

# AFTER OIL-FOR-SECURITY

## A BLUEPRINT FOR RESETTING US-SAUDI SECURITY RELATIONS

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Cover photo: Saudi army officers walk past F-15 fighter jets, GBU bombs and missiles displayed during a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the creation of the King Faisal Air Academy at King Salman airbase in Riyadh on Jan. 25, 2017. [Photo by FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

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Photo above: A Patriot missile battery is seen near Prince Sultan Air Base at al-Kharj on Feb. 20, 2020. [Photo by ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/POOL/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

# KEY POINTS

1. One of Washington's most important priorities and challenges in Saudi Arabia is to help the kingdom provide for its own security.
2. The 1980 Carter Doctrine was instrumental at the time it was issued, but it is a deficient concept for future U.S.-Saudi security cooperation because it remains a one-way street.
3. Since Desert Storm, Washington and Riyadh have sought to improve Saudi armament, while paying scant attention to Saudi defense management, which is critical to manage, employ, and sustain those Saudi weapons.
4. The Saudi defense transformation plan is the Saudis' own version of Goldwater-Nichols, the single most consequential and comprehensive defense reform in U.S. history. Almost all U.S. security cooperation efforts should be tied to this transformation plan.
5. The United States has a handicapped diplomatic presence in the kingdom, and its enormous security cooperation posture has never been properly organized and integrated. It lacks both a base operating support-integrator and a security cooperation office. Each is needed in the kingdom to organize and integrate all parts of the U.S. security cooperation posture and allow for more effective coordination between the U.S. security cooperation enterprise in Washington and all relevant Saudi national security agencies.



Photo above: Members of Saudi Special Forces take part in “anti-terrorist” exercises on March 18, 2015, in the desert scrubland of Suwayf, north of Arar city on the Iraqi border. [Photo by FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP via Getty Images.](#)



# AFTER OIL-FOR-SECURITY

## Introduction

U.S.-Saudi bilateral ties are on the mend, but until the ambiguities and transactional nature of the 1945 oil-for-security covenant are addressed by both sides, mistrust will prevail and tensions are bound to reemerge.

The burden of fixing or stabilizing the U.S.-Saudi relationship is a shared responsibility. For its part, Saudi Arabia should make a determined and demonstrable effort to address legitimate U.S. concerns, including human rights, oil production policy, security overtures to Beijing, and the war in Yemen. The United States, meanwhile, should reconstruct its security framework with the kingdom to make it more effective against the multifaceted threat posed by Iran.

In this report, I focus on the latter for two main reasons: First, the security factor in the U.S.-Saudi relationship — though one of its key pillars — is, ironically, under-analyzed and even misunderstood. While there is a consensus among U.S. and Saudi officials and observers on the need to upgrade the two countries' defense relations — a process in which good progress has been made, both tactically and operationally — there is no serious discussion of how this could be achieved on a more *strategic level*.

Second, for the Saudis, external protection is a core — in fact, the biggest — concern in their relationship with Washington. Therefore, a fuller understanding of that concern and importantly, how it could be addressed, serves U.S. objectives. The Saudis would love to see more U.S. investments in their economy, perhaps a more courteous or professional tone by U.S. leaders when referring to their country (as a presidential candidate, Joe Biden called Saudi Arabia a “pariah” state with a government of “no redeeming social value”), and a greater U.S. appreciation of the monumental yet challenging reforms the Saudi leadership is pursuing. But no Saudi expectation of the United States will ever top security assurance, especially at a time when the kingdom is undergoing historic socio-economic change that requires security and, more specifically,

the ability to effectively defend against direct and indirect Iranian aggression.

Despite its much-reduced faith in America's willingness to protect it, Saudi Arabia still values an enhanced U.S. security involvement. Saudi Crown Prince and de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) conveyed this very message to senior officials in both the Trump and Biden administrations. It's time for Washington and Riyadh to reconfigure their security ties in accordance with new U.S. geopolitical priorities and new Saudi defense requirements. This report will lay out such a process.

## The Carter Doctrine

The U.S.-Saudi diplomatic relationship dates back to 1933, but it rose to prominence in 1945, when U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt secretly met with King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud aboard a U.S. heavy cruiser in the Suez Canal to bring the kingdom closer to America's sphere of influence and gain access to its oil. Yet, the clearest expression of U.S. security support to Saudi Arabia (and other Gulf Arab countries) only came three-and-a-half decades later through the Carter Doctrine.

Worried about the Soviet Union's potential incursion into the oil-rich Gulf after its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, President Jimmy Carter proclaimed on Jan. 23, 1980, in his State of the Union Address, that the United States would use its military resources to defend American interests in the Middle East if necessary. Three years after his statement, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), previously the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, was created to give teeth to the Carter Doctrine and establish a larger U.S. military presence in the region.

The biggest test to the Carter Doctrine was in August 1990, when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein decided to seize Kuwait, his small, wealthy neighbor. The United States responded less than a week later by launching Operation Desert Shield to defend Saudi Arabia. Then on Jan. 17, 1991, to liberate Kuwait, Operation Desert Shield transitioned to Operation Desert

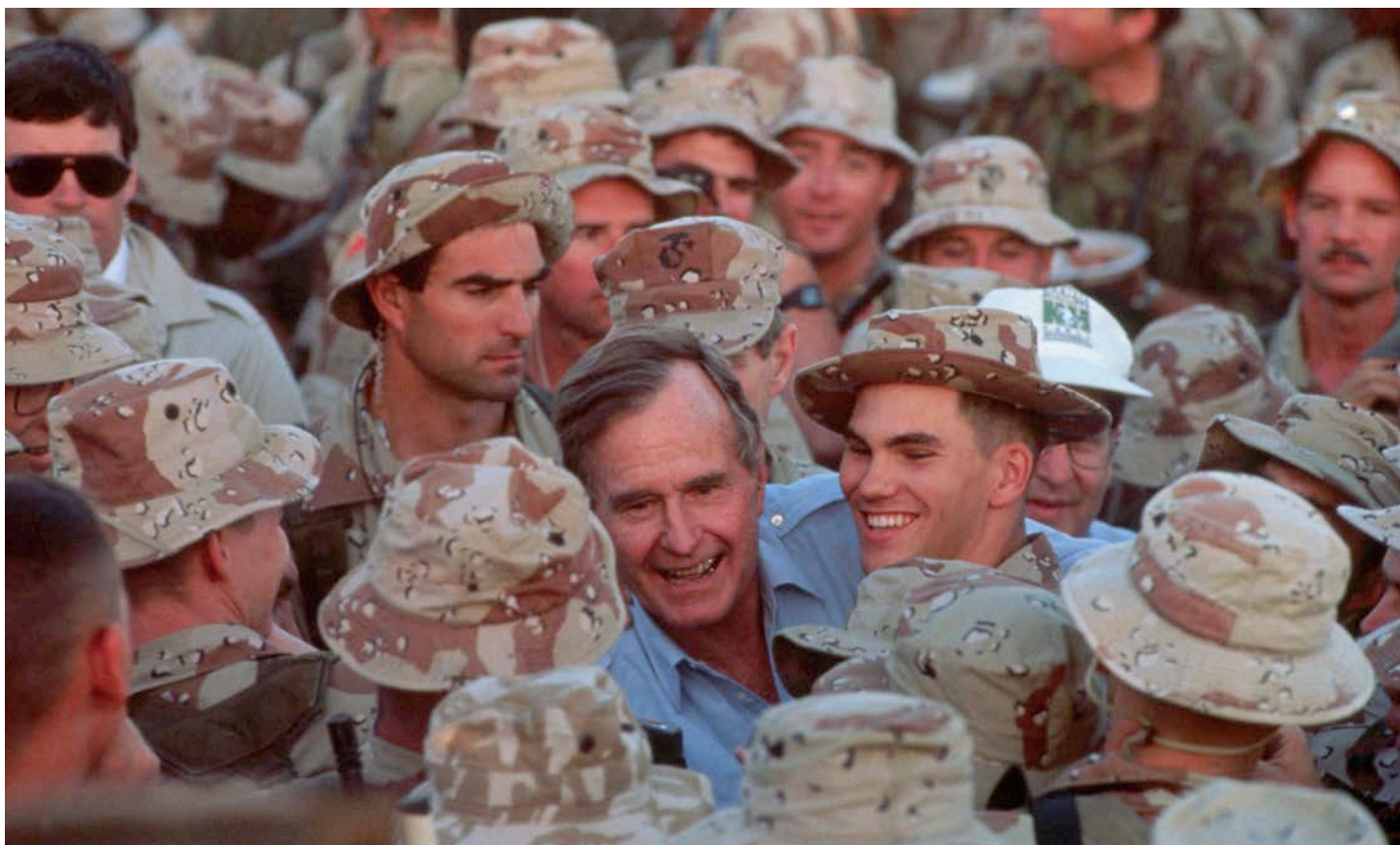


Photo above: President George H. W. Bush shakes hands with U.S. Army troops in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War on Thanksgiving Day, 1990.

Photo by Wally McNamee/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Image.

Storm, the biggest U.S. military campaign since Vietnam. A little over a month after that, American troops freed Kuwait from Iraqi occupation and achieved a complete military victory.

The U.S.-led military effort against Iraq effectively secured Saudi Arabia and the region. It also cemented Pax Americana in the broader Middle East and reaffirmed Saudi Arabia's belief in Washington's willingness and ability to defend it from danger. But once Operation Desert Storm was over, it was unclear to the Saudis what the conditions and parameters of future U.S. intervention were because Saudi and U.S. leaders never officially discussed those issues.

The United States decided to intervene in 1990-91 because it perceived that the stakes of allowing the Iraqi dictator to dominate the massive energy resources of the Gulf were too high. To the extent that the Saudis participated in Washington's decision, it was merely to express a wish to evade Iraqi control. For the United States, securing Saudi Arabia and liberating Kuwait served a broader strategic purpose, which was to maintain a U.S.-friendly regional order. To put it less

diplomatically, the United States had no special affinities for or legal obligations toward the Saudis or the Kuwaitis. Had Saddam opted for less maximalist goals and pursued less extreme measures — for example, by launching a political destabilization campaign against the Saudi and Kuwaiti governments — Washington might not have intervened so forcefully, or even used force at all.

The reason I bring up this hypothetical scenario is because Saudi Arabia found itself in a similar situation in 1996, and then again more devastatingly in 2019. In 1996, Saudi agents trained by Lebanese Hezbollah and working for the Iranians blew up the Khobar Towers military housing complex in Dhahran with a 5,000-pound bomb planted in a fuel truck, killing 19 American airmen and injuring hundreds more, including Saudi citizens. This represented, in no uncertain terms, a national security threat to the kingdom. Even though there was evidence, collected by the Saudis and soon after by the Americans, implicating Tehran, President Bill Clinton decided not to retaliate against the Iranians. The Saudis didn't expect, nor did they want, the United States to go to war

against Iran for perpetrating a major terrorist attack on their soil, but they also didn't think that Tehran would go unpunished and not be held accountable for its crime. Unsure about the U.S. security commitment to them, the Saudis chose to limit their cooperation with the United States in the investigation for fear of Tehran lashing out against them.

On Sept. 14, 2019, Iran struck Saudi Arabia's oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais from its own territory using 25 drones and cruise missiles. The complex operation was a shock to the Saudis, to the Americans, and to all those (not few) who assumed such an act of overt aggression by Iran against any Gulf Arab nation was unthinkable in the presence of a powerful and forward-deployed U.S. military deterrent in the Gulf.

The Trump administration, and the Saudis themselves, not only failed to deter but also to respond to Iran's belligerence. If the 1996 attack caused Riyadh to question the viability of the Carter Doctrine, the 2019 raid virtually eliminated any Saudi confidence in the U.S. security commitment. Similar to 1996, after their oil installations were hit, the Saudis unambiguously communicated to Washington their wish to deescalate, urging Trump to hold his fire, in large part because they didn't necessarily trust that the Americans would protect them in a shooting war with Iran.

These two examples of Iranian attacks against Saudi Arabia (and several others, albeit less lethal and destructive) raise a key question regarding the future of U.S.-Saudi security relations: In a strategic environment where the threat to Saudi security — primarily posed by Iran and its regional proxies — is a lot more complex than in the past (yet no less serious), and where U.S. interests in the Middle East and priorities around the world have changed considerably, what's left of the Carter Doctrine?

The Carter Doctrine was instrumental at the time it was issued because it clearly signaled not only to the Soviet Union but also to the American people that the United States was determined to use military force against any potential aggressor to secure

its oil interests in the region. However, this was an *American* policy statement meant to address *American* concerns and support *American* objectives, which then focused on the preservation of cheap and constant energy flows from the region to the U.S. economy.

The unilateral nature of the Carter Doctrine hasn't changed since. Consider again Iran's 2019 strike against Saudi Aramco. Even though the attack was the worst in the history of Saudi-Iranian relations, and even though it represented the single largest disruption of daily oil supply in history, Washington did not intervene militarily in support of Riyadh or even entertain a limited punitive strike, because unlike in 1990, it didn't consider its vital national interests to be at risk. That same year, the U.S. was, and still is, much less dependent on Middle Eastern oil due to its own energy revolution and significant increases in production, which made it a net exporter in 2020 and 2021.

This is not meant to fault the United States for prioritizing its self-interest; that's what sovereign states do. But it would be dishonest not to recognize that the Carter Doctrine continues to be a one-way street that doesn't pay nearly enough attention to the distinct needs, fears, or considerations of Saudi Arabia or any other Arab partner whose security may be at risk or who is under attack. Indeed, there has never been any serious dialogue, either within the U.S. government or with the Saudis, on the conditions under which the United States would come to the defense of Saudi Arabia should it be attacked.

Of course, there is a connection between the physical safety of Saudi Arabia (or any other partner) and U.S. interests. For example, if the Saudis can't pump enough oil because their infrastructure suffered a debilitating hit by the Iranians, then that affects U.S. energy interests and the U.S. economy. But this relationship is not direct, opening the door to various complex contingencies in which the Iranians could use different forms of lower-level violence against Saudi Arabia in pursuit of their objectives and, as a result, leave U.S. security policy exposed.

**“There has never been any serious dialogue on the conditions under which the United States would come to the defense of Saudi Arabia should it be attacked.”**



For decades, that's exactly what the Iranians have done. They have sought to amplify the fissures in the security relationship between the United States and its Gulf Arab partners. Tehran learned from Saddam's folly. It realized that to dominate the region, it didn't have to roll its tanks and invade its Arab neighbors (and as a result, trigger the wrath of the United States). All it had to do to expand its influence is patiently and methodically coerce, intimidate, and exacerbate the political weaknesses of its Arab adversaries by operating in the gray zone (meaning, below the threshold of conventional war) while maintaining plausible deniability. The United States has had the wrong answer to this hybrid and nuanced form of Iranian aggression in part because it looks nothing like the marching conventional Iraqi army in the open Kuwaiti desert.

## Partnership, not Guardianship

Saudi Arabia is not in a uniquely unenviable position when it comes to its security ties with Washington. Uncertainty about the U.S. security commitment is what *all* international partners

of the United States must manage. Unlike a treaty ally, a partner does not have an official defense pact with Washington, legally obligating the latter to come to the defense of the former in the event of an attack (and vice versa).

It's doubtful that the United States would elevate its security relationship with Saudi Arabia to an alliance. There are simply too many problems and hurdles with this proposition, both political and strategic. At home, there is no appetite among the American public, and most American elites, for forging a formal alliance with an absolute monarchy such as Saudi Arabia. It's hard to imagine any American president bringing up this issue for a vote in Congress because it would immediately be rejected by most lawmakers (under U.S. law, a treaty requires ratification and the "advice and consent" of the Senate).

Extending an official defense pact to Saudi Arabia without doing the same with other critical regional partners, including Israel, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar (not to mention Taiwan, which is now a core concern of U.S. officials), is also a recipe for a diplomatic crisis with each of these countries. And



Photo above: U.S. and Saudi tanks take part in the Eager Lion multinational military maneuver, on Sept. 14, 2022, representing one of the largest military exercises in the region. Photo by KHALIL MAZRAAWI/AFP via Getty Images.



the United States simply cannot afford to establish alliances with all or even some of these countries and commit more military resources to the Middle East at a time when it is focused on stopping China from becoming a hegemon in Asia. This would be strategically unwise and contrary to America's new foreign policy priorities, as outlined in the [National Security Strategy](#) and [National Defense Strategy](#).

So, if the status quo in U.S.-Saudi security ties is unsatisfactory and unsustainable, at least to the Saudis, and the chances of upgrading the relationship into a formal alliance are remote, what is politically and strategically feasible?

In a perceptive report, Martin Indyk and Steven Cook make a compelling case for a new and broader "[U.S.-Saudi strategic compact](#)" through which the United States commits to boosting defense ties with Saudi Arabia (short of extending a formal security guarantee) and, in return, the kingdom commits to cooperating on domestic reform, human rights, oil policy, the war in Yemen, and normalization with Israel. The strength, closeness, and evolution of U.S.-Saudi defense relations, the authors argue, would depend on the level of cooperation Washington receives from Riyadh on these above-mentioned issues.

Indyk and Cook recommend that the United States underscore the Carter Doctrine, establish a "Strategic Framework Agreement," and create "formal consultative mechanisms, joint military exercises, integrated defenses, and other hard-power manifestations of an American commitment to Saudi security." They add that a more flexible U.S. arms sales policy toward Saudi Arabia would be advisable.

In his latest [essay](#) on the future of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, F. Gregory Gause shares the views of Indyk and Cook on the need for greater U.S.-Saudi cooperation on Iran-centric military contingencies. But he, too, offers no specifics on how this could be done.

These measures, if effectively pursued, could improve various aspects of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. But in my view, they ultimately fall short because they do not *fundamentally restructure* U.S.-Saudi security ties. After all, the United States and Saudi Arabia already have an annual strategic dialogue (at times interrupted due to political tensions). Their armed forces interact on the ground almost constantly and pursue several joint military exercises throughout the year. A lot of their

defense equipment is, in fact, interoperable. U.S. posture in the kingdom, though trimmed lately, continues to be strong in terms of equipment compared to other places across the globe where the United States has a military presence. And, with the exception of Poland and Ukraine at present, Washington has transferred (technically, sold) more weapons to Riyadh than to any other partner in the world.

Yet has any of this made U.S.-Saudi security relations more effective or Saudi Arabia more capable and secure? The answer is no, because the very concept that governs the U.S.-Saudi security relationship is flawed. It still centers on U.S. guardianship. It fails to embrace, leverage, and operationalize the element of security partnership with Saudi Arabia.

## New Security Cooperation

U.S. security cooperation in Saudi Arabia, the Middle East, and possibly elsewhere should evolve and become more ambitious in terms of objectives. It's no longer enough for Washington to use this critical tool in American statecraft to acquire military access and basing in the region, sell arms, develop political relations with local leadership, or sustain Arab-Israeli peace agreements. Today, U.S. security cooperation, per the Defense Department's own definition, should seek to more effectively *incentivize and enable* regional partners to provide for their own security, and if necessary, participate in U.S.-led joint combined operations in pursuit of collective security interests. It's a tall order, no doubt, but that's the new bar that should be reached. That is the north star.

It stands to reason that any war with Iran should be avoided because it would be devastating for the entire region. Hundreds if not thousands could be killed given the decades-old Saudi-Iranian rivalry and sectarian tensions; and should the fighting linger and escalate, the global economy could suffer greatly as a result of disruptions in the energy markets. But the Saudis and the Americans have no choice but to prepare for a war and other military contingencies with Iran *together* and show Tehran that they are willing and able to fight jointly precisely to deter conflict. What near-isolationist voices in Washington fail to appreciate is that the chances of war or renewed Iranian aggression increase whenever Tehran sees vulnerabilities in Saudi defenses and fault lines in the U.S.-Saudi security relationship.

## **“Since Desert Storm, Washington and Riyadh have sought to improve Saudi armament while paying scant attention to the attendant Saudi defense management that is so critical to manage, employ, and sustain those weapons. ”**

A more secure and capable Saudi Arabia has two basic requirements:

1. An ability to domestically generate credible and sustainable combat power in peace time.
2. An ability to respond effectively, alone or as part of a coalition, to various military contingencies.

Saudi Arabia has been able to do neither, at least not sufficiently and effectively.

The Saudi defense sector, in both its civilian and military aspects, is ineffective in more ways than one and vastly inefficient. It costs Riyadh hundreds of millions of dollars every year. The reasons for this outcome are numerous.

Despite the latest defense reforms, Saudi Arabia still struggles with providing sound strategic, operational, and tactical guidance for its armed forces. The Saudis still have difficulty engaging in systematic defense analysis and strategic planning. This means they don't properly prioritize either missions or capabilities, and don't know how to properly identify their military requirements. They still buy expensive equipment that is unnecessary or irrelevant to their needs and are hardly capable of monitoring, assessing, evaluating, or improving the readiness levels of their troops.

The Saudi Ministry of Defense (MOD) has little ability to effectively identify, train, deploy, and retain a technically capable force. Human-resource management policies, functions, and strategies that allow for the recruitment, training, promotion, assignment, and retirement of military personnel are seldom applied. The Saudi non-commissioned officer corps has insufficient authority and very little leadership development. Too many soldiers are drawn from the lowest rungs of society, and they have as much skill, experience, knowledge, and depth of training as Saudi officers.

Military academies neither educate nor produce capable Saudi leaders as they claim to do. Academic standards and objective

evaluations of student performance remain insufficient. The system does not do a good job of punishing underachievers nor does it reward the high-level performers. In the civil-military realm, there are few rules or credible organizational mechanisms to allow civilian and military personnel to better communicate, analyze, plan, and operate together, just as there is inconsistent adherence to sound principles and practices of defense budgeting and programming.

Through its ongoing defense transformation plan, Riyadh has come a long way, and in Yemen it has fielded a better-trained force and sustained a much longer fight than in any other operation in which it was involved. However, the Saudis still face considerable challenges on the Yemeni battlefield; to this day, they have failed to reverse the territorial and strategic advances of the Iran-backed Houthis, while worsening Yemen's humanitarian catastrophe.

Saudi Arabia needs the United States, its largest and most important security and weapons provider. But the United States needs Saudi Arabia, too, because no matter how often U.S. leaders say that America wants to “end the endless wars in the Middle East,” as long as Iran continues to pursue its suspicious nuclear program and as long as it threatens regional security, the chances are that the U.S. might have to do battle again in the region.

However, the critical difference in a potential next war will be that Washington will not want to fight alone. It will need its regional partners to contribute in ways far more meaningful than they did in Operation Desert Storm or even in Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State.

Consider the example of Desert Storm: All the operational planning and the vast majority of the fighting was done by the Americans. All the critical battles that flanked, cut off, and degraded the Iraqi military and ultimately ejected Iraqi forces from Kuwait were waged by U.S. troops. All the major operations that destroyed Saddam's command and control capabilities, suppressed his air defenses, established sea

control and air dominance, and defeated the elite Iraqi Republican Guard units were conducted by American soldiers, airmen, and sailors.

The Saudis barely engaged in direct combat, but when they did, they mostly underachieved. Even in their supposedly [finest hour in al-Khafji](#), they could not finish the job on their own. In January-February 1991, Iraqi units led by the 5th Mechanized Division, 3rd Armored Division, and 1st Mechanized Division attacked the Saudi town of al-Khafji in a desperate attempt to draw Riyadh into the war and coalition troops into ground combat. The 2nd Saudi Arabian National Guard Brigade and the Qatari Brigade performed much better than anticipated. But ultimately, they couldn't repel the invaders by themselves and had to frantically call for U.S. air and artillery fire support to liberate the city.

Since Desert Storm, what both Washington and Riyadh have sought to improve is Saudi armament while paying scant

attention to the attendant Saudi defense management that is so critical to manage, employ, and sustain those Saudi weapons. Indeed, U.S. and Saudi officials have focused on acquiring and training on American equipment. This heavily tactical and operational U.S. security cooperation approach is not unique to Saudi Arabia. This is what the United States did in Afghanistan for 20 years and has done throughout the Middle East and other developing regions. It is a recipe for failure with any partner that doesn't have the most basic defense capacities.

The Saudis need to acquire some ability to strategize, task-organize, plan, operate, integrate, manage, and sustain, all of which happens in Phase Zero (i.e. shaping activities before a security crisis erupts or an attack is launched) and requires investments in defense institution building across multiple domains, including doctrine, strategy, planning, resource management, human capital development, acquisition, and logistics.

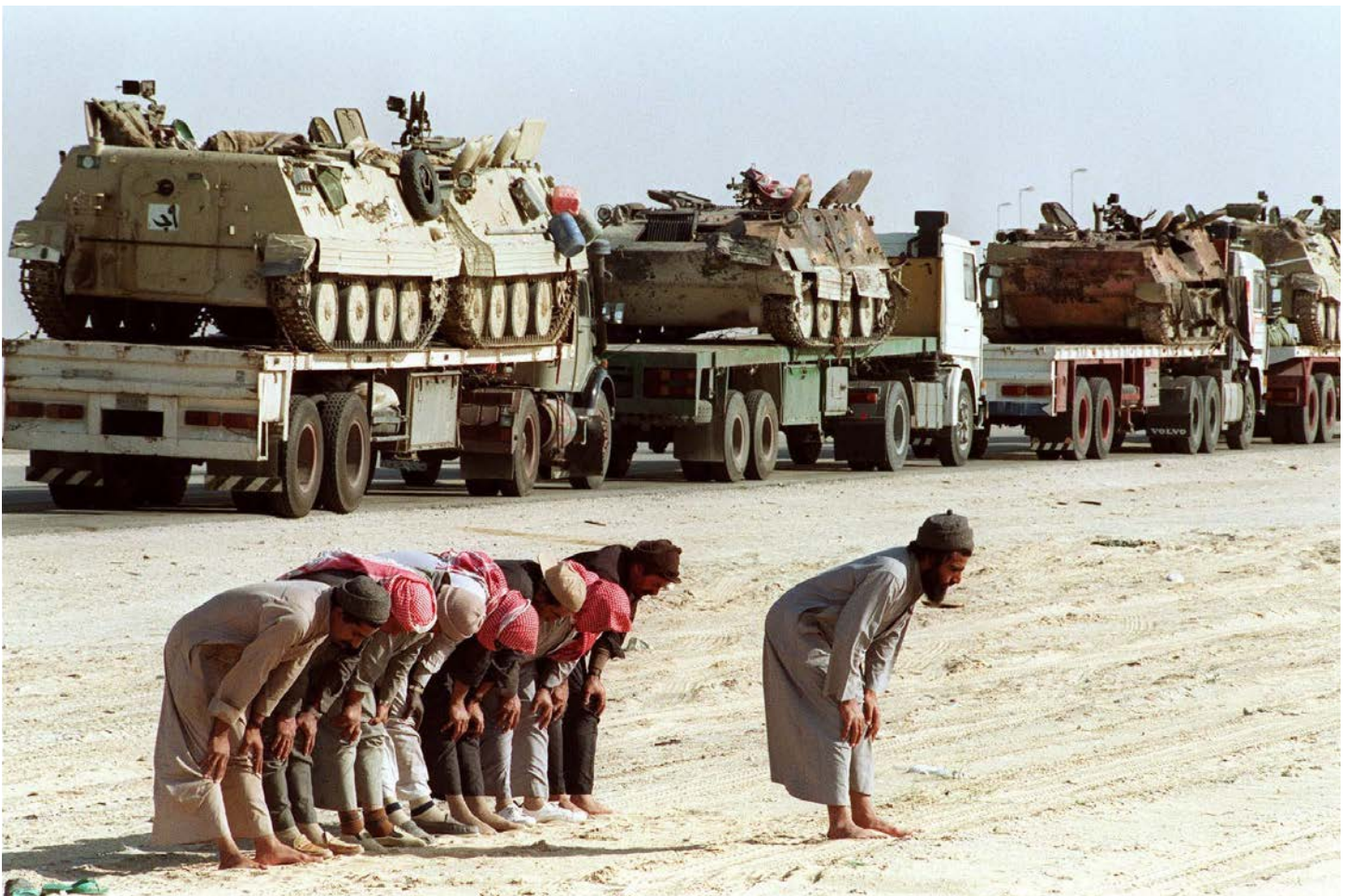


Photo above: Transport truck drivers take a break to pray on Feb. 9, 1991, while hauling burned-out and abandoned Iraqi armored personnel carriers and tanks south from the Saudi border town of Khafj. [Photo by CHRIS WILKINS/AFP via Getty Images](#).



If and when the Saudis are able to develop these processes and competencies with or without U.S. help, they will be in a stronger position to create, in *partnership* with the United States, unified defense plans and joint warfighting concepts. Such plans and concepts would benefit tremendously not only the Saudis but also the Americans by creating a roadmap for both daily operational planning with CENTCOM and future capability-based resource planning with the Department of Defense.

Enhanced Saudi steady-state activities to secure the kingdom provide the CENTCOM commander with the opportunity to incorporate Saudi military capabilities into the operational plan (OPLAN). “The Saudis are very interested in strategic plans with us,” recently [remarked](#) CENTCOM Commander Gen. Michael “Erik” Kurilla. He [added](#), “Our strategic planners travel to the kingdom regularly to work with Saudi military leaders to build up their ideas for a long-term strategic vision.” Yet if the Saudis are not building military power the right way in Phase Zero, and thus are incapable of effectively deterring and contributing capabilities to a potential fight, the value of joint U.S.-Saudi contingency and strategic planning diminishes.

That’s why integrating Saudi Phase Zero into joint U.S.-Saudi contingency planning is so crucial. CENTCOM (and other U.S. geographic combatant commands) may integrate Phase Zero into contingency planning through the theater campaign plan. But that’s its *own* Phase Zero, and its own contingency planning. There is little Saudi interest in, and thus minimal contribution to, either process. If the United States and Saudi Arabia want to better “shape the environment” to influence Iran’s will and calculations without having to fire a single shot (which is what Chinese strategic culture has been preaching since ancient times), they have to do it together. This process should go beyond the preparation for combat operations. It should incorporate measures that seek conflict *prevention*.

All of this is extremely hard, of course, because Saudi Arabia and the United States have never done it before. Even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the most integrated and successful alliance in the history of the world, struggles

at joint defense planning, also known as the NATO Defense Planning Process. It’s true that Saudi Arabia and the United States are not allies — therefore, they have neither the treaty obligations to act nor the necessary infrastructure, processes, procedures, personnel, and expertise to execute this integrated method of defense — but that doesn’t mean there isn’t room for a clear and lasting *political understanding* that supplants the Carter Doctrine and includes a more coordinated approach to security. One of the biggest challenges facing NATO, as correctly articulated by the Obama and Trump administrations, is that many of the alliance’s members do not meet budgetary thresholds and military planning goals. Luckily, given its immense wealth and healthy defense spending, Saudi Arabia does *not* have that problem. Washington’s challenge, and priority, is to help the Saudis convert that budget to combat power.

## Top-Down and Bottom-Up

The Saudi leadership deserves credit for finally recognizing that the entire Saudi defense apparatus needs a total redo. Since MBS’s ascension to power in 2017, Riyadh has been involved in a historic [defense transformation process](#) under his control. Whether that oversight has been effective is a separate matter, though.

Little is publicly known about the Saudi defense transformation process (because the Saudi leadership has not advertised it with great fanfare, as it has with Vision 2030). However, it is the most serious attempt at overhauling the kingdom’s national security institutions since it was founded by the Al Saud tribe in 1932. Indeed, this is the Saudis’ own version of Goldwater-Nichols, the single most consequential and comprehensive defense reform in U.S. history, launched in 1986.

The Saudi defense transformation plan is undoubtedly a long-term affair, given the multitude of societal, political, and organizational challenges. Also, MBS might be biting off more than he can chew, and the risk is that by trying to attack everything at once he might end up accomplishing very little

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if anything at all. But there is a firm recognition by the Saudi leadership that the old way of doing things — corrupt, ineffective, and inefficient — was making the kingdom less secure. So while it is a reform marathon, at least it has finally started.

In 2018, the Pentagon recognized the opportunity in this Saudi defense course correction and began to offer advice, through outside defense management specialists, at the request of Riyadh. This U.S. assistance has been helpful as it taught the Saudis to appreciate implementation processes just as much as strategies and ideas. But it also has been incredibly modest, and it continues to face significant challenges that ironically have little to do with the Saudis.

In part due to political tensions in the bilateral relationship, leadership in the U.S. government has yet to fully unleash and support the U.S. advisory role in Saudi Arabia. Absent top-level stimuli, especially from the National Security Council, U.S.-Saudi cooperation on defense and security matters will

not go very far. This lack of leadership has led to ineffective coordination not only within the Pentagon but also with the Department of State.

The State Department is critical in Phase Zero planning and implementation because it is typically better equipped to meet the requirements of shaping the political environment. Yet for Foggy Bottom to effectively play that role, it needs, at a bare minimum, a U.S. ambassador in Saudi Arabia. To this day, there is no U.S. chief of mission in Riyadh (there has not been one since January 2021), which is incredibly hurtful to all aspects of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Beyond the handicapped U.S. diplomatic presence in the kingdom, Washington is not postured for success from a security cooperation standpoint. Much of this is the result of legacy structures and arrangements that were established a long time ago and negotiated with the Saudi government. It's important to understand those structures and arrangements as well as their many limitations.



Photo above: Saudi Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud in an official ceremony at the Ministry of Defense building in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Feb. 8, 2017. [Photo by Ramazan Turgut/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.](#)

## **“With U.S. help, the Saudi National Guard and to a lesser extent the Ministry of Interior are undergoing a process of restructuring to more effectively align their visions and strategies with those of the country’s broader defense transformation plan.”**

The United States cooperates on security with the Saudi government mainly through three organizations that have been based in the kingdom for several decades:

1. The United States Military Training Mission to Saudi Arabia (USMTM)
2. The Office of the Program Manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM-SANG)
3. The Ministry of Interior-Military Assistance Group (MOI-MAG), which recently transitioned to U.S. Army Military Assistance Group (USA-MAG)

USMTM, OPM-SANG, and USA-MAG advisors are in Saudi Arabia not to fulfill operational duties, serve on Saudi staffs, or integrate into the Saudi Armed Forces’ daily operations, but rather to strictly offer advice. Even at the brigade level, the Saudis have made it a point of emphasis that they are the ones who drive the process of cooperation, not the other way around.

Operational since the early 1950s, USMTM works closely with the regular Saudi Armed Forces. OPM-SANG has been advising the SANG since a memorandum of understanding was signed in 1973 by U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Nicholas Thacher and SANG Commander Prince Abdullah Ibn Abdul Aziz. The 50-year document stipulates that the United States will train, equip, and develop the military, logistics, administrative, and management capabilities of four battalions of mechanized infantry and one battalion of light artillery within the SANG.

The SANG has a distinct chain of command and human resources, intelligence, training and education, communications, and health departments that are also separate from those of the Saudi Ministry of Defense (MOD). Various Saudi princes used to treat the national security ministries over which they presided as their own fiefdoms and money-making machines. MBS has acknowledged the major, self-inflicted weakness that is caused by this unintegrated Saudi military structure, and he is eager to address it by

deemphasizing the traditional independence and powers of the SANG and the MOI and giving the green light to create greater synergies among all military and internal security agencies.

With U.S. help, the SANG and to a lesser extent the MOI are undergoing a process of restructuring to more effectively align their visions and strategies with those of MBS’s broader defense transformation plan (the MOI’s counterterrorism duties have now been transferred to the Presidency of State Security, which MBS created in 2017). If MBS manages to effectively incorporate the SANG into the Saudi military — which is no simple matter because these two entities’ processes to organize, train, equip, deploy, employ, and sustain do not match at all — it might show that he is more serious about creating a joint force than he is about absorbing the SANG into the new defense architecture under his command (though one does not necessarily preclude the other).

Created as a result of a 2008 agreement as a State Department program between U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Saudi Minister of Interior Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, MOI-MAG — now USA-MAG — advises and trains the kingdom’s internal security and counterterrorism forces. Both OPM-SANG and USA-MAG are subordinate units to U.S. Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC), and ultimately, to Army Materiel Command (AMC).

In addition to USMTM, OPM-SANG, and USA-MAG, there are anywhere from 30 to 40 smaller U.S. organizations in the kingdom pursuing security cooperation-like activities with the Saudi MOD and SANG outside of USMTM and OPM-SANG. This constellation of mini-organizations can be described as a disparate hodgepodge of “mission partners.”

This enormous U.S. advisory infrastructure in the kingdom has never been properly integrated. USMTM, OPM-SANG, and USA-MAG function almost autonomously and there is barely any intersection between them. It’s true that the Saudis prefer it that way, and Washington cannot force them to stop treating their distinct military branches and national security ministries





Photo above: Saudi army artillery personnel fire shells toward Yemen from a post close to the Saudi-Yemeni border, in southwestern Saudi Arabia, on April 13, 2015. [Photo by FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

as rivals. But the Americans feed into this flawed Saudi mindset and approach by too easily accepting the status quo and failing to point to better practices that serve collective security interests.

Lacking in Saudi Arabia is what the Department of Defense calls a base operating support-integrator (BOS-I). The role of a BOS-I can vary but typically includes serving as a “garrison command,” coordinating with all parts of the U.S. security cooperation posture in the host nation, and providing efficient use of mission support resources for all U.S. forces operating on host-nation soil.

The organization that, by default, has pursued BOS-I-like activities in the kingdom is USMTM. One major problem with that construct is that the Saudi MOD, not the U.S. government, has been covering the costs of USMTM’s BOS-I-like activities for years. Contrast this with countries like Jordan and Kuwait, where there is a U.S. government, Title 10-funded Area Support Group operating as the BOS-I under U.S. Army Central (ARCENT). In Qatar, there is one under U.S. Air Forces Central (AFCENT). In Bahrain, there is one under U.S. Naval Forces

Central Command (NAVCENT). Yet in Saudi Arabia, there isn’t one. The Saudi government foots the bill even though it is already indirectly paying for many of these BOS-I activities through Foreign Military Sales (FMS)-case administration fees with the U.S. government.

In 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates sent out around the same time a cable and a memo, respectively, to all U.S. embassies around the world instructing them to create a unified position out of the senior defense official/defense attaché (SDO/DATT) roles. This person would have primacy over security cooperation efforts in the host-nation and serve as the most senior representative of the Defense Department. (In the majority of host nations, the SDO/DATT is the defense attaché, who is based in the embassy. However, in the Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia, the security cooperation mission supersedes that of the defense attaché.)

While CENTCOM’s leadership resisted the 2009 memo, it had no choice but to acquiesce given the rules of civil-military relations in the American system (strategic/policy guidance issued by the secretary of defense must be followed by all

military commands and organizations). However, the concept of the SDO-DATT in Saudi Arabia was established *only eight years later*, and even then, only partially.

To get it to this point in late 2017, it required an immense bureaucratic fight. OPM-SANG and MOI-MAG (later, USA-MAG) rebuffed the unified construct proposal because neither organization technically works for CENTCOM. Instead, they both report to USASAC, and ultimately to AMC, which, like CENTCOM, is headed by a four-star general. The compromise was that only USMTM and the Defense Attaché Office would be brought under the SDO/DATT framework while OPM-SANG and USAMAG would remain separate and only be obligated to perform a “coordinating” role under the SDO/DATT and CENTCOM.

To underscore how disjointed the U.S. security cooperation posture in Saudi Arabia is, and how damaging it is to U.S. strategic objectives, consider the following: CENTCOM, the geographic combatant command that directs and enables *all* military and security cooperation activities in its Area of Responsibility, does *not* have authority over two major military organizations — OPM-SANG and USAMAG — operating in Saudi Arabia, one of the U.S.’s largest and most important regional partners.

This disorganized U.S. structure is no secret to CENTCOM, to ARCENT, to USASAC, and to civilian Army or Defense leadership in the Pentagon. The problem is that every time an attempt is made to address this legitimately complex issue, the conversation never goes above the two-star or Senior Executive Service (SES)-2 level, and ultimately it is shelved in favor of other priorities. But there’s Saudi culpability here, too. The United States is to a large extent bound by this posture, negotiated with Riyadh decades ago, and cannot undergo a full reorganization of its presence in the kingdom without the approval of the Saudi government.

The good news is that there now is an appetite by the Saudi leadership to introduce some changes to the U.S. posture to make it more tied to the defense transformation plan.

Saudi Defense Minister Khaled bin Salman (MBS’s brother) discussed this very issue with Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl in the most recent U.S.-Saudi [Strategic Joint Planning Committee in May of last year](#). The Defense Security Cooperation Agency was assigned that job, but there has been no progress to date.

Assuming there’s a strong Saudi and American will to restructure the U.S. posture in the kingdom, implementation still faces considerable challenges. Had this been pursued in the 2000s, for example, when the Middle East was a bigger priority in U.S. foreign policy and CENTCOM was one of the most influential geographic combatant commands, it would have been more manageable. But today, when the region matters less to Washington (rightly or wrongly) and CENTCOM has fewer resources, it is a lot more challenging.

It also doesn’t help that the expectations of the Saudis with regard to U.S. help tend to be unrealistic, and their requests are equally misplaced. The Saudi government wants more higher-ranking American officers embedded in Saudi national security ministries to consistently be involved in the defense transformation process. Yet there’s obviously a limited number of U.S. general officers and flag officers around, and most are being deployed to other priority regions, not to the Middle East. Nevertheless, that is *not* what the Saudis really need. Instead, they need experienced U.S. defense management specialists to offer advice on Saudi institutional change.

Yet despite all the political, bureaucratic, human-capital, and financial challenges, establishing a U.S. Security Cooperation Office (SCO) in the kingdom should be a top security priority for Washington. As it stands, USMTM is not manned or equipped to support large-scale institutional change inside the Saudi MOD. The main mission of the SCO would be to coordinate security cooperation activities across Saudi national security agencies — not just the MOD but also the Ministry of National Guard and the MOI — and the U.S. security cooperation enterprise. Operating *without* cumbersome BOS-I responsibilities, the SCO would oversee the programs that would provide *locally informed advice*

**“Establishing a U.S. Security Cooperation Office in the kingdom — one that provides locally informed advice that’s tailored to the Saudis — should be a top security priority for Washington. ”**



Photo above: Military drones are displayed at Saudi Arabia's first World Defense Show, north of the capital Riyadh, on March 8, 2022. [Photo by FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

that's tailored to the Saudis, as opposed to concepts and processes borrowed or copied from the American system.

Following civilian guidance from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and military input from CENTCOM, the SCO would execute a Country Security Cooperation Plan that would take applicable Phase Zero activities/requirements and overlay them on the Saudi defense transformation effort. Like all other SCOs worldwide, it would be fully funded by the U.S. government, though sharing the costs with the Saudis under the right set of laws, rules, and procedures could be an option, too. There are more than enough FMS-case administration billets currently inside USMTM and OPM-SANG to create the SCO without having to expend additional U.S. human and financial resources.

USMTM, OPM-SANG, and USA-MAG don't necessarily have to be discontinued (their fate would be subject to discussion with the Saudis), but their size, roles, and responsibilities would have to be rewritten to make them more consistent with those of technical assistance field teams that handle

purely technical, tactical, and operational duties (i.e., not institutional ones) while operating under the unifying oversight of an SCO. These organizations also need to demonstrate better return on investment to the Saudi government.

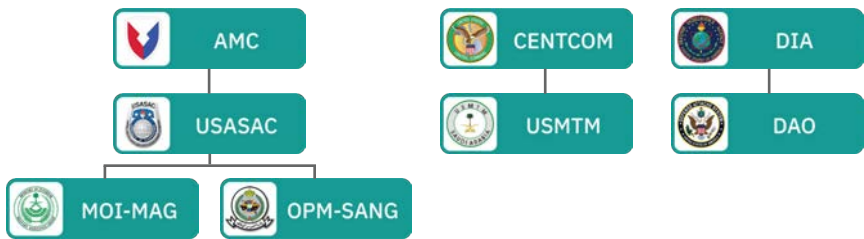
Private American consulting companies with a presence in the kingdom are also heavily involved in the defense advisory process, and while some are doing important work, the reality is that all of them have their own business interests and considerations that aren't necessarily or fully consistent with those of the U.S. government or the Saudi government. This doesn't suggest constraining the activities of those companies. Rather, the trick is to establish a more effective public-private partnership, where the U.S. government is in the driver's seat and not the other way around. An ideal division of labor would suggest that the U.S. government advise the Saudis on what to do and how to do it, while the contractors assist with the implementation and the technical aspects of U.S. weapons systems.



## Legacy Posture

(Pre-2017)

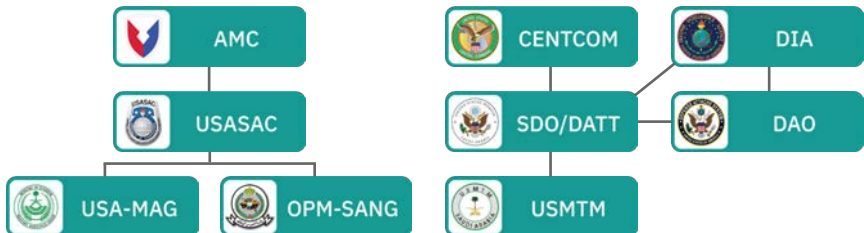
- ✗ No SCO (No SC Program Integration and Oversight)
- ✗ No BOS-I



## “Compromise” Posture

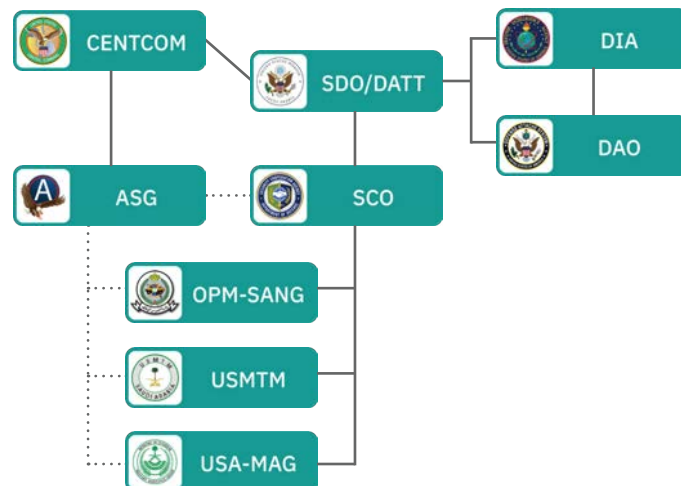
(Post-2017)

- ✗ No SCO (No SC Program Integration and Oversight)
- ✗ No BOS-I



## Recommended Posture

- ✓ SCO
- ✓ BOS-I (ASG)



## Legend:

- Oversight
- ..... Coordinating basis only

## Acronyms:

- **AMC:** Army Materiel Command
- **ASG:** Area Support Group
- **CENTCOM:** US Central Command
- **DAO:** Defense Attaché Office
- **MOI-MAG:** Ministry of Interior - Military Assistance Group
- **OPM-SANG:** Office of the Program Manager-Saudi Arabian National Guard
- **SCO:** Security Cooperation Office
- **SDO/DATT:** Senior Defense Official / Defense Attaché
- **USAMAG:** US Army Military Assistance Group
- **USMTM:** US Military Training Mission
- **USASAC:** US Army Security Assistance Command

## A Pivotal Moment

Unquestionably, Operation Desert Storm was a defining moment in U.S.-Saudi security relations. To this day, U.S. and Saudi leaders celebrate anniversaries of their countries' historic ties by showing clips on big screens of American troops securing the kingdom and liberating Kuwait.

However, this was more than three decades ago. It happened in a very different era in U.S. foreign policy and in a very different regional and international context. U.S. interests in the region have changed considerably since. So have the threats to those interests. And if its withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 is any indication, America's willingness to go to war again in the Middle East has eroded.

One of Washington's most important priorities and challenges in Saudi Arabia is to help the kingdom provide for its own security. The logic is simple: the better Saudi Arabia can deter and defend against Iranian aggression, the less the United States has to contribute to these missions, thus giving it the opportunity to transfer more of its military resources in the

region to the Indo-Pacific and/or Europe, where they're needed the most.

Assisting the Saudis with those objectives requires a fundamentally new look at U.S. security cooperation and a restructuring of the U.S. military assistance and training program in the kingdom. Arming the Saudis and training them on how to shoot is important, but it's nowhere near sufficient. The United States needs to help the Saudis pay much closer attention to and invest in defense governance.

Make no mistake about it, reorganizing the U.S. security cooperation presence in the kingdom is a very heavy lift that requires adroit U.S. diplomacy and strategic communication with Riyadh as well as effective interagency coordination and compromise, which is mainly why leadership in the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom have avoided this conversation for such a long time. But the time for this reorganization is now, and the Saudis finally have the willingness to reform and the right set of ideas for national defense. The United States is in a seminal period in the relationship with Saudi Arabia, but Washington is half-stepping with respect to its response. 🌀



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