

Arab League Summit and the Importance of Saudi Arabia's Presence in Regional and International Order: 'A Time for Renewal and Change'

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Layla Ali*



([SPA](#), 2023)

Arab leaders and officials met in Jeddah as Saudi Arabia hosted the 32nd Arab League Summit on May 19, 2023, where for the first time in more than a decade, representatives of all 22 Arab nations took part. Most prominently, Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad took part in the meeting as part of Syria's re-admittance into the Arab League, ending a more than decade-long suspension. Economic ministers met at the opening meeting of the Economic and Social Council at the ministerial level ahead of the Arab League summit on May 15. During the summit on Friday, the organization's members adopted the 'Jeddah Declaration,' which reaffirmed the Arab League's united stance on achieving security and stability across the Arab world and beyond its borders.



More than anything, the summit highlighted Saudi Arabia's efforts in helping foster the right circumstances to achieve security, stability, and economic prosperity for the Arab region. As such, one of the major outcomes of the summit was the leading role Saudi Arabia is now playing both on the regional and international levels. The visit and attendance of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky as the guest of honor stressed the growing role of Saudi Arabia in international diplomacy. Throughout the meeting, Saudi Arabia repeatedly underlined the need to reinvigorate Arab ties and improve communication between Arab countries and their neighbors. Important foreign policy topics were therefore at the center of discussion on Friday. Equally, the Kingdom is set to take on a primary role in confronting the challenges facing the region's countries which can only be tackled by pushing for closer cooperation and constructive dialogue.

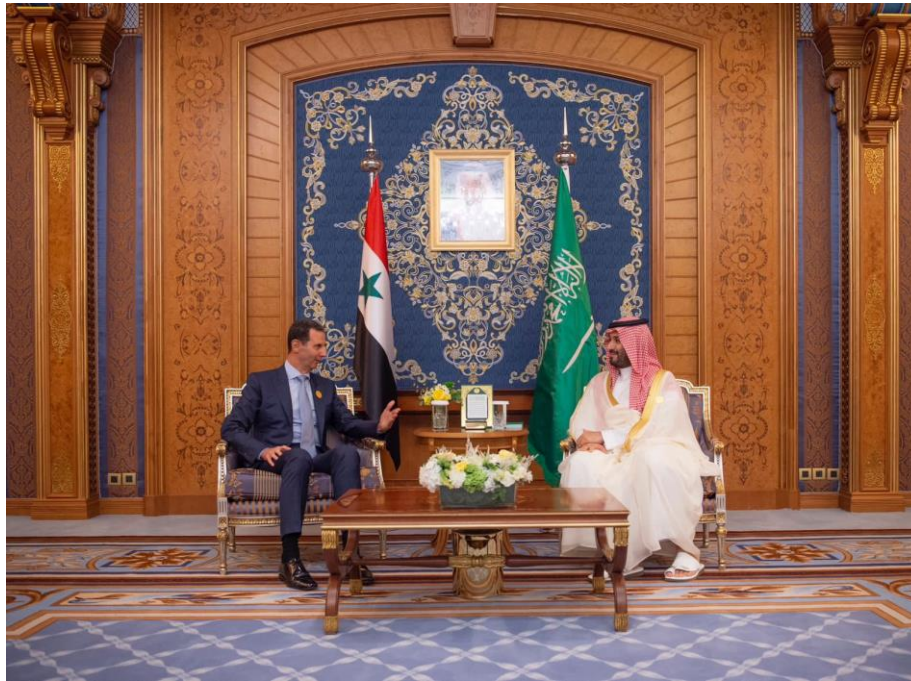
In his speech addressing the meeting, the president of the 31st Arab Summit and Foreign Minister of Algeria, Ahmad Atef, stressed the importance of coming together to confront regional and international challenges. Likewise, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan spoke on the capacity of Saudi Arabia to hold the Presidency of the 32nd Arab Summit, stating that the meeting would hopefully lead to further inter-Arab cooperation. During the summit, Arab leaders appeared to be focused on more modest goals, like enlisting President Assad's help in countering militant groups and drug traffickers. On his part, Arab League Secretary-General Ahmad Aboul Gheit welcomed Syrian Foreign Minister Dr. Faisal Mekdad in his speech, expressing hopes that the re-inclusion of the Syrian seat in the Arab League would lead to resolving the Syrian crisis.

Since the last Arab Summit in Algeria in November 2022, the Arab region has witnessed numerous developments, which led to the holding of two Arab Summits within less than a year. The developments in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Palestine, in addition to the positive relations between Arab countries and their neighbors, signify that due to the negative impacts of external interference, the Arab world needs to maintain a strong, unified stance. Under the chairmanship of His Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Summit [emphasized](#) the importance of strengthening joint Arab action, consolidating understanding, and increasing cooperation to

achieve sustainable development goals and implement the ambitious development visions among the Arab countries.

The February 6 earthquake that ravaged southern Turkey and northern Syria, killing approximately 56,000 people underscored the need for a massive humanitarian response that Arab states contributed to immediately. However, it also offered many states an opportunity to push for improved relations with Damascus through humanitarian access. Saudi Arabia utilized this opportunity to lay the groundwork for possible re-normalization with the Syrian government. Prince Farhan's statement on March 4 made this apparent, in which he asserted that "there is a consensus building in the Arab world, that the status quo is not tenable. And that means we have to find a way to move beyond that status quo." This ultimately resulted in the visit of Prince Faisal to Syria in April where he met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. As part of the visit, the Saudi Foreign Ministry said in a [statement](#) that Prince Faisal's visit falls within the framework of "the Kingdom's keenness and interest to reach a political solution to the Syrian crisis that ends all its repercussions and preserves Syria's unity, security, stability, and its Arab identity, and restores it to its Arab surroundings, in a way that achieves the good of its brotherly people."

Syria's return to the Arab League this year reflects a much larger realignment of the region after Saudi Arabia and Iran also restored diplomatic ties. The summit's declaration states that the return of Syria to the Arab League will contribute to the stabilization and reunification of the country and aims at "helping Syria overcome its crisis in line with the joint Arab efforts." This further stresses the Kingdom's strategic policy by improving relations with adversaries such as Syria, Turkey, and Iran. For Riyadh, de-escalation is a win-win formula that will provide long-term stability not only for Saudi Arabia but also for the wider Middle East region.



([KSA MOFA](#) (Twitter) 2023)

The Kingdom plays a crucial role in the region, balancing Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Turkey to protect its security and wield regional influence. The recent Saudi-Iranian deal on March 10 holds the potential to end one of the region's most significant rivalries and extend economic ties across the Gulf. The deal also opens doors to a security dialogue among the Gulf Arab states, Iran, and Iraq, and for broader discussions. Such a dialogue could be a venue for states to discuss and develop ways to address their primary security concerns, particularly in the Gulf, have an impact on the war in Yemen and perhaps eventually in other arenas in the Arab region such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Furthermore, the Arab League Summit on Friday added a further opportunity to deliberate on such recent improvements.

The significance of the attendance of President Zelensky at the summit on Friday cannot be overlooked as it represents the result of a recent flurry of diplomacy by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is pursuing mediation efforts not only at the regional level but also on the international stage. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman [expressed](#) his readiness to mediate in the war between Moscow and Kyiv, stating “we reaffirm the Kingdom's readiness to continue mediating efforts between Russia and Ukraine, and to support all international efforts aimed at resolving the crisis politically in a way that contributes to achieving security.” In his address to the summit, President Zelensky discussed the treatment of Muslim Tatars living under Russian occupation in the Crimean Peninsula. President Zelensky stated, “I am sure we

can all be united in saving people from the cages of Russian prisons.” Last year, in a diplomatic coup, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman secured the release of 10 foreigners captured by Russia in Ukraine. President Zelensky [wrote](#) on Twitter shortly after arriving in Jeddah on Friday that “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays a significant role and we are ready to take our cooperation to a new level.”



([Arab News](#), 2023).

Finally, Saudi Arabia has played a leading role in evacuating foreign nationals and mediation efforts to broker a ceasefire in Sudan. Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, the foreign minister of Djibouti, mentioned that the Arab Summit on Friday would be a “unique opportunity.” Sudan, itself an Arab League member, is in the midst of ongoing fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, killing hundreds and displacing hundreds of thousands more. Saudi Arabia took this opportunity at the Arab Summit to play a leading role in efforts in Sudan, as the Kingdom aims to collectively apply pressure on warring parties in Sudan to stop the conflict, establish a ceasefire, and open humanitarian corridors with a firm resolution. The Jeddah Declaration referred to the developments and events taking place in

Sudan and the Arab countries reaffirming “the need to ensure de-escalation [and] resort to dialogue and unity.”

Saudi Arabia’s role in various rapprochement efforts throughout the region acts as the driving force in campaigning for strengthening relations for a better future for the Arab people. Moreover, leading the summit is also an opportunity to demonstrate the growing desire for greater Arab unity. In a region gripped by diverging interests and various armed conflicts, it was significant to see Arab leaders sitting in a roundtable and listening to one another. With the presidency and as the host of the summit this year, Saudi Arabia in particular showed renewed diplomatic skills and finesse in terms of laying out the path for a new course.

**Layla Ali is a Researcher at the Gulf Research Center*