



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

**Regional Issues in the Middle East
and Saudi-Korean Relations
Webinar Summary and Key Outcomes**



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July 17, 2023

Summary and Key Outcomes

The Gulf Research Center (GRC) organized a roundtable webinar, “Regional Issues in the Middle East and Saudi-Korean Relations,” on July 17, 2023, in order to shed light on regional issues in the Middle East and the importance of the bilateral relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of South Korea. Overall, the webinar developed ideas that could contribute to strengthening these relations with a focus on political, security, and economic aspects.

The webinar featured opening remarks by His Excellency Ambassador Sami Alsadhan, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the Republic of South Korea, and His Excellency Ambassador Joon-Yong Park, the Ambassador of the Republic of South Korea to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The speakers of the session were Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, Chairman of the GRC; Dr. Park Hyondo, Professor of Islamic Studies at the Sogang Euro-MENA Institute in Sogang University; Prof. Saleh Alkhatlan, Senior Advisor at the GRC; Dr. Sung Il Kwang, the Head of Political and Economic Research Laboratory at the Center for Middle East & Islamic Studies in Korea University; Dr. Mansour Almarzoqi, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Strategic Studies at Prince Saud Al-Faisal Institute for Diplomatic Studies; and Dr. Lee Kwon Hyung, Deputy President of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP). Dr. Christian Koch, the Director of Research at the GRC, and Amnah Mosly, a researcher at the GRC, moderated the session.

The webinar’s speakers agreed that Saudi Arabia and South Korea have embarked on a successful journey across many sectors. Specifically, trade and investment have been at the forefront of this relationship, as both countries have been increasingly investing in each other’s markets. Additionally, there is a stronger political will by both governments to enhance bilateral relations. The webinar highlighted that while the two countries have always had a strong relationship, South Korea is now paying greater attention to the developments in the region and seeking to enhance

ties with Saudi Arabia. Cultural exchanges have also played a vital role in recent times in strengthening bilateral relations.

From a South Korean perspective, the speakers highlighted the great support for Saudi Arabia, as the Kingdom has become a preferred destination for Korean businesses and companies. On the economic front, it was highlighted that the South Korean government is interested in the Free Trade Agreement with the GCC. While negotiations have resumed, the FTA has yet to be adopted.

The webinar also discussed the rapid developments in the region, as these developments affect the international community. The speakers highlighted that Saudi Arabia aims to promote regional security and stability with recent steps into that direction including the rapprochement with Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, pushing for Syria to rejoin the Arab League, and negotiating with Yemen. On security issues in the region, the speakers focused on four topics: Iran, Israel, Yemen, and Syria.

On Iran, the speakers agreed that establishing a direct diplomatic relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is an important and positive step. However, it is important to highlight that the rapprochement does not necessarily translate into full agreement on all issues. There are still issues to be discussed, such as maritime security, energy security, counterterrorism, sectarianism, expansionism, and interventionism. The speakers clarified that Riyadh and Tehran accepted China as the third-party guarantor as it enjoys good relations with both countries and is a United Nations Security Council member.

On Israel, the speakers explained that since Saudi Arabia's initiative in 2002, the Kingdom has insisted on a two-state solution. From a Saudi perspective, it was emphasized that normalization alone cannot bring peace and thus will only come after peace with Palestine. On Yemen, the webinar highlighted that the Kingdom believes a discussion between Yemen's legitimate government and the Houthis should take place. From a Saudi perspective, it was explained that the Kingdom wants a safe border with no intervention and would be willing to participate in the reconstruction of Yemen but under an international commitment as it is an international responsibility. The speakers noted that there have been positive developments with the continuation of the ceasefire as the most glaring example.

On Syria, the speakers underlined that the re-establishment of relations with Damascus is on a step-by-step basis. The refugee crisis continues to be a significant issue. However, the speakers underscored that bringing Syria back to the Arab League was important to reduce Iranian influence. The webinar highlighted that the current geopolitical landscape provides more opportunities for middle-power countries like Saudi Arabia and South Korea to help shape the international agenda.

In that context, the webinar put forward the following policy suggestions:

- Enhance intelligence sharing and information collaboration between the two countries.
- Collaborate on defense technology as there is a great interest in Saudi Arabia to localize its military equipment.
- Develop a common vision for peace and prosperity in East and West Asia.
- Increase political consultations and dialogue by amending the MoU between the two foreign ministries to ensure frequent and regular meetings and follow-ups.
- Consider Saudi Arabia joining MIKTA, an informal middle power partnership between Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia, led by respective Foreign Ministers.