



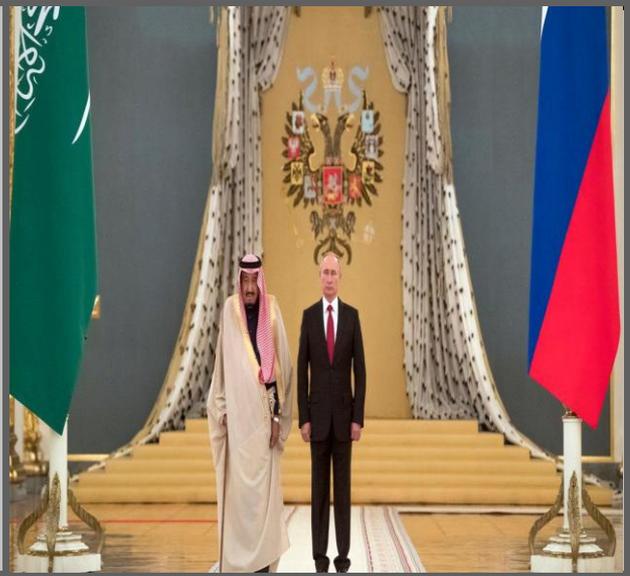
KING'S SALMAN'S VISIT TO MOSCOW: A NEW RAPPROCHEMENT IN THE MAKING

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



A bit of history was made this week, when King Salman arrived in Moscow on a four-day visit from October 4-7, 2017. This was the first visit by a Saudi monarch in almost a century of diplomatic relations. Amid the recent years' flurry of visits by Middle Eastern leaders, the Saudi monarch arguably had been the only one missing. Hence, the heightened anticipation.

Since Saudi Arabia's formal establishment in 1932, Moscow and Riyadh have been at odds in almost every Middle Eastern dispute. It was only in 1990, two years after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, that the two countries agreed to restore relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened new doors, albeit briefly. While Moscow blamed Riyadh for keeping oil prices low and criticized Saudi financial support for the Chechen rebels, Saudi authorities voiced frustration on Russia's arms sales to regional rivals such as Iran.

When Putin came to power in May 2000, he became the first Russian head of state ever to visit Riyadh in 2007, against the backdrop of Saudi frustration over the US war in Iraq. However, the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 obstructed any real development in bilateral ties, as both states again found themselves on opposite sides of a regional conflict.

A growing rapprochement was witnessed in 2016 on the sidelines of the G20 summit where both countries agreed to collaborate in world oil markets to wrestle a global surplus, saying they could limit output in the future and signing a joint statement to this effect.

The visit to Moscow by the Saudi King has been widely seen as fortifying a relationship that is pivotal for world oil prices and possibly signaling a shift in Middle East politics. President Putin called the present visit "a landmark event",¹ while Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir neatly put Saudi-

¹ Sputnik, "Putin: Saudi King's Visit to Russia a Landmark Event," *Sputnik International*, October 5, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201710051057969962-putin-saudi-king-visit-landmark-event/>.

Russians relations as having reached a "historic moment".²

King Salman, the first sitting Saudi monarch ever to visit Russia, brought with him investment deals worth several billion dollars, providing much-needed investment for a Russian economy that is increasingly becoming decrepit by low oil prices and Western sanctions. More than fifteen cooperation agreements worth billions of pounds were signed during the visit. Among other things, these encompassed Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) on oil, military and space exploration signed between Russian and Saudi communications ministries, as well as between Russia's Industry and Trade Ministry and Saudi Arabia's Commerce and Investment Ministry. The framework of economic, cultural and scientific cooperation was also agreed upon, as well as cooperation in the area of agriculture, peaceful use of nuclear energy and space exploration. Among the deals was an agreement between Russian sovereign wealth fund RDIF and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund to invest up to \$100 million in transport projects in Russia. The two countries also signed a deal to set up a \$1 billion joint investment fund.³

Moreover, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on the purchase from Russia of S-400 air defense systems.⁴ This move marked a huge shift for the Kingdom, which buys most of its military supplies from the United States and Britain.

Equally important to note is that King Salman's visit to Moscow came prior to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) meeting in November 2017. The Saudi King invited Putin to visit his country- an offer the Russian leader accepted- and said they planned to keep cooperating to keep world oil prices stable. The leaders also discussed an extension of the OPEC agreement to cap oil output until the end of March 2018, to help support prices.

Despite the aura of bonhomie, the two powers seemed to agree to disagree on one geopolitical issue - Syria. Riyadh backs rebels fighting President Bashar al-Assad's army, while Russian and Iranian forces support Assad. This leaves Moscow allied with Saudi Arabia's arch-rival Iran, whose influence Riyadh fears is growing in the region. However, any dissonance was covered by mutual expressions of respect, and the pomp and ceremony Russian officials put on to greet the Saudi King. Indeed, Russia pulled out all the diplomatic stops to welcome King Salman. Ahead of his departure from Moscow, King Salman was even awarded an honorary doctorate by the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, which is run by the Russian foreign ministry.

While talking to media after the talks, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov focused on common issues, saying the two leaders had agreed on the importance of fighting terrorism, finding peaceful solutions to conflicts in the Middle East, and on the principle of territorial integrity.⁵ His Saudi counterpart, Adel al-Jubeir, said new prospects had opened for Russia-Saudi ties that he could not previously have imagined.⁶

² Mark Molloy, "Saudi King Salman's golden escalator breaks down on visit to Russia," *The Telegraph*, October 6, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/06/saudi-king-salmans-golden-escalator-breaks-visit-russia/>.

³ Yuliya Talmazan, "Saudi King's Visit to Russia Marks Shift in Relations on Syria, Oil Prices," *NBCNews.com*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/saudi-king-s-visit-russia-marks-shift-relations-syria-oil-n808271>.

⁴ Stephen Kalin and Sami Aboudi, "Saudi Arabia agrees to buy Russian S-400 air defense system: Arabiya TV," *Reuters*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-russia-missiles/saudi-arabia-agrees-to-buy-russian-s-400-air-defense-system-arabiya-tv-idUSKBN1CA10D>.

⁵ "PressReader," *PressReader.com - Connecting People Through News*, <https://www.pressreader.com/lebanon/the-daily-star-lebanon/20171006/281479276624637>.

⁶ Ibid.

Riyadh's recent advances toward Moscow emphasize a new diplomatic approach by Saudi Arabia towards regional and international issues, one that is rooted in practicality and realism. Historically, Saudi Arabia and the former USSR were at odds on almost every regional conflict, particularly during the height of the Cold War. For Riyadh, the Middle East is now dangerously unbalanced with the United States scaling down its presence and Iran increasing its influence. Russia is a suitable partner who could fill the vacuum left by the United States, and at the same time, maybe rein in Tehran.

Moreover, Moscow too is motivated by its pragmatic interests in the region. It is unlikely to jump in over its head trying to become the power-broker that Washington once was. However, so far it seems that Russia's high-risk gamble in Syria has paid off. There is no doubt that Russia has made itself much more of a factor in key parts of the Middle East as the US has taken a step back in some ways, especially in Syria.

Given the long history of tension and distrust between Russia and Saudi Arabia, it may be too early to talk about a major shift in the relationship. Whether each side will deliver what it has promised so far remains to be seen. Although Riyadh is coming around to Moscow's position on Syria and Russia's growing regional influence more broadly, the Saudis' concerns about Iran's growing influence are unlikely to decrease, and Riyadh will likely remain worried about Russia's treatment of Muslims within its borders.

There is no doubt that both countries approached the meeting with clear political goals. In all practicality, the visit can hardly help Russia replace the United States as Riyadh's key ally. However, it could become a trust-building measure, and therefore, another variable from the Middle Eastern geopolitical equation.