

Resilient Partnership under Scrutiny: UK–Saudi Defence Cooperation, Path Dependence, and Managed Continuity (1902–2025)

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The United Kingdom first established a strategic relationship with emerging Saudi leadership during the First World War, at a time when much of the Arabian Peninsula remained under Ottoman sovereignty. The initial Anglo–Saudi agreement was concluded in 1915, and this framework was subsequently reaffirmed and adapted through a further treaty in 1927, following the capture of Mecca and Medina. British military assistance and materiel support contributed to the consolidation of the nascent political order during this formative phase. Following the proclamation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the United Kingdom maintained a sustained and wide-ranging defence relationship with the Kingdom, encompassing arms cooperation, advisory interaction, and broader security coordination. The historical foundations of the relationship are routinely referenced by officials in both countries to legitimate and advance contemporary cooperation. Although bilateral relations have periodically experienced political strain, defence collaboration has displayed notable resilience and continuity. This article analyses the evolution of UK–Saudi relations and evaluates the principal drivers and modalities through which this partnership has been maintained from its origins to the present.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; Security, Defence cooperation, Middle East; United Kingdom; Saudi Arabia.

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1. Introduction

According to George Linabury, “1902 is an appropriate point of departure, because it was in that year that Saudi power re-emerged on the Arabian Peninsula, this time under the leadership of Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Faisal Al Sa‘ud—widely known as Ibn Sa‘ud” (Alotaibi, 2017). Under an agreement signed in 1915, the territories subsequently conquered and brought under the authority of Ibn Sa‘ud—who would

later become the first king of Saudi Arabia—were placed under a form of British protection, within which the United Kingdom provided arms and financial subsidies. After the war, and following Ibn Sa‘ud’s further territorial expansion across the Arabian Peninsula, the United Kingdom formally recognised his sovereignty over what would become modern Saudi Arabia by signing the Treaty of Jeddah in 1927. The Saudi state was officially proclaimed in 1932. Despite intermittent periods of political tension, the United Kingdom has



since sustained close relations with Saudi Arabia. Historically, this relationship has been anchored in arms sales, military ties, and—over many decades—energy and political-economic exchange (Alqst, 2022).

Contemporary UK–Saudi relations rest not only on these historical foundations but also on the continuity of shared interests in defence, security, and trade. These convergent interests have remained salient in the twenty-first century, reflected in ongoing cooperation on several of the United Kingdom’s principal security concerns, including counter-terrorism and broader regional security challenges (Van Rij & Wilkinson, 2018). Conceptually, the article approaches UK–Saudi relations through the lens of security partnership resilience. It argues that the relationship has endured because it is underpinned by two mutually reinforcing mechanisms: (a) defence-industrial and operational path dependence, including long-term platform sustainment, training pipelines, and advisory missions; and (b) political-economic interdependence, including arms procurement, trade, and investment linkages, which generates constituencies for continuity in both states. These mechanisms help explain why cooperation has often been maintained—even when political frictions, reputational costs, or regional crises created periodic pressure to recalibrate the relationship.

The article’s central research question is therefore: How and why have UK–Saudi relations—especially in the defence and security domain—remained resilient across episodes of political strain and shifting regional contexts from the early twentieth century to the present? To answer this question, the article pursues three objectives: (1) to trace the evolution of UK–Saudi ties from their early twentieth-century origins to the present; (2) to identify the principal drivers of continuity, particularly in defence, security, and political economy; and (3) to evaluate the instruments and modalities, such as arms cooperation, institutional linkages, and security coordination, through which the relationship has been operationalised in different historical phases.

For the purposes of analysis, “cooperation” is operationalised across four observable dimensions: (1) arms transfers and defence-industrial contracts, including major platforms and sustainment arrangements; (2) institutionalised military engagement, including training missions, advisory

structures, and coordination mechanisms; (3) security and intelligence collaboration, including counter-terrorism cooperation and related coordination; and (4) political-economic ties, including trade, investment flows, and government-backed commercial facilitation. This operationalisation enables the article to move beyond narrative description by linking changes in cooperation to identifiable mechanisms and domains.

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, historically informed case-study approach combining process tracing with triangulation across multiple source types. Its evidentiary base draws on academic monographs and peer-reviewed research on British Persian Gulf policy and Saudi state formation; parliamentary reports and official UK government documents, including committee publications and ministerial statements; internationally used datasets on arms transfers, notably SIPRI, and publicly available trade and investment statistics; and reputable secondary analyses, including investigative and policy-oriented publications where appropriate.

The article also recognises important limitations: defence and security cooperation is partially opaque by design; major contracts, including Al Yamamah and related government-to-government support arrangements, are difficult to value precisely because of confidentiality, offset arrangements, and changing accounting conventions; and publicly reported figures on trade, investment, and employment effects may vary across sources and methodologies. To mitigate these constraints, the analysis prioritises cross-source corroboration and distinguishes clearly between documented facts, estimates, and interpretive claims.

2. Relations from the Outset to 2001

According to Gary Troeller, the first references to British relations with the Wahhabis date to the early nineteenth century, when Wahhabi power rose on the Arabian Peninsula. The earliest known written document exchanged between Saudi rulers and the British is a written declaration sent by Imam Abdullah ibn Faisal to the British government on 21 April 1866. In this communiqué, Imam Abdullah assured the British authorities that he would neither oppose nor harm any British subjects within Saudi territories, nor attack or injure the lands of Arab polities allied with Britain. Following this declaration, Saudi–British contacts

regained momentum in the early twentieth century, particularly after Abdulaziz ibn Abdulrahman ibn Faisal Al Sa'ud re-established the Third Saudi State (Aldamer, 2001).

In 1902, when the future King Abdulaziz Al Sa'ud—known to the British as “Ibn Sa'ud”—recaptured Riyadh from the rival forces of Ibn Rashid, British officials began to take a growing interest in the rapidly shifting political landscape of central Arabia. Over the subsequent quarter-century, British officials in the Persian Gulf, London, and India monitored, recorded, and assessed the changing configuration of Arab politics. During the First World War, local British agents reported on both the evolving balance of power in south-western Arabia and the contestation between Saudi and Yemeni interests. This struggle culminated in Saudi Arabia's annexation of 'Asir in 1930 and the subsequent delineation of the Saudi–Yemeni border under the Treaty of Taif in 1934 (Tuson, 2004).

On 20 May 1926, a meeting was convened at the British Colonial Office to consider issues arising from negotiations with Ibn Sa'ud. The meeting—attended by nine officials from the Colonial Office, the Foreign Office, the India Office, and the Air Force—first addressed who should lead the negotiations with Ibn Sa'ud. It then reviewed the Anglo–Hashemite Treaty of 16 April 1923 and agreed on a set of guiding principles for the prospective agreement with Ibn Sa'ud. Specifically, it was decided that: (a) the treaty should open with an emphasis on perpetual friendship and peace; (b) the text should include a clause stating that Ibn Sa'ud recognised His Majesty's Government's position in Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan; (c) the text should avoid any provisions concerning British intervention or protectorate arrangements in Arab countries that might generate conflict with Ibn Sa'ud; (d) the agreement should not address the issue of ensuring the safety of pilgrims; (e) cooperation with Ibn Sa'ud to end the slave trade should be pursued, and recognition should be sought for a mission appointed by His Majesty's Government in Jeddah or elsewhere; (f) no clause should commit His Majesty's Government to protecting Ibn Sa'ud from external attack, as such an obligation could bind Ibn Sa'ud while also placing His Majesty's Government in a difficult position; (g) the presence of a British mission in Jeddah should be referenced only indirectly; and (h) the prevailing view was that the

agreement should remain in force for seven years, renewable upon consultation with both parties upon expiry, and should refer to Ibn Sa'ud as “King of the Hejaz, Sultan of Najd and its Dependencies” (Bostanci, 2022).

By the mid-1930s, Anglo–Saudi relations were strained, shaped in part by new strategic conditions on the Arabian Peninsula and in the surrounding maritime corridors. Ibn Sa'ud—then in his early fifties—sought to secure the future of his dynasty and kingdom. He was apprehensive about the growing power of reformist states such as Iran and Turkey. Developments in Palestine threatened not only the prospect of a wider regional war but also the possible strengthening of the Hashemites—Saudi Arabia's traditional rivals—who sought to position themselves as patrons of the Palestinian cause from Transjordan. Saudi leaders further interpreted Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935 as an indirect threat to the Kingdom. Meanwhile, the prolonged economic crisis triggered by the New York stock market crash produced a marked decline in pilgrimage flows to Saudi Arabia, precipitating a severe fiscal shock. In response, Saudi decision-makers concluded that securing the Kingdom's future required a strategic alignment with the United Kingdom and/or other regional powers (Kostiner, 1992).

From this period onward, Anglo–Saudi relations also became more complex as new actors entered the Arab political arena and as Europe's strategic environment continued to evolve. Italy, for instance, sought to consolidate its position in Eritrea by cultivating closer ties with Yemen. The expanding Italian presence in the Red Sea compelled British policymakers to incorporate European strategic considerations more directly into their approach toward Saudi Arabia. For the British Empire, safeguarding its regional interests depended above all on preventing any other European power from gaining a durable foothold in the area. Throughout his contacts with German and Italian representatives, Ibn Sa'ud kept the British informed about the nature and scope of these discussions. When the German government, as part of a prospective arms-sales arrangement, requested that the Saudis sign a neutrality agreement with Germany, Ibn Sa'ud consulted London; the British objected to such an agreement, and Ibn Sa'ud ultimately aligned his position with theirs (Blom, 2009).

In January 1939, Ibn Sa'ud wrote to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain seeking clarification on several issues, including the nature of Britain's response in the event that Saudi Arabia were attacked by a foreign aggressor. In Chamberlain's reply—drafted on his behalf by the Foreign Office—he argued that an attack on Saudi Arabia by a neighbouring state or a European power was highly unlikely, yet he did not provide a guarantee of British support in such circumstances. Nevertheless, the response underscored Britain's "deep interest in Saudi Arabia maintaining its independence and integrity" (Fitzpatrick, 2019).

Foreign Office records indicate that, by the early 1940s, Britain's principal interest lay in Ibn Sa'ud's political and symbolic standing in the Arab and Islamic worlds. During the same period, the British wanted to reduce the subsidies they provided to the Saudis. Costs were steadily rising—from £396,582 in 1940 to over £1.1 million in 1941, nearly £3 million in 1942, and £3.8 million in 1943—reaching a total of £8.3 million. Foreign Office Undersecretary Charles Baxter wrote: "Recent reports from Jeddah indicate that some of the subsidy is being wasted due to the extreme poverty of the royal family and the corruption of officials." Moreover, as Hajj visits increased, the need for British aid also decreased (Rubin, 1979).

From the Second World War onward, the United States became the Saudis' principal great-power ally. In the 1960s, however, London moved to revitalise and deepen its own ties with Riyadh. The United Kingdom concluded what amounted to a near-complete military air-system package for Saudi Arabia, including the sale of forty Lightning fighter aircraft, twenty-five Jet Provost training aircraft, and nine radar stations; from this point, bilateral military relations began to acquire a more institutionalised and durable form. The British Military Mission responsible for training the Saudi Arabian National Guard was established in 1964 and continues to operate to the present day. As the historian Mark Curtis observes, the National Guard was "designed in particular to protect the royal family from social unrest and from military coups originating in the regular armed forces." For a period, Saudi Arabia's minister of oil was reportedly protected by a team drawn from former SAS personnel (Wearing, 2016). *New Statesman* notes that, since that time, the United States has become Saudi Arabia's primary Western patron, while adding that

Britain's role has remained important in practice. Both the United Kingdom and the United States have regarded Saudi Arabia as a strategic partner in the Middle East owing to its geopolitical location and extensive hydrocarbon reserves, and the United Kingdom has supplied the Saudi Kingdom with substantial quantities of military equipment since the 1960s (Power, 2019).

In December 1974, Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey visited Saudi Arabia to discuss Saudi investment in the United Kingdom and the global financial system and, in the words of his principal private secretary, to "establish good personal relations with the influential minority that matters in this important country." In March 1975, Fahd visited London, followed by a further visit in October, during which he met the Queen and a number of ministers, intended to inaugurate "this happy new era" in bilateral relations. The following month, Foreign Secretary James Callaghan undertook the first visit to Saudi Arabia by a British foreign secretary, seeking to build on the "tremendous momentum" of bilateral contacts and to secure greater participation by British firms in Saudi Arabia's expansive new development projects (Curtis, 2017). Given the sensitivity and methodological variation in "today's prices" conversions, the analysis treats contemporary-value estimates cautiously and relies primarily on the original reported figures.

The modern phase of defence cooperation between the two countries is commonly dated to the mid-1980s, shaped by regional dynamics during the Iran–Iraq War and its wider security spillovers. Saudi military authorities entered into negotiations with British defence and security officials, leading to the signature of two major arms and defence contracts known as Al Yamamah I and Al Yamamah II. Under Al Yamamah I, signed in 1985, Saudi Arabia procured major UK-supported air platforms, including Tornado variants and Hawk trainers, alongside associated weapons, training, and support arrangements (Nonneman, 2001; Panavia Aircraft Gmb, 2024).

Following five years of efforts to purchase F-15 fighter-bombers from the United States, Saudi Arabia signed a contract with the British government in July 1985—initially estimated at around £20 billion. Nonneman characterised the agreement as "the largest defence contract in British history" and argued that it effectively shifted the organisational dependence of the Royal Saudi

Air Force away from exclusive reliance on the United States by embedding long-term UK-linked procurement, training, and sustainment structures (Nonneman, 2001). In January 1993, Al Yamamah II was concluded, expanding deliveries and extending the support architecture (Panavia Aircraft Gmb, 2024).

The United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia have shared a particular concern for the maintenance of Persian Gulf stability, to which the United Kingdom has contributed both operationally and through multilateral diplomacy. During the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War, under Operation Granby, Britain deployed a large force alongside coalition partners; this deployment is commonly described in official historical summaries as the United Kingdom’s largest single overseas deployment since the Second World War (Nonneman, 2001).

In 1999, the British government reported that Saudi Arabia ranked among the United Kingdom’s most significant markets in the Middle East, while UK–Saudi commercial relations continued to be shaped by both arms trade and broader investment ties (Alqst, 2022). During the same period, Saudi Arabia was portrayed in UK discourse as an increasingly salient partner in counter-terrorism, particularly as cooperation frameworks expanded in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Van Rij & Wilkinson, 2018). On the other hand, during these years, Saudi Arabia was a vital partner for the United Kingdom in global counter-terrorism efforts. The Saudi government took a firm stance against terrorism and expressed its determination to act against terrorist organisations. It also had a record of condemning terrorist acts. The Saudi royal family immediately condemned the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and was among the first to offer assistance to the United Kingdom following the 7 July attacks (Byman, 2016).

3. Bilateral Relations from 2001 to the Present

In the aftermath of the 11 September terrorist attacks, the fact that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi nationals dealt a severe reputational blow to Saudi Arabia and complicated its relationships with key Western partners, including the United Kingdom. In the bilateral UK–Saudi context, this shock did not simply generate “tension”; it reshaped the public and bureaucratic logic through which cooperation could be justified. Whereas earlier phases of the relationship had

been dominated by defence procurement and political economy, the early 2000s compelled both governments to foreground counter-terrorism cooperation as a principal justificatory pillar. For Riyadh, intensified cooperation with Western partners served a dual purpose: it addressed an acute domestic security threat—particularly after al-Qaeda’s operational turn toward attacks inside the Kingdom from 2003—while also functioning as a form of reputational repair, signalling that Saudi Arabia was part of the solution rather than a source of insecurity (Byman, 2016). For London, counter-terrorism cooperation offered operational and intelligence benefits, reinforced access to a strategically significant regional actor, and created a politically defensible rationale for maintaining a close relationship even amid heightened public scrutiny. In this sense, the post-9/11 period produced a functional bargain: Saudi Arabia supplied counter-terrorism capacity and intelligence value, while the United Kingdom maintained political access and security coordination—an exchange that stabilised the partnership when broader narratives were contested. Personnel diplomacy reinforced this reframing. Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former head of Saudi intelligence, was appointed ambassador to the United Kingdom in 2002 and took up the London post at a moment when the Saudi state faced intensified domestic, regional, and international pressure (Alhargan, 2015). His presence in London can be interpreted not only as a routine diplomatic rotation but also as signalling: placing a high-profile security figure in a key European capital helped reassure interlocutors, maintain elite channels, and manage the reputational and political fallout of the early 2000s. In effect, the relationship’s resilience during this phase was sustained through a shift in emphasis—from a largely procurement-centred partnership to one in which counter-terrorism cooperation became a central mechanism of relationship maintenance and re-legitimation (Byman, 2016).

A second inflection point emerged with the 2011 Arab Spring. The wave of mobilisation and the rise of political Islam generated renewed concerns within the Saudi leadership about regime security, elite stability, and regional order. Saudi regional behaviour in this period, including support for actors aligned with its preferred order, reflected a strategic attempt to contain perceived threats and maintain influence amid rapid political

change. From Riyadh's perspective, the primary objective was not simply "regional power" in an abstract sense, but the management of political contagion and the prevention of adverse outcomes that could threaten regime security. From London's perspective, the Arab Spring sharpened a long-standing dilemma: Saudi Arabia is simultaneously framed as a strategically consequential partner and a politically controversial actor. UK official and parliamentary discourse frequently acknowledges this duality. In parliamentary evidence, Sir Tom Phillips—UK ambassador to Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2012—characterised the Kingdom as "a long-standing ally and a key partner in a complex and volatile region" (Hussain, 2017). This formulation is analytically revealing because it suggests that UK engagement rests less on normative convergence than on an assessment of utility under volatility. The implication is that the relationship's endurance depends on perceived strategic and functional benefits that persist even as political and reputational costs rise.

The launch of Vision 2030 in 2016 further expanded the relationship's foundations by widening the political-economic agenda. Saudi Arabia's diversification strategy sought to reduce reliance on oil revenues, develop new sectors, and reposition the Kingdom within global markets and innovation networks. For the United Kingdom, this agenda offered a route to deepen interdependence beyond defence procurement, positioning British capabilities in sectors such as financial services, higher education, and technology—areas commonly presented as British comparative advantages in external economic policy discourse. This shift is best understood as an additive recalibration rather than a replacement of the defence pillar: diversification-linked cooperation does not displace security ties, but broadens the relationship, making it more resilient by ensuring that cooperation does not hinge on a single domain (Van Rij & Wilkinson, 2018).

Government-backed commercial instruments also mattered. In 2013, UK Export Finance announced substantial support for UK exports linked to the Sadara petrochemicals project, framing the initiative as a major opportunity for British firms and underwriting significant financing guarantees (Clarke, 2016). While such projects are often discussed as trade policy, analytically they are also mechanisms of partnership reproduction: long-term industrial projects create multi-

year contractual ecosystems, embed bureaucratic coordination, and cultivate domestic constituencies in both states with a material interest in stability. In this sense, political-economic interdependence functions as a resilience mechanism by raising the opportunity costs of rupture and distributing the relationship across multiple sectors and actors (Clarke, 2016; Van Rij & Wilkinson, 2018).

At the same time, the mid-2010s marked the emergence of a major constraint: intensifying domestic contestation in the United Kingdom over arms exports, legal compliance, and reputational risk, with Yemen as a focal issue. From this period onward, cooperation became increasingly mediated not only by strategic calculation but also by the institutional politics of oversight, litigation, and public legitimacy. Parliamentary scrutiny—most visibly through the Committees on Arms Export Controls—generated detailed examination of whether UK-supplied weapons could be implicated in the Yemen conflict and whether the government's licensing framework was being applied appropriately (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021). This development matters because it altered the governance environment of UK-Saudi cooperation: continuity increasingly required procedural justification and a defensible process, not merely political agreement.

Judicial review became the most consequential channel through which these domestic constraints shaped policy. In 2019, the Court of Appeal held that the government's approach to licensing arms exports to Saudi Arabia was unlawful because it had not properly assessed whether there was a pattern of past serious violations of international humanitarian law by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, requiring the government to reconsider relevant licensing decisions (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021). In July 2020, the UK government announced that it would resume licensing after revising its approach and concluding that there was "not a clear risk" that exports might be used in serious international humanitarian law violations (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021). Government communications to exporters in 2023 reiterated the procedural basis for the resumed approach and the government's position regarding the legal standards applied (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021). Taken together, this sequence illustrates a key point for the article's broader argument: controversy and constraint did not terminate the relationship, but they

changed the mode through which it is governed and legitimised. The result is best conceptualised as “managed continuity”: cooperation persists, but increasingly through proceduralisation, case-by-case decision-making, and more explicit justificatory practices designed to withstand legal and political scrutiny. Continuing parliamentary debates about the architecture and effectiveness of export-controls oversight further underscore how contestation has become institutionalised within UK governance rather than operating merely as episodic political noise (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021).

Against this backdrop of heightened contestation, the defence dimension nonetheless remained central. Arms-transfer data are widely used to characterise Saudi Arabia’s supplier structure in the mid-2010s, typically portraying the United States as the dominant supplier while the United Kingdom remained a major secondary supplier (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021). This structure matters for resilience because defence cooperation is not reducible to discrete procurement events; it is sustained through training, maintenance, upgrades, spare parts, and organisational know-how—especially for advanced air systems that require continuous support. Defence relationships therefore exhibit a form of path dependence: once a platform ecosystem is embedded, the incentives for incremental continuation are strong, even under political strain. Domestic political contestation in the United Kingdom has also been visible in elite interventions. Emily Thornberry, then the Labour Party’s Shadow Foreign Secretary, argued in a *Guardian* commentary in September 2018 that earlier Labour efforts to restrict arms exports to the Middle East were difficult to implement in practice given the scale of exports to Saudi Arabia (Kurtaran, 2018). Regardless of one’s normative evaluation, this observation points to a practical mechanism: defence-industrial ties can create embedded commitments that are politically and administratively difficult to unwind rapidly.

Institutional defence diplomacy reinforced this embeddedness. In September 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—then also serving as defence minister—met UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon in Jeddah, where the two sides signed an agreement on military and security cooperation. Public reporting framed the agreement as supporting cooperation on counter-terrorism, intelligence, and training (Shay,

2019). Such agreements matter not only as symbolic events but also because they institutionalise routines: they normalise cooperation through recurring bureaucratic interaction, reinforce coordination mechanisms, and provide formal reference points that help sustain engagement even when political climates fluctuate. Operational and training interaction further reproduces interoperability and professional networks. For example, RAF participation in Saudi-hosted exercises such as Spears of Victory has been presented in official UK communications as contributing to joint capability development and professional exchange (Royal Air, 2023). These recurring engagements function as relationship-maintenance mechanisms: they embed shared procedures, reinforce professional trust, and sustain the practical ability to operate together.

Crucially, the relationship is not sustained by UK incentives alone; the Saudi side obtains more than hardware. Beyond the material acquisition of equipment, Saudi Arabia gains training pipelines, operational exposure, and doctrinal learning that support force modernisation and—indirectly—regime security by strengthening internal and external defence capacity. In addition, cooperation with major Western partners can provide political signalling benefits: it communicates international embeddedness and partnership legitimacy, even when the relationship is controversial. For the United Kingdom, the benefits likewise extend beyond economic value: defence cooperation supports strategic presence and access, sustains parts of the defence-industrial base, and preserves leverage with a pivotal regional actor. This reciprocal utility helps explain why the partnership has tended to adapt rather than fracture under pressure.

The post-2022 geopolitical environment introduced yet another arena in which UK–Saudi interaction became publicly salient: energy diplomacy and strategic dialogue. In March 2022, Prime Minister Boris Johnson met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a Strategic Partnership Council; public reporting linked the visit to discussions about energy-market stability in the context of severe geopolitical disruption following the war in Ukraine. This episode illustrates how energy governance and macroeconomic stability can catalyse high-level engagement even when other dimensions of the relationship remain contentious.

It also reflects a broader pattern: UK–Saudi relations are repeatedly reproduced through issue areas that combine global-systemic stakes with bilateral instruments, enabling cooperation to persist through shifting regional contexts (Al Riyadh, 2024).

On the political-economic track, UK official statistics and government briefings continue to frame Saudi Arabia as a major economic partner, summarising total trade in goods and services and emphasising the Kingdom's role within the United Kingdom's Middle East economic portfolio (Al Helou, 2025). The same period saw intensified state-led promotional framing through the "Great Futures" campaign and related joint messaging about expanding economic cooperation and facilitating market access (Al Helou, 2025; Al Riyadh, 2024). Analytically, these initiatives matter because they institutionalise a multi-sector narrative of partnership, thereby strengthening political-economic interdependence as a complement to defence cooperation. They also reinforce the "two-level" nature of relationship management: external cooperation is pursued through domestic constituencies—firms, investors, and regulators—whose interests can favour continuity.

Emerging-technology governance has also entered the bilateral agenda. Saudi Arabia participated in the UK-hosted AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park in 2023 and endorsed the Bletchley Declaration (Al Riyadh, 2024). This demonstrates how "new economy" agendas—technology governance, investment narratives, and innovation positioning—can be incorporated into the relationship alongside defence and energy. For Riyadh, such participation aligns with Vision 2030 ambitions in technology and global positioning; for London, it supports priorities in advanced technology governance and complements investment-oriented diplomacy.

Finally, the resilience of UK–Saudi ties in the contemporary era is reinforced by the governance infrastructure of long-term support arrangements. The United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence manages government-to-government programmes providing equipment and associated support services for Saudi Arabia, highlighting how such arrangements require sustained contract governance, assurance, and administrative capacity (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021; Panavia Aircraft Gmb, 2024). This is a central mechanism of path dependence: advanced defence cooperation is

maintained not only through procurement decisions but also through continuous organisational labour—sustainment, training, upgrades, and compliance management. These routines create durable institutional interdependencies that make abrupt discontinuity costly and administratively disruptive. They also help explain how continuity can be maintained under scrutiny: when political contestation rises, the relationship often adapts through proceduralisation and risk controls rather than terminating.

Taken together, the period from 2001 to the present reveals a dual pattern. On the one hand, the relationship diversified: counter-terrorism, economic reform cooperation, investment facilitation, and emerging-technology agendas broadened the partnership beyond a narrow arms-trade frame (Al Riyadh, 2024; Byman, 2016). On the other hand, the relationship became more contested within UK domestic politics, particularly over arms exports and Yemen, producing legal and parliamentary constraints that altered how cooperation is authorised and defended (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021). The key outcome was not rupture but adaptation: UK–Saudi relations persisted through institutional routines and political-economic stakes while being increasingly governed through proceduralisation, justificatory practices, and risk-management frameworks that enable cooperation to continue under heightened scrutiny (Brooke-Holland & Smith, 2021; Panavia Aircraft Gmb, 2024).

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the evolution of UK–Saudi relations from their early twentieth-century origins to the present, with particular emphasis on the defence and security domain. The central finding is that the durability of the partnership is best explained not by uninterrupted political alignment, but by the interaction of two reinforcing mechanisms: defence-industrial and operational path dependence and political-economic interdependence. Across successive historical phases—state formation and early British protection arrangements, Cold War-era reinvigoration of military ties, the post-1980s consolidation of large-scale defence cooperation, and the post-2001 expansion of counter-terrorism coordination and commercial diplomacy—UK–Saudi relations have repeatedly adapted to changing

regional conditions while preserving a core infrastructure of cooperation.

The analysis demonstrates that defence cooperation generates a form of “institutional stickiness.” Once major platforms, training pipelines, advisory missions, and sustainment arrangements are embedded, they create continuous technical and organisational requirements that raise the costs of abrupt disengagement. These routines also cultivate professional networks and bureaucratic habits that reproduce cooperation in practice even when political narratives fluctuate. Political-economic interdependence, meanwhile, broadens the constituency for continuity by tying the relationship to trade, investment, and government-backed commercial facilitation. Together, these mechanisms help account for how the partnership has been maintained through episodes of diplomatic strain and shifting threat environments.

The post-2010s period further clarifies the relationship’s adaptive capacity under constraint. Intensified domestic contestation in the United Kingdom—particularly around arms exports, Yemen, and legal compliance—has not produced a straightforward rupture. Instead, it has tended to reconfigure governance, pushing policy toward proceduralisation, case-by-case licensing justification, and greater reliance on oversight and reporting as instruments of legitimation. In other words, continuity has increasingly been pursued through risk-managed cooperation rather than through the optics of unconditional political support. This pattern supports the article’s broader theoretical claim: resilience in security partnerships is often produced by institutional practices and technical dependencies as much as by shared threat perceptions.

A comparative implication also follows from the UK–Saudi case. The United Kingdom’s role has been distinctive not primarily because it provides a comprehensive security guarantee, but because it has operated through a concentrated set of niches—platform ecosystems, long-term sustainment, training and advisory missions, and recurrent operational interaction—capable of generating durable interdependencies. These features help explain why the United Kingdom remains a consequential partner even in a landscape where Saudi Arabia’s security relations are diversified and where the United States retains a larger regional footprint.

Defence and security cooperation is partly opaque by design, and the valuation of major programmes is often contested because of confidentiality, offsets, and accounting variation. Moreover, public debate and media reporting can unevenly represent the balance between strategic utility and normative controversy, requiring careful triangulation among parliamentary records, official documents, and specialist datasets. Future research would benefit from deeper archival work on earlier phases, more systematic comparison across Western suppliers, and finer-grained tracing of how specific sustainment and training arrangements function as “lock-in” mechanisms over time. It would also be valuable to assess how emerging-technology cooperation and diversification agendas may reshape the balance between defence-centred ties and broader political-economic interdependence in the coming decade.

Overall, the UK–Saudi relationship illustrates how a bilateral partnership can persist not despite contestation and change, but through adaptation—sustained by institutionalised defence practices, embedded political-economic linkages, and an evolving governance repertoire that manages frictions while preserving the strategic core of cooperation.

Authors’ Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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