



中国传媒大学  
COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY OF CHINA



Institute for a Community  
with Shared Future  
人类命运共同体研究院



## **Blinken's visit to Riyadh to rebuild bilateral ties** **between USA and KSA**

By Ms. Areeba Danish, Mphil International Relations Scholar and PRCCSF  
Fellow, Pakistan Research Center for a Community with Shared Future  
(PRCCSF), Islamabad



*Published on 28<sup>th</sup> July 2023*

## **Introduction**

In the context of shifting alliances and geopolitical tensions in the Middle East region, the visit of Antony Blinken's was a turning point in both countries as they engaged with regional issues.



Historically, strategic alliances

in areas like energy, counterterrorism and defense has defined the Saudi-American relationship. This partnership has grown and deepened occasionally but has also seen times of friction, particularly around human rights issues and regional policy. For decades, the relationship was based on an exchange that was appropriated for both actors: Riyadh provided Washington with costly oil. In contrast, the US gave KSA with arms and defense protection.<sup>1</sup> This article examines the importance of Blinken's visit, the complications of Saudi-US relations, and the potential outcomes determining the future of cooperation and mutual interests between the two countries.

## **Context of Strained Relations**

The bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States has long been marked by a complicated combination of disagreement and cooperation. Historically, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Hesham Alghannam and Mohammad Yaghi, "Biden's Trip to Saudi Arabia: Successes and Failures," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2022).



alliance has been based on common security objectives, economic links, and regional cooperation. However, disagreements on essential policy issues have strained the relationship in recent years.

Furthermore, regional dynamics have contributed to divergent interests between the two countries. The Saudi monarchy erupted in rage in 2015 over nuclear talks between the West and Tehran, which Riyadh saw as jeopardizing the security of the Gulf countries. Another factor bolstering the bilateral relationship is Washington's shift in foreign policy, prioritizing the Asia-Pacific area over the Middle East.

The war in Yemen, where the Saudi-led coalition's involvement has received condemnation and concern from the US and the international community due to civilian losses and humanitarian crises, was one of the primary concerns that harmed relations. Furthermore, the killing of writer Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi embassy in Istanbul in 2018 strained the relationship further, prompting calls for responsibility and justice.<sup>2</sup> The event resulted in fines against Saudi officials, legislative demands to reconsider the partnership, and a review of arms sales to Saudi.

### **Blinken's Visit and Its Significance**

Secretary Blinken's visit to Riyadh is vital to repairing bilateral ties between the two countries. The high-level visit demonstrates the importance of the US relationship with

---

<sup>2</sup> David Ignatius, "How the mysteries of Khashoggi's murder have rocked the U.S.-Saudi partnership," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-the-mysteries-of-khashoggis-murder-have-rocked-the-us-saudi-partnership/2019/03/29/cf060472-50af-11e9-a3f7-78b7525a8d5f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-the-mysteries-of-khashoggis-murder-have-rocked-the-us-saudi-partnership/2019/03/29/cf060472-50af-11e9-a3f7-78b7525a8d5f_story.html)

Saudi Arabia and its regional influence. It also emphasizes a conciliatory approach to resolving controversial situations while maintaining strategic objectives.

During the visit, Secretary Blinken is expected to meet with Saudi authorities on various themes, including human rights, regional stability, weapons sales, counterterrorism, and energy cooperation.<sup>3</sup> The discussions



attempt to increase knowledge, express policy objectives, and explore possibilities for collaboration.

#### **i. Rebuilding Trust and Addressing Human Rights Concerns**

Addressing human rights problems in Saudi Arabia is one of the most challenging parts of the KSA-US relations. The assassination of Jamal Khashoggi remains a highly charged topic, and the US administration is under pressure to bring those responsible accountable. The visit of Secretary Blinken provides a chance for open engagement, pressing Saudi authorities to take severe measures towards justice and transparency. The United States sought guarantees that such tragedies would not happen again and lobbied for greater journalistic freedom there.

---

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera Staff, “Blinken to visit Saudi Arabia to discuss ‘strategic cooperation’,” *Aljazeera*, June 02, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/2/blinken-to-visit-saudi-arabia-to-discuss-strategic-cooperation>



## ii. Strengthening Security Cooperation

The visit emphasized the necessity of the two countries maintaining strong security cooperation. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States are concerned about regional security, counterterrorism measures, and the containment of Iran's influence in the Middle East. Strengthening security cooperation was critical to addressing common challenges and promoting regional security. The cooperation has involved joint military exercises, arms sales, training programs and intelligence sharing, intended to strengthen the competencies of Saudi security forces.<sup>4</sup> However, it is significant to highlight that the nature of international relations is a matter to change, and future advancements in security cooperation between the KSA and the US may have occurred.

## iii. Promoting for Regional Stability

Conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq have substantially impacted regional stability. Secretary Blinken's visit allows the US to engage with Saudi authorities to identify common ground on these concerns. One of the significant focuses of Blinken's visit was to address the Yemen issue.<sup>5</sup> The United States has become increasingly public in its support for a peaceful settlement of the war. The meetings attempted to establish a solution to cease the fighting, protect civilians, and deliver humanitarian aid to the Yemeni people.

---

<sup>4</sup>“U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations,” *Council Foreign Relations (CFR)*, December 07, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-arabia-relations>

<sup>5</sup>“Yemen war: US presses Saudi Arabia to agree ceasefire,” *BBC News*, October 31, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46040789>



#### iv. Defense Cooperation and Arms Sales

The arms sales have always been the basis of Saudi-US relations. For many years the US has been an important supplier of military equipment to KSA. KSA has depended significantly on American arms to improve its defense capabilities, from fighter planes and helicopters to tanks, ammunition and missiles. These arms sales have been a major source of money for the US defense sector. Meanwhile, concerns over the misuse of military equipment have impelled calls for more substantial control and limitations on future sales. Secretary Blinken's visit, consents both sides to address these issues, while maintaining Saudi Arabia's security objectives and the defense alliance. In recent years, the US-Saudi Arabia ties have seen significant changes. For example, the Biden administration has been more cautious in its military deals to Saudi Arabia, citing human rights concerns.<sup>6</sup> The US has antagonistically sponsored Saudi Arabia's military modernization initiatives. The US hopes to improve Saudi Arabia's capability to secure its territory and subsidize to regional security through military exchanges, arms sales and training programmes. However, defense cooperation is an important element of their bilateral relations.

#### v. Economic Cooperation and Climate Change

Economic links have long been a cornerstone of the US-KSA relationship. The visit looked at the potential for additional economic cooperation, investment, and trade to benefit both countries and enhance their economic alliance. Saudi Arabia is a prominent participant in the global energy market, and its actions substantially influence the world economy and

---

<sup>6</sup> Catie Edmondson, "House Votes to Block Arms Sales to Gulf Nations, Setting Up Trump's Third Veto," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/us/politics/saudi-arms-vote.html>

efforts to combat climate change. The United States is focusing more on renewable energy and carbon reduction goals. The visit of Blinken opens the door for collaboration on energy diversification, technological transfer, and solving climate change problems.



### **Way Forward**

The visit of Secretary Blinken to Riyadh embodied a turning point in the bilateral relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. It was keen to resolve disputes and institute common ground on critical matters, including regional security, security and economic cooperation, arms sales, and human rights. While impediments exist, the visit re-establishing trust and provides a forum for open communication between the two countries. Nevertheless, adopting a productive and mutually beneficial alliance is critical for regional and global security as both states steer the ever-changing geopolitical dynamic.