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TRANSCRIPT

Event

**“MBS in Washington: What’s Next for U.S.–Saudi
Relations?”**

DATE

Thursday, November 6, 2025 at 9:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING

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Mona Yacoubian: What does Mohammed bin Salman's trip to Washington tell us about the current state of U.S.-Saudi relations? What are both sides hoping to achieve, from investment and security guarantees to energy and nuclear cooperation? And how do broader regional dynamics shape Saudi Arabia's growing regional ambitions and its evolving role in the Middle East?

I'm Mona Yacoubian, director of the Middle East Program here at CSIS. And to help us unpack all of this I'm joined by Michael Ratney, former ambassador of the United States to Saudi Arabia and nonresident senior advisor to the Middle East Program here at CSIS. Ambassador, great to have you here.

Michael Ratney: Thank you.

Ms. Yacoubian: So the crown prince's visit to Washington marks a remarkable turnabout in the bilateral U.S.-Saudi relationship. It comes after President Trump's first planned foreign trip to the region in May, where his first stop was Saudi Arabia. What is the significance of Mohammed bin Salman's trip?

Amb. Ratney: So it's true the U.S.-Saudi relationship has gone through some ups and downs, to say the least. I think the relationship in general has been on a good trajectory for the past few years, even predating the beginning of this Trump administration, and I think it's in good shape now.

It's interesting to look back. The relationship was kind of bumpy in the Obama administration, and yet Barack Obama did visit Saudi Arabia. I think the Saudis sort of looked forward to the first Trump administration, and that was great until towards the end, if you recall the Iranian attack on Abqaiq and Khurais, when the United States essentially did nothing, sort of washed their hands of responsibility for what was a really kind of profound strike by the Iranians at the heart of Saudi energy infrastructure.

And I think the Saudis were looking forward with some trepidation to the Biden administration because they had heard a lot of his rhetoric about human rights and some of the negative comments about Mohammed bin Salman, and they didn't quite know what to make of it. In the end, the relationship got worse and then it got better towards – especially towards the end, as we started negotiating a normalization agreement and an agreement for a possible U.S.-Saudi mutual defense treaty.

And then, at the beginning of the Trump administration, I think that trajectory continued. I think in some sense there was probably a warmer relationship between President Trump and Mohammed bin Salman, warmer than with Biden. But essentially, the substance of the relationship was continuing.

The interesting thing and the point of your question was the significance of the actual visit, because if you recall the last time Mohammed bin Salman visited was probably seven years ago and there was some optimism, but then that optimism was colored by all of the events thereafter including the Khashoggi killing and a lot of other things. And even though the relationship continued and in some sense got much better, the idea of a visit by him to Washington I don't think was in the offing because I think people were concerned about the public reaction, and I think the Biden administration in particular was nervous about the imagery of it.

So I think, basically, a positive trajectory. And now, with President Trump inviting him to Washington, sort of says that he's back and Saudi Arabia – the U.S.-Saudi relationship is back.

Ms. Yacoubian: So MBS is back. Helpful tracing of the ups and downs of the relationship.

So looking toward the coming couple weeks when he arrives, what can we expect in terms of deliverables? What are the expectations of each side, both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia?

Amb. Ratney: So these visits often have a lot of announcements and MOUs and that sort of thing, and I think we'll see some of that. My expectation is the Saudi priority is really going to be in two areas.

As you recall, in the discussion of normalization one of the elements of that deal was going to be a mutual defense treaty. Not on the cards right now because that requires Senate ratification, which I think the sense is it's not possible, certainly not without all the other pieces of the puzzle. But there's also discussion of a U.S.-Saudi bilateral defense agreement that was not a defense treaty that would require ratification by the Senate but is an agreement that essentially cements U.S.-Saudi military cooperation. And I think that will be a high priority for the Saudis because I think, given the uncertainty of the region they live in, they're going to want any kind of gesture of U.S. support for their security in the face of threats that continue from Yemen and Iran and elsewhere. So I think a defense piece is a big part of it.

Ms. Yacoubian: Is that going to be along the lines of the – sort of like the executive order that President Trump issued on behalf of Qatar? Is it a similar type of framing that you'd expect?

Amb. Ratney: So the short answer is I'm not sure. I think that Qatar agreement was somewhat unusual because it purported to be – have the substance of a defense treaty but without Senate ratification. So, effectively, the executive order that the president did for the Qataris potentially dies with the end of the administration. I think what the Saudis are going to want is something that is more permanent, something that endures after this administration, because they're going to want the sort of assurances and the quality of the relationship with the United States to go well past and not be dependent on any one administration.

The other big piece, I think, has to do with artificial intelligence and technology. You know, AI and advanced tech is really kind of at the center of Saudi's ambitions to diversify their economy away from a dependence on oil. I think they have been frustrated, like the Emirates and other countries, that we have not – we did not in the Biden administration and have not yet in this Trump administration come up with a kind of predictable, reliable export regime for the most advanced chip technologies. The Saudis have huge ambitions and waiting investment from big U.S. companies to develop datacenters. They want to develop their own artificial intelligence industry, including the intellectual capital that goes into developing it, not just hosting the datacenters. But I think they're going to want some kind of solid assurances that the U.S. is going to be there as a partner as they develop and invest in their AI program.

So I think those are the two big pieces I would – I expect there will be other pieces: commercial elements, I'm sure; probably an energy element. I don't know, perhaps they'll talk about renewable energy or even nuclear energy. But I think artificial intelligence and a defense agreement is really at the center of it.

Ms. Yacoubian: So Saudi Arabia's human rights record has long been criticized by human rights organizations, democracy promotion organizations. I think it's a fairly safe bet that it's not going to be raised in the context of this visit by the president or the administration. But give us a sense, Michael, of the situation on the ground in Saudi Arabia.

Amb. Ratney: Yeah. It's interesting, I've always thought about human rights in Saudi Arabia – often as a public matter, it sort of gets simplified or oversimplified or condensed into that one term, human rights in Saudi Arabia bad, right? But when you go there and you look around, you realize it really is a mixed picture. And the only way you can think

about it, I think, realistically, and the only way you can start to address some of the shortcomings, is to disaggregate each element of it and see where have the Saudis made progress and where are there still issues.

Where they've made progress is actually kind of remarkable, and I think in some cases lost in the public narrative. The most obvious area is, obviously, the role of women in society. This was sort of the – it was Saudi's brand for years and years. The fact that women couldn't drive was the most obvious thing, but it was more deep than that. Women's lives were essentially controlled by a set of regulations called guardianship laws, and those are mostly gone right now. And women are in the workplace. Women have more control over their lives than I think any time in, certainly, the lives of living Saudi women right now. They can – they can travel, get passports; they can live on their own; they can get jobs – all without permission of a male relative, which is something that hung over them in the past. So I think they deserve credit for that.

There's other elements. The status of foreign workers has often been pretty bleak, but they've really made progress. They have read the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report and taken it to heart and tried to improve the lot of lives of migrant laborers there. It's not perfect. There are still problems at their southern border, where Ethiopian migrants are finding themselves in horrific conditions. But in general, they've made considerable progress on the issue of human trafficking and the status of foreigners in the country.

Religious freedom was often a big kind of nagging issue. You know, Saudi Arabia was defined by its Islamic nature and the fact that Islam had something of a monopoly on religion there. Religion, to the extent that it was ever practiced – other religions, like Christianity or Judaism – was done in absolute secrecy. Now the Saudis are much looser about it. You know, I don't think you'll see churches opening up any time soon, but people do find that private worship is something that's – they're no longer fearful of. And that's a big deal because, as Saudi's economic ambitions advance, they diversify their economy, they're welcoming foreigners both businesspeople and tourists, I think they want to feel comfortable that if you're a Christian or a Jew or any non-Muslim faith that you don't feel kind of beleaguered or targeted because of it. So they haven't gotten as far as opening churches, to be sure, but I think their tolerance for other religions has really changed considerably.

You know, there's areas that are less – where they've made less progress. The things that we often found to be of most concern have to do with their judiciary. They still suffer from – it's an opaque judiciary.

Once you're kind of in the system, it's hard to know what's happening. It's hard to know where the charges are or what's going to happen to you. We would find it when there's American citizens that get caught up in that.

And so the way I think of it is, you know, the Saudis are trying to modernize very, very quickly, and this judicial system really hasn't caught up with it yet. It's still essentially laden with Sharia law that kind of dictates most aspects of the legal system there, and most of the lawyers and judges and prosecutors come from that background. But, on the other hand, they've promulgated a commercial code – a modern commercial code so U.S. companies have clarity and, basically, parity with other commercial codes elsewhere in the – in the world. And I know for a while they've been working on a – on a criminal code, essentially, so there's transparency. If you commit a certain crime and are convicted of it, this is the punishment that you'll get. In the past, really up until now that's up to the discretion of a particular judge who's an Islamic scholar, not a trained lawyer.

So I think the human rights picture is a mix. I agree with you, I don't think it's going to be the centerpiece of the conversations when Mohammed bin Salman visits Washington. But nonetheless, it's something that a lot of foreign observers watch because Saudi wants to be welcoming to foreigners. And I think that reputation is something that they're going to have to think about.

Ms. Yacoubian: So a previous centerpiece of U.S.-Saudi engagement was this idea of the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel. And even in his recent interview on "60 Minutes," President Trump sounded somewhat optimistic that this could be on the horizon. That said, it does seem as though the prospect is actually more distant given Gaza and all that has happened over the last couple years. What's your sense on that?

Amb. Ratney: Sure. You know, the whole idea of normalization between Saudi and Israel, it emerged actually at kind of a low point in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, the fall and winter of 2022. Almost improbably, the idea was injected into our conversations about how we could improve the relationship.

The way the conversation emerged is it sort of centered around a trade. On the one hand, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia would conclude a mutual defense treaty. It's something Saudi badly wants, given the investments that they're making in the future and the uncertain region that they live in. And in exchange for that, Saudi Arabia and Israel would normalize relations. There would be other things. There was always going to be kind of an economic and energy component to it. There was always

going to be a significant element for the Palestinians, because the Saudis have been clear they want to use this as a way to kind of cement the possibility of a pathway to Palestinian statehood. And it was a package: an economic component; a Palestinian component; normalization; defense treaty; and probably beyond the defense treaty a defense cooperation agreement of some sort, a more nuts-and-bolts agreement. And the idea was you need something for everybody, because this would have to go to the Senate, specifically the treaty part, and to get 67 votes in the Senate, basically, there has to be something in it for everyone – for Saudi, for the U.S., for Israel, for the Palestinians.

As the Gaza war kind of got off after October 7th, and the situation dragged on for so long, and the situation in Gaza became so bleak, and the catastrophe for the Gazan people was so horrible and so visible in the media, it became harder and harder for the Saudis to move ahead with this. Obviously, the idea of Saudi-Israel normalization, it has huge advantages, but I can't say it's hugely popular among the average Saudi citizen or even among the average Arab more broadly. And the Saudis have to be aware of that. I think they see the advantage of it.

To be honest, I think the basic calculus is still valid – that integrating Israel into the region has advantages for everybody. A U.S.-Saudi mutual defense treaty helps bring clarity to that strategic relationship between the United States and Saudi, especially if something goes wrong, i.e., serious war with Iran. So I think the basic calculus is there. I'd like to say it's just a question of timing. This is not the timing. The Saudis have publicly said over and over again this is not the timing. Basically, we have an uncertain ceasefire in place in Gaza, thank God.

Whether there's an opportunity for that to transition to a longer-term peace agreement of some sort is unknown. And the Saudis have made clear what their requirements are. You know, they want to see the Israeli Defense Forces out of Gaza. We're far from that right now. And they want to see a commitment by the Israeli government to a pathway to Palestinian statehood. We seem far from that as well. So I think those two elements are still going to hang over the discussions. And I know President Trump is probably enthusiastic about this happening and thinks he has the kind of force of personality and the relationship with MBS to make it happen. And it might. But I don't think it'll happen soon.

Ms. Yacoubian:

So let's dive, just for a moment, a little more deeply into the recent 20-point ceasefire agreement negotiated by the Trump administration, which talks about some of these elements that we shorthand as "day after" – an international stabilization force, for example, as well as Palestinian governance arrangements. Do you see Saudi Arabia playing any sort of role in this?

Amb. Ratney: I could imagine them playing a role. I don't think they'll play a role in a stabilization force. I think it's too sensitive for them. It's too sensitive for most Arab and Muslim countries, but we'll see. I know there was a lot of hope that they'll participate in a reconstruction effort. Obviously, billions of dollars, horrific damage being done, and something that goes well beyond humanitarian catastrophe. It's a long-term, multiyear process to help Gazans rebuild. I don't think the Saudis just want to get saddled with the bill for that though, nor do the Emiratis, nor do others.

What they want is it to be connected to some broader effort, sort of a coherent regional effort, in which the U.S. and Europe and the Middle East and others are all participating in reconstruction of Gaza. And that reconstruction is connected to something, a political pathway for the Palestinians particularly, because they don't want it to happen again. I think from the Saudi perspective, they want to be responsible citizens in their region, but what they don't want to do is be stuck with the bill for something they had no part of.

Ms. Yacoubian: So let's turn for a moment to Israel's September 9th strikes on Doha, which many consider a watershed in lots of ways. Not long after those strikes Saudi Arabia and Pakistan announced a mutual defense agreement. It can't be purely a coincidence, the timing of that announcement. Can you unpack for us a little bit what the dynamics were around that, and to what extent they relate to what happened in Doha?

Amb. Ratney: I mean, I think everybody in the region found it shocking. It seems quite a few people in Washington found it shocking too, as it turns out. And it really shook, I think, the sense of some Gulf partners about our reliability. Here's Qatar. We have the largest air force facility in the region in Qatar. We have a longstanding and deep partnership. They were instrumental in the negotiations over the hostages. And they found themselves the victim of airstrikes, both by Iran and later by Israel. And I think the Qataris would ask themselves, OK, so what is the value of a strategic partnership with the United States if we're the victim of airstrikes by both the Israelis and the Iranians?

And I think the other Gulf partners looked at that as well and kind of asked the same questions. So, yeah, the Saudis and the Pakistanis, they've had an extremely close military relationship for many, many decades. Even during the period when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait there were Pakistani soldiers in Saudi Arabia at that point. So that partnership is longstanding. The timing of the announcement, maybe not a coincidence. I don't know. These things sometimes are partly

coincidence and partly not. It's a little bit hard to tell. But I do think it sent a message that even though our Gulf partners want kind of a primary relationship with the United States, they're going to hedge, because sometimes they just don't know exactly where they stand.

I don't think it's a rupture in the relationship with us. I don't think they want to break the strategic partnership. In fact, I think what they want is greater clarity in that partnership. They want to know exactly where we stand, and we want to know exactly where they stand. That's the beauty of some kind of a defense agreement that might emerge from this trip by MBS to Washington.

Ms. Yacoubian: So you mentioned Iran, in passing. And we know that Saudi Arabia and Iran have been in the midst of a normalization process, of sorts, that started in 2023. What's the status of that normalization?

Amb. Ratney: Yeah, what it really comes down to is they reestablished diplomatic relations. It had been broken, I think, six or seven or eight years earlier. And the Saudis made a decision in 2023 that they just wanted to deescalate the relationship. That essentially stoking tension between the two countries wasn't serving anybody's interest. I don't think they thought it cured the relationship. I don't think they have any kind of change in their general sense of distrust for the Iranian regime. I don't think they – I don't think detente or the reestablishment of mutual relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia means they like each other again, or they trust each other again.

I think the Saudis just look around the region and they're making these huge investments, and they're transforming their economy and their society. And they're surrounded by threats. And they have – they don't have a perfect set of tools in their toolbox. One of them is diplomatic relations with Iran, open conversations. They're going to have exchange of ministers, maybe exchange of commercial delegations, at least the veneer of normalcy between them. I don't think it changes their general perception of what Iran is doing in the region, sponsoring proxy forces that ultimately could threaten Saudi Arabia. But I think for them it's just one more kind of imperfect tool to try to deescalate conflict in the region.

Ms. Yacoubian: So I want to turn to another key country in the region, Syria, which is in the midst of its own historic transition following the collapse of the Assad regime last December. We've seen Saudi Arabia step up and play a much more significant role in terms of seeking to help stabilize Syria. And indeed, on President Trump's trip in May, it's widely reported that it was MBS who influenced President Trump's decision to not only announce the lifting of sanctions – which is, as we both know, a little

more complicated – but to meet Sharaa in person. That is expected to be followed up by a White House Oval Office meeting with Ahmed al-Sharaa, potentially as soon as November 10th.

It's pretty remarkable, considering his own – Sharaa's own past as a former al-Qaida leader. Help us understand better both how Saudi Arabia and Syria – you were also, of course, formerly a U.S. envoy – or, a special envoy for Syria. So help us understand what those goals look like for both the U.S. and for Saudi Arabia, and to what extent are the two countries cooperating on Syria?

Amb. Ratney:

So I think the Saudi perspective is, you know, they live in an imperfect region. Maybe that's an understatement. Imperfect region. They're going to look for imperfect solutions, right? The war, the civil war in Syria, went on for over a decade. Untold numbers of people were killed, even larger numbers displaced, huge property damage. The war ultimately left Assad in place. There was more jihadis, and more Iranians, and more Iranian proxy forces, and more Hezbollahis, and more refugees. And yet, Assad was still there. And then, somewhat surprisingly to a lot of people in Washington and the region, he was gone.

And I think the Saudi view is, you know, the next step here is not going to be perfect. So let's see what this guy is all about. We knew what he was about. And he started to make the right noises in terms of the quality of governance, and unification of the country, and stability, and peaceful relationship with Israel. It sounded pretty good. And I think the Saudi view was, pretty good might be as good as we get, at least for the moment. Let's invest in pretty good and see if we can get it to something even better than that.

The trajectory, to be fair, has been auspicious, I think. And I think – I'm sure – I'm quite sure that the crown prince made the argument to President Trump when Trump visited Saudi Arabia a few months ago. And he bought the argument, that this might not be the perfect guy, but given how uncertain this region is we should at least give him, if not the benefit of the doubt, at least the opportunity to show that he can govern Syria in a decent way. And that should be supported financially.

So the Saudis have started investing in that, I think all to the good. Convinced the United States to remove sanctions on Syria, some of which have been removed, some of which are in the process of being removed. Because I think the argument that the Saudis made, and I think most in the region are making the same argument, which is if you want Syria to continue on some kind of a positive trajectory it has to breathe economically. It can't be suffocated with sanctions and it can't

be denied the opportunity for investments. So it looks like the Saudis decided to give them at least the opportunity, and convinced President Trump, I think, for the good, to do the same thing.

Ms. Yacoubian: So we have time for one more question.

Amb. Ratney: Sure.

Ms. Yacoubian: And I want to take advantage of you being here to draw you out further on a recent op-ed you wrote for The Wall Street Journal, in which you push back on the critique that Saudi Arabia's investments in the arts, entertainment, sports fields is really not an attempt to whitewash their human rights record, but really is part of a broader, I think, historic transformation. You referenced that a bit in the beginning of our talk, but I wonder if you could elaborate further on how we should understand Saudi Arabia and its role, not only in the region but globally at this moment.

Amb. Ratney: You know, sure. Like, if you had visited Saudi Arabia 10 years ago or 15 years ago, the idea of going to a Backstreet Boys concert or a wrestling tournament was just inconceivable. And the fact that that kind of recreation and entertainment was denied Saudis made it kind of an odd place; I think kind of a dour place. In a way, kind of a neurotic place. Not a normal place. And as the Saudis have tried to modernize their country, one of the things they want to do is just be more normal. And part of normal is there's recreation and entertainment. And Saudi being Saudi, and the Gulf being the Gulf, they spend big on it. And they bring in big names.

Sometimes I thought it was a bit patronizing of people outside Saudi, particularly in the West, to look at that and look at it through the lens of – through our eyes. Surely, they're doing this for us, right? Why else would they bring these concerts and sporting events, other than to impress foreigners? And when you live there and you see what's going on, you realize, they don't particularly care about impressing foreigners, at least – maybe in some ways they do, but certainly not this way. Here they have a huge – I mean, it's a country of over 30 million people. Probably two-thirds of those are Saudis. A huge percentage of those Saudis are fairly young. And they see the world. They see the world through social media. They know what's going on.

And the idea that their country doesn't have that, it doesn't make any sense. And the idea that their country should somehow be punished because of shortcomings in human rights by denying them entertainment makes no sense to them. And when you visit there, and you go to some of these events, and you talk to the Saudis, and you see

just the joy of their living these kind of deliriously normal lives, you think, is it up to me to say they don't deserve that because we as a government have a problem with various aspects of Saudi's human rights record? It just never made sense to me.

If a mayor of a U.S. city decided to bring a sporting team or a concert, we'd say this is an enlightened person who wants to bring culture and education and recreation to his people. Somehow that doesn't translate to the Arab world? I don't buy that. So I think, to me, it's just part and parcel of an effort by the Saudis to – you know, we think of it in terms of some of these gigantic projects that they're building and the magnitude of the transformation of their own society. But part of what they're doing is just trying to make it a normal place.

Ms. Yacoubian: Ambassador Ratney, thank you so much. You've given us a lot to think about, a lot to look for during the upcoming visit of the Saudi crown prince. Thank you for being with us today.

Amb. Ratney: Thanks for the conversation.

(END.)