

# Russia and Saudi Arabia at a Turning Point

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**Abstract:** King Salman's visit to Russia, the first ever by a Saudi monarch, shows that Moscow and Riyadh are switching gears from competition to cooperation. This rapprochement is guided by pragmatism and overlapping interests: boosting global oil prices, finding a compromise in Syria, and developing defense ties at a time of uncertainty in the Middle East and worldwide. However, there are certain limits as to how close Russian-Saudi ties can become. While Russia's alliances with Iran and the Assad regime do not tie Vladimir Putin's hands in conducting multi-vector diplomacy in the region, it does obstruct the deepening of commercial and diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf. Equally, the hopes for a windfall of investment into the Russian economy and large-scale purchases of arms by Riyadh could prove difficult to fulfil.

Russia and Saudi Arabia never enjoyed a cordial relationship. Back in the early Cold War era, while the Soviets sided with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt and other secular nationalist regimes, the Saudis led a rival coalition of conservative monarchies in league with the west. Later, the Saudis, together with the Pakistani security services, bankrolled and assisted the mujahedeen fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan. In more recent times, Russian authorities have viewed Saudi Arabia, with whom they re-established diplomatic ties in 1990 after a hiatus of 52 years,<sup>1</sup> as the exporter of extremist Islam to Muslims in the Northern Caucasus and other parts of the federation. The pro-Kremlin media never miss an opportunity to blast the U.S., the self-proclaimed advocate of democracy and human rights, over its longstanding alliance with the Saudis. Not to forget the war in Syria, in which Moscow and Riyadh are on opposite sides. Furthermore, Russia's direct military involvement since September 2015 on the side of the struggling Assad regime has strengthened its security links with Iran, Saudi Arabia's archrival in a contest straddling the Middle East. When confronted with the grave humanitarian consequences of the Russian campaign, the Kremlin propagandists point at the civilian deaths and devastation caused by the Saudi-led coalition's actions in Yemen.<sup>2</sup> There is speculation that Russian hackers and fake news triggered Saudi Arabia's spat with Qatar, driving a wedge within the Sunni bloc that is opposed to Assad.<sup>3</sup> In short, there are a legion of contentious issues.

Now, however, with an unprecedented three-day visit by King Salman bin Abdulaziz to Moscow, it seems we have arrived at a turning point. King Salman had been to Russia before – as a governor of Riyadh in 2006. Putin, too, travelled to Saudi Arabia in 2007. But, as then-king Abdullah never returned the gesture,<sup>4</sup> Salman's visit is

the first of its kind.<sup>5</sup> To mark the occasion, Moscow hosted a week of Saudi cultural events. Salman was welcomed by Putin, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and even Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, the self-appointed leader of all Muslims in the Russian Federation.<sup>6</sup> The visit broke news about major deals: a \$1.1 billion project for the Russian petrochemical company Sibur to build a plant in Saudi Arabia, a \$1 billion joint technology investment fund, and another \$1 billion financing vehicle geared towards energy projects. Saudi investment to the tune of \$200 million may flow into Russian toll roads, including a new one in Moscow. There is also talk of Islamic banking projects to benefit the large Muslim population of the Russian Federation.<sup>7</sup> Last but not least, a spokesman for Russia's Federal Service for Military and Technical Cooperation declared that an agreement had been reached for the sale of S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to Saudi Arabia.

This trip to Moscow did not come out of the blue. It had been in the works since the first time King Salman and President Putin talked on the phone in April 2015. Much of the groundwork of was laid by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi family go-between with the Kremlin.<sup>8</sup> In September 2016, months before Mohammed's promotion to first place in the line of succession, he and Putin negotiated Russia's accession to the OPEC-agreed oil production limits. A preliminary arms deal, estimated at \$3.5 billion by state-owned industrial corporation Rostec, followed suit in July 2017.<sup>9</sup> In parallel, the Saudis and the Russians have been chalking up progress over Syria. A meeting between Russia and Saudi-backed Syrian opposition in Cairo yielded agreements over the rebel-held enclaves of East Ghouta and Rastan.<sup>10</sup> As Mohammed bin Salman, who is also the Defence Minister, put it some time ago, "relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia [were] going through one of their best

moments ever."<sup>11</sup> His father's presence in the Kremlin presents the ultimate proof of this.

### The Energy Dimension

Russia and Saudi Arabia's interests have partially converged. Both suffer from the low prices of crude oil, putting their fiscal health at risk. That is why the original agreement struck by Putin and Prince Mohammed in September 2016, whose aim is to keep the price above \$50 per barrel, has held on. In May, the two countries' energy ministers, Alexander Novak and Khalih al-Falih, extended the deal for another nine months during a meeting in Beijing. King Salman's visit broke the news that the "OPEC Plus" arrangement could run until the end of 2018.

The investment projects announced during these visits suggest that cooperation is geared towards the long term. Russia is keen to attract investment from the Gulf. In 2016, the Qatar sovereign fund paid €2.5 billion together with natural resources company Glencore for a 19.5 percent stake in the Russian state-owned giant Rosneft (Putin happily remarked at the time that Rosneft's shares had shot up by 18 percent as a result).<sup>12</sup> In September, the Qataris and Glencore sold their shares to a Chinese conglomerate, so Russia is no longer hostage to Saudi-Qatari squabbles.<sup>13</sup> But fresh funding from the Saudis will be more than welcome given the difficulties besetting Russian state-owned energy firms due to EU and American sanctions (recently beefed up by the U.S. Congress).<sup>14</sup> Minister Novak mentioned that Novatek, controlled by Putin's personal friend Gennady Timchenko (who is on the western blacklist), would be willing to partner with Saudi companies in a liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the Arctic. Saudi Aramco and Gazprom Neft (both state-owned) are reportedly in talks to set up a joint research and technology center.<sup>15</sup>



### Shifting Geopolitics

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Saudi Arabia has seen Russia's military and diplomatic clout increasing with its intervention in Syria and its closer ties with two other regional powers, Iran and Turkey. At the same time, relative withdrawal of the U.S. from the region has given Riyadh extra incentives to diversify security ties beyond those with its long-standing ally. Obama's reluctance to step into Syria, the nuclear deal with Iran, and the uncertainty surrounding Donald Trump's foreign policy have all had an impact on the Saudis' strategic thinking. Russia, whose quasi-alliance with Iran is not problem-free, could act as a counterweight to it in Syria. According to Moscow experts, Riyadh might solicit Russian mediation in Yemen.<sup>16</sup> Last but not least, both Russia and Saudi Arabia are allies of the al-Sisi regime in Egypt.

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For his part, Vladimir Putin knows the time is ripe to fold his Syrian operation.<sup>17</sup> It has delivered benefits: Assad is secure in his position, the U.S. is willing to engage with Russia, and Moscow is now a key player in the Middle East. However, the costs of are becoming more and more apparent as well. In September, the deadliest month since the battle for Eastern Aleppo in December 2016, Russia suffered its most high-profile loss when General Valery Asapov, seconded to the Syrian Army's Fifth Corps, was killed by ISIS mortar fire near the city of Deir al-Zour. Assad's troops and Russia are coming dangerously close to the Syrian Democratic

Forces (SDF), which are allied with America, including embedded commandoes and artillery units under the command of the U.S. Marine Corps. The risks of an undesired escalation are not to be overlooked. The Russian air force has already bombarded the SDF.<sup>18</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defence blamed Asapov's death on the U.S.'s "two-faced policy", hinting that the Americans are covertly sharing information with ISIS.<sup>19</sup> They are also alleging that a patch of land on the Jordanian border at al-Tanf has become a "black hole" through which jihadis enter Syria.<sup>20</sup>

The volatile situation in Syria highlights the merits of diplomacy. The Astana Process, initiated by Russia, Turkey and Iran in the wake of the fall of Eastern Aleppo, now includes Saudi-backed Salafi militias such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jayish al-Islam. It is not that long ago that the Russian Ministry of Defence would bracket this group together with ISIS and the al-Nusra Front (now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or HTS). Nowadays they are bundled with the moderate opposition and represented at the table. Putin is persisting with the de-escalation zones plan worked out in Astana. His recent working dinner with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan was, reportedly, all about the future of the Idlib enclave, though it looks as if there was no meeting of minds.<sup>21</sup> As the Cairo meeting showed, Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, can deliver.

Russia is eyeing the Gulf as a potentially lucrative market for its arms exports. Over time, transfers to Saudi Arabia and its neighbors could reduce its dependence on India and China, which account respectively for 39 percent and 11 percent of Russia's arms exports. Both of those nations are keen to develop their own defense industries, while Russia is also concerned about China cloning its technologies. Russia has already made limited inroads into the Gulf market: e.g.,



it sold anti-tank systems to Bahrain in 2014, following a delivery of AK-103 rifles three years earlier.<sup>22</sup>

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Talk of a major arms deal with the Saudis dates back to at least 2012. In 2015, during the annual MAKS international air show near Moscow, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir singled out the mid-range Iskander missiles as a product of interest.<sup>23</sup> Other items on the list included cruise missiles (of the kind put on display in the Syrian campaign) and air defense systems. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a Saudi ally, have been conducting negotiations of their own with Russian arms firm Rostec for the purchase of Sukhoi Su-35 ground attack jets, as well as over possible joint manufacturing projects. For Saudi Arabia, it is an advantage to have Russia as an alternative supplier at a time when western companies are under scrutiny over the controversial war in Yemen.<sup>24</sup> The sale of high-end weapons systems carries many advantages for the Russian arms industry, which suffers from a plethora of problems—not least the contraction of the federation's own defense budget. For instance, the transfer of fighter jets is usually linked with profitable maintenance and servicing contracts.

### **The Limits of Cooperation**

Even if Russia and Saudi Arabia remain in engagement mode, there are numerous obstacles that will hinder the development of their relationship. Key among them is Russia's relationship with Iran. Moscow has to make a choice: either it goes along with Assad and Tehran's strategy of reconquering the whole of Syria or sticks to the search

for a political solution through multilateral diplomacy. Only in the latter scenario is there scope for a bargain in which Saudi Arabia acquiesces to Assad's stay in power while Russia commits to restraining Iran.

Right now, Russia is oscillating between the two strategies. It talks de-escalation with the Saudis and Turks, while offering full support to the regime's offensive in the province of Deir al-Zour. The mid-September visit to Damascus by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, a member of Putin's inner circle who oversees the Syrian dossier, appears to have cemented an agreement to push eastwards. The Russian forces are doing Iran's bidding.<sup>25</sup>

Territories cleared of ISIS are being taken over by Iran's proxies, securing a land bridge between Baghdad and Damascus. It has also transpired that the murdered General Asapov was seconded to the Syrian Arab Army's Fifth Attack Troops Corps—composed of volunteers but equipped and trained by the Russians. In other words, Russia has been de facto in command of Assad's main crack force. Whether this enhances its leverage over Iran and the Damascus regime or, on the contrary, puts the Iranians in the driver's seat is still in question. The Israeli leadership, for one, seem to think that it is the latter. As early as in August, Prime Minister Netanyahu went to see Putin in Sochi in order to voice his concern over Iran's expanding role in Syria.<sup>26</sup>

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If Saudi Arabia and Russia should make headway, Iran will have plenty of chances to play the spoiler. Tehran has already



demonstrated the capacity to undercut Russian initiatives. That is how Moscow-based analysts interpreted a deal for the exchange of populations between besieged opposition- and regime-held towns which was mediated by Iran and Qatar in April. The population swap came as a reminder from Tehran as to who is ultimately pulls Assad's strings. On paper, Iran backs Russia's de-escalation zones, but it is hard to see how deep its commitment to them is.<sup>27</sup> But the Iranians are also in a position to thwart the Russian–Saudi rapprochement before it has even taken off. If forced to make a choice, Moscow will choose Tehran over Riyadh. As Russian experts Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov contend, “[w]hile Russia and Iran have a lot of issues to argue about, they also have a number of common interests in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in terms of Eurasian transit routes, the situation in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, as well as in oil and gas markets.”<sup>28</sup>

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It is not simple with regard to arms sales, either. Saudi Arabia has its conditions. In the recent past, it has tied the purchase of Russian arms to Moscow cancelling the delivery of S-300 SAMs to Iran (Iran received four S-300PMU2 batteries, originally contracted in 2007, in April-July 2016). Now, Riyadh will most likely demand technology transfer as part of a prospective deal to acquire the S-400s systems.<sup>29</sup> The current arms deal involves the localized production

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of AK-103 assault rifles, the Kornet-EM anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) system, the TOS-1A advanced multiple rocket launcher and AGS-30 automatic grenade launchers including their grenades. Yet, a high-technology product such as the S-400 is another matter, as we know from the ongoing negotiations between Russia and Turkey.<sup>30</sup> As Max Suchkov notes at Al Monitor, “the Russian party insists that the “localization” component should be minimal, while major components should be produced exclusively by the Russian state-owned arms company Almaz Antey. The concrete details of each agreement, however, are to be discussed at an intergovernmental Russian–Saudi session on military and technical cooperation in late October.”<sup>31</sup> Saudi Arabia's \$110 billion arms deal with the U.S., including 44 Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (Thaad) launchers and 360 missiles along with fire control stations and radars (total worth: \$15 billion), might prove an even more serious stumbling block.

## Outlook

Russia's core strength in the Middle East and North Africa is that it is not constrained by a permanent alliance with any of the major regional powers, and nor is it bound firmly to the region. That allows it to operate with a degree of flexibility and balance between competing poles, a point proven by the U-turn in Russian relations with Turkey in the summer of 2016 and now with the remarkable shift in ties with the Saudis. The problem is that local players, deeply involved in the conflict in Syria, might soon discover that Russia has a delivery problem. Its growing prominence does not mean it has the leverage to be an arbiter in Syria, let alone in the broader region. Despite all the Cold War analogies, Russia cannot replace the U.S.





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as a referee in regional squabbles. For the newly forged partnership between Moscow and Riyadh to work, it is imperative that the Saudis adjust their expectations and focus on what is achievable in the short run. Russia still needs Iran and will not downgrade its relationship by pivoting to Riyadh. As a retired Russian diplomat remarks: “the Saudis have the money, which the Russians need. But the Saudis need the Russians to stop what they see as a strengthening Iran, and Russians just can’t deliver it.”<sup>32</sup>

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Symbolically, these initiatives mean a lot to both Russia and Saudi Arabia. But the strategic and economic benefits may prove elusive. Back in 2015, the Russian Direct Investment Fund launched a plan for a \$10 billion investment vehicle together with the Saudis. But, just like the negotiations for a major arms deal, the plan never went very far.



## Endnotes

1- At the same time, the Soviet Union was the first state to establish relations with the Saudis, opening an embassy in Jeddah as early as 1926. That was long before the famous meeting between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud in February 1945 which laid the foundations of a the US-Saudi alliance. In the 1920s and 1930s, Bolsheviks viewed the Saudi family as a anti-imperialist force opposed to the pro-British Hashemites. Joseph Stalin closed the Soviet Embassy in Saudi Arabia in 1938.

2- Russia abstained during the vote on the UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (14 April 2015), which gives legitimacy to the intervention in Yemen.

3- Russian hackers to blame for sparking Qatar crisis, FBI inquiry finds, The Guardian, 7 June 2017

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/07/russian-hackers-qatar-crisis-fbi-inquiry-saudi-arabia-uae>>

4- Abdallah visited Moscow as a crown prince in 2003.

5- The visit was originally planned to take place in July, after the G20 summit in Hamburg, but was postponed as the king cancelled his trip to Europe.

6- His rivals for the title, the presidents of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Ingushetia, were present too, eager to bolster their contacts with the Saudis. Max Suchkov, Russians, Saudis look for Ways to Spruce up Relationship Al Monitor, 6 October 2017. <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/saudi-arabia-king-salman-russia-visit-putin.html>>

7- Maria Dubovikova, A turning point in Saudi-Russian relations, Arab News, 4 October 2017 < <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1172311/saudi-arabia>>

8- Prince Mohammed first came to Russia in June 2015 to attend the St Petersburg Economic Forum. His contacts with Putin became regular thereafter.

9- Russia and Saudi Arabia Agree \$3.5 Bln Arms Deal, The Moscow Times, 11 July 2017. <<https://>

[themoscowtimes.com/news/saudi-arabia-russia-arms-deal-58360](https://themoscowtimes.com/news/saudi-arabia-russia-arms-deal-58360)>

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14- Matt Flegenheimer and David E. Sanger, Congress Reaches Deal on Russia Sanctions, Setting Up Tough Choice for Trump, New York Times, 22 July 2017.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/us/politics/congress-sanctions-russia.html>>

15- Saudi king's visit expected to strengthen ties with Russia, Financial Times, 4 October 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/7cee568-a8eo-11e7-ab55-27219df83c97?mhq5j=e5>

16- Kirill Semenov, Saudis could seek Russian bailout in Yemen, Al Monitor, 7 October 2017. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/saudi-arabia-bail-out-yemen-conflict-mediation.html>

17- Pavel K. Baev, Russia Tries to Conclude Its Syrian Venture, Eurasia Monitor Vol. 14, No. 121, Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-tries-to-conclude-its-syrian-venture/>

18- Erin Cunningham and David Filipov, U.S. allies accuse Russia of strikes in eastern Syria, Washington Post, 25 September 2017.



<[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/us-allies-accuse-russia-of-strikes-in-eastern-syria/2017/09/25/6bcbab0-a1ff-11e7-b573-8ec86cdfed\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.17ece65612df](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-allies-accuse-russia-of-strikes-in-eastern-syria/2017/09/25/6bcbab0-a1ff-11e7-b573-8ec86cdfed_story.html?utm_term=.17ece65612df)>

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