



(Photo Source: [SPA](#), 2023)



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Russia – Saudi Relations: Two Years Post Ukraine Crisis

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February 24, 2024, marked the two year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With the conflict moving into its third year, stress over the current international order, plus uncertainty about potential shifts in global power persist. In addition, new conflict lines have appeared, such as the Israeli military operation in Gaza and the re-emerging threats on maritime security in the Red Sea, both following last October's Hamas attack on Israel. Moreover, a wider regional confrontation remains a distinct possibility, endangering the de-escalation policies pursued by the GCC states over the past years.

Politically, the relationship between Russia and Saudi Arabia has been marked by a pragmatic approach. Both countries seek to advance their interests globally, including in the Middle East, often engaging in dialogue to understand each other's positions better and to explore areas of mutual benefit. However, although Saudi Arabia's ties with Western countries, especially the United States, add a layer of complexity to its relationship with Russia, the Kingdom has been diversifying its international partnerships, including strengthening ties with Russia, as part of its broader strategic objective. In that context, relations between Riyadh and Moscow have evolved significantly over the years, particularly in the realm of energy cooperation. While historically the two countries have gone through periods of both cooperation and competition, recent years have seen more alignment, despite differences and the complex international context. Their diplomatic interactions, bilateral trade, and occasional strategic cooperation reflect a recognition of the importance of maintaining a functional relationship.

The Kingdom's Role in International Diplomacy in Light of the Ukraine Crisis

Within the framework of bilateral relations, President Vladimir Putin visited Riyadh on December 6, 2023, in his first trip to the region since the war began in Ukraine in February 2022. While in Riyadh, President Putin expressed his support and appreciation for continued mediation efforts including humanitarian and political efforts undertaken by Saudi Arabia in facilitating Ukrainian-Russian prisoner exchanges. Such mediation led to the [release](#) of ten prisoners from Morocco, the United States, Great Britain, Sweden, and Ukraine in September 2022 and underlined the role a country like Saudi Arabia can play in an environment marked by direct conflict.

Overall, Saudi Arabia has taken on a more active diplomatic role over the past year in the Ukraine crisis. This was highlighted by the visit of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to both Ukraine and Russia in March 2023, where he underlined Riyadh's readiness to mediate between the two sides.

As part of the 32nd Arab League Summit in May 2023, the Kingdom then extended an invitation to President Zelensky of Ukraine, to present his perspective and continue the discussion on how the Arab countries can support the Ukrainian position. This was followed by a meeting hosted by Saudi Arabia in August 2023, headed by national security advisors from various countries regarding the Ukraine crisis which followed a previous meeting in Copenhagen to discuss a possible peace plan for Ukraine. One outcome of the talks in Jeddah was that participants agreed on the importance of continuing international consultations on the issue. Although Russia was not

invited, Riyadh ensured, through close communication with Moscow, that the Kremlin would not view the conference as a hostile anti-Russian attempt.

Since the outset of the war, Saudi Arabia has tried to pursue what it considers a balanced approach. While on the one hand, Riyadh has refused to join Western sanctions against Russia, the Kingdom has also repeatedly condemned the Russian aggression. Saudi Arabia [voted](#) in favor on February 23, 2023, of a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution that called for Russia to end hostilities in Ukraine and called for the withdrawal of its forces. In October 2023, the Kingdom also voted for the UNGA resolution against the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, and before that, in March, Saudi Arabia voted in support of the UNGA resolution that supported international law, the UN charter, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, including Ukraine.

In more recent efforts, the state-run Saudi Press Agency said that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had “[affirmed](#) the Kingdom’s keenness and support for all international endeavors and efforts at resolving the Ukrainian-Russian crisis” during President Zelensky’s trip to Riyadh on February 27, 2024.



(Photo Source: [Arab News](#), 2024)

Riyadh-Moscow Ties

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia have followed a steady path over the past years, with an emphasis on energy and economic relations. The volume of trade between the two countries surpassed \$3.3 billion in 2023. The formation of the Saudi-Russian Business Council in 2021 and the Saudi-Russian Joint Committee in 2017 has helped to diversify and widen the foundation of economic cooperation and establish a platform for business and investment that can advance trade by utilizing the opportunities presented by the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 and the significant projects undertaken by the Kingdom. The eighth session of the Saudi-Russian Joint Intergovernmental Commission took place in Moscow in October 2023, co-chaired by the Minister of Energy, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud and the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Alexander Novak, with the attendance of 200 businessmen. As part of the meeting, both sides agreed on the importance of new areas of cooperation and developing the strategic relationship between the two countries.



(Photo Source: Saudi-Russian Joint Summit, [Ministry of Energy](#), 2023)

Riyadh and Moscow have also continued their coordination within the framework of OPEC+ in order to preemptively halt inflation in oil prices following the agreement to slash oil output by two million barrels per day (bpd) starting in November 2022. Given Russia's significant role in energy markets as well as market uncertainty surrounding the global economy and oil market outlook, Saudi Arabia views a cooperative relationship with Russia on energy matters as beneficial for the overall state of the world's economy. That effective coordination remains in place was illustrated in December 2023 when Saudi Arabia's step to reduce its oil production another 1 million bpd to stabilize oil prices was followed by a Russian decision to cut its own production by 500,000 bpd. Given the centrality of oil income to both countries, their close coordination is a central component of the direction that oil prices will take over the coming months. It also underlines that the OPEC+ meetings in Vienna result in collective decisions taken by OPEC+ state members and in no way reflect support for Moscow in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

In addition to the economic and energy domain, political relations have remained steady. During President Putin's December 2023 trip to Riyadh, he discussed bilateral cooperation in trade, economics, and investment areas, as well as exchanged views on the regional and international agenda with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. President Putin emphasized that "nothing can prevent the development of our friendly relations" as he invited the Crown Prince for their next meeting in Moscow. Previously, the two sides had reviewed their cooperation during the visit of Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to Moscow in March 2023 where he met with his counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

Russia has also supported the invitation of the Kingdom to join the BRICS bloc. While there has been no official confirmation from the Kingdom in terms of the status of its membership in the group, the expansion signifies a growing alignment of geopolitical and economic agendas within the BRICS member states. While for Saudi Arabia, BRICS membership would provide other alliance options, the expansion of the BRICS to a BRICS+ format has made it a more attractive institution for consensus-building and dialogue in the developing world.

In terms of the recent crisis in Gaza, the Kingdom has sought Moscow's input to stop the military escalation there. As part of the Islamic Ministerial Committee delegation that visited Moscow in November 2023, Prince Faisal bin Farhan emphasized that the Arab-Islamic ministerial delegation looked forward to working with Russia and international partners to put an end to the crisis.



Moscow and Riyadh have so far also demonstrated a degree of pragmatism when dealing with their differences and capitalizing on points of agreement in regional crises such as Syria, Egypt, Sudan, and Libya. There is potential strategic significance in Russia's synergistic position with the Kingdom in areas of regional conflict including with regard to Syria's return to the Arab League as well as the re-establishment of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. While Saudi Arabia realizes that there still need to be new mechanisms for dealing with the challenges in the process of Syria's reintegration, Moscow [welcomed](#) the process stating that this would help support the stability and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. This was further stressed in a [statement](#) by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Moscow welcomes this long-awaited step, the logical result of the process, which has gained momentum, of returning Syria to the 'Arab family.'"

On Sudan, Moscow and Riyadh underscored the importance of adhering to the Jeddah Declaration on the Protection of Civilians in Sudan and pushing for political dialogue between all sides. In March 2023, Russia and Saudi Arabia also called for the intensification of international efforts under the auspices of the UN on Libya, specifically pertaining to the formation of permanent Libyan national bodies of government power. This was pointed out in the joint statement by the Sixth Joint Ministerial Meeting of the Strategic Dialogue between the GCC and Russia on July 10, 2023. The role of pro-Kremlin elements within areas such as the Sudanese military and Libya suggests the need for open lines of communication between Moscow and Riyadh.

Maintaining the Kingdom's Interest and Regional Security

Within the context of its bilateral relationship with Russia, the Kingdom seeks to avoid jeopardizing its economic and security interests against the backdrop of what it views as a great power competition between the West and Russia. Yet, there is also a recognition that the balancing act will be difficult to sustain in the long run since safeguarding their national interests and security outweighs the benefit of taking a side on the Ukraine issue.

The Kingdom does favor a continued relationship with Moscow. Aside from the need to pursue multilateral engagements, there is a concern that Russia could act against the region's interest when it comes to Syria and Iran. On October 6, 2022, Iran's First Vice President, Mohammad Mokhber, met with senior Moscow officials to agree on a deal for the delivery of weapons to Russian forces. Since then, Iran has supplied Russia with surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missiles, in addition to drones.

For the moment, the Kingdom hopes that its ties to the Kremlin will enable it to raise such concerns diplomatically. Yet, it is also clear that the Saudi-Russia relationship in the context of the Ukraine crisis remains characterized by a delicate balance between shared interests and divergent perspectives. Looking ahead, the Saudi-Russia relationship will likely continue to evolve in response to changing global dynamics and shifting power structures. While competition and divergence may persist, the pragmatic pursuit of shared interests and the necessity of cooperation in key areas will remain part of their bilateral engagement.

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