



The Evgeny Primakov  
Center for International  
Cooperation

Policy brief

# Russia and Saudi Arabia in the new world order

Nikolay Surkov

N°4, 2024



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## **Policy brief**

### **Russia and Saudi Arabia in the new world order**

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Nikolay Surkov. Russia and Saudi Arabia in the New World Order: policy brief No. 4 / 2024. – Moscow: Primakov Center, 2024. – 19 p.

ISBN 978-5-6053281-1-7

**№ 4, 2024**

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Источник иллюстрации на обложке: canva.com

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# Summary

- In 2015, after Mohammed bin Salman was appointed Crown Prince, for the first time in several decades, real power in Saudi Arabia was transferred to a young leader eager to make bold and unconventional decisions in both foreign and domestic policy. Mohammed bin Salman focused his efforts on restoring regional stability, which is critically important for the kingdom's ambitious modernization plans.
- Mohammed bin Salman is not only addressing military and political challenges but he also prioritizes the strengthening of the kingdom's economic potential. He was one of the first Arab leaders to publicly acknowledge that economic power is being redistributed towards the developing nations, leading to a transformation of the world order and a shift in the balance between the Global North and the Global South.
- High-ranking officials in Saudi Arabia publicly acknowledge that the current world order has already become multipolar. In this multipolar world, Saudi Arabia intends to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy and develop partnerships with all major economies, not only with the U.S. or China. Saudi leadership believes that there is a need for mechanisms of global governance that take into account the interests of developing countries and address their needs.
- As part of its readjusted foreign policy, Saudi Arabia attaches great importance to South-South connections, because the Global South has its own technological and financial centers. Thus, the Kingdom aspires to reduce its dependence on the developed Global North.
- Participation in the BRICS+ format gives Saudi Arabia, as one of the key countries of the Global South, an opportunity to contribute to the creation of an alternative to the Western-led world order. From the Saudi perspective, BRICS+ potentially offers a platform that can better represent the interests of developing countries, without undermining other multilateral formats like the G20. Saudi Arabia aims to maintain a non-aligned approach, within which closer cooperation with China does not rule out allied relations with the United States.
- Saudi Arabia sees two main goals for BRICS+ - addressing global challenges and ensuring sustainable development. Among the most pressing global issues Saudi officials list climate change and regional conflicts. The priorities of the current Saudi strategy include ensuring inclusive growth, strengthen-

ing financial stability, and reducing global inequality.

- Russia is viewed by Saudi Arabia as a potential partner in ensuring security in the Gulf. Moscow pursues pragmatic policy in this region, realistically assessing its own capabilities and avoiding attempts to replace the U.S. as a security guarantor or to compete with China in the economic sphere. Though, Russia is willing to act as a peacemaker and mediator.
- In 2019, the Russian leadership suggested to build a new security architecture in the Gulf to reduce tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. Moscow tried to convince its Arab partners that, rather than attempting to isolate Iran, a dialogue should be organized to ensure maximum transparency, especially in military affairs. Russia proposed to establish a mechanism similar to the OSCE, starting with confidence-building measures and mutual invitations to military exercises.
- Saudi Arabia continues to rely on a military alliance with the United States as a cornerstone of its national security. However, this alliance does not rule out improved relations with Iran and peaceful coexistence between the two regional powers. Riyadh believes that de-escalation could be achieved through the creation of an inclusive structure similar to what Russia has proposed.
- Riyadh recognizes the need to move beyond traditional alliances to more effectively advance its interests in a changing world, and in the eyes of Saudi leadership, Russia is a power with global influence. Both sides understand that Russia is unlikely to replace the U.S. in foreseeable future, but Riyadh is carefully exploring the opportunities that cooperation with Moscow may bring. In 2021, Saudi Arabia officials announced that they expected a breakthrough in bilateral relations.
- In the political sphere, Russia and Saudi Arabia share a strategic goal: restoring stability in the Middle East after the Arab Spring and the Gaza crisis. Saudi Arabia maintains an active dialogue with Russia on regional issues.
- One of the key areas for Saudi-Russian cooperation within the OPEC+. Moscow and Riyadh are interested in maintaining balanced oil prices and avoiding price wars.
- Despite intensified political ties, trade and economic cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia remain underdeveloped. However, Russian officials hope that by 2030, trade will reach \$7 billion and that Russia will become one of Saudi Arabia's key partners in food security.

# 1. Saudi foreign policy transformation

In 2015, Saudi Arabia saw a change of monarch, which was followed by adjustments to the kingdom's foreign policy. The King Salman Doctrine emerged, marking Riyadh's shift from a reactive to a proactive policy. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman became the de facto leader of the country. For the first time in several decades, real power in Saudi Arabia was in the hands of a young leader inclined toward bold and unconventional decisions, both in foreign and domestic policy. Initially, his foreign policy appeared somewhat impulsive, but as he gained experience, it became more nuanced and subtle. In a major policy interview in 2021, Mohammed bin Salman made it clear that he intends to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy based on national interests and aimed at ensuring the kingdom's security<sup>1</sup>.

Mohammed bin Salman focused his efforts on restoring regional stability, which was critically important for Saudi Arabia's extensive modernization plans. He focused Saudi foreign policy on the so-called Iranian threat, which, in Saudi perception, extends beyond the nuclear issue to include Iran's growing regional influence and its cooperation with non-state actors. Notably, in the final communiqué of the Arab summit held in Jeddah in July 2022, containing Iran and combating the spread of weapons of mass destruction were positioned as key conditions for maintaining regional stability<sup>2</sup>.

Mohammed bin Salman had to pay significant attention on regional conflicts and crises, especially those where Saudi leadership saw signs of Iranian influence, such as Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. The situation was further complicated by the perception among Saudi leaders that the U.S. failed to respond adequately to Iran's increased activity and did not fulfill its commitments as a security guarantor. Consequently, America's inability to act emboldened Tehran in its regional expansion.

◆ **The Crown Prince focused not only on addressing military and political challenges but he also prioritized strengthening the kingdom's economic potential. By 2022, Saudi Arabia's economy became the fastest-growing**

1 Full Transcript: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman interview with Saudi journalist Abdullah Al-Mudaifer // Arab News, 28/-4/2021. Access: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1850146/media>

2 Jeddah Summit: Joint Vision for Stable, Prosperous Middle East // Asharq Al-Awsat, 17.07.2022. URL: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3762411/jeddah-summit-joint-vision-stable-prosperous-middle-east>

**among G20 countries, with GDP growth rate reaching an impressive 8.7%<sup>3</sup>.**

However, this growth was partly a result of favorable conditions in energy markets, and economic indicators subsequently declined in the following years.

◆ **The kingdom's dependence on oil remained substantial, with the share of non-oil sectors in GDP not exceeding 14.5%. Nevertheless, this share steadily increased, and thanks to Mohammed bin Salman's efforts, new industries emerged in Saudi Arabia, including renewable energy, semiconductor manufacturing, aerospace, and automotive sectors, alongside a rapidly growing services sector.**

This transformation can be called a new wave of industrialization, comparable in scale to that of the 1960s and 1970s. In 2023, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) became the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world, accounting for about a quarter of all investments made by such public funds.<sup>4</sup> By 2024, it was reported that some megaprojects initiated under the Vision 2030 program were partially curtailed. However, this should be seen not as a rollback of reforms but rather as an effort to use resources more efficiently and set attainable goals.

Mohammed bin Salman was one of the first Arab leaders to publicly acknowledge that redistribution of economic power is underway, leading to a transformation of the world order and a shift in balance toward the developing countries of the Global South.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Saudi Arabia started looking for not only for military allies but also for new partners which could contribute to the Kingdom's economic and technological progress as part of its modernization program - Vision 2030.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Khan S. Saudi Arabia's economy seven years after Crown Prince Mohammed's appointment // The National, 21.06.2024. URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2024/06/21/saudi-arabias-economy-seven-years-after-crown-prince-mohammeds-appointment/>

<sup>4</sup> Sallon H. Saudi Arabia takes on debt to finance its megaprojects // Le Monde, 21.03.2024. URL: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2024/03/21/saudi-arabia-takes-on-debt-to-finance-its-megaprojects\\_6639855\\_19.html#](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2024/03/21/saudi-arabia-takes-on-debt-to-finance-its-megaprojects_6639855_19.html#)

<sup>5</sup> Full Transcript: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman interview with Saudi journalist Abdullah Al Mudaifer // Arab News, 28.04.2021. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1850146/media>

<sup>6</sup> Kosach, Saudi Arabia: Transformation of Power and Politics

## 2. Role of BRICS in the new world order

According to Mohammed bin Salman, the global order established after World War II was dominated primarily by the developed countries of the North, particularly the United States, but currently the balance is changing.

◆ **Riyadh acknowledges the growing power of the Global South and seeks new partnerships in addition to existing ones. This pragmatic approach persists. The Kingdom has started to expand cooperation with Russia, India, China, Latin American countries, and Africa, simultaneously maintaining traditional ties with the United States and Europe.**

Senior Saudi officials assume that the world order has already become multipolar. In this new, multipolar world, Saudi Arabia intends to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy and develop partnerships with all major economies, not just with the United States or China. According to Saudi leadership, there is an urgent need to create institutions and mechanisms for global governance that will take into account the interests and needs of developing countries. Simultaneously, the Global South requires transparent and inclusive formats for cooperation. Saudi Arabia declares its commitment to the principle of multilateralism while advocating for greater role for developing countries within various international formats, including the UN. The Kingdom is interested in preserving the leading role of the UN, but it is believed necessary to make the composition of its governing bodies more balanced and to enhance overall efficiency of the organization.

As part of its updated foreign policy, Saudi Arabia attaches great importance to building South-South ties, that is, with developing countries, **since the Global South has established its own technological and financial centers. This allows for an end to the dependency on the developed North that characterized the previous world order. In the new multipolar world order, Saudi Arabia aims to become a major player not only in the Middle East but also in Africa, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.**

The invitation received in 2023 to join BRICS was perceived by analysts in Saudi Arabia as recognition of the kingdom's significant role in the global economy, as an energy superpower and major investor, as well as of Saudi

influence in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Participation in the BRICS+ format is believed to give Saudi Arabia, as one of the key countries of the Global South, the opportunity to take part in creating an alternative to the Western world order. The Saudi foreign policy discourse emphasizes the necessity to address the issue of inequality in the levels of development among states and underdevelopment.

◆ **From the perspective of the Saudi establishment, BRICS+ is potentially a format that can better represent the interests of developing countries, but not at the expense of other multilateral formats, such as the G20.**

BRICS+ is viewed as an additional platform for developing cooperation, primarily economic, among countries of the Global South.<sup>8</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, there is no tendency to idealize BRICS. Saudi experts note the complicated relations between some member states of BRICS, which raises questions about their ability to make consensus decisions and act effectively. The institutional weakness of BRICS has also drawn attention, specifically the lack of permanent structures responsible for developing agendas and coordinating the positions of member countries. The anti-American stance of Russia and China is considered a cause for particular concern, because it might create risks for Riyadh's relations with Washington.

From the Saudi perspective, BRICS+ is likely to become a forum for the most successful developing countries that can collectively advocate for their interests and promote the development of the Global South.

◆ **As part of its economic development strategy, Riyadh focuses on enhancing connectivity among countries and regions, ensuring access to markets, and views BRICS+ as a (potential) tool/mechanism for achieving consensus within the developing world.**

Saudi officials believe that reform of the global governance is necessary to overcome asymmetries in the world order. Riyadh calls for measures that will restore trust in international organizations and enhance the effectiveness of the UN Security Council, emphasizing the importance of indiscriminate application of international law (Israel's operation in Gaza was viewed by Saudi Arabia as a key example of double standard policy pursued by the West).

At the same time, officials and the expert community in Saudi Arabia unanimously assert that the country does not intend to take sides in the rivalries between great powers, either between US and Russia tensions or between US

<sup>7</sup> Ali L. BRICS & Saudi Arabia's Membership: What Does This Mean? // Gulf Research Center, 21.01.2024. URL: <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/136>

<sup>8</sup> Saudi Arabia: We are interested in developing future cooperation with the BRICS group. // Al Arabiya.net, 02.06.2023. Access: <https://ara.tv/655fj> (in Arabic).

and China. Saudi Arabia adopted a critical stance toward Russia following the Ukrainian crisis, but Riyadh did not join the US-led group of countries that imposed sanctions on Russia or cut down relations with it.

Overall, in the view of Saudi leadership, a multipolar world is a world in which situation is not defined by the dominance of a single superpower or the confrontation between two superpowers. **In this context, Saudi Arabia strives to adhere to a non-aligned approach, and closer cooperation with China does not rule out allied relations with the United States. Saudi Arabia insists on the right of countries (including those of the Global South) to pursue non-aligned policies based on their own national interests. This is not so much about choosing development models as it is about the right not to participate in the confrontation of great powers.** It is emphasized that involvement in such confrontations will inevitably lead to losses for Saudi Arabia and jeopardize the achievement of long-term development goals.

Saudi Arabia prioritizes the development of economic cooperation with other BRICS+ members, which aligns with the Vision 2030. In this regard, Saudi Arabia positions itself as a reliable partner in the energy sector, capable of ensuring stability of energy markets. Within BRICS+, the Kingdom focuses on the following goals: tackling global challenges and ensuring sustainable development. Among global challenges, climate change and regional conflicts are considered the most pressing. The current priorities of Saudi strategy include ensuring inclusive growth, strengthening financial stability, and overcoming global inequality. The official statements and expert publications suggest that Riyadh expects further expansion of BRICS and the establishment of G20 equivalent for the Global South, uniting the most influential and prosperous countries, which are capable of becoming a driving force for growth.

### 3. Security in the Gulf and the Middle East, as seen from Moscow and Riyadh

As noted earlier, Saudi foreign policy prioritizes regional stability, and Russia is regarded as a potential partner in addressing this issue.

◆ **Riyadh appreciates the fact that Moscow pursues pragmatic policy in the Gulf, realistically assessing its own capabilities and not attempting to replace the United States as a security guarantor or compete with China in the economic domain.**

Instead, Russia positions itself in the Gulf as a peacemaker and mediator, anticipating a more prominent regional role, which serves its long-term interests as a great power.

Back in 2001, Moscow proposed a concept for security architecture in the Gulf, which focused on the Iraqi crisis. In 2007, this concept was updated to deal with the escalating tensions around Iran's nuclear program. Its main features were a step-by-step approach to security issues and inclusivity, particularly active participation of Iran, with the ultimate goal of establishing a local equivalent of the OSCE. This initiative was well received by the Gulf monarchies but it did not progress further, as at that time the Arabs were not inclined to compromise with Tehran.

◆ **In 2019, after the de facto failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Russia made an attempt to revive its initiative for a security architecture in the Gulf that might reduce tensions between Riyadh and Tehran<sup>9</sup>. Moscow was inspired by the significant warming of its relations with Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole, and sought to convince its Gulf partners that, instead of isolating Iran, it was necessary to establish dialogue and ensure maximum transparency, especially in the military sphere.**

Russian initiative proposed holding an international conference to define

<sup>9</sup> PRussian Concept of Collective Security in the Persian Gulf Region. Full text //, 23.07.2019. Access: <https://tass.ru/politika/6695215>

the principles and features of the security system resembling the OSCE in Europe. It also emphasized the importance of confidence-building measures, including mutual invitations to military exercises. Russian officials stressed the initiative was about greater openness and active cooperation. Besides the GCC plus Iran, the new architecture is supposed to include the guarantors – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the EU, the Arab League, and the OIC<sup>10</sup>. From the Saudi perspective, the persistent instability in the Gulf and the Middle East, as a whole, **stems the implementation of the Saudi plans for the fundamental socio-economic transformation outlined in the Vision 2030. The risk of escalation frightens foreign investors and tourists, poses threats to supply chains, and diverts significant resources to security challenges. Given this situation, since the early 2020s, Saudi Arabia has been increasingly active in pursuing a policy of de-escalation in the region.** As part of these efforts, Saudi Arabia has improved relations with Iraq and Turkey, and in 2023, after a seven-year hiatus, it restored diplomatic relations with Iran. This event marked the beginning of a thawing in relations between Riyadh and Tehran.

Particular emphasis should be put on the fact that despite all the adjustments in its foreign policy, Saudi Arabia still maintains a close military alliance with the United States which is perceived as a primary guarantee of security. However, such an alliance does rule out improving relations with Iran and seeking ways to ensure the peaceful coexistence of the two regional powers. Riyadh, as well as Moscow, believes that de-escalation in the Gulf might be achieved through the establishment of an inclusive security architecture that would embrace Iran.

There is no Saudi concept for regional security, but the Kingdom was actively engaged in the formulation of the joint vision for the GCC that was publicized in spring 2024.<sup>11</sup> This document emphasizes that security and stability are essential for further development of the six Gulf monarchies. It declares readiness of the GCC member states to resolve disputes through negotiations, diplomacy, and dialogue, highlighting the importance of mechanisms for regional cooperation and coordination, as well as the necessity of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among states. Notably, the document calls for the creation of platforms for direct negotiations between conflicting parties.

10 Statement and Q&A by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov at the plenary session of the International Conference Raisina Dialogue, New Delhi, January 15, 2020. URL: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/press\\_service/video/vistupleniya\\_ministra/1424865/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/video/vistupleniya_ministra/1424865/)

11 Gulf Cooperation Council Vision for Regional Security // Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, 29.03.2024. URL: <https://www.gcc-sg.org/ar-sa/CognitiveSources/DigitalLibrary/Lists/DigitalLibrary/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%86%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AA/GCCPOL%20EE.pdf>

This may apply not only to the situation in the Gulf but also, for example, to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

If we closely analyze the GCC vision, the security threats in the Gulf can be divided into several groups. The first group consists of threats to the internal stability of states, linked to interference in domestic affairs or the activities of non-state actors. Neither of these is explicitly attributed to Iran, yet a remark about preventing non-state actors from being equipped with ballistic missiles and unmanned systems is quite revealing. Given how actively such systems are used by the Houthis in Yemen, it can be assumed that in the context of possible negotiations regarding the security architecture regional regime for the non-proliferation of missile and drone technologies may become one of the key issues.

Another group of threats includes the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), primarily nuclear weapons, and the prevention of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and the Gulf region. It is important to note that Saudi Arabia consistently declares its support for global and regional efforts to ban all types of WMD. The kingdom advocates for strict compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation (NPT) and the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia also signed conventions banning chemical and biological weapons.

Saudi Arabia pursued peaceful nuclear program since 1977. In the following decades, relevant scientific centers were established, and in 2011, the Kingdom announced a plan to build 16 nuclear reactors and to develop nuclear power generation. Though this plan has not been fulfilled yet, Saudi Arabia aims to establish a complete nuclear cycle on its territory. Riyadh insists on its right to access uranium enrichment technologies and nuclear fuel reprocessing (which can be used to produce weapon-grade plutonium). Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has repeatedly warned that Saudi Arabia might be forced to develop its own nuclear weapons if Iran acquires an atomic bomb. Such statements might create problems for obtaining equipment and technologies (especially those necessary for uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing), as potential Western contractors do not want to be involved in any possible violations of the NPT. Consequently, China is believed to be the most likely partner for the Saudi nuclear program.

◆ **Saudi Arabia recognizes the right of all states to peaceful nuclear energy. The parallel implementation of nuclear programs, albeit explicitly peaceful, by two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, amid mutual distrust and a lack of transparency mechanisms, is fraught with unnecessary friction and suspicions.**

However, given the sensitivity of the issue, it is expected that serious pre-

liminary work will be required to build trust through cooperation in less contentious areas.

There is also a third group of security threats and challenges in the Gulf, which appears to be the most promising in terms of establishing ties with other regional players. Members of the GCC point to the need for international cooperation on issues such as securing maritime communications and combating smuggling. This topic was already addressed during Saudi-Iranian negotiations in 2023, although no specific agreements were reported.

Fight against terrorism and extremism might become a promising area for cooperation, since Saudi Arabia, as well as Russia, faces terrorist threat both on its territory and in the region. The Saudi counter-terrorism strategy includes three components: military, financial, and ideological. The military component involved direct participation (airstrikes) in operations against radical Islamists in Syria, as well as financial support for international counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel.

The financial component of Saudi Arabia's counter-terrorism strategy can be considered to be the most significant, as the kingdom has repeatedly faced accusations that various private funds and charitable organizations have been raising money for radical groups in other countries. In 2019, Saudi Arabia became the first Arab country to achieve full membership in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The kingdom is also a participant in several international initiatives aimed at combating the financing of terrorist activities. The authorities have taken full control of all foreign activities of private charitable organizations and have banned cash donations in mosques. Measures are being implemented to identify and shut down unlicensed money exchange and transfer centers.

As part of efforts to counter extremist ideology, Saudi Arabia, in cooperation with the UN Counter-Terrorism Center, established the Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology (Etidal) in 2017. Its tasks include monitoring extremist content in media and social networks, as well as promoting religious tolerance.

Overall, it appears that Russia and Saudi Arabia share similar approaches regarding the principles for building a security architecture in the Gulf, focusing on direct dialogue, reliable communication channels, and inclusivity, including the engagement of a broad range of extra-regional actors. There is also mutual understanding of the need for a step-by-step approach, which is based on building trust through addressing relatively narrow and more technical issues, or by identifying spheres where divergences are minimal.

## 4. Bilateral relations: past and present

The first attempt to establish relations between Riyadh and Moscow was made as early as 1926; however, the ideological component of Soviet foreign policy (socialism, atheism) hindered this rapprochement. Irregular contacts on specific issues, such as Afghanistan, occurred in the 1980s, but full restoration of diplomatic relations was only possible after the Kuwait crisis of 1990-1991, when Moscow condemned Iraqi aggression and supported the international coalition against Iraq. Soviet embassy was opened in Riyadh in May 1991.

Support for liberation of Kuwait allowed the USSR to obtain substantial loans from Saudi Arabia and its neighbors.<sup>12</sup> Later in the 1990s, Moscow regarded these countries as potential investors and a market for Russian weapons. Despite diplomatic efforts in the first half of the 1990s, trade and investment cooperation with Saudi Arabia developed slowly. Significant tensions erupted because of Riyadh's position on the conflict in Chechnya. Saudi Arabia's attempt to bring the Chechen issue before the UN in July 1995 was perceived by the Russian leadership as interference in internal affairs and a violation of territorial integrity. Saudi aid to Chechnya from 1995 to 1998 sparked considerable discontent, as it was provided without coordination with Russian authorities. There was another source of concern - the position of the Gulf countries regarding the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, where Saudi Arabia and its allies supported the Bosnian Muslims. Mutual suspicion was only somewhat reduced by the end of the 1990s, after the Gulf states refused to recognize Chechnya's independence, despite the persistent requests of separatist leaders.

Diplomatic contacts between Russia and Saudi Arabia intensified in 2002-2003 in the midst of escalating tensions in Palestine and increased Western pressure on Iraq. Moscow began to play a more active role in the Middle East, which attracted Riyadh's attention, as it was already showing the first signs of discontent with American policy in the region. The visit of Crown Prince Abdullah to Moscow in 2003 was a breakthrough. Attempt was made to agree on cooperation in the fight against international terrorism and the financing of extremist groups. The parties also signed their first agreement on coordi-

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<sup>12</sup> Melkumyan E. *Russia and the Arab Gulf States: Opportunities for Interaction / Russia and the Islamic World: Historical Retrospective and Contemporary Trends*. Moscow: Kraft+, 2010. pp. 144-160.

nation of oil policy to maintain stability in global markets.<sup>13</sup>

Another window of opportunity for expansion of bilateral relations opened after President Vladimir Putin's visit to the Gulf in 2007. This visit took place amidst the deteriorating relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while Russia was then one of the key participants in P5+1. The meeting between President Putin and the leadership of Saudi Arabia led to speculations about potential purchase of large quantities of Russian weapons.<sup>14</sup> However, no breakthrough in relations occur.

When the Arab Spring began, new tensions emerged in Russian-Saudi relations due to different positions regarding the Syrian crisis. Nevertheless, this period of chill in relations turned out to be relatively short, and in 2015, Saudi Arabia began gradual reproachment with Russia. The culmination of these efforts was marked by King Salman's visit to Moscow in 2017. This new rapprochement with Russia was facilitated by Saudi Arabia's course to diversify its foreign policy and to go beyond traditional alliances so as to advance its interests more effectively in a changed world, in which Russia is an influential global power. In 2021, Saudi leadership mentioned a qualitative leap in bilateral relations.<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, both sides understand that Russia is unlikely to replace the United States as a guarantor of security for Saudi Arabia in the foreseeable future, but Riyadh is carefully exploring the opportunities that cooperation with Moscow may bring.

As of 2024, it is premature to say that there is a solid foundation for a strategic partnership between the two countries. Nevertheless, there is potential for cooperation in all important areas.

◆ **In the political sphere, Russia and Saudi Arabia share a common strategic goal: to restore stability in the Middle East following the Arab Spring and the crisis in Gaza.**

Saudi Arabia is actively engaging in dialogue with Russia on the regional agenda. Saudi leadership has repeatedly stated that cooperation with Russia is possible on Syria, Yemen, and Iran's nuclear program.<sup>16</sup> Other promising areas of cooperation include countering extremist ideologies, combating terrorism, and piracy.

One of the key areas of bilateral cooperation is energy, specifically within

<sup>13</sup> Negotiations took place between the President of Russia and the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, on September 2, 2003. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/29294>

<sup>14</sup> Saudi Arabia plans to purchase \$4 billion worth of weapons from Russia // RBC, 23.11.2007. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/23/11/2007/5703c9ff9a79470eaf767f75>

<sup>15</sup> King Salman: A Qualitative Leap Has Occurred in Saudi-Russian Relations // CNN Arabic, 24.11.2021. Access: <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2021/11/24/saudi-russia-relations-king-salman>

<sup>16</sup> Saudi Arabia and Russia are discussing coordination on regional issues // KHALEEJ ONLINE, 24.09.2021. Access: <http://khaleejonline/Xem8ja>

the OPEC+, which has been functioning since 2016. Moscow and Riyadh are interested in maintaining balanced oil prices and avoiding price wars. Cooperation with Russia also allows Saudi Arabia to significantly enhance its ability to regulate global oil prices.<sup>17</sup> In light of the crisis in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia faced pressure from Western countries, which demanded that it increases oil production to deprive Russia of export revenues. However, Saudi Arabia, which is itself interested in maintaining relatively high oil prices, did not yield to this pressure, despite the risk of deteriorating relations with the United States.

Economic ties between Russia and Saudi Arabia remain essentially at an initial level, and bilateral trade is several times lesser than that between Russia and the UAE. While Saudi Arabia is seeking alternative high-tech suppliers outside the West, Russian exports to the kingdom are predominantly represented by low-value-added goods, which places Russia at a disadvantage compared to players like China. As a result, there are still no major contracts or investment projects. Despite the fact that two countries agreed to create a joint investment fund worth \$10 billion, they have not been able to find sufficiently attractive projects to invest these funds. Russian companies have not yet been able to make a significant contribution to the implementation of the Vision 2030. However, nuclear energy may become an exception, as Russia possesses unique competences in this area.

Nevertheless, in 2023, Russian officials expressed hope that by 2030, trade with Saudi Arabia might reach \$7 billion.<sup>18</sup> The most promising area for bilateral trade is Russian export of grain and other agricultural products. The growth rates of these sales indicate that Russia is likely to become one of Saudi Arabia's key partners in the field of food security. In 2023, the value of Russian agricultural products supplied to Saudi Arabia increased from \$1 billion to \$1.4 billion.

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Saudi Arabia is adjusting its foreign policy to the emerging multipolar world order, paying increasing attention to relations with the Global South, particularly with the new global centers of economic and political influence. The kingdom itself became one of the poles of the new world, which was demonstrated by an invitation to join BRICS+. The strengthening of the Southern vector in Saudi foreign policy aligns well with Russia's Pivot to the East. Both countries recognize the importance BRICS and other non-Western multilateral formats, which makes them partners in building a more balanced world

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17 Saudi Arabia hopes to reach a new agreement in OPEC+ involving Russia] // KHALEEJ ONLINE, 23.05.2022. Access: <http://khaleej.online/eqArME>

18 Novak expects trade between Russia and Saudi Arabia to grow to \$7 billion by 2030, October 11, 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/18972115?ysclid=lycyplbweh723011998>

order and modernizing the global governance system. Russia and Saudi Arabia also have similar approaches to regional stability in the Middle East and the parameters of the security architecture for the Gulf. Moscow and Riyadh actively search for ways to develop economic cooperation, especially in energy markets and food security. It is premature to assert that, in the near future, Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia will reach the same strategic level that was achieved by the Kingdom with the United States or China, yet, if current positive trends persist, there is a high probability of further rapprochement in areas of mutual interest.



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ISBN 978-5-6053281-1-7



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