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Shifting Contours of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

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Shifting Contours of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

In response to the uncertain geopolitical regional and global environment, Riyadh has been adjusting its foreign policy to one based on 'multi-alignment' including reducing dependence on major global powers such as the US, and endeavoring to stay out of the US' great power competition. In this context, Riyadh has spearheaded diplomatic initiatives, fostered economic partnerships, and played a role in mediating conflicts, all while attempting to better leverage its influence to shape the political and security dynamics of the broader Middle East. The shift by the Kingdom is certainly a reflection of the transformative shift in the international order which requires a different positioning. This paper examines the diplomatic initiatives, economic partnerships, and conflict mediation efforts that shape the contours of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy.

On the diplomatic initiative front, Saudi Arabia has taken steps towards developing a greater understanding on both regional and international issues with countries of the Global South, including China and Russia. This is evidenced by the frequent high-level interactions the Kingdom engages in, such as the recent visits of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India, and Brazil to Riyadh from September 9-10, 2024, followed by the visit of Chinese Premier Li Qiang for the fourth meeting of the High-Level Saudi-Chinese Joint Committee on cooperation and coordination. For Riyadh, China is a choice or an option to consider, for example, as facilitator for Iran-Saudi rapprochement and the Kingdom's move towards BRICS.



Much of the emphasis in terms of diplomatic initiatives is on enhancing relations with Saudi Arabia's neighbors and to resolving long-running conflicts within and beyond the Middle East. Given the current developments occurring, much of the attention is naturally given to the ongoing crisis in Gaza. In 2024 alone, Saudi Arabia has pushed forward on the Palestinian issue through various diplomatic engagements, including most recently, on the sidelines of the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly



(UNGA) high-level week in New York. On September 27, 2024, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and a Chairman of the Arab-Islamic Contact Group for Gaza, which includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Türkiye, held an emergency meeting of the League of Arab States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) given the escalation of the Israeli military attacks against Palestine and Lebanon. This meeting was in light of the "International Alliance to Implement the Two-State Solution" announcement, which looked at measures to strengthen cooperative Arab and Islamic activities to guarantee the creation of an independent Palestinian state and followed an announcement by Prince Faisal bin Farhan on behalf of the Arab and Islamic countries and European partners, calling on countries to take the same decision and join the international consensus represented by 149 countries that recognize Palestine. The Kingdom also led discussions on steps to intensify Arab and Islamic efforts during the General Assembly's work as members of the Ministerial Committee assigned by the Joint Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit on Gaza met on September 25, 2024, with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres. Furthermore, the Kingdom convened a coordination meeting with Ministerial Committee members on September 22, 2024, to enhance Arab and Islamic endeavors during the General Assembly's sessions.

The Kingdom then participated in the Security Council session on Palestine, in which the Foreign Minister stressed the significance of the Security Council's attention being primarily focused on the Palestinian issue in light of the ongoing military escalation. The Kingdom criticized the lack of serious efforts and decisive action by the Security Council to address the situation. Prince Faisal [stated](#), "we have repeatedly raised the urgent Palestinian issue before the Security Council without any serious action being taken. Since last October, 6 draft resolutions out of 10 have been vetoed, and the adopted resolutions have not yet succeeded in achieving a ceasefire, addressing the catastrophic humanitarian situation, or paving the way for a credible political path toward peace. We wonder what the Council needs to end this suffering and implement international law."





In Amman, Prince Faisal bin Farhan attended the Arab-Islamic Ministerial Committee meeting on September 18, 2024, which focused on halting the conflict in Gaza and the meeting in Madrid on September 13, 2024, to discuss the implementation of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This meeting was also attended by the European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and European counterparts such as Norway and Slovenia hosted by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

One notable event was the World Economic Forum's special meeting in Riyadh in April 2024, where the Kingdom facilitated high-level discussions with top European diplomats. During the same time, the



Kingdom also held a meeting in Riyadh in which American Secretary of State Antony Blinken attended the meeting of the Six-Party Arab Committee .

In collaboration with Norway, Saudi Arabia hosted a ministerial meeting in Brussels in May 2024, focusing on a coordinated approach to the formal recognition of Palestine. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia convened various consultative meetings in Riyadh with foreign ministers from the region to discuss developments in the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip, underlining the need to address urgent conflicts and shape the region's diplomatic landscape.

Taking the crisis in Gaza as a point of departure, there is a recognition for the Kingdom that longstanding regional disputes must be tackled more proactively through multilateral diplomacy instead of being allowed to fester to the point of eruption. As a result, one can see broader efforts also being undertaken on other fronts.

On the sidelines of an Arab League meeting in Cairo on September 11, 2024, Prince Faisal bin participated in an Arab Ministerial Liaison Committee meeting for direct dialogue with the Syrian government discussing the strengthening of the Arab role in resolving the Syrian crisis and addressing its political, security, and humanitarian consequences. The Kingdom's foreign minister also attended an Arab Ministerial Working Group meeting on supporting the sovereignty of Somalia.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is supporting initiatives aimed at resolving the crises in Yemen and the Red Sea, where Houthi rebel attacks in the RedSea are endangering international trade. At the 79th Session of the UNGA, Prince Faisal bin Farhan [stressed](#) “The Kingdom is committed to restoring peace to Yemen and supports all efforts aimed at resolving the crisis, alleviating the suffering of the Yemeni people, and achieving a political solution that restores security and stability to Yemen and the broader region.”

In Sudan, Saudi Arabia has been mediating between the opposing parties since the civil conflict started last April 2023, conducting several rounds of talks in an effort to bring about reconciliation. In July 2024, Sudan's Transitional Sovereignty Council and Saudi Arabia re-held discussions aimed at resuming talks to end Sudan's ongoing year-long civil war in renewed efforts to revive the peace talks.

Similar efforts have been undertaken towards the crisis in Ukraine. In fact, Saudi Arabia has taken on a more active diplomatic role as far as Ukraine is concerned over the past year. This was highlighted by the visit of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to Ukraine and Russia in March 2023, where he underlined Riyadh's readiness to mediate between the two sides. The Kingdom facilitated the Ukrainian-Russian prisoner exchanges, which led to the release of ten prisoners from multiple nationalities in September 2022. This underlined the role a country like Saudi Arabia can play in an environment marked by direct conflict. Crown Prince and Prince and Prime Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Jeddah in June 2024, in which both sides reviewed developments in the Ukrainian-Russian crisis.

Outside of the regional issues, Saudi Arabia is seeking to work with the global community to address shortcomings in the current multilateral system for addressing critical global issues. As the current international landscape is shaped by organizations and systems largely defined by Western powers in the post-World War II era, these powers often exercise the ability to bypass established orders and selectively apply the rule of law when it serves their interests. This has proven quite detrimental to the overall cause of global peace and security with numerous disputes left unresolved. Instead, the sense within the kingdom is that a renewed commitment and revised mechanism is required for the international community to uphold the principles of fairness and the universal application of the law.



During his participation in the 55th session of the Human Rights Council held at the UN headquarters in Geneva on February 26, 2024, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan emphasized how important it is for the Kingdom to maintain close cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms, stressing the ambitious development vision for 2030 including enhancing its comprehensive human rights concept. On the international level, Prince Faisal bin Farhan reiterated the Kingdom's demand to implement Security Resolution No. (2270) and activate the humanitarian mechanisms accordingly when it comes to the situation in Gaza. He [stressed](#) that "Any institutional dialogue on human rights cannot be taken seriously if it ignores the tragic situation in Palestine. What rights are we talking about while Gaza is under the ashes? How can the international community remain silent while the people of Gaza are displaced and suffering from the ugliest forms of human rights violations?"

During the 2024 Summit of the Future, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, speaking on behalf of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz, emphasized Saudi Arabia's commitment to reforming the international system. He underscored the UN's failure to address the humanitarian crisis in Palestine and called for a new global framework that promotes sustainable development and equitable growth, especially for developing nations. Prince Faisal [stressed](#) the "urgent need for radical reforms in international institutions" and highlighted Saudi Arabia's active role in shaping the Charter of the Future to enhance multilateral cooperation and ensure that global institutions effectively respond to modern challenges.

To address the urgent need for reform in the international order and its organizations, Saudi Arabia is focusing on building partnerships with like-minded countries to enhance South-South cooperation. The aim is to strengthen global governance by creating more diverse and representative voices within the international system, moving beyond the dominance of traditional powers that have long played the political game. Instead, international organizations like the United Nations must more effectively reflect the world's diverse interests.

Economic partnerships also play a key role for the Kingdom as Saudi Arabia attempts to strategically allocate its resources and systematically plan its investments to ensure that it maintains a leadership position in the region, secures its national interests, and advances its core values. By diversifying its economic and political partnerships, the Kingdom is preparing itself for a rapidly changing international landscape. Central to this strategy is the Kingdom's Vision 2030, which emphasizes not only economic diversification away from oil but also a broader diplomatic outreach, enhancing Saudi Arabia's standing on the global stage. This is seen as the best way to ensure flexibility for navigating geopolitical shifts while at the same time safeguarding long-term interests.

Until recently, Saudi Arabia remained firmly within the Western sphere of political and military alliances, a framework that aligned well with its trade patterns, as both its imports and exports were largely concentrated within the same hemisphere. However, the global landscape has shifted dramatically. Today, more than two-thirds of Saudi Arabia's oil exports are destined for Asia, while only around one-fifth of these exports go to Europe and the United States. The Kingdom's currency, pegged to the U.S. dollar, has provided stability for decades, but this arrangement may face challenges due to a mix of internal and external pressures.

While Saudi Arabia thus remains reliant on Western defense systems, its primary economic partners are now predominantly in the East. This growing disconnect between its military dependencies and economic realities suggests that the Kingdom's foreign policies will increasingly need to balance the interests of its traditional Western allies with those of its Eastern trading partners. As a result, these shifts will not only shape Saudi Arabia's alliances but also have significant implications for investors looking at the region.

A third aspect of Saudi Arabian policy is its expanded role as a mediator in conflict resolution, acknowledging that this strategy requires long-term investment without the expectation of immediate



results. While the Kingdom is acutely aware of the limitations of its influence in global conflicts, it sees value in developing the infrastructure for mediation and conflict resolution. This approach marks a shift from its previous more confrontational strategies, which proved ineffective.

Recent efforts included, for example, reiterating its call to a resolution to the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Specific moves include the release of prisoners of various nationalities as well as convening a conference of national security advisors and leaders from more than 40 nations and international organizations in 2023 in Jeddah.

Saudi Arabia's mediation efforts have also involved Sudan. In July 2023, Saudi Arabia, alongside the United States, acted as a key mediator in facilitating a ceasefire agreement between warring factions in Sudan. This initiative aimed to bring an end to the violence that had gripped the country and displaced countless civilians. The ceasefire talks brought together various international actors, including the African Union, Egypt, the UAE, and the United Nations, who participated as observers. Saudi Arabia's readiness to convene such a diverse group of stakeholders reflects a growing diplomatic capacity to foster collaboration in pursuit of stability and to play the role of a bridge-builder between different interests.

Conclusion

It can be argued that all of the above boils down to advancing a renewed concept of peace that emphasizes proactive engagement and collaboration among countries in the international system to address contemporary conflicts. Recognizing the complexities of the modern world, the Kingdom is beginning to promote a new vision of global coexistence that goes beyond traditional notions of peacekeeping. Saudi Arabia aims to redefine how the international community perceives and pursues peace by advocating for a more inclusive and cooperative approach.

Historically, the concept of coexistence was closely associated with the Cold War, a period defined by a fragile balance of power between rival superpowers. During this era, coexistence has meant avoiding direct military conflict through mutual deterrence and cautious diplomacy, with peace maintained by the constant threat of war. As the global landscape continues to evolve, however, the overall understanding of coexistence requires updating. In today's interconnected world, Saudi Arabia is beginning to recognize that coexistence cannot simply be about preventing conflict, but must also involve actively fostering collaboration and mutual respect among nations.

A central argument is that there is a disconnect between the efforts being made on the ground and the tangible results, which highlights the need to explore alternative approaches and form new coalitions. Saudi Arabia and the GCC states are actively engaging in various initiatives, but to achieve meaningful progress, these efforts must go beyond the conventional methods of diplomacy. In the context of the Gaza crisis, for example, a more global movement is necessary to push for a solution, as both Israel and the United States appear reluctant to make the necessary changes, while the Arab Quartet's influence remains limited.

Ultimately, of course, many of the initiatives from Saudi Arabia and the GCC are driven by a degree of self-interest, as the region's current economic diversification efforts require a more stable regional situation in order to be successful. Yet, there is an opportunity here to shape a new discourse both regionally and globally. The contours of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy are starting to reflect this much-needed mindset.

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