



# The “New” Saudi Arabia: Hedging and Detente in Saudi Foreign Policy

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The diplomatic moves that Saudi Arabia has pursued since 2020 are a complete reversal of its policies since 2015, when Mohammed bin Salman began his meteoric rise. Bin Salman is laying the groundwork for his ascent to the throne and is interested in gathering the Arab world around him and playing a more significant role on the global stage. He strives to lead an independent Saudi line through strategic hedging and a return to the kingdom’s traditional tools of influence—financing and brokerage—while abandoning failed efforts to change the regional situation using force. This Saudi strategy, accompanied by the kingdom’s own sense of its value, reflects internal, regional, and global logic that has a distinct impact on Israeli interests, including in the war in Gaza.

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## Bin Salman and Regional Detente

In May 2017, just before Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud was declared Crown Prince and acting leader of Saudi Arabia, it appeared that winds of war were blowing from Riyadh. Bin Salman [announced](#) that Saudi Arabia was Iran’s principal target and said, “We know that the aim of the Iranian regime is to reach the focal point of Muslims (Mecca) and we will not wait until the fight is inside Saudi Arabia and we will work so that the battle is on their side, inside Iran, not in Saudi Arabia.” Some months later, bin Salman even [called](#) Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei “a new Hitler,” and promised he would not be allowed to do to the region what Hitler did to Europe. Yet five years later, in [a March 2022 interview](#), his words reflected a completely different strategy toward Iran: “They are neighbors. Neighbors forever. We cannot get rid of them, and they

get rid of us,” adding, “It’s better for both of us to work it out and to look for ways in which we can co-exist.”

This new outlook underlies the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the resumption of diplomatic relations, brokered by China and signed in March 2023, and it reflects a conceptual change in Riyadh’s foreign policy—a change that goes far beyond the Iranian issue. Whereas in the first three years of his de facto leadership many of bin Salman’s actions could be characterized as “rash and foolhardy” (notably, the failed war in Yemen, the strange “kidnapping” of former Lebanese Prime Minister Sa’ad al-Hariri, the Gulf boycott of Qatar, and the widely reported killing of regime opponent Jamal Khashoggi), the Crown Prince is gradually adopting a more restrained approach, focusing on the kingdom’s internal issues. He has realized that in addition

to the primary objective he inherited from his predecessors—blocking Iran and its so-called regional “Shiite crescent”—Saudi Arabia must adapt to new challenges: the Middle East’s lower position on the United States list of priorities; the need to reinforce governance, cohesion, and prosperity at home, in order to prepare for the transfer of the crown; and preparations for the post-oil era.

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At present, Saudi Arabia prefers diplomacy over armed conflict so that it can focus on socioeconomic modernization and attract vital investment, and for that purpose it needs stability. Bin Salman has not abandoned his inclination to embark with determination and even some impulsiveness on would-be regional exploits, dragging other countries with him, only now it is not toward wars and boycotts, but to regional reconciliation arrangements that until recently appeared unimaginable. The kingdom, together with the United Arab Emirates, has ended a decade of direct and indirect fighting on various fronts following the regional upheaval of the so-called Arab Spring, out of the belief that the immediate threats to the Royal House arising from that upheaval have subsided and at this stage can be contained. The regional moves led by the Crown Prince do not signify reconciliation but detente, i.e., an easing of more superficial tensions with no resolution of the deeper problems, which may well erupt in the future. At present, there is a desire to sweep them under the rug for several reasons:

- At the domestic level: The kingdom is interested in curbing conflicts, some of which it itself fomented, and achieving a situation of zero problems in its foreign relations so that it can turn its attention to internal matters.

Since it is currently enjoying relatively high oil prices, it is focusing on national projects, some of a megalomaniac nature, aiming for the economic diversity required by Vision 2030. The political level and the individual level are one and the same in this case, as bin Salman is a type of centralizing ruler the kingdom has not experienced since the days of its founder, ibn Saud.

- At the regional level: Saudi Arabia seeks closer relations with Iran, perhaps heeding the advice to “keep your enemies close,” understanding Tehran’s superior power, and recognizing that the attempt to block its nuclear ambitions by diplomatic means has run its course. It is noteworthy that shortly after the Israeli-Gaza War erupted in October 2023, bin Salman held a first-ever phone call with Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi (who also participated in a joint Arab League and OIC summit in Saudi Arabia on the war), and presumably seeks to distance the kingdom as much as possible from the regional crisis.
- At the global level: The dwindling American attention to the security problems of Saudi Arabia, its traditional ally, has led Riyadh to understand that it cannot allow itself to continue pursuing the political and military escapades of the previous decade and improvement of its strategic situation also depends on this.

### **Perceptions of the Changing Role of the United States**

It is impossible to understand Saudi Arabia’s new regional posture, particularly the renewal of relations with Iran, without taking into account the regional adjustment to the gradual shift toward a multi-polar global system, with a number of powers competing for global hegemony. The Western barrier isolating bin Salman was breached even before the war in Ukraine in early 2022 and was finally shattered when the war demonstrated Saudi Arabia’s weight in the global energy economy, thus intensifying the courtship of bin Salman. Bin

Salman’s decision to reject the United States request to increase oil production due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in July 2022 (even after a visit by President Joe Biden that marked the end of the rift over Jamal Khashoggi’s murder in 2018) reflected a change of strategic policy in the kingdom. In a search for a different balance of relations, Riyadh now examines its position on each and every issue, giving priority to its own interests.

Even if Riyadh hopes for the return of Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential elections, the new Saudi policy toward the United States does not depend on the president or the administration but, rather, on the assumption that the strength of the United States has declined and that it is no longer committed to the defense of the kingdom. The watershed was the serious Iranian attack in September 2019 on Aramco facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia with drones and cruise missiles. This attack, which temporarily [disrupted](#) about half the kingdom’s oil production capacity, was a wake-up call for Riyadh over its vulnerability in the face of Iran, particularly regarding what Riyadh sees as its “abandonment” by the United States, which did not provide military assistance. All this sharpened Saudi understanding of the need to diversify its sources of support at the global level and hedge its risks at the regional level with respect to Iran, its main rival.

Where the United States exits, China steps in: as a superpower without significant sources of energy of its own, China depends on oil imported from Saudi Arabia and has already overtaken the US as Riyadh’s biggest trading partner. Bin Salman knows that during the long years of monarchy that awaits him, the US is likely to lose the lead in other ways in favor of Beijing, and he wants to get the most out of the Chinese presence in the Middle East and position Saudi Arabia as China’s preferred regional partner. Beijing’s sponsorship of the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation agreement in March 2023 (even if its real role in the process was relatively marginal) gave China its first

significant diplomatic foothold in the region. Therefore, it was likely one of the factors that pushed the United States to engage in the normalization talks with Riyadh later that year, negotiating for the first time returns as a defense pact and nuclear program.

Diversification of its sources of support is vital for Riyadh, in spite of the risks and the costs, to avoid finding itself on the losing side in a multipolar system. Sitting on the fence during the war in Ukraine was a prominent but not sole example of its long term policy as an independent actor maneuvering between the powers. In the same way, in 2022, Riyadh played the role of broker in the prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine and also helped to release the American basketball player Brittney Griner from Russian imprisonment. By its determined refusal to stand fully with the West on the war in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia is winking to the Arab world and the whole Global South, which are alienated from the West and not enthusiastic about supporting its coalition against Moscow; at the same time, however, the kingdom is careful to clarify at every opportunity that it is not in Putin’s pocket. This can be seen, inter alia, in the invitation to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Arab League Summit hosted by Saudi Arabia in May 2023 and to the summit conference on the subject of the war in Ukraine that it hosted in August 2023.

The Saudi “disengagement” from US hegemony comes while Riyadh remains deeply dependent on the United States for its security needs. The Saudi Royal House understands that neither China nor Russia is able or interested in replacing the US as a security supplier for Saudi Arabia in the foreseeable future. With this in mind, Saudi moves toward China represent an attempt to create leverage to pressure the US to maintain its interests and assets in the region. At the same time that bin Salman is openly demonstrating his “independence,” he seeks to obtain advanced weapons and security guarantees as well as collaboration on the

subject of civilian nuclear energy. In September 2023, he openly announced in an interview that Saudi Arabia is ready to normalize ties with Israel if its security demands will be fulfilled.

### Regional Diplomacy

Another feature of the emerging Saudi foreign policy, which can also be seen in light of the changes in the global balance of power, is assumption of a position representing a regional diplomatic force. The Saudi Crown Prince and acting ruler no longer conceals his ambition to lead the Arab world; he looks around him with a sense of superiority and at times contempt for the countries that formerly led the Arab world, such as Egypt, which are now experiencing prolonged conflicts and even state failure.

Bin Salman wants to exploit the fact that his kingdom is the world's largest exporter of oil and home of Islam's holiest sites. This gives it enormous influence over a billion and a half Muslims and the global economy and enables it to shape a new system of relations, not only at the global level but also with the countries of the region. The regional center of gravity has moved—and with growing momentum since the Arab Spring in 2011—to the Gulf states, not only in economic and political terms but also gradually in sports, science, and culture. This places bin Salman in serious political and economic competition with Saudi Arabia's neighbors in the Gulf.

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So it is no accident that among the countries that participated in the regional boycott of Qatar, Saudi Arabia is leading the process of reconciliation with Doha and was the first to renew diplomatic relations. Moreover, since it is

not clear to what extent Riyadh achieved its far-reaching demands at the start of the boycott, it is keen to reshape the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and regain its position as its dominant and most active force, compared to the United Arab Emirates, which was more hesitant over the process (and only recently, two and a half years after the reconciliation agreement was signed at the al-'Ula Summit, renewed relations with Qatar), and sees itself as competing with Saudi Arabia in the field of economics as well as politics.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia, which at the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011 was the most resolute Arab opponent of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, not only renewed diplomatic relations with Damascus in April 2023, under Russian sponsorship, but also enthusiastically led the move to readmit Syria into the Arab League, confirming the normalization of Assad in the region. The reconciliation with Iran helped bring Saudi-Syrian normalization closer, but the closer ties with Assad can also be seen as another step in the Saudi efforts to play a central role in the Middle East's "era of agreements." Moreover, it reflects how Riyadh's approach of diversifying reliance on the powers influences its regional policy. Saudi Arabia evinced blatant disregard of US opposition to the normalization of Assad and was willing to discuss economic cooperation with the Syrian tyrant in breach of the US sanctions. In effect, Saudi Arabia's longstanding policy of seeking its protection in the shadow of the United States, which was conditional on opposing US rivals in the region, is giving way to a more delicate balance between the regional actors, some of them in the camp that opposes the United States. Regarding Syria, the move carries a simple message: if the US is not prepared to take action and propose an alternative to the Assad regime, then Saudi Arabia will do as it sees fit in the service of its own interests.

At first glance, Saudi Arabia's diplomatic moves in recent years look like surrender and a retreat from its political ambitions in favor of

a focus on internal challenges. But to a large extent, this diplomatic activity also reflects Saudi confidence in its own immunity, in view of changes in the regional architecture at the start of the current decade. A range of Saudi moves involving regional actors are positioning the country as an assertive and leading force in the Middle East.

- **Yemen:** The surprising success of the ceasefire in the war between the Houthi rebels in Yemen and the coalition led by Saudi Arabia, which has lasted since April 2022 and stopped Houthi fire into Saudi territory completely, can be attributed inter alia to bin Salman’s diplomatic flexibility. After it failed to quash the Houthis militarily, Riyadh understood that it must recognize that it will remain a fighting force beyond its southern border and that it cannot continue realizing Vision 2030 when its strategic facilities are exposed to repeated attacks from Yemen. The kingdom, therefore, turned to negotiations with the Houthis, brokered by Oman, in which it de facto recognized the Shiite movement’s control of large parts of Yemen, including the port city of al-Hudaydah on the Red Sea coast, in the hope of weakening Houthi ties with Iran, which had grown closer after the start of the Saudi campaign in Yemen in 2015. Nevertheless, the Houthi drones and missile fire toward Israel in retaliation for its operation in Gaza in October 2023, some of which were intercepted above and by Saudi Arabia, proved that Iran retained the Houthis in their regional axis and were able to utilize them also out of context in the Yemen War. A deadly border fight between the Saudis and the Yemeni militia in parallel signifies the risk posed to the ceasefire, whose survival could be a decisive factor in the success of the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation agreement.
- **Syria:** Saudi determination to normalize relations with the Assad regime, notwithstanding reservations in the Arab world, is linked to Riyadh’s desire to **block** the spread of Captagon—a cheap stimulant

drug flooding the Gulf states that became the focus of Syrian production and distribution after the war. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has its eye on the extensive economic opportunities offered by Syrian reconstruction, in view of the current economic restrictions on Assad’s two patrons—Russia, which is bogged down in war, and Iran, which is under sanctions—that had hoped to sweep up these profits for themselves. There is a chance that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry will move to the economic arena in Syria. Perhaps more than anything, the Saudis are not prepared to leave these potential profits for the UAE, which preceded them in resuming relations with Damascus.

- **Hamas:** In April and June 2023, the Hamas leadership visited Saudi Arabia with a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Islam, indicating an approaching thaw in relations that **were tense** in recent years, including the arrest of dozens of Hamas activists in the kingdom. This thaw, which included the release of Hamas prisoners, shows a decline in Saudi fears not only of Iran, which is close to Hamas, but also of the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the regional movements identified with it, such as Hamas. Saudi antagonism to the political Islam stream represented by the Muslim Brotherhood was the main engine driving Riyadh’s foreign policy in the previous decade, and more than anything, the resumption of relations with Qatar in 2021 symbolized its abatement. At the same time, the muted Saudi reaction to Israel’s war against Hamas in 2023, which aimed to obliterate the organization’s rule in Gaza, together with harshly condemning its attack on Israel via the Saudi-controlled media, attests to Riyadh’s wish to see Hamas out of power.
- **Turkey:** Also successful was the detente led by bin Salman with Turkey, following tense (although not officially severed) Saudi-Turkish relations in recent years, linked to the identification of President Erdogan and his ruling party with the Muslim Brotherhood,



and in view of the fact that Ankara sent a lifeline to Qatar during the Gulf boycott. The Gulf reconciliation with Qatar in 2021, the decline in Saudi fears of the regional force of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Turkey's financial distress contributed to the end of the tension and culminated in a meeting between bin Salman and Erdogan in Ankara in January 2022. That meeting led to an official deal in which the Turkish court decided to shelve the Khashoggi murder trial on Turkish soil and leave the legal decision to Saudi Arabia, and in return, Riyadh began to grant Turkey economic aid.

- **Egypt:** Egypt's stability depends to a great extent on the generosity of Gulf state leaders, who now wish to make it clear to Cairo who sets the tone in the region. Saudi Arabia displayed a significant commitment to aid the regime of President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi after he deposed the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, and in the subsequent decade, invested billions of dollars in maintaining its stability in the face of Egypt's economic distress. The assistance was rooted in the concern that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt would encourage its allies and the forces of political Islam in the Gulf and the region as a whole. The proximity of the giant futuristic city Neom and tourist ventures planned by Saudi Arabia for the Red Sea coast was intended to help Egypt by creating many jobs for the unemployed population. Therefore, the announcement by Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan that from now on, the continuation of Saudi financial aid to Arab countries will be conditional on certain economic reforms is partly due to dissatisfaction with el-Sisi's financial management and the desire to seize leadership positions in the Arab space, apparently at Egypt's expense.
- **Sudan:** The resumption of internal fighting in Sudan in April 2023 gave Saudi Arabia an opportunity to prove its regional diplomatic influence. Thanks to the ties formed in recent

years with the two hawkish forces in Sudan (in competition with the UAE for influence in this arena), the Saudis took it upon themselves to host and lead the efforts to broker peace in Sudan, alongside the United States as a secondary partner. Saudi Arabia has a direct interest in stability in Sudan, in view of its proximity to the African state (particularly for the Red Sea Project, the jewel in the crown of the burgeoning Saudi tourism industry, embodying great hopes).

- **Israel:** The Saudis froze the normalization process with Israel shortly after the Gaza War erupted in October 2023, yet the United States has sent a clear signal that Riyadh is ready to pick it up when the crisis is over. A month before that war, bin Salman expressed optimism about nearing a peace agreement with Israel. He already crossed the Rubicon in March 2022, when announcing that Israel is "a potential ally, not an enemy." Although Riyadh officially clings to the formulation of the Arab Peace Initiative, which conditions the normalization on a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, it appears that significant benefits from the United States will be possible under certain conditions even without a full political settlement of the conflict. In September 2023 bin Salman reduced the demand from Israel to an ambiguous "improvement of the Palestinian life." Yet bin Salman will still have to show the Saudis, and the entire Arab and Muslim world, some concrete reward from Israel in the Palestinian context. Moreover, the war in Gaza, which has restored the Palestinian issue to center stage, only strengthens this need and is likely to increase the Palestinian factor in the deal, demanded by both Riyadh and Washington.

### Possible Challenges

While the Saudi Crown Prince is forging ahead with a new foreign policy for the kingdom, many challenges remain. Internally, there are still those who are not satisfied with bin Salman's

rule and can challenge him, either due to his openness or because he has jailed, banished, or disinherited members of the royal family and the veteran oligarchy that stood in his way.

In the regional arena, bin Salaman has begun healing wounds and putting out fires, some of which were largely of his own making. His desire to lead the Arab world will confront opposition from leaders of countries that were formerly more prominent in the Arab world, such as Egypt, but also and perhaps principally from his partners-competitors in the Arabian Gulf.

In the global arena, there is unresolved baggage with the United States. Not only on the subject of human rights is Riyadh not prepared to accept dictates from the US, but in his refusal to increase oil production, bin Salman also demonstrated his confidence that he can flout Washington without being penalized. However, this was a calculated gamble, and President Biden’s [decision](#) not to “punish” bin Salman in this case will not necessarily be repeated in the future. With a different administration or in different circumstances, the response to Riyadh’s growing independence could be more severe.

## Significance for Israel

Saudi Arabia wishes to return to its position as a leader of the region, gathering the Arab world around it and using its traditional tools of influence—financing and brokerage—while abandoning failed attempts to change the regional situation by means of force. Israel must think about how it can adapt to these developments, which create new dynamics and balances of power in the region and a situation of zero conflicts in foreign policy. It appears that the new Saudi strategy, to the outside at least, no longer sees the Middle East as a zero sum game. This is a central piece in a changing regional puzzle in which most actors, Arabs and others, seek closeness to their rivals while hedging the risks. Therefore, in certain conditions, Israel can also find a place in the new order, since in the eyes of Riyadh, there

is nothing to prevent it from maintaining ties with both Iran and Israel simultaneously if the circumstances suit it.

On the one hand, the “tactical” rapprochement of Gulf states with Iran could lead to stronger pressure on its part and a demand to refrain from warmer relations with Israel. Iran has publicly expressed its opposition to the Abraham Accords and is trying to drive a wedge between its Arab neighbors and Israel. Now that Iran is gaining greater political leverage over the Gulf states, it could adversely affect the public dimension of their relations with Israel. The settlement with the Houthis in Yemen could also cause Riyadh to feel more confident, and thus have less need for aid from Israel. On the other hand, the Gulf states are hedging their risks and seeking to maintain proper relations with all sides as a way of maximizing their interests and keeping their options open. It would not be reasonable for them to upset their quiet security relations with Israel since Iran was and remains the main threat to them, and in this context, Israel is perceived as an asset.

Thus the regional detente led by Saudi Arabia, which will probably be extended to other regions, does not only herald bad news. Overall, it should not put an end to Israeli-Saudi normalization. In fact, if Iran is interested in maintaining improved relations with its neighbors, this could also curb its options for actions such as sending its proxies to attack them. The return of Syria to the fold of Arab countries could also, in the long run, harm Iran’s status in Syria, certainly in commercial and economic terms.

Mohammed bin Salman is currently in the second stage of his rule. The first stage was characterized by his meteoric rise and by his various internal and external moves, some of which damaged the kingdom’s status. Now he wishes to put all that behind him and continue the revolution he initiated with the intention of engineering a new Saudi Arabia, more concentrated in government terms, more open in social and religious terms, and more

a country seeking to wean itself off reliance on oil. Has he learned from his mistakes? It is not clear. Moreover, Saudi interests remain as before, but bin Salman has started to adopt new methods—more diplomacy and economics, less force—to promote his regional objectives, largely because of the changing circumstances and, above all, the changing role of the United States in the region.

Israel has no deep familiarity with the internal processes in the kingdom, and it certainly cannot influence them. However, it has some influence in Washington, which it has used in the past to soften some of the criticism of bin Salman. The future king of Saudi Arabia has presented it with challenges, including the demands with negative potential to acquire advanced arms and establish a nuclear program, but also opportunities, first and foremost the possibility of a more pragmatic view of ties with Israel and normalization, in conditions and circumstances that suit him and his kingdom.

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