

Battle of the Narratives: U.S.–Saudi’s Transforming Relationship and Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Introduction

The world is increasingly accepting a multipolar reality, with the U.S. declining in its political, economic, and social influences. Great powers such as China and Russia, and rising powers such as Turkey, India, and Saudi Arabia are beginning to break from the Western-led neoliberal global order. Deciding its own fate in the region and the world, Saudi Arabia has made drastic changes in its relationships and foreign policy in recent years, most clearly in 2022 during the OPEC oil cuts and more recently, in its growing relationship with non-Western-aligned world powers. The significance of Saudi Arabia’s recent actions on the world stage lies in the impact it has had on U.S. foreign policy and the ability to control U.S. narratives within both countries. With recent moves previously expected to take under the approval of the U.S., Saudi Arabia has attempted to turn the current international order upside-down by not taking the U.S.-led guidance on its oil decisions and further brokering relationships with the U.S. contemporary enemies (i.e. China in the East and Syria).

These issues call for a new framework in U.S. foreign policy, one that doesn’t ignore, but acknowledges the changing world and its multipolar state, and one where the U.S. is a friendly (but necessary) state in foreign relations. This narrative, rather than a leadership narrative where the U.S. is the final arbitrator of all global political and economic policies, is more likely to leave a positive impact and influence on both its allies and non-aligned powers.

Literature Review

There are multiple ways to understand how states interact with each other for political, economic, and social interests. Miskimmon¹ et al. expand on master, system, and identity narratives to explain how people and states understand themselves and each other. In addition, Entman's² framing theory shows how the actions or visuals actors choose to use can promote certain perspectives of events to either further or counter different narratives. The following literature helps frame this essay, which is a comparative analysis of the narratives Saudi Arabia and the United States use to justify their actions and responses towards one another. The paper will assess their actions and responses throughout two specific events: (1) the recent OPEC+ oil production cuts and (2) Saudi Arabia's meetings with China, Russia, and other non-Western allied powers.

First, a system narrative offers coherent stories of how the world works, including terminology such as multilateralism, unipolarity, globalization, a rules-based international order, spheres of influence, and a "world of alliances."³ Menon⁴, Patrick,⁵ and Latham⁶ examine closely how the world order is formed, with the U.S. as the recurring hegemonic power. At the same time, each author describes how the world order is shifting as fewer countries accept the arrangement "with the dominance and imperatives of U.S. military, political, and economic power."⁷ The current world order is generally regarded as a post-Cold War neoliberal global order with the U.S. as a unipolar power. However, this set-up is breaking down. Patrick mainly

¹ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle, "Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order," Routledge, 2013.

² Robert Entman, Chapter 1 in "Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy," University of Chicago Press, pp 23-28, 2004.

³ Miskimmon et al., 2013.

⁴ Shivshanker Menon, *Nobody Wants the Current World Order*, Foreign Affairs, August 3, 2022.

⁵ Stewart M. Patrick. *The World Order is Dead. Long Live the World Order*. Council on Foreign Affairs, June 25, 2019.

⁶ Andrew Latham, *The rules based international order is ending. What will replace it?* The Hill, November 15, 2022.

⁷ Menon, 2022.

argues the liberal world order is cracking because it disregards the new distribution of global power, globalization is exacerbating economic inequality that policymakers have not remedied, and transformative technologies are disrupting labor markets and political systems. Latham provides similar reasons for the breakdown of this order, adding in “deglobalization” as a cause. These articles offer reasons why the U.S. might not be able to control the actions of emerging powers on an international scale, such as Saudi Arabia. With Saudi Arabia’s new alliances with states which are strengthening their economic and financial situation without the help from Western countries, the country may provide a clear example of a shifting world order.

Second, Beinart,⁸ Loyola,⁹ and Packer¹⁰ describe different ways in which the U.S. is currently interacting with other countries — arguing for either isolationism, or taking a “solidarity” position rather than a “leadership” position for approaching the world. In the end, this paper will include a section on the role of the U.S. and implications for the country as a new world order becomes widely accepted. These articles help in determining the next diplomatic states the U.S. might be able to take to respond to the shifting world order.

Again, there are many ways to understand the new relationship between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. However, narratives and framing theories most directly tackle meanings behind the content both countries are producing, whether on social media or in press statements. Thus, these theories directly inform this comparative analysis paper on the Saudi Arabia-U.S. relationship and their recent behaviors and responses towards one another. As the following sections will demonstrate, I argue that as a regional power, Saudi Arabia is taking major steps in establishing

⁸ Peter Beinart, *Biden wants the U.S. to Lead the World. It Shouldn't*, The New York Times, December 2, 2021.

⁹ Mario Loyola, *Desantis was right about Ukraine*, Atlantic Monthly March 22, 2023.

¹⁰ George Packer, *A New Theory of American Power*, The Atlantic Monthly, December 2022.

itself as a possible superpower in an increasingly multipolar world, and the U.S. influence in the region is slowly declining — placed in the context of the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War.

Background: The Cases of Oil and Meetings with Non-Aligned Powers

Introduction

Saudi Arabia has taken key economic and political issues into its own hands, worrying its Western counterparts and prompting reactions from the Biden administration. These actions are reflected in Saudi Arabia's oil policies and taking meetings without the presence of the U.S., both actions that are often seen at an expense to the U.S. in Western media and political rhetoric.

Oil Issue

Earlier this April, OPEC+, led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, announced that the cartel would cut oil production by around 1.2 million barrels a day, or 1 percent of global production. The justification behind these slightly-dramatic decisions indicates Saudi Arabia's perception of itself in the global order, which is a regional leader acting on its own sovereignty. Last fall, Saudi Arabia, a member of OPEC+, decided to cut oil production by 2 million barrels during a time when the US pushed Saudi Arabia to produce more oil. Saudi Arabia argued that the agreement was solely an economic one for the sake of recovering from COVID-era losses and stabilizing the economy in the face of an impending global recession; however, the US argued this move was political in nature and not purely for economic self-interest.

Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Energy referred to key system narratives, which provide a way of understanding how countries interact with each other, to take its position: most importantly, (1) the role of OPEC+ in the global market; (2) international economic pressures;

and (3) Western vs. Eastern/Global South influence in combating the US narrative of this problem. Additionally, several issues were used to help prop this argument, including the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the impact of COVID-19 on the global economy and oil prices in the past two years, and domestic economic issues Saudi Arabia faces following recent years of low oil prices.

Non-Aligned Powers Meetings

Saudi Arabia is also placing itself among the global hegemon by interacting with countries socially and politically deemed as non-aligned powers, or those states which the U.S. and Western countries compete with on an economic and political basis. First, Saudi Arabia plans to invite President of Syria Bashar al-Assad to an Arab League summit in Riyadh in May, a move that would officially reintegrate Syria back into regional cooperation. Syria was suspended from the Arab League summit in 2011. Besides Iran, Saudi Arabia is becoming Syria's main supporter in de-isolation and normalization of ties. Additionally, the country is in the process of restoring consular services and relations with Syria, according to Saudi state television. The two countries agreed to reopen their embassies in late April, a decade after Saudi Arabia closed its embassy in Damascus in 2012. Saudi Arabia's re-establishment of relations with Syria is also coming after its recent agreement with Iran to re-open embassies and consulates after six years of closing their embassy.

The initiatives Saudi Arabia is taking with currently-shunned states in the region by many Western and Arab states sends a clear signal to the rest of the world where Saudi Arabia sees itself in the Middle East, and by extension, the global order — a superpower state. In a battle for global political and economic control against its opponents, the country is disregarding Western

opinions of normalizing ties with these countries to strengthen its own ally network and regain control of the regional narrative as a strong leader in the Arabian Gulf untied to foreign agendas. Other countries, including Egypt, Turkey and the UAE have suggested normalizing relations with the Syrian regime as well. Most recently, talks were held in Moscow with diplomats from Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, with Russia and Iran attempting to broker a reconciliation agreement between Turkey and Syria.

These growing relations, and the role of Russia, Iran — and to a broader extent China, and Saudi Arabia in holding agreements — all point to non-Western states taking major roles as political decision-makers without the hands or implementation of US or Western concern. While it seems that Syria and Turkey are not necessarily weak powers (Turkey seems to be a rising power), Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are certainly positioned as future superpowers. The recently-reconciled relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran (brokered by China) is one major cause of Saudi Arabia's support for Syria (Iran's close ally).

From the framing of the US, Saudi Arabia's normalization of al-Assad and Syria is worrisome, especially as processes to prosecute low-level regime officials for possible war crimes have begun in Europe. Some US officials noted in a letter to the Biden administration that under the current regime, "many of the conflict's symptoms are worsening, from human suffering, industrial-scale drug trafficking, refugee flows, terrorism, geopolitical conflict and ethnic and sectarian hostilities." But as mentioned previously, this framing of al-Assad is a non-issue to Saudi Arabia, at least for their agenda.

The Syria case is not the only one that raised eyebrows: earlier this March, Saudi Arabia and Iran reopened diplomatic relations, brokered by China. Some U.S. media portrayals of this case mentioned a "snub" taking place, framing the event as not approved by the Biden

administration.¹¹¹² On one hand, the deal brokered by China represents mistrust in the role the U.S. could play in establishing strong relationships between battling regional powers. However, from a more realistic perspective (and the one that U.S. state analysts are taking), the U.S. has no real relationship with Iran, therefore is not an unbiased mediator between the two countries. It is better for an outside actor to broker the relationship, while the U.S. continues its own interests with Saudi Arabia. This is overwhelmingly the perception of Saudi Arabia's recent moves to normalize relations with Iran and Syria, as well as with Yemen in ending the nearly-ten-year Yemeni civil war.

In short, Saudi Arabia's actions are an attestation to an increasingly rising New World Order, one where power lies in multi-polarity and will include Saudi Arabia as a superpower.¹³

Battle of the Narratives: The Perspective of the United States

Oil Issue

The main framework the U.S. used to criticize Saudi Arabia and OPEC+'s decision to cut oil production in Fall 2022 is through a political diplomacy lens. According to the FY 2022 – 2026 Joint Strategic Plan Framework, one of US' goals is to "Promote global prosperity and shape an international environment in which the United States can thrive." OPEC+'s choice to cut oil production undermined this goal. The US argued (1) cutting oil production from

¹¹ Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr, "A New Order in the Middle East?," Foreign Affairs, March 31, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/iran-saudi-arabia-middle-east-relations>.

¹² Anna Brown, "What Does the Saudi-Iran Deal Mean for the Middle East?," The Washington Institute, last modified March 29, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-does-saudi-iran-deal-mean-middle-east>.

¹³ Martin Chulov, US urged to hold Assad to account as power shifts in Middle East, The Guardian, 27 March 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/27/us-urged-to-hold-assad-to-account-as-power-shifts-in-middle-east>

anywhere except Russia would strengthen Russia's funds for war against Ukraine and (2) cutting oil in a post-pandemic era where low oil prices will help global economies is harmful to their growth and finally, (3) the US argued Saudi's decision to cut oil production came one month before the midterm elections, which would decrease support for Biden in Congress.

US Point of View		
Identity	System	Issue
World leader Pro-NATO Democratic	International Rules based order World of alliances Anti-Sphere of influence (Russian hegemony)	Saudi Arabia against Ukraine, against political goals Oil cuts weaken global democracy Oil production OPEC+ cuts month before US midterms

For the US, the oil-production cut issue impacts the U.S.' identity as the world leader as Saudi Arabia is seen as undermining its role in shaping economic diplomacy, which is a loss for Ukraine, global development in the current world order, and the potential for Biden and the Democratic Party in the U.S. to gain support. The solution, is to threaten Saudi Arabia with "consequences," which could mean cutting political or economic relationships to an extent.

US Point of View	
Problem	Oil production being cut
Cause	Saudi Arabia's political goal of undermining US
Evaluation	Oil supply is important for Ukraine, global development, and Biden's US midterm prospects
Solution	Threaten Saudi Arabia with "consequences"

Non-Aligned Powers Meetings

From the perspective of the U.S., state leaders and media made strong efforts to define the meetings Saudi Arabia has held as good, and minimized the role of China in any of these events. First, in response to the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Syria, the Biden administration has made it clear that it condemns the humanitarian crimes that Assad has committed. At the same time, it emphasized the importance of stabilizing the region, which normalizing ties with Arab countries might do.¹⁴ In this regard, the Saudi normalization of ties with Syria progresses U.S. goals, although quietly.

Second, in many articles and state reports,^{15,16} the Biden administration reacted with a nonchalant attitude toward the relationship between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China, specifically

¹⁴ Charles Lister, "Biden's Inaction on Syria Risks Normalizing Assad—and His Crimes," *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/08/biden-syria-policy-assad-war-crimes/>.

¹⁵ Nahal Toosi and Phelim Kine, "U.S. official project calm as China stuns world with Iran-Saudi Deal," *Politico*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/13/china-middle-east-deal-00086888>.

¹⁶ Patsy Widakuswara, "White House Welcomes Chinese-Brokered Saudi-Iran Deal," *VOA*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/white-house-welcomes-chinese-brokered-saudi-iran-deal/6999700.html>.

noting the significance and importance of the new relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran instead. Emphasizing the U.S.'s foreign policy goal of de-escalation in the region and need for restoration of diplomatic relations between many fighting parties, U.S. officials frame this case as a good and positive step towards achieving peace in the region and stability between two regionally-powerful and dangerous actors.

In this rhetoric, the U.S. emphasizes narratives of itself as a friendly state, a decision-maker in the region who knows when to take a back seat, and finally, the final arbitrator of regional politics. By displacing acceptance of the issue at hand, the U.S. demonstrates itself in agreement with a dicey political move by Saudi Arabia, proving that the issue is actually in alignment with U.S. goals and furthers U.S. policy.

US Point of View		
Identity	System	Issue
Friendly state	International Rules based order	China taking role as mediator
Decision-maker (state)	World of alliances	Saudi Arabia taking non-aligned state as partners
Final arbitrator		

Therefore, the greatest issue in this case is not that China is a mediator in the Saudi-Iran relationship, but rather that the media and state actors are arguing that China took a greater role on the world stage than it actually did — downplaying the fact that China is only one of many

important economic actors in the region and still unmatched in terms of political and military diplomacy (when compared to the U.S.) The solution, for the sake of the U.S., is clearly to recognize the importance of these new relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is a positive move for several reasons: (1) it stabilizes regional powerful actors in the Middle East and (2) it furthers U.S. policy goals.

US Point of View	
Problem	Including China in mediation narratives
Cause	Non-Western media and Saudi, Iranian, and Chinese spokespersons
Evaluation	China is a nominal stakeholder in the new Saudi-Iranian relations
Solution	Recognize the significance and importance of two dangerous and strong powers (Saudi Arabia and Iran) resolving issues between each other, stabilizing the region and reaching a US policy goal

Battle of the Narratives: The Perspective of Saudi Arabia

Oil Issue

Saudi Arabia primarily emphasized an economic framework. Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Energy relied on narratives regarding the responsibility it had to its citizens to stabilize the

economy, position itself as a leader in the Gulf against external pressures and foreign actors, and increasingly hegemonic power dynamics in natural resource control. The country referred to system narratives of OPEC+ role in the global market, international economic pressures, and Western vs. Eastern/Global South influence in combating the US narrative of this problem. Several issues were used to help prop this argument, including the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the impact of COVID-19 on the global economy and oil prices in the past two years, and domestic economic issues Saudi Arabia faces following recent years of low oil prices.

Saudi Arabia Point of View		
Identity	System	Issue
Saudi Arabia regional leader Caretaker of citizens Leader in oil policy	Sovereignty	Economy weakened following pandemic Standards of living decreasing Citizen unrest

For Saudi Arabia, the problem is a system issue related to the global economy and sovereignty. The solution is to publicize the OPEC+ decision for proof of legitimacy in shaping their economic policy.

Saudi Arabia Point of View	
Problem	Economic instability and disgruntled population
Cause	Pandemic
Evaluation	Oil production key to economy
Solution	Cut oil production, publicize it, and gain regional support.

Non-Aligned Powers Meetings

First, Saudi Arabia's understanding of its brokered relationship with China is an example of the country taking its own initiative in deciding regional relationships, rather than looking westward for advice from its long-time partners the U.S. and Europe. The country's decision to reinstate a relationship with Iran is backed by its recent decision to implement and support a ceasefire in the Yemen conflict, where both Saudi Arabia and Iran have backed certain parties in the civil war for years. With a ceasefire underway between the Yemeni state and its opposition, Saudi Arabia and Iran are given a stalemate period to renegotiate their political and economic relationships, clearly choosing to carry on in diplomatic affairs. However, from a realistic perspective, this deal could not take place without a third and unbiased party, which is the role China had taken up.

In terms of the relationship with Syria, Saudi Arabia seeks to minimize the threat of regional security and political powers in the region. Therefore, the country reintroduced Syria into the Arab world in a show of good will towards the weakened and damaged state.

In both of these cases, Saudi Arabia views itself as the final arbitrator of regional power relations, and no other states (including China). Additionally, it continues to place itself as a regional leader, stabilizing the relationship between shunned countries and the Arab countries, as well as introducing and publicly welcoming the introduction of new great powers in the region (in this case, China).

Saudi Arabia Point of View		
Identity	System	Issue
Saudi Arabia regional leader Final arbitrator Regional stabilizer	Sovereignty Globalization	Long-term wars ineffective and draining economy Diplomatic resolution between regional enemies

To conclude, from Saudi Arabia's point of view, the problem has been long-term conflicts and major regional threats to security and stability, caused by long-standing interventions from foreign actors and a lack of leadership from any state in settling the disputes in the region. It solves this problem by deciding that a reunification is overdue, and expressing good will between itself and other states while taking the role of the main regional leader.

Saudi Arabia Point of View	
Problem	Long-term conflicts and too many regional enemies
Cause	Foreign influence and lack of strong Saudi leadership
Evaluation	A Reunited Middle East is best
Solution	Using other global powers for brokering relationships and reinstating good will between Arab states

Conclusion and Recommendations

Post-2003 Iraq War Aftermath

Since the withdrawal of US troops in Iraq almost ten years ago, the nature of Arab countries and their leaders' perceptions of U.S. intervention have drastically changed and impacted the effectiveness of U.S. policy. Besides Saudi Arabia, other Arab countries in the Gulf (mainly Qatar and UAE) and in the region (such as Syria and Palestine) began searching for other, less-volatile options for foreign direct investment and aid. Iraq War's aftermath may have directly contributed to the rise of China and outside actors in the region, with political vacuums, more wars and conflict, and broken economies spurring from decades of U.S. military intervention.¹⁷

But while some argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine and China's interest in the Middle East and Africa are symbolic of this new world order already existing, the reality is that

¹⁷ "How the war in Iraq changed the world—and what change could come next," Atlantic Council, March 28, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-the-war-in-iraq-changed-the-world-and-what-change-could-come-next/>.

the West still holds far greater control and power over the global political and economic narratives of development, mainly due to the expansive military and defense complex and amount of investment and aid the U.S. continues to grant in the region. However, this doesn't mean that the US shouldn't acknowledge the rapidly-changing power dynamics in regional state conflicts.

Some critics argue that the US needs to take a stronger position in denouncing the Saudi Arabia-Syria relationship and normalization of al-Assad, mainly due to alleged international war crimes against the Syrian people and disregard for what Biden often refers to as the "rules-based international order." It is difficult to offer plausible diplomatic advice on this matter, especially as Saudi Arabia is seemingly ignoring the global status quo and US-Western opinion for both the issues of Syria and oil production. Acknowledgement of these agreements and activities is a start, but it might also serve to legitimize them and harm the "Great Powers" narrative from the US. At the same time, ignoring these developments could lead to long-term side effects of a decreased position of power in the global arena, which the US might just have to accept anyway as the world moves away from a Western hegemonic system.

Time will tell if this is a blip in the drawn-out shift to a multipolar world, or if Saudi Arabia has succeeded in placing itself as a contender for a future superpower status.

US Policy Recommendations

1. Continue to accept the normalization of ties between Arab states and competing powers, demonstrate good will towards positive mediation that ends conflicts and wars.

2. In terms of oil, seek alternative options to energy that do not rely on the political outcomes of allies — instead, focus on growing energy sources in the country to further support economic growth and public support of U.S.
3. In terms of non-allied powers meetings, continue to acknowledge and appreciate efforts toward security and stabilization without demonstrating dismay at the lack of a main role in these events.
4. *Identity Narrative Replacement:* Review the Department of State's FY 2022 –2026 Joint Strategic Plan Framework to search for failing and outdated narratives of U.S. leadership-led foreign policy and replace them with narratives of friendliness and mediation, which is more likely to garner international support.
5. Support aid and development in countries where the U.S. had major roles in damages and conflict and decrease the role of military and defense in the region, which has great destabilizing effects.

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