

Empire, Oil and Security

The Historical Evolution of British–Saudi Relations

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Abstract

British–Saudi relations have survived the dissolution of Britain’s imperial system, the rise of American predominance in the Gulf, and repeated regional crises. Their durability nevertheless conceals substantial changes in the distribution and instruments of influence. This article examines the relationship from the early twentieth century to September 2026 through a historical analysis of imperial diplomacy, oil development, defence cooperation, and economic diversification. It draws on English-, Russian-, and Arabic-language scholarship, published treaty texts, diplomatic records, judicial materials, and bilateral policy statements. The central argument is that continuity has depended on the reconstruction of mutual interests rather than the preservation of an unchanged alliance. The agreements of 1915 and 1927 established different relationships between British strategic protection and Saudi sovereignty; the American oil concession subsequently exposed the limits of British political predominance. The rupture associated with the Suez crisis further demonstrates that cooperation was neither automatic nor uninterrupted. Defence programmes later sustained institutional connections while generating political and legal constraints. More recently, Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia’s diversification of external partnerships have widened cooperation and increased competition for access to the Saudi market. The relationship is therefore best understood as an evolving, sectorally uneven interdependence in which historical connections create opportunities but do not determine Saudi choices.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, British Empire, oil, Gulf security, defence cooperation, Vision 2030, strategic diversification

Introduction

The relationship between Britain and Saudi Arabia offers a revealing case through which to examine the transformation of international relations in the modern Middle East. It began before the Saudi kingdom existed in its present form and developed as the political geography of the Arabian Peninsula was being redrawn. Britain approached central Arabia from an imperial system organised around India, maritime communications, and the security of the Gulf. Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, by contrast, sought to consolidate authority, overcome regional competitors, and secure external recognition without surrendering control over his emerging state ([Al-Rasheed, 2010](#); [Leatherdale, 1983](#)). Their engagement consequently combined unequal resources with objectives that only partly coincided.

The persistence of this relationship invites a question that a chronological account alone cannot answer: why did Britain remain a consequential Saudi partner after the disappearance of the imperial structures that initially sustained its regional influence? A related question concerns Saudi agency. If the kingdom’s external options expanded through oil revenues, American security cooperation, and later engagement with Asian powers,

what continued to make the British connection useful? These questions require attention both to durable institutional ties and to the moments when those ties proved insufficient to prevent disagreement.

This article argues that the relationship endured because its practical foundations were repeatedly renegotiated. Imperial diplomacy, oil, and security did not form a simple succession in which one element displaced another. Their relative importance changed, while earlier connections were adapted to new purposes. Economic diversification has added further areas of cooperation, but it has also made the relationship more competitive: British capabilities must now demonstrate their value within a much wider set of Saudi partnerships. Strategic interdependence, as used here, therefore denotes reciprocal costs and benefits that differ across sectors; it does not imply equal power, political agreement, or an unconditional security guarantee.

Historiographical Perspectives and Research Approach

The historical literature offers different explanations of the relationship's origins. [Onley \(2007\)](#) shows how Britain's Gulf position depended on cooperation with local rulers and commercial intermediaries, complicating any account of imperial influence as a purely external imposition. [Goldberg \(1985\)](#) places the 1915 agreement within a longer history of Anglo-Saudi contacts, while [Al-Enazy \(2010\)](#) assigns British policy a substantial role in the territorial formation of the kingdom. Read alongside [Al-Rasheed's \(2010\)](#) analysis of Saudi political and social development, these works establish the need to distinguish the external conditions of state formation from the domestic processes through which authority was consolidated.

Arabic-language scholarship adds an important qualification to the idea of a coherent British strategy. [Al-Arrami \(2015: 253\)](#) identifies divergent preferences between the Arab Bureau in Cairo and the government of British India in the Hashemite–Saudi conflict. British policy thus emerged from institutional disagreements as well as imperial priorities. The Arabic historical overview prepared by the [British Library Partnership Team \(2014\)](#) also directs attention to the India Office records of recognition, boundary negotiations, and oil concessions. These materials help connect diplomatic language with the changing territorial and economic setting in which agreements operated.

Russian-language research is particularly useful for connecting the post-imperial relationship to more recent regional dynamics. [Godovanyuk \(2018, 2019\)](#) examines the conjunction of renewed British military engagement, commercial interests, and diplomatic contradictions in the Middle East. [Nebolsina \(2019\)](#) addresses British covert involvement in North Yemen, while [Kosach \(2024\)](#) analyses the national-interest calculations behind Saudi cooperation with both Washington and Beijing. [Gasanov and Sadygzade \(2022\)](#) demonstrate why Britain's ties with several Gulf states constrained its response to the Qatar crisis. Together, these studies make it possible to assess bilateral cooperation within a regional network rather than in isolation.

The analysis combines a chronological account with comparison of several turning points: the treaties of 1915 and 1927, the American oil concession, the Suez rupture and subsequent restoration of diplomatic relations, the consolidation of defence cooperation, and the institutionalisation of economic partnership under Vision 2030. At each point, it asks what each side sought, which instruments it could employ, and what limited the resulting bargain. Published official statements are treated as evidence of declared priorities, not as independent proof of implementation. The article relies on published and digitised materials rather than newly discovered archival evidence; its contribution lies in explaining the relationship between changes in sovereignty, resources, and the practical organisation of cooperation.

Empire and the Foundations of British–Saudi Relations

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain's principal interests in the Gulf derived from its connection to India and the wider imperial communications system. Treaty relations and political agencies enabled London to protect maritime interests without annexing the Arabian interior. Yet the apparent reach of this system should not obscure its dependence on local rulers, merchants, and intermediaries. [Onley's \(2007\)](#) account of the Gulf Residency reveals an imperial order that worked through negotiated relationships as well as unequal power. The rise of Ibn Saud gradually made the relationship between the coastal system and the interior more difficult for British officials to disregard.

Ibn Saud's recovery of Riyadh in 1902 initiated the expansion that eventually produced the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His conquest of al-Hasa in 1913 was especially consequential because it extended his authority to the Gulf littoral and altered his significance for British strategic calculations ([Vassiliev, 1998](#); [Goldberg, 1985](#)). Britain's contacts with him therefore predated the First World War. The Ottoman alliance with Germany nevertheless accelerated British interest, encouraging officials to cultivate regional actors whose cooperation might weaken Ottoman authority. Ibn Saud entered a wartime diplomatic framework that also included Sharif Husayn of the Hijaz, making British commitments difficult to reconcile.

This was not simply a matter of London choosing between two interchangeable clients. Ibn Saud and the Hashemites possessed different territorial ambitions, political resources, and claims to legitimacy. British agencies likewise assessed them from different vantage points. [Al-Arrami's \(2015\)](#) study emphasises the Arab Bureau's preference for Sharif Husayn and the more favourable attitude towards Ibn Saud within British India. The divergence matters because it prevents the eventual Saudi victory from being read backwards as the

execution of a single British plan. Imperial institutions could shape opportunities and constrain choices without fully controlling the outcome.

The Treaty of Darin, signed in December 1915, formalised Anglo-Saudi relations by recognising Ibn Saud's authority over Najd and its dependencies while restricting his dealings with other powers (Goldberg, 1985). For Britain, the agreement served wartime security and the protection of its position in the Gulf. For Ibn Saud, recognition and material support strengthened his standing against regional competitors. These overlapping interests did not remove the agreement's asymmetry. Recognition was coupled with limitations on external autonomy, and the value of British support depended partly on the alternatives available to the Saudi ruler.

The treaty is therefore best understood as an unequal bargain whose effects cannot be reduced either to British domination or to Saudi diplomatic success. Al-Enazy (2010) highlights the imperial framework within which territorial consolidation occurred, whereas Al-Rasheed (2010) places greater weight on internal political, religious, and social processes. The two perspectives illuminate different levels of explanation. External assistance could affect the pace and diplomatic consequences of expansion, but it could not by itself generate the alliances, coercive capacities, or legitimacy through which Ibn Saud established authority.

The conquest of the Hijaz in the mid-1920s changed the stakes once more. Control of Mecca and Medina broadened the religious and international significance of Ibn Saud's rule. Britain now had to accommodate his stronger position while managing its commitments to Hashemite rulers in Iraq and Transjordan. Hagar (1981) shows that recognition, frontier questions, and relations with neighbouring territories remained closely connected. The problem was not merely whether Britain would recognise a ruler, but how a consolidated Saudi state would fit within an imperial regional order already containing other British partners.

The Treaty of Jeddah of 20 May 1927 placed the relationship on a substantially different basis. Article 1 recognised the independence of the dominions of the King of the Hijaz and of Najd and its dependencies; the treaty's contemporary wording is important, since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not proclaimed until 1932 (Treaty of Jeddah, 1927). The agreement consequently should not be described as British recognition of a Saudi kingdom already constituted in its later form. It marked a change in the status of Ibn Saud's dominions and in the legal framework of the bilateral relationship.

Recognition nevertheless did not eliminate the practical consequences of British predominance around Saudi territory. Frontier disputes and relations with neighbouring rulers continued to connect Saudi policy to the British regional system (Hagar, 1981; Leatherdale, 1983). The distinction between sovereignty and freedom from external constraints is essential here. The 1927 settlement expanded the space for independent diplomacy, but geography and unequal capabilities continued to influence its exercise. The proclamation of the kingdom in 1932 consolidated Saudi statehood without resolving every contradiction in its relationship with Britain.

Oil and the Limits of British Predominance

The oil concession granted to Standard Oil of California in 1933, followed by the discovery of commercially significant oil in 1938, exposed a central limitation of Britain's position: political influence did not guarantee commercial control. The Saudi oil industry developed around American capital and expertise, providing an institutional foundation for a growing American role in the kingdom (Vitalis, 2007). From the British perspective, this was more than the loss of a particular commercial opportunity. An increasingly valuable part of Saudi development was becoming organised through a competing external relationship.

Oil altered the relationship on different timescales. A concession first created expectations of future income and an external corporate presence; the expansion of production subsequently increased the resources available to the state. It would therefore be misleading to treat the 1938 discovery as an immediate transfer of financial or diplomatic power. The transformation depended on the development of production, infrastructure, markets, and revenue arrangements. Vitalis (2007) also shows that the oil industry was embedded in social and labour relations, reminding us that its political consequences cannot be inferred from export figures alone.

As these changes accumulated, Saudi external relations acquired a wider range of options. Britain could remain influential in the surrounding Gulf while having a more limited role in the kingdom's principal industry. Oil therefore produced a mismatch between inherited regional influence and emerging economic power. The British Library Partnership Team's Arabic overview (2014) places the American concession within the same historical sequence as the earlier treaties, allowing the contrast to become clear: diplomatic agreements had stabilised one relationship, while the organisation of oil development created another.

This shift did not amount to the replacement of territorial geopolitics by resource politics. Access routes, frontiers, and regional security remained important, but they now intersected with the protection of an expanding oil economy. For Saudi Arabia, petroleum eventually increased the capacity to finance state institutions and international partnerships. For Britain, the challenge became how to remain relevant where historical proximity no longer supplied a privileged economic position. The subsequent expansion of defence cooperation should be read partly against this background.

Post-war Rupture and the Reconstruction of Cooperation

The Second World War accelerated changes in the distribution of external power in the Middle East. The 1945 meeting between King Abdulaziz and President Franklin Roosevelt aboard the USS Quincy symbolised the growing importance of the American relationship (Bronson, 2006). Britain nevertheless retained substantial regional commitments and continued to seek influence through diplomacy, military facilities, and commercial links. As Louis (1984) demonstrates for the immediate post-war period, imperial retrenchment involved struggles over how influence would be reorganised, rather than a single moment of withdrawal.

For this reason, the post-war decades cannot be presented as a smooth transition from empire to alliance. The Suez crisis brought a genuine rupture: Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Britain in 1956, and relations were restored only in 1963. The contemporary diplomatic record associates the resumption with renewed negotiations and regional security concerns (U.S. Department of State, 1963). This interruption is analytically decisive. Shared economic interests and earlier contacts did not prevent Saudi opposition to British policy, while the eventual restoration required a change in the political circumstances of cooperation.

The conflict in North Yemen subsequently provided one setting in which British and Saudi interests converged against expanding Egyptian influence. Nebolsina (2019) examines British covert involvement, including the role of mercenaries and the relationship between their operations and Saudi support for royalist forces. Her analysis draws attention to instruments that operated alongside formal diplomacy. It also cautions against treating cooperation as unlimited: both the organisation of assistance and the willingness to sustain it were contingent on political calculations. The episode illustrates how practical security collaboration could re-emerge after a diplomatic rupture without reproducing the earlier imperial relationship.

British retrenchment east of Suez and the withdrawal from its treaty commitments to the Gulf states in 1971 changed the wider regional setting. It did not, however, constitute Saudi decolonisation: the kingdom had a different diplomatic trajectory from the Gulf protectorates. The comparison with Qatar is useful precisely because it reveals this distinction. Sadygzade's (2025) study of Qatar–UK relations describes the development of cooperation after Qatari independence; the Saudi case requires an explanation centred instead on the earlier recognition of sovereignty, the oil economy, and the reconstruction of relations between already independent states.

Military training, equipment, and technical support increasingly offered Britain a way to retain a useful role. At the same time, the Arab–Israeli conflict, regional nationalism, and the Iranian Revolution reinforced Saudi concerns about security and political survival (Niblock, 2006). Cooperation became more contractual and specialised, but it did not thereby become symmetrical. British access to the Saudi market and Saudi access to military capabilities were different forms of reliance, carrying different costs and possibilities for substitution. The durability of the relationship must be assessed through those differences.

Defence Cooperation and Its Political Constraints

The Al-Yamamah programme, initiated in the 1980s, became the most prominent expression of the defence relationship. Its importance extended beyond the supply of aircraft. Complex weapons systems require training, maintenance, spare parts, and technical support, creating institutional connections that can persist beyond the original purchase. Defence cooperation thereby gave Britain a continuing role after the loss of imperial predominance and gave Saudi Arabia access to capabilities it sought for military modernisation. Such connections explain persistence more convincingly than a general appeal to historical friendship.

The same arrangements also created vulnerabilities. Long-term technical reliance can make changing suppliers costly, while a supplier's dependence on major contracts can reduce its willingness to confront a customer. These are analytical implications of the structure of defence cooperation, rather than evidence that either government could dictate the other's policy. They help explain why the relationship could be durable and politically controversial at the same time. The 2018 joint communiqué presented defence cooperation as a longstanding component of the partnership and connected it with wider security and industrial objectives (UK Government, 2018).

The allegations surrounding the Al-Yamamah contracts demonstrate that commercial and security interests also encounter domestic institutional constraints. The Serious Fraud Office investigation, its discontinuation, and the ensuing controversy raised questions about the relationship between national security claims and anti-corruption obligations. Williams (2008) analyses these tensions in law and public procurement. The episode should not be treated merely as an interruption in an otherwise self-contained strategic relationship: it shows that the political sustainability of cooperation is partly determined within the supplier state.

The 1990–1991 Gulf War further demonstrated the importance of external military partnerships to Saudi security. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait brought a direct regional threat and made Saudi territory central to the coalition effort in which Britain participated. Yet the war also underscored the predominance of the United States in the regional security order (Hiro, 1992; Pollack, 2002). Britain's contribution remained significant, but its role rested increasingly on particular capabilities and bilateral arrangements within a larger American-led framework.

The Yemen conflict brought these tensions into sharper focus. In 2019 the Court of Appeal held that the British government's decision-making on relevant arms export licences was unlawful because it had not adequately assessed whether past incidents amounted to violations of international humanitarian law. This was a ruling about the legality of the decision-making process, not a judicial finding that every Saudi operation or every British export was unlawful (Court of Appeal, 2019). The distinction is necessary to assess how judicial scrutiny constrained policy without attributing a broader determination to the court than it made.

The diplomatic difficulty was wider than export licensing. Godovanyuk (2019) identifies the tension between maintaining close military and political links with Riyadh and attempting to contribute to a peaceful settlement in Yemen. Britain's multiple roles could provide channels of influence, but they also exposed it to criticism over the consistency of its policy. Defence partnership therefore cannot be evaluated solely by contract continuity. Its longer-term significance depends on whether security objectives, legal scrutiny, and claims to diplomatic credibility can be reconciled.

Vision 2030 and the Diversification of Partnership

Saudi Vision 2030 introduced a wider domestic rationale for international cooperation. The Arabic-language programme places economic diversification, investment, human capabilities, and the development of non-oil activities within a common national transformation agenda (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This changes what the kingdom seeks from external partners. A relationship valuable for supplying equipment or facilitating diplomatic contacts does not automatically satisfy the demand for skills, productive capacity, and technology. British firms and institutions must consequently connect their participation to Saudi development priorities.

The launch of the UK–Saudi Strategic Partnership Council in March 2018 gave this broader agenda an institutional framework. The joint communiqué identified cooperation in education, healthcare, finance, technology, culture, energy, and defence. The 2021 Economic and Social Pillar statement organised cooperation into four clusters, linking trade and investment with public services, energy and industry, and cultural and sporting activities (UK Government, 2018, 2021). These arrangements widened the number of institutions involved and created channels through which cooperation could continue beyond individual diplomatic visits.

The May 2024 joint statement reported bilateral trade exceeding £17.3 billion and set a target of £30 billion by 2030. It also described cooperation in renewable energy, hydrogen, innovation, education, and financial services (UK Government, 2024). The distinction between reported trade and a future target is essential: an agreed ambition is evidence of political intent, not of an achieved economic result. The statement demonstrates the breadth of the agenda, but assessing its economic effects would require separate evidence on completed investment, implementation, and outcomes.

A wider agenda does not in itself remove earlier patterns of dependence. The relevant question is whether cooperation develops Saudi capabilities or mainly expands the purchase of external services. From the perspective adopted here, durable partnership should be assessed through the development of skills, productive activity, and institutions capable of sustaining cooperation. This does not presume that every project has already produced such effects. It identifies the criteria by which the economic content of the relationship can be distinguished from its diplomatic presentation.

British interest in the Gulf also reflects its own changing external position. Godovanyuk (2018) links the renewed east-of-Suez orientation to military engagement and commercial objectives, including the growing significance attached to Gulf partnerships around the Brexit process. Yet Saudi Arabia is one participant in a regional network of British interests. Gasanov and Sadygzade (2022) show that during the Qatar crisis London sought to preserve valuable relationships with both Doha and its opponents. Applied to the Saudi case, this finding indicates a limit to bilateral expectations: close cooperation did not require Britain to adopt all of Riyadh's preferences in an intra-Gulf dispute.

Saudi diversification places a further limit on assumptions of British privilege. Seyedi Asl, Zabardast Alamdari and Sadygzade (2025) interpret the kingdom's engagement with Asian powers and multilateral groupings as part of a broader eastward orientation. Their argument helps situate British–Saudi relations within a changing field of external options. The relevance here is not that an eastern partnership necessarily replaces a western one, but that Saudi decision-makers can pursue different objectives through different partners. The historical British connection remains an asset, while its practical value must be renewed.

Kosach (2024) provides a useful qualification by interpreting Saudi cooperation with the United States and China primarily through national development and foreign-policy interests, rather than simply as an attempt to exploit great-power rivalry. Read together, these approaches suggest that diversification can increase room for manoeuvre without eliminating reliance in particular sectors. The implication for Britain is specific: it can remain a significant partner in defence, finance, education, or technology even where it lacks a leading role in Saudi trade as a whole. Sectoral relevance and overall strategic predominance are different propositions.

Security nevertheless continues to affect the relationship's trajectory. On 22 September 2026, the UK Ministry of Defence announced additional defensive support for Saudi Arabia, including the provision of an RAF Voyager aircraft following a Saudi request, and linked its decision to regional stability and trade and energy

interests (UK Ministry of Defence, 2026). As a contemporary official statement, this establishes the government's announced action and rationale; it does not establish the operation's eventual effects. It nevertheless shows why economic diversification has broadened the relationship without making security concerns disappear.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of British–Saudi relations is better explained by the repeated reconstruction of cooperation than by an uninterrupted alliance. The imperial setting made Britain important to Ibn Saud, but Saudi state formation also depended on domestic authority and regional competition. The agreements of 1915 and 1927 represented different bargains over recognition and external autonomy. The American oil concession then demonstrated that British political influence did not confer control over the kingdom's principal economic resource. These changes were cumulative, yet they also altered what each partner could expect from the other.

The Suez rupture is central to this interpretation because it tests the assumption of continuity against an episode of actual diplomatic breakdown. Cooperation was later rebuilt around shared security concerns and increasingly specialised capabilities. Defence programmes gave the relationship institutional depth, while the controversies surrounding Al-Yamamah and Yemen demonstrated that their continuation carried legal and political costs. Historical ties therefore explain the availability of channels and accumulated expertise more readily than they explain agreement on particular policies.

Vision 2030 has widened the relationship and changed its terms of evaluation. Access to finance, technology, skills, and productive capabilities now complements traditional defence cooperation. At the same time, Saudi engagement with a broader range of partners increases the pressure on Britain to offer demonstrable value. The resulting interdependence remains uneven: the parties have different capabilities, dependencies, and alternatives across individual sectors. Greater Saudi autonomy should consequently not be confused with the disappearance of external reliance, just as Britain's diminished regional predominance should not be confused with irrelevance.

The broader significance of this case lies in the distinction between historical continuity and continuity of power. A bilateral relationship can survive the erosion of its original hierarchy when institutions, capabilities, and shared interests are adapted to changed circumstances. It can also remain vulnerable to diplomatic rupture, domestic scrutiny, and competition from other partners. British–Saudi relations illustrate both possibilities. Their persistence is an outcome to be explained through successive political bargains, rather than an inherited quality that can be assumed from the length of their history.

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