



BRIDGING DIVIDES: SAUDI ARABIA'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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Saudi Arabia's diplomatic approach after the Gaza outbreak in 2023 reveals its emerging role as a stabilizing force in the Middle East. By balancing regional interests and maintaining its strategic independence, Riyadh is steering away from traditional reliance on Western allies, particularly the U.S., to pursue a more autonomous and multipolar foreign policy.

Since his rise to power in the mid-2010s, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has prioritized regional stability as a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic transformation. This strategy reflects Riyadh's intent to diversify its oil-dependent economy, attract foreign investment, and enhance its geopolitical influence (Borck, 2025).

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia has relied on its alliance with Western powers, particularly the United States, which has provided security assurances in exchange for privileged access to the Kingdom's abundant oil resources (Adil, 2024). However, under MBS, Saudi Arabia began to engage more openly with regional rivals and non-Western powers, signaling a move towards greater autonomy in its foreign policy. In 2023, Saudi Arabia achieved a historic rapprochement with Iran through China's mediation, showcasing its pragmatic willingness to engage non-Western actors to stabilize the region. Simultaneously, normalization talks with Israel brokered by the U.S. signaled Riyadh's strategic intent to recalibrate regional power dynamics. However, the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel disrupted this trajectory, reigniting Israeli and Arab world tensions.

Undeterred, Saudi Arabia continued its dialogue with Israel for normalization while distancing itself from overt U.S. security arrangements, underscoring its strategic independence. More recently, Riyadh abandoned its pursuit of a bilateral defense treaty with the U.S., due to the Israeli normalization stalemate (Nakhoul & Magid, 2024). This is because the bilateral defense treaty with the U.S. would require formal recognition of Israel (Nakhoul & Magid, 2024). As Saudi Arabia carves out its role as a credible mediator, its pragmatic and balanced diplomacy could redefine regional power structures in 2025.



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Saudi Arabia's Role as a Main Regional Fixer

Unlike overt mediators like Qatar and Egypt, Saudi Arabia's recent foreign policy focuses on bridging adversaries while avoiding directly entangling itself in the active conflict. MBS has publicly condemned Israeli actions in Gaza, framing them as genocide, while simultaneously advocating for Palestinian statehood (Gardner & Khalil, 2024). Analysts, however, argue that these statements primarily serve domestic and religious audiences rather than indicating unequivocal support for Palestinian sovereignty (Middle East Eye, 2024).

Riyadh's continued pursuit of normalization

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with Israel—despite the Gaza conflict and rising Arab public grievances against Israel—highlights its capacity to navigate sensitive relationships between conflicted parties. Meanwhile, Riyadh's rapprochement with Iran in 2023, brokered by China, marks a strategic recalibration aimed at reducing sectarian tensions and enhancing its regional influence. At the second China-Saudi-Iran trilateral meeting in November 2024, Saudi Arabia and Iran pledged to strengthen bilateral ties while condemning Israeli military operations in Palestine and Lebanon (Yusha, 2024). By reducing sectarian tensions through direct engagement and showing its collaborative attitude with a historical rival, Riyadh has reduced the risk of confrontation while asserting its presence in regional diplomacy. This pragmatic approach is closely tied to "Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia's blueprint for economic diversification and sustainable development. This is because regional stability is essential for attracting foreign investments and mitigating geopolitical risks to key initiatives such as green energy projects (Sons, 2024). Resolving tensions with Iran not only lowers the risks of conflicts in Yemen and Lebanon but also secures critical trade and energy routes integral to Saudi economic growth.

Riyadh's strategic distancing from Western powers—while balancing engagements with non-Western actors and historically conflicted parties—bolsters its autonomy within an increasingly multipolar world. By fostering partnerships across ideological and geopolitical divides, Saudi Arabia will continue its quest for becoming a regional fixer in 2025, aligning its diplomatic efforts with its strategic priority of achieving domestic economic transformation under Vision 2030.

Saudi-Israel Normalization: A Path to Regional Inclusivity

Despite progress in regional diplomacy, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the most significant obstacle to sustainable stability in the Middle East. Saudi-Israel normalization is vital for fostering broader regional cooperation but hinges on meaningful advancements toward a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud has reiterated this stance, stating, "Stability will only come through resolving the Palestinian issue" (Reuters, 2009). If a lasting ceasefire is secured in Gaza in 2025, normalization talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel will likely return to the forefront of regional diplomacy, shaping the next phase of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

In September 2024, Saudi Arabia led the formation of a global coalition involving Arab, Muslim, and European partners, including diplomats from the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the European Union, to push for a two-state solution (Tanios, 2024). This coalition highlights Riyadh's diplomatic commitment to pushing for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though persuading Israel to agree to a framework that includes the establishment of a Palestinian state based on 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital remains a considerable challenge. Even though the international coalition was shaped, an overwhelming majority of the Knesset voted against a two-state solution and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu consistently rejected committing to do so (Haboush, 2024). To navigate these hurdles, Riyadh may leverage its strategic influence, offering incentives such as regional security guarantees, expanded economic partnerships, and collaboration

on energy projects linked to the Vision 2030 agenda. These incentives could serve as bargaining tools in advancing normalization negotiations, creating a foundation for broader cooperation. Saudi Arabia's normalization efforts with Israel could also accelerate a more inclusive and multilateral regional framework if they succeed. Such a framework could address not only bilateral disputes but also shared challenges like migration, energy, and counter-terrorism in the region.

Although optimism surrounding these prospects should be tempered, Saudi Arabia's willingness to revisit normalization talks demonstrates its strategic intent and its potential contribution to regional stability. The Israel-Gaza ceasefire agreement, which came into effect on January 19, 2025, will provide an opportunity for Riyadh to cautiously advance normalization efforts and advocate for progress toward a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine.

However, the return of the Trump administration in 2025 will introduce new uncertainties to U.S. policy in the region. During his first term, Trump brokered the Abraham Accords with Jared Kushner's mediation and constructed close ties with Gulf powers. Even after leaving office, Trump's business connections and familial relationships have kept him closely linked to the Kingdom. These dynamics suggest that while the new administration may present opportunities for Riyadh, it could also complicate the normalization process and broader regional objectives.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to deviate from its path of strategic independence. Since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ascent, Riyadh has embraced a more autonomous foreign policy, breaking away from its reliance on the U.S. and engaging with China and historical rivals to diversify alliances and enhance regional stability. This trend will

support Saudi's foreign policy stronger to deal with the new Trump administration.

Through the cultivation of partnerships across ideological divides, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a diplomatic broker capable of transcending historical and ideological conflicts. No longer tethered exclusively to the West, Saudi Arabia is now actively cultivating ties with a broader range of powers. This will ensure greater leverage in international negotiations and expand economic and strategic options. Riyadh's ability to balance competing pressures, promote multilateral cooperation, and align diplomacy with its Vision 2030 goals will be instrumental in shaping a stable and prosperous regional order in 2025.

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