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# The Dynamics of Saudi-Russian Relations

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Saudi Arabia-US partnership is a defining pillar of Middle Eastern geopolitics. However, increasing Saudi-Iranian hostility, recent changes inside the Saudi regime, and lingering questions over the consistency of the Trump administration's support have led Riyadh to diversify its bilateral relationships. King Salman bin Abdulaziz's historic four-day visit to Moscow in early October must be seen in this context. The Saudi-Russian rapprochement will likely have huge strategic and economic consequences for Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Saudi Arabia and Russia, the two petroleum superpowers, were not on good terms for much of the Cold War – an ironic state of affairs, as Soviet Russia was the first country to establish full diplomatic relations with the Saudi kingdom. Together with Pakistan and the US, the Saudis armed the Afghan mujahedeen during the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan.

However, the disintegration of the USSR influenced the geopolitical and geostrategic configurations of the world in general and the Middle East in particular. As post-Soviet Russia became a status-quo power, the Saudi regime no longer feared that Moscow wanted to overthrow the monarchy.

But because the Taliban had been propped up under the tutelage of Pakistan's intelligence agencies and was considered the source of Pakistani-US-Saudi influence, Moscow had reason to believe Riyadh was representing competing forces in Russia's Central Asian periphery. Moreover, the Kremlin accused the Saudis of playing a negative role in the perpetuation of the Chechen war.

The 9/11 terror attacks in the US dramatically changed regional geopolitics as the world became aware of the horrors of Islamist terrorism.

Realists in Moscow feel Russia's Middle Eastern policy should be determined by its interests in the "near abroad" – the Transcaucasus and Central Asia. As Russia will have to forcefully resist Islamic fundamentalism – the spread of which could destabilize areas both close to and inside the Russian periphery – for years to come, Moscow should engage in active diplomacy with Middle Eastern countries.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting with former King Abdullah in Riyadh in February 2007 was the first official visit by a Russian leader to the desert kingdom, and it paved the way for further improvement in bilateral ties.

### **The Syrian quagmire**

Moscow and Riyadh have been able to establish a truce, but many issues threaten their fragile rapprochement. In the past few years, Syria has become a major bone of contention. While Saudi Arabia sides with rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar Assad, Russian and Iranian forces have supported the beleaguered president. Riyadh feels aggrieved over Moscow's continuous efforts to sustain the Assad regime, whose armed forces have made military advances in the south and west of Syria.

The Saudis have scaled back their demand for Assad's ouster as Russia's high-risk gamble in Syria has paid off, but they continue to remain implacably hostile to any Iranian presence in Syria. Riyadh's strong opposition to Tehran's involvement in Middle Eastern affairs was clearly voiced by King Salman at the Kremlin, where he [emphasized](#) that "the security and stability of the Gulf region and the Middle East is an urgent necessity for achieving stability and security in Yemen. This would demand that Iran give up interference with the internal affairs of the region, to give up actions destabilizing the situation in this region."

### **Changing geopolitics**

Moscow's immediate aim in the Middle East is to ensure its presence on the regional geopolitical chessboard. Russia's growing significance in the Middle East has coincided with an increase in perceptions of shrinking American influence in the volatile region.

Saudi-American ties were strained during the Obama administration over Washington's backing of a nuclear agreement with Iran. Although President Trump's landmark Riyadh Summit and a nearly \$110 billion arms deal in May 2017 have led to a major improvement in Saudi-US relations, Riyadh still feels it should engage with Moscow to protect its interests and maintain regional security in uncertain times.

For its part, Moscow would like to promote the belief among Saudis that it is in Riyadh's interest to have good relations with Russia. It is also, of course, in Putin's interest to present his "friendship" as unconditional, in comparison to America's conditional and capricious approach to the Middle East. That is presumably what he was alluding to when asked whether Saudi Arabia would always side with the US. He cryptically [replied](#), "Is there really anything in the world that's absolutely permanent? It seems to me, on the contrary, that everything's changing."

Riyadh and Tehran have been locked in a no-holds-barred proxy battle for influence in the Middle East for a long time. The Saudi regime is currently embroiled in a diplomatic standoff with Qatar, which has found support from Tehran. As Iran's recent successes in Iraq and Syria have somewhat tipped the geopolitical competition in Tehran's favor, the Moscow visit by King Salman may have been driven by the desire to pull Russia away from Iran.

Saudi Arabia is desperate to prevent the creation of a contiguous Shiite axis connecting Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Riyadh is therefore trying to use the Moscow link to subdue Tehran's attempts to project power. Saudi Arabia's [decision](#) to buy Russia's advanced S-400 Triumf missile defense system can be seen as a vital component of this diplomatic effort. (Washington is Riyadh's topmost weapons supplier, with the Saudis depending heavily on Patriot missile systems.)

China and India remain Russia's biggest arms markets, but Riyadh well knows that Moscow is looking to open new markets in order to move towards military self-sufficiency. Constrained by Western sanctions, Russia hopes a warming of relations with the Saudi kingdom will provide a stimulus to its struggling economy. Moreover, as both Saudis and Russians have been hit by the fall in oil prices in recent years, enhanced cooperation and policy coordination in the oil sector is likely to cement bilateral ties.

The deal between OPEC and non-OPEC countries to cut production in a bid to shore up crude prices has remained intact so far, reflecting common ground between Riyadh and Moscow. The coming together represents a win-win situation for both countries. Russia hopes to become the real power broker in the Middle East, while Saudi Arabia hopes to counter the Iranian threat while securing its hydrocarbon future.

There are at least two major reasons why Riyadh cannot be ignored by either Washington or Moscow as they formulate their diplomatic engagement with the Middle East. First, it is a key player in the global oil market. Second, it is the birthplace of Wahhabism, a militant Islamist movement that has become almost synonymous with jihadist terrorism. Saudi Arabia can thus afford to boost

Riyadh-Moscow strategic cooperation beyond energy issues while pursuing an independent position in the US-Russian geopolitical rivalry.

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