defense agreement, known as "the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement". This agreement stipulated the sale of US arms to Saudi Arabia and US training to the Saudi Army (US Department of State, 2009).

Relations between the two countries developed over the next decades on the basis of the same formula of the alliance. The administrations of Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon considered the Saudi regime as an ally and a bulwark against the spread of communism. The alliance was characterized by intertwining and increasing economic, military and security interests (Bronson, 2005, pp. 119-137). Indeed, the Arab-Israeli conflicts in 1948, 1967 and 1973, and the participation of Saudi Arabia in the 1973 oil embargo did not undermine the alliance between the two countries (Blanchard, 2009, p. 4).

Military cooperation reached its peak in the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (Delaney, 2009, p. 48). Bush saw this invasion as a direct threat to Saudi Arabia (Gause, 1994). The United States dispatched about 200,000 US troops to Saudi Arabia to defend it (Bronson, 2006, p. 194). Saudi Arabia, for its part, participated in the coalition that expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991. In addition, it hosted more than 5,000 US military forces, which imposed a no- fly zone over southern Iraq in the task called "Operation Southern Watch" (Prados, 2003, p. Summary). US forces were withdrawn from Saudi Arabia and were transferred to Al Udiid Air base in Qatar at the end of August 2003 (CFR Staff, 2017).

Although the relations of the two countries have been strained in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, which have been carried out by 19 terrorists, including 15 Saudi nationals, they have overcome the crisis and developed their security relations. Saudi Arabia's effort in fighting against terrorism and the bilateral security cooperation was highly commended by George w. Bush's statements (Merritt, 2009, p. 23).

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The military, economic and security alliance have continued under the Obama and Trump administrations. However, several issues have emerged to challenge this alliance, which will be analyzed in the following section:

#### 4. The challenges of the Saudi-US alliance

##### 4.1 *Regime change in Egypt*

Obama's policy towards Egypt was a prominent point in the disagreement between the United States, and Saudi Arabia over the Arab spring. Obama's decision not to support President Hosni Mubarak against mass protests in early 2011 angered the members of the Saudi royal family. They saw that Obama abandoned a common friend and described this abandonment as an American failure to support an old ally (Blanchard, 2017, p. 34).

Unlike Saudi Arabia's view, which considered the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to Saudi interests, the Obama administration viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a moderate group that could be integrated into the political process. The US lifted the official ban on contacting between its diplomats and the Muslim Brotherhood. It also welcomed the elections in Egypt, which produced a majority of the Muslim Brotherhood in parliament. Additionally, it has criticized the decision of the Egyptian army to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi in 2013 (Gause, 2014). In contrast, Saudi Arabia supported the measures taken by of the Egyptian army against the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013. When US politicians proposed cutting off aid to Egypt after the overthrow of Morsi, Saudi Arabia gave Egypt \$5bn by way of compensation. This sum is three times what the USA gives to Egypt annually (McDowall, 2013). Saudi financial and political support for the Egyptian government has continued since 2013 (Blanchard, 2017, p. 34).

##### 4.2 *The Iranian nuclear deal*

Saudi leaders have seen Iran as a source of threat and instability in the Gulf region. Therefore, Saudi officials did not welcome Obama's opening to Iran and feared that any cooperation between Iran and the Obama administration may affect the strength of the relationship between Riyadh and Washington and may increase Iran's influence in the Middle East and the Gulf region (Friedman, 2013). Thus, the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan (JCPOA) (5 + 1) in July 2015 on Iran's nuclear program became a source of tension between Saudi Arabia and the USA. In particular, Riyadh was not included in the preliminary negotiations, which were held secretly in Oman in 2013 (Gause, 2014).

Obama has tried, during his visit to Riyadh in March 2014 and January 2015, to reduce the tension between the two countries, and reassure the Saudi officials about the course of American-Iranian relations. However, disagreement between the two countries continued. In his last visit to Riyadh in April 2016, Obama could not restore confidence in the bilateral relations (Black, 2016).

Obama's stance on the tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in addition to Saudi Arabia cutting all diplomatic links with Iran in 2016, led to the increase of tension between Saudi Arabia and the Obama administration. In an interview with the Atlantic Magazine, President Obama demanded that Saudi Arabia and Iran could share the region (Goldberg, 2016). In another interview he stated that:

The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran will prevent achieving the desired results of the US administration concerning crises in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon, affecting the goals of the national security of the United States in the Middle East.

He added that “the proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran is not in the interest of anyone” (Rose, 2016).

#### *4.3 The civil war in Syria*

While Saudi Arabia and the Obama administration initially agreed to end Bashar Al Assad’s regime in Syria (Gause, 2014). However, Saudi Arabia believed That Obama did not do his best to achieve this purpose and he was reluctant to send weapons and funds to the opposition. Moreover, Obama declared a red line in 2012 on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. However, when Bashar used Sarin Gas on civilians in 2013, Obama retreated from the military option and agreed with Russia on dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons. Hence, Obama’s behavior has further increased tension between the United States and Saudi Arabia. In fact, Saudi Arabia voiced its doubts about the credibility of Obama’s position and questioned whether Obama had the desire to topple Al-Assad (Global Security, 2017). In this vein, Saudi Foreign Minister, Abdel Al-Jubeir, pointed out that:

Putting a red line on the Assad regime and not to abide by it was a huge strategic mistake that encouraged the Assad regime and its allies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).

#### *4.4 The Yemeni crisis*

Both Saudi Arabia and the Obama administration had a common vision for Yemen. Consequently, they supported the Yemeni Government headed by Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. With the cessation of power transfer and the overthrow of Hadi by the Houthis, the Saudi Government and its allies launched the “Decisive Storm Operation” in March 2015 to confront the Houthis and keep Hadi in power (Horton, 2016). The Obama administration supported Saudi Arabia in its war in Yemen not only to help and protect Riyadh as an ally in the region but also to protect its own interests in the region and to deal with the threat of Al-Qaeda Organization in Yemen. (Heistein, 2017).

The Obama administration focused on combating Al-Qaeda in Yemen and providing intelligence and logistical support to the Saudi Arabia- led air campaign since 2015. It dispatched a US advisory mission to Saudi operations headquarter and sold arms and ammunition to Saudi Arabia. It also announced new arms deals to the Kingdom during 2015, 2016 (Hartung, 2015) to replenish the stockpile used in the war in Yemen. In doing so, Obama wanted to improve relations with Riyadh after the conclusion of the nuclear deal with Iran (Gause, 2016).

However, in the past months of the Obama administration, a disagreement emerged between the USA and the Saudi regime as a result of suspending the sale of precision-guided missiles to Saudi Arabia due to the deterioration of humanitarian conditions in Yemen. But the Obama administration continued to provide logistical and intelligence support for the Kingdom and protected the Saudi border against any threat (Ryan, 2016).

#### *4.5 The Palestinian question*

The Palestinian cause continued to be an outstanding cause in the dispute between the USA and Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the alliance. King Abdullah remained committed to the terms of the peace initiative that he has presented under the auspices of the Arab League in 2002. Also, King Salman has committed to this initiative too. Additionally, in September 2015, King Salman and President Obama reaffirmed the importance of the 2002 Arab peace initiative and the need for a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the conflict (Blanchard, 2017, p. 35). However the lack of progress in the peace process added to Saudi frustration of the Obama administration (Fisher and Hubbard, 2017).

#### 4.6 JASTA

Although the report of the Joint Investigation Commission regarding the events of 11 September has acquitted Saudi Arabia of a charge of supporting terrorism, the controversy over the September events did not finished. In May 2016, the US Senate unanimously approved the bill called “Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act”. On September 28, 2016, both houses of Congress passed the bill into law after overriding a veto from President Obama. The practical effect of the legislation was to allow the continuation of a longstanding civil lawsuit brought by families of victims of the September 11 attacks against Saudi Arabia for its government’s alleged role in the attacks. The Obama administration, for its part, warned of the diplomatic and economic repercussions of this law (Mazzetti, 2016). In particular, Saudi Arabia threatened to withdraw its investments and assets from the USA estimated at \$750bn (Council on Foreign Relation, 2016).

Despite Obama’s fear of the repercussions of the JASTA legislation on security and economic relations between the two countries and the Saudi threats of economic response, the security and economic relations between them were not affected (Lippman, 2016). Crown Prince Mohamed bin Nayef stressed the bilateral security cooperation between the two countries. Also, the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Abdullah bin Faisal, affirmed the continuous cooperation between the two countries in spite of disagreements in some cases. Prince Abdullah indicated that:

The two countries have succeeded in overcoming various challenges throughout the history of their relationship, including confronting the Soviet expansion, liberating Kuwait, and fighting Al-Qaeda and ISIS. We may disagree sometimes, which is a normal matter among close allies. However, our goals are still the same, and we are looking forward to cooperation with the next US administration (Flanagan, 2016).

#### 4.7 Freedoms and human rights issues

Human rights and freedoms continued to be controversial issues in the relations between the two countries. In particular, the USA has criticized Riyadh for violations of women’s rights and religious freedoms as documented annually by the US State Department, which designated the Saudi Arabia as “a country of particular concern” regarding religious freedoms since 2004, and used this designation again in the subsequent years. For instance, the Obama administration supported the right of Saudi citizens to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, while Saudi leaders rejected the US administration’s position and described it as an unacceptable foreign interference in the country’s domestic affairs (Blanchard, 2016, Summary). In addition, US officials called on Riyadh to provide due process of law and allow peaceful expression of opposition (Blanchard, 2014, p. 1).

### 5. The resilience of the Saudi–US alliance

The previous disagreements between Saudi Arabia and the USA have had a limited impact on the alliance between them, the resilience of the alliance was evident in the policies of both Obama and Trump administration, and survived the Khashoggi case, as explained in the following section:

#### 5.1 Obama and the Saudi alliance

Obama has repeatedly stressed the close security cooperation between the two countries, considering Saudi Arabia a strong ally in fighting terrorism (The White House, 2014).

Furthermore, US Department of State has praised, in its annual reports, Saudi Arabia for maintain strong relation with the USA for combating terrorism (Blanchard, 2016, p. 18) and

the exchange of information for preventing any possible terrorist acts. It has also praised Saudi Arabia's efforts to combat the financing of terrorism and extremism (US Department of State, August 2011), to improve the legislative structure to fight against terrorism (US Department of State, 2015), to modernize curricula and books (US Department of State, 2013), and to educate imams and monitor sermons to prevent the spread of extremist ideology in light of a huge increase in terrorist activities in the Middle East since 2011 (US Department of State, 2012).

On Military Cooperation, Arms sales have strengthened military relations and defense cooperation between the two countries. The leaders of both countries view arms sales as a symbolic pledge to cooperate during periods of regional unrest (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2017a).

US arms sales to Saudi Arabia have increased during the Obama administration. Saudi Arabia became the first country in the Middle East that buy US arms estimated at more than \$115bn through 42 separate deals between the period from 2009 to 2016. Four deals concluded in October 2010 estimated at more than \$60bn (Blanchard, 2016, pp. 41-42), which exceeded any deals made by any US administration since the establishment of relations between the two countries and were the largest value of arms sales to one country in the history of the USA. Thus, Saudi Arabia became the largest customer purchasing foreign military sales from the USA (Fleurant *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, military relations and arms sales were not affected by disagreements between the two countries, but strengthened the bonds of alliance between them.

Economically, The USA and Saudi Arabia have enjoyed strong economic relations. With regard to oil, Saudi Arabia has maintained its position as one of the major suppliers of oil to the USA. For example, Saudi Arabia was the second largest exporter of crude oil to the USA after Canada in 2015 (Blanchard, 2016, p. 30), 2016, (Blanchard, 2017, p. 37), 2017 (US Energy Information Administration, 2019), and 2018 (Blanchard, 2018, p. 24).

It should be noted that oil relations between the two countries depend not only on Saudi oil exports to the USA but also on the influence of the Saudi Arabia in the world oil market. This influence stems from the fact that it possesses the world's highest oil reserves estimated at one fifth of the world's oil reserves (JODI-Oil World Database, 2019) for 75 years (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Annual Statistical Report, 2016, p. 10) and that it is able to produce oil estimated at 12,5 million barrels per day. This enables it to play the role of "swing suppliers" to alleviate the effects of interruption of power supply in any region, and to play a key role in balancing the price of oil in the global market by increasing and decreasing oil production (Bahgat, 2003, pp. 447-461). Therefore, Riyadh has played a vital role in the world economy, and Washington encouraged this role (Barone, 2018).

With regard to trade relations, Saudi Arabia has been one of the largest trading partners of the United States in the Middle East. For instance, the volume of Saudi exports to the USA in 2016 reached about \$16.9bn, and the volume of US exports to Saudi Arabia reached about \$18bn (Blanchard, 2017, p. 36), about 15 per cent of the total of Saudi Arabia's imports from all countries of the world for the same year (Saudi General Authority for Statistics, 2016, p. 90).

According to the office of Economic Analysis of the US Department of Commerce, the volume of direct Saudi investment during 2016 reached \$9.8bn, an increase of 1.6 per cent from 2015 (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019a).

As for the volume of the Saudi investment in US treasury bills, US treasury bonds in Saudi Arabia reached \$116.8 billion in March 2016 (US Department of the Treasury) by a decrease of 6 per cent from January 2016, making Saudi Arabia ranks the 14th globally

(Sheffield, 2016), and the first among OPEC countries that invest in US treasury bonds (Wong, 2016). By the end of 2016, the volume of these bonds was \$102.2bn (US Department of the Treasury, 2019a, 2019b).

With regard to education, Saudi Students in US universities contributed about \$1.7bn to the US economy in 2014. The number of Saudi students enrolled in American Universities was 59,945 students in 2015 and 56,900 students in 2016, representing about 6 per cent of all foreign students in the USA. Thus, Saudi Arabia ranked fourth in terms of the number of its student in the USA after China, India and South Korea (International Trade Administration, 2016, p. 25).

### 5.2 *The trump factor*

President Trump came to the white house with a different view on many issues that were a source of friction between the USA and Saudi Arabia under the Obama administration for example, on the Iran issue, Trump pledged to take aggressive positions towards Iran. On 8 May, 2018, he declared the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran. Trump described the agreement as catastrophic and announced that the USA seeks to impose great economic sanctions on Iran (The White House, 2018a). In his speech before the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2018, he stressed:

Iran is fueling strife and spreading terrorism and destruction in the Middle East. I call on the world to prevent Iran from spreading chaos in the Middle East region (Connell, 2018).

Saudi Arabia, for its part, praised Trump's decision (Mindock *et al.*, 2018) and announced its support for re-imposing economic sanctions against Iran (Blanchard, 2018, p. 1).

Furthermore, in April 2017, Jim Mattis, US defense secretary, confirmed that the USA supports the Saudi war in Yemen as a means to defend against Iran's moves in the region, and that Saudi Arabia was the best partner in combating terrorism (Bukhari, 2017).

Moreover Trump's asked that King Salman to increase Saudi oil production to about 2 million barrels per day to compensate for the difference in the global oil market as a result of imposing sanctions on Iran and Venezuela. Consequently, King Salman confirmed the increase of production to ensure a global market balance (Wroughton and Kalin, 2018). Also, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman declared that Saudi Arabia and OPEC rose their production by 1.7 million barrels per day to compensate for Iran's low production of oil (Flanders *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, In contrast to Obama's suspension of sales of precision guided missiles to Saudi Arabia, Trump resumed the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. The Trump administration confirmed its support for Saudi Arabia's operations in Yemen to contain the Iranian influence in the region and to end the conflict in Yemen, which is a priority for US national security (Blanchard, 2018, pp. 33-34).

The Trump administration also has evolved in supported the military operations of coalition forces in Yemen. This support involved the exchange of intelligence, logistical support, the presence of US military advisers providing military advice, the improvement of border security and defense operations against ballistic missile, and anti-terrorism operations in Yemen (Blanchard, 2018, pp. 22-23).

However the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Yemen led the Secretary of state and Secretary of Defense to urge all parties of the dispute to accelerate the cessation of hostilities and the cessation of military actions carried out by the coalition forces in the Yemeni populated areas. They also called for all parties to support the United Nations' efforts to resume a negotiated political track to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Yemen and to alleviate the humanitarian crisis (Browne, 2018).

On issues related to democracy and human rights, Trump stated that the USA will not seek to impose its way of life on others ([The White House, 2017a](#)).

Trump affirmed in his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2018 that: “The US respects the right of every nation to continue to follow its customs, beliefs and traditions. America will not tell you how you live, work or worship” ([Connell, 2018](#)).

In this respect, president Trump stressed that the United States will continue to support the Saudi Arabia in its efforts aimed at promoting the Saudi society and the economy in accordance with the vision of the Kingdom 2030 ([The White House, 2017b](#)). He also praised Saudi Arabia’s decision about the right of the Saudi women to drive and described the decision as a positive step towards promoting women’s rights and opportunities in the Kingdom.

The Trump administration took a neutral stand on the conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. After the outbreak of the crisis in 5 June 2017, Trump accused Qatar of funding terrorism, though the US Secretary of State called for Saudi Arabia and its allies to end their boycott of Qatar, and called for Qatar to stop providing the financial support for terrorists ([Smith et al., 2017](#)). Trump also remained neutral and called upon the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council to negotiate and settle the dispute among themselves. Simultaneously, the USA maintained close defense cooperation, including arms sales, with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar ([Blanchard, 2018](#), p. 35).

On the Palestinian issue, Saudi Arabia voiced its opposition to Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel ([Gaouette and Labott, Key, 2017](#)). It described the decision as unjustified, irresponsible, biased and not neutral ([Sabur et al., 2017](#)). In January 2018, King Salman affirmed the right of the Palestinian people to establish its independent state, and its capital is Jerusalem. He stressed that a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian cause according to international resolutions must be reached. However, the Jerusalem decisions did not have any ramification on the Saudi–US relations.

Furthermore, the situation in Egypt ceased to be an issue of disagreement between Saudi Arabia and the USA under the Trump administration. Unlike Obama, whose relations with Egypt were strained, President Trump has sought to improve US relations with Egypt ([Sharp, 2018](#)), and started military aid and cooperation with Egypt, which was in line with Saudi view. Trump welcomed Al-Sisi’s visit to Washington in 2017 ([Tharoor, 2017](#)). He stressed the importance of the strategic partnership between the two countries ([The White House, 2018b](#)).

Close security cooperation between the Trump administration and Saudi Arabia continued. During Trump’s visit to Riyadh in May 2017, a strategic vision for joint cooperation, which includes new initiatives to fight terrorism and its financing, was announced ([US Department of State, 2018](#)). The Trump administration also asserted that the Saudi government is a strong partner in regional security and counterterrorism efforts ([Blanchard, 2018](#), p. 16).

On Military Cooperation, Arms sales continued to strengthen relations between the two countries. On 19 May 2017, Trump informed Congress of his intention to conclude three proposed deals of precision guided ammunition with Saudi Arabia formally, delayed by the Obama administration. On 20 May 2017, President Trump and King Salman signed a proposed deal of US arms sales worth \$350bn over 10 years ([Thomas, 2017](#)), to support Saudi defense needs ([Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2017b](#)).

Economically, with regard to trade relations, Saudi Arabia was also the largest trading partner of the United States in the Middle East in 2017. The volume of Saudi exports to the USA estimated at more than \$18.8bn and the volume of US exports to the Kingdom estimated at more than \$16.3bn ([Blanchard, 2018](#), p. 23).

According to the office of Economic Analysis of the US Department of Commerce, The volume of direct investment of the USA in Saudi Arabia in 2017 increased to reach \$11.1bn, an increase of 4.7 per cent from 2016 (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019b).

The volume of the Saudi investment in US treasury bills, US treasury bonds rose dramatically during the Trump administration to reach about \$169.5bn in August 2018 (US Department of the Treasury, 2019c). Thus, Saudi Arabia ranked 10th globally and the first at the Arab level regarding investment in US Treasuries. The increase in Saudi shares in US Treasury bonds indicates that Saudi Arabia desires to strengthen its economic ties with Washington (Andrew, 2017).

## 6. The Khashoogi case

The killing of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoogi at the Saudi consulate in Turkey on October 2, 2018 led to tension between Washington and Riyadh. Trump indicated that the consequences of the assassination of Khashoogi represented one of the biggest foreign policy crises of his presidency (Haberman *et al.*, 2018). The Trump administration's position was mixed. On the one hand, Trump pressured the Saudi government to investigate the matter and punish the perpetrators. He also said that the United States would impose substantial sanctions if Saudi Arabia was found to be involved in the crime. On the other hand, Trump defended the value of the Saudi–USA alliance and the importance of arms deals, trade relations and investment, as well as Saudi's influential role in the world oil market.

Although Trump pledged to impose severe sanctions against Saudi Arabia in case of its involvement in the murder of Khashoogi, he repeatedly pointed out that any possible US sanctions should not include the dissolution of arms deals estimated at billions of dollars with the Saudis (Dallas news, 2018). On October 20, 2018, as Saudi authorities admitted the involvement of Saudi officials in Khashoogi's murder, Trump voiced his confidence in the Saudi authorities.

On 20 November, 2018, Trump issued a statement on Saudi Arabia and declared his support for Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, challenging the American legislators, who wanted to impose tougher sanctions against Saudi Arabia (Bredemeier, 2018). The statement (The White House, 2018c) included several points which confirmed the resilience of the US–Saudi alliance.

Trump stressed the importance of close security cooperation between the two countries to face extremism, terrorism and Iranian influence and to achieve stability in the Middle East, According to Trump:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran". He also added that Saudi Arabia would gladly withdraw from Yemen if the Iranians would agree to leave. Additionally, Saudi Arabia agreed to spend billions of dollars in leading the fight against Radical Islamic Terrorism.

Trump also referred to the importance of the economic dimension in the relation between the two countries:

The Kingdom agreed to spend and invest \$450 billion in the United States. This is a record amount of money. It will create hundreds of thousands of jobs, tremendous economic development, and much additional wealth for the United States" ant that "Saudi Arabia have worked closely with us and have been very responsive to my requests to keeping oil prices at reasonable levels – so important for the world.

Moreover, Trump emphasized the importance of US arms sales to Saudi Arabia:

If we foolishly cancel these arms contracts, Russia and China would be the enormous beneficiaries – and very happy to acquire all of this newfound business. It would be a wonderful gift to them directly from the United States!

Finally, Trump stressed the importance of continuing partnership with Saudi Arabia to ensure interests of USA and the interests of Israel and the countries of the region:

The United States intends to remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia to ensure the interests of our country, Israel and all other partners in the region:

Trump repeated his defense of Saudi Arabia, of the Saudi–Israeli links during a press conference in Florida on November 22, 2018:

If you look at Israel, Israel would be in big trouble without Saudi Arabia, [ . . . ] (Staff, 2018):

On 27 November 2018, Trump repeated the same view during his interview with the Washington Post newspaper (Rucker *et al.*, 2018). He affirmed that:

The Saudi have been a great ally. Without them, Israel would be in a lot more trouble. We need to have a counterbalance to Iran [ . . . ] it's very, very important to maintain that relationship. It's very important to have Saudi Arabia as an ally, if we're going to stay in that part of the world". However, Trump concluded that "Oil is becoming less and less of a reason because we're producing more oil now than we've ever produced. So, you know, all of a sudden it gets to a point where you don't have to stay there.

Finally, it is worth noting that some observers saw Trump's reference to the decline of the importance of oil as a warning to Saudi Arabia that its influence may not be permanent (Blake, 2018).

### 7. The change in the formula of the Saudi–US alliance

It should be noted that there has been some changes in the formula of "oil for security" which has shaped the Saudi–US alliance for many years. In the first part of the formula related to oil, The USA has reduced its dependence on Saudi oil due to the discovery and production of rocky oil (Shale oil) in the USA. However, despite the decline of the importance of Saudi oil, the USA still relies on the influential role of Saudi Arabia in controlling oil prices in the global oil market. In fact, Saudi Arabia will continue to play a prominent role in the global oil market owning to its largest oil reserves.

With regards to the second part of the formula related to security, the USA has increasingly shifted its strategic interest to Asia (Pivot to Asia), which started under president Obama and continued with Trump. This has involved moving some American troops from the Gulf region to Asia and the Pacific. However, this development didn't affect several aspects of the military relations between Saudi Arabia and the USA, and Saudi Arabia continues to be one of the largest buyer of US weapons. There are also a joint cooperation between them in maritime security and cyber security. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia no longer relies solely on the US security umbrella to protect its security. This is attributed to two reasons: First, the American policy itself is seeking to strengthen its allied countries militarily to reduce their dependence on the United States' direct military support. This is part of its offshore balancing approach that prevents the direct military intervention in issues that do not affect its vital interests (Moawad, 2017, pp. 9-19).

The second reason relates to the impact of the relative decline in the US role in the Middle East region following the events of the Arab Spring. This decline led Saudi Arabia to keep its options open without abandoning its long strategic alliance with the USA. For example, Saudi Arabia has formed a number of alliances with influential regional and international

powers, such as the Arab alliance in “Operation Decisive Storm” in Yemen, the international alliance against terrorism announced by Saudi Arabia in December 2015, with the participation of 34 Arab, Asian and African countries, and the quartet alliance against Qatar in June 2017 (Miller, 2017).

Additionally, Saudi Arabia has sought to strengthen its relations with Russia, China and some European countries. Accordingly, it is clear that the foundations of Saudi–US alliance have been changed, but this change did not reach the degree that could lead to the disintegration or collapse of this alliance at the present time.

## 8. Research findings

This study has analyzed the factors of continuity and change in the Saudi–US alliance and the resilience of this alliance in facing several challenges. The study has revealed that these challenges did not have negative repercussions that may lead to the demise of the alliance. Accordingly, the study reached the following findings:

- The Saudi–US alliance is not based on shared values, culture and ideology, but it is based on common interests. The mutual benefits of the alliance explain why it endured.
- Common interest have included oil supplies to the USA, maintains a reasonable price for oil in the international market, countering terrorism, and curbing the Iranian influence.
- In particular, Saudi Arabia is keen to sustain its strategic alliance with the United States to achieve regional balancing against regional threats, and strengthen its regional status in the face of its adversaries.
- For the USA, Saudi Arabia has continued to be a reliable ally in the energy market, and a partner in containing Iran and combating terrorism.
- The alliance survived the September 11th terrorist attacks (2001), and the differences over US stand on the Arab spring. Despite these challenges, the alliance remained intact due to its solid foundation based on mutual interests.
- President Trump has revived cooperation with the Saudi Arabia, with his emphasis on economic deals (arms sales to Saudi Arabia, Saudi investments in the United States) and the Saudi role in moderating the price of oil in the global energy market.
- US pivot to Asia to face the Chinese challenge and seize economic opportunities in the rising continent, as well as its increasing levels of energy sufficiency due to the discovery of shale oil, poses a serious challenge to US commitments in the Middle East and its alliance with Saudi Arabia in the long term.
- President Trump’s belief in transactional relationship with allies, and his demand that they should compensate the USA for its role in defending them and maintaining their security, will further complicates the relationship between the US and its allies, including Saudi Arabia.
- Realizing the previous development, Saudi Arabia has increased its transactional relationship with the Trump administration (more arms purchases and more economic investments in the USA). However, it has also opened new frontiers for cooperation with other major powers such as Russia and China. However, the structure of the current international system suggests that it is difficult for Saudi Arabia to find another strategic ally which is capable of replacing the USA in the foreseeable future. (Godbole, 2018).

To conclude, and as noted in the theoretical part, the Saudi-US alliance continues to represent a case of a historical alliance. Such alliance endures because it relies on past successes as focal points to justify additional cooperation and partnership.

Finally, and building on the previous findings, one could propose a future research agenda that could include such topics as, the future of alliances in global politics, the changing nature of US alliances around the world and how they will adjust to the current views of the Trump administration. At the regional level, more research is needed to explain Saudi foreign policy under its new leadership, and the significance and sustainability of its regional alliances.

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