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Issue Brief

US-Saudi Arabia Ties: A New Realignment Under Trump

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Saudi Arabia became the first foreign country to be visited by the new US President Donald Trump as he landed in the country on May 20, 2017 to attend the first Arab-Islamic-America Summit to discuss the battle against terrorism and the rising tide of extremism.



Prior to this trip, Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was amongst the first few foreign leaders who met President Trump at the White House earlier this year, calling it a "historical turning point"¹ in their relations. Subsequently, Trump's choice of the Saudi Kingdom as his first state visit as POTUS, further emphasizes the importance of the realigning of relationship between both the countries, and cementing their strategic relations further by offering the Saudis the biggest arms deal in American history.

Trump signed a \$110 billion defense deal - the biggest such agreement in history - with Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, with an additional \$350 billion in economic and defense investments between the two countries over the next 10 years.² During President Obama's Administration, Saudis had grown nervous of US interests in the region and its relationship with them as the then US administration was more dedicated to stabilize relations with Iran which resulted in the signing of the nuclear deal signaling a potential restoration of cordial and workable US and Iranian ties.

The new defense agreement under the Trump Administration has brought back the essence of strong Saudi-US alliance which was, by and large, put on a back burner during the two terms of his predecessor. In addition, President Trump also solicited Saudi Arabia's help to fight the ISIS in the Middle East, as well as its help to solve the Israel and Palestinian conflict for which the "Arab and the Islamic Leaders"³ Summit was arranged.

The Trump Presidency has reinvigorated its strategic partnership with the Saudis which is expected to witness a new haul over his term. The relationship between both the countries, to some extent, will disinherit the standard relationship of exchange of oil and money. Saudi Arabia has always been keen to play a larger, more controlling role in the Middle East and will categorically demand a greater role in the strategic shaping of the Middle East which the US will agree to as it needs Saudi Arabia to target the ISIS and the ongoing war in Syria and Yemen.

Post Trump's trip to the Saudi Kingdom, one can easily chalk out certain objectives that Trump Administration, by some extent, was successful in carrying out in Saudi Arabia. Although the first impression of the trip remains attached primarily to the economic and military engagement, on the side lines, President Trump also desired to bring all the Islamic states together to isolate Iran not only in the region, but also globally. Saudis new and invigorated defense ties with the US, and their pronounced stance towards Iran as a threat in the Middle East and a threat to the US has added towards a stronger US-Saudi alliance. Iran stands to be the regional rival of the Saudis and has been occasionally accused of having an extremist ideology, and an aspiration to take over the Muslim world.⁴ Similar rhetoric regarding Iran in the Trump Administration, as well as in the Saudi Kingdom, has attuned well with both the nations; collectively referring to Iran as a destabilizing¹ force, and President Trump suggesting a military action to 'disrupt' the Iranian regime.⁵ In addition, the Iranian factor has brought both the countries together even more than before, as both have become vocal regarding their growing concerns; while, turning towards each other to curtail the growing clout of Iran.

Furthermore, at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit, Trump championed the vision of 'Peace, Security and Prosperity', but failed to put a plan for that vision forward. He spoke about terrorism and its evil, yet failed to articulate and propose any plan for a way forward. He spoke of fighting terrorism as a proposition and an idea, but failed to lay down a game plan on how to fight this monster, or how the US will engage the new Islamic Military Alliance of 41 countries put together by Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, Trump, through the Arab and Islamic Leader Summit, sought help of the Saudi political and financial influence to encourage the Muslim countries to join the fight against the Islamic State in the Middle East.

The kind of weapon sale promised by the US to Saudi Arabia has raised suspicions on the softening of the US position on the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen's civil war, which is widely blamed for a high civilian death toll.⁶ The billion dollar US defense deal with the Saudis came under criticism in the US as members

of both the Republican and the Democrats in the Senate and Congress propagate to block the sales of weapons and equipment⁷ which President Trump has promised to Saudi Arabia in shape of the defense deal. This preemptive sale of advance weapons and equipment also raises the question of the US larger motive in the Middle East as it might eventually fuel a regional arms race. This move by the US will not only create fissures in the already weak security calculus in the Middle East, but will also give rise to the Shia-Sunni divide in the region. To be sure, President Trump's promise of a new strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia will certainly help fuel to the already destabilizing situation in the Middle East.

Notes and References

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 - ⁶ "Hidden cost of Trump's \$110 billion Saudi arms deal: Support for 'endless quagmire' in Yemen," CNBC, 23 May 2017, <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/23/hidden-cost-of-trumps-saudi-arms-deal-support-for-yemen-quagmire.html>
 - ⁷ US politicians challenge Donald Trump's multi-billion dollar Saudi Arabian arms deal, The Independent, May 27, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-latest-saudi-arabia-arms-deal-us-politicians-challenge-congress-senate-a7761021.html>