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# Saudi Arabia-African Summit: the Road Ahead

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## Saudi Arabia-African Summit: the Road Ahead

The Saudi-Africa Summit held in November 2023 reflected the continued commitments the Kingdom has maintained to African countries. 50 African leaders and senior government officials descended upon the Kingdom to develop multilateral relations through diplomatic, economic, and security engagements. Widely perceived as a success, the Summit inspires confidence in the continued development and deepening of relations between the two regions. Notably, economic cooperation has witnessed resounding growth in recent years due to strategic Saudi investments towards the continent.

### Economic Relations

For decades, the geographic and cultural proximities of the two regions have led to mutual interests on several fronts. Saudi Vision 2030 parallels the African Agenda 2063 as they both strive to make structural transformations to their respective economies. In Saudi Arabia's case, it hopes to diversify the economy away from oil reliance. One of the ways it plans to achieve this is by investing in African sectors, particularly agriculture and infrastructure. Agriculture is among the possible synergies that have potential to increase Saudi-Africa trade volumes, which exceeded \$45 billion in 2022 and includes other areas such as logistics, energy, and natural resource exploration.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman inaugurated the King Salman Initiative for Africa, which is set to invest 1 billion USD across the continent over the next ten years.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the Crown Prince committed 25 billion USD for future investments, 10 billion to finance Saudi exports to African countries, and 5 billion USD to finance development until 2030. Hence, the Saudi-Africa Summit served as a vehicle to further the long-standing economic ties linking the regions.

The Saudi-Africa Summit also came just ahead of the COP28 meeting, hosted in the United Arab Emirates and attended by global leaders, including African heads of state. Prior to COP28, the UAE announced a 4.5 billion USD initiative for green energy in Africa, which shows a growing trend of economic engagement between Gulf monarchies and the African continent.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the GCC states aspire to address mutual needs and build upon long-standing relationships, informed by their cultural and geographic proximity to Africa. To date, GCC-led investments exceed 100 billion USD, support human capital development, bolster multilateral trade, and increase output in underdeveloped sectors.

African leaders also supported Saudi Arabia's candidacy to host the World Cup in 2034 and the World Expo in 2030, another factor underlining the long-term and positive multilateral rapport derived from the conference. Perhaps one of the most intriguing propositions is the joint strategic vision for Saudi-Africa

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<sup>1</sup> "Saudi Arabia launches \$1-billion development initiative in Africa," *Saudi Gazette*, Nov. 10, 2023, [https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/637579/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Arabia-launches-\\$1-billion-development-initiative-in-Africa](https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/637579/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Arabia-launches-$1-billion-development-initiative-in-Africa)

<sup>2</sup> COP 28 UAE, Africa Green Investment Initiative, November 2023, <https://www.cop28.com/en/african-green-investment>



media cooperation through news and television programs. This uncharted territory will help integrate the respective cultures.

At the same time, several African economies face a risk of debt distress as a result of a challenging recovery from the coronavirus pandemic as well as the conflict in Ukraine that has strained global supply chains and energy prices. During its presidency of the G20, Saudi Arabia sought to suspend debt service payments for African countries; and on the cusp of the Summit, Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan hoped to “support Ghana and other countries” with their debt.<sup>3</sup> As such, the Kingdom signed deals worth over 533 million USD with several African governments, which will stimulate revenue streams and alleviate debt constraints for African economies. Although no longer chairing the G20, the Kingdom persevered in its pursuit of a permanent membership for the African Union, the G20 granted the AU a permanent membership in September 2023.

### Diplomatic Relations

On the diplomatic front, Saudi Arabia currently has 27 embassies in African countries and is striving to increase it to 40. These diplomatic extensions will enable the Saudi leadership to play a more significant role in mitigating or mediating negotiations in times of political impasse, as it has done for Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea in recent periods of political precarity.<sup>4</sup>

Coup d'états have deposed governments in Niger, Gabon, and Mali in the last three years alone. Regional neighbours, including Nigeria, Ghana, and their Economic Community of Western Africa (ECOWAS) partners, have imposed economic sanctions on Niger and Mali and diplomatically isolated transitional governments.<sup>5</sup> Despite the current and contentious climate, Saudi Arabia invited transitional leaders from Gabon, Niger, and Sudan and thus demonstrated an unwavering campaign to foster ties.

In a time when Western governments have withdrawn diplomatic representation and aid from several countries plagued by instability and coups, Saudi Arabia has maintained them, reinforcing the Kingdom's role as an ally when other nations have turned their backs. The inclusion adheres to their prior commitments to the “people” of Gabon and Niger; as such, positive images reverberate throughout such bilateral partnerships.

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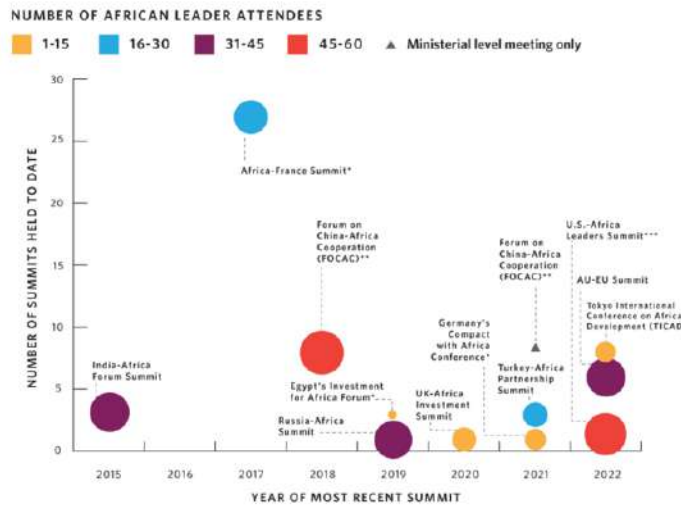
<sup>3</sup> “Saudi Arabia to sign deals worth over \$500 mln with African nations – Minister,” *Thomson Reuters*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-arabia-sign-deals-worth-over-500-mln-with-african-nations-minister-2023-11-09/>

<sup>4</sup> N. Gbadamosi, “Saudi Arabia courts African leaders,” *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 15, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/15/saudi-arabia-africa-mbs-debt-investment-development/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



### Attendance of "Africa+1" Summits by African Leaders, December 2022



SOURCE: Carnegie Africa Program's analysis based on government and the African Union websites, and various news sources. First published December 6, 2021. Updated December 2022.

Saudi Arabia has demonstrated its leading role in a new geopolitical order as 50 African leaders attended the Saudi-Africa Summit and few other multilateral conferences par with the attendance by as many African leaders. China, the United States, and Russia are the few other countries that have secured congruent numbers of African leaders. For instance, the US-Africa Leaders Summit, the Forum in China-Africa Cooperation, and the Russia-Africa Summit were attended by over 45 African leaders, respectively. Whereas other summits, including the UK Africa Investment Summit, experienced lower attendance by African leaders. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a relevant global partner and fostered promising ties with African leaders.

#### Security

The Summit also fell in the shadow of worldwide conflicts, which influenced its dynamics. In a joint declaration, African and Saudi Arabian leaders articulated grave concern for the “humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.” They conveyed the urgency for a “comprehensive and just settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” In addition, leaders vowed to continue cooperation in countering terrorism as violent extremists torment the Horn of Africa, the Sahel Corridor, and other pockets of the continent.<sup>6</sup>

The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, initiated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2015, formalised the security cooperation between 43 African and Arab countries, thus illustrating the prolonged stability in their rapports. The coalition precedes the Council of Arab and African States, established to promote maritime security in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Maritime Security has gained in importance and relevance for Saudi Arabia as the country continues with its Vision 2030 economic

<sup>6</sup> “Riyadh Declaration of Saudi-African Summit,” Saudi Press Agency, Nov. 10, 2023, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N1995116>



diversification program. The location of Neom as well as other tourist destinations on the banks of the Red Sea demands attention being paid to the security needs of the Red Sea as well as the Horn of Africa.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A. Dogan, "Saudi Arabia's Neom Diplomacy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 3, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83975>

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