

Saudi Arabia

ISSUES

- Saudi Arabia is at a critical juncture, attempting a radical economic overhaul through Vision 2030, and a radical socio-cultural transformation away from rigid Islamist hardline strictures toward a more open social and cultural space. At the same time, there has been a concentration of political power in the person of the crown prince and a harsh crackdown on rival political and business leaders, as well as a constriction of public space for political or civic expression both at home and abroad.
- There are signs that the Saudi leadership is attempting to correct its foreign policy missteps, especially ending its intervention in the Yemen civil war. But progress is uncertain, including ending the confrontation with Qatar, and Saudi Arabia is still facing a significant challenge from Iran and an increasingly unstable regional environment.
- Yemen, the oil price war, and the murder of Saudi dissident and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi have created the most acute crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations since the events of September 2001.
- The Pensacola shooting reinforces concerns about the persistence of radical Islamic beliefs in Saudi Arabia, including within the Saudi military, and their threat to global peace and security.
- The economic and socio-cultural attempts at progress in the kingdom are critical, but there is concern that the increasing levels of repression and the dangerous missteps in foreign policy might presage an unstable future for the kingdom.

US INTERESTS

- A strong Saudi Arabia is a critical partner for the U.S. in promoting regional security and stability, challenging Iranian bad behavior, and advancing shared objectives, including resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Despite the growth of U.S. domestic energy production, Saudi Arabia remains the linchpin of global oil production and is, therefore, essential for maintaining stability in world energy markets and the global economy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain vital cooperation with the Saudis on critical energy infrastructure protection and promote global stability in energy and financial markets.

- Maintain a robust bilateral dialogue with Saudi leaders on regional issues of concern to promote agreement on shared concerns, including resolving the Yemen and intra-GCC conflicts.
- Help and encourage the kingdom to achieve the goals of Vision 2030 and open up social and cultural space, but the U.S. should also be firm and clear in insisting on respect for human rights, the rule of law, and civil liberties in Saudi Arabia.