

Saudi Arabia's Emergence as a Diplomatic Broker

by [Elizabeth Dent \(/experts/elizabeth-dent\)](/experts/elizabeth-dent)

Mar 12, 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Elizabeth Dent \(/experts/elizabeth-dent\)](/experts/elizabeth-dent)

Elizabeth Dent is a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where she focuses on U.S. foreign and defense policy toward the Gulf states, Iraq, and Syria.



Brief Analysis

Riyadh has demonstrated the desire and ability to play a bigger diplomatic role in the Middle East and beyond, so Washington should support these aspirations—while taking care to balance relations with other Gulf states and ensure that Riyadh contributes constructively.

Saudi Arabia has hosted a slew of international meetings this year, part of a broader effort to cast itself as a global diplomatic powerbroker and repair relations with neighbors. Underpinning its ambitious “Vision 2030” strategy for diversifying the Saudi economy is a desire to position itself as a major player that can lead diplomacy on international crises, exert influence in a wider variety of sectors, and attract more foreign investment. Achieving this status could also enable Riyadh to play a more prominent role in ensuring Middle East stability while bolstering its influence over other regional powers, namely Iran. By leveraging its deep relationships and Saudi ambitions, the United States has an opportunity to shape the kingdom’s approach to key issues.

Saudi Diplomatic Engagement in 2025

Although Riyadh’s audition for the global spotlight began years ago, it has kicked into overdrive this year, with the kingdom hosting multiple bilateral and multilateral meetings since January alone. These include the first high-level, direct meeting between Russia and the United States in years; an emergency Arab League summit to discuss postwar reconstruction plans for Gaza; an international meeting on securing assistance for post-Assad Syria; and the first foreign trips by interim Syrian president Ahmed al-Sharaa and newly minted Lebanese president Joseph Aoun. Most recently, Riyadh hosted President Volodymyr Zelensky this week amid high-level U.S. discussions on resolving the Ukraine war, and [a follow-up summit \(https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-russia-ukraine-us-talks-explainer-cab6fb54f7c77ac0c5966d0ab2c1ed56\)](https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-russia-ukraine-us-talks-explainer-cab6fb54f7c77ac0c5966d0ab2c1ed56) between President Trump and Vladimir Putin may take place there as well.

Syria. Despite actively campaigning for the Assad regime’s readmission to the Arab League and reopening the Saudi

embassy in Damascus in 2023, Riyadh immediately issued a [statement of support](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/08/world/middleeast/syria-global-reactions-world-leaders.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/08/world/middleeast/syria-global-reactions-world-leaders.html>) for the Syrian people once the regime was ousted. In addition, the kingdom opened an air bridge that quickly [delivered](https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2025/01/01/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-0) (<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/gulf/2025/01/01/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-0>) critical humanitarian assistance, [sent](https://www.arabnews.com/node/2584000/saudi-arabia) (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2584000/saudi-arabia>) a Royal Court delegation to discuss economic support for the new Syrian government, and [hosted](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/12/ministers-from-17-countries-meet-in-saudi-talks-on-speeding-aid-to-damascus) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/12/ministers-from-17-countries-meet-in-saudi-talks-on-speeding-aid-to-damascus>) an international meeting to discuss lifting sanctions, attended by the other Gulf Cooperation Council states along with Germany, Syria, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and others. Saudi Arabia was also the first nation to exchange foreign minister visits with President Sharaa's new government.

Gaza war and Arab-Israel normalization. Riyadh has historically played a major role in backing the Palestinians, often using its regional clout to rally support for collective Arab action on statehood and other issues. It continues to pursue this leadership role today. After President Trump suggested that the United States could help end the Gaza war by [displacing more than 2 million residents](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/when-riviera-meets-sumud-why-palestinian-realities-dont-mesh-trumps-gaza-plan) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/when-riviera-meets-sumud-why-palestinian-realities-dont-mesh-trumps-gaza-plan>) and turning the Strip into another "Riviera," Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) [invited](https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-hosts-alternative-summit-on-gaza-reconstruction/a-71703601) (<https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-hosts-alternative-summit-on-gaza-reconstruction/a-71703601>) Arab leaders to Riyadh to discuss an alternative plan drafted by Egypt. The kingdom's leadership in wrangling Arab governments to [coalesce around a unified proposal](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-arab-summits-hold-key-viable-gaza-plan) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-arab-summits-hold-key-viable-gaza-plan>) showed a level of synchronicity not often seen in the region. Unfortunately, the follow-up meeting in Cairo did not appear to produce a plan acceptable to the United States or Israel—an outcome that Riyadh seemingly anticipated by sending its foreign minister to the event in lieu of MbS, the de facto head of state. Meanwhile, the Saudis are expected to continue pursuing normalization with Israel after the Gaza war just as they did during the Biden administration—a goal that could open unprecedented security and economic opportunities in the region.

Lebanon. After eight years of tensions stemming from Riyadh's discontent with Tehran's outsize influence in Lebanon, Beirut [seemed to turn a corner](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-should-aim-riviera-lebanon) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-should-aim-riviera-lebanon>) in recent weeks by forming a government that has vowed to curb the influence of top Iranian proxy Hezbollah. In response, MbS appears to have launched a bilateral reset, hosting President Aoun last week and reactivating a \$3 billion security assistance package for the Lebanese army that had been suspended since 2016 due to mounting friction over Iran. Their joint statement also called for the disarmament of any nonstate groups (namely, Hezbollah), as well as a full Israeli military withdrawal from all parts of Lebanon.

Ukraine war. On February 18, Riyadh hosted U.S.-Russian talks between delegations led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, with the two governments [agreeing](https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-riyadh-talks-trump-putin-rubio-0c3beebfef5839e9d509ff58239a6bc5) (<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-riyadh-talks-trump-putin-rubio-0c3beebfef5839e9d509ff58239a6bc5>) to work together on ending the war in Ukraine and improving their economic and diplomatic relations. Although Ukraine was [notably excluded](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russian-win-ukraine-would-be-us-loss-middle-east) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russian-win-ukraine-would-be-us-loss-middle-east>) from those talks, the kingdom welcomed President Zelensky earlier this week and hosted talks between U.S. and Ukrainian delegations, potentially laying the groundwork for a Trump-Putin summit. Riyadh is no doubt pleased with [reports](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/11/world/ukraine-us-talks-saudi-arabia-intl/index.html) (<https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/11/world/ukraine-us-talks-saudi-arabia-intl/index.html>) that the

talks were successful, resulting in the Ukrainians accepting a thirty-day ceasefire (so long as Russia complies) and Washington resuming security assistance and intelligence sharing with Kyiv. Riyadh's decision to remain neutral on the war from the outset and avoid alienating any of the parties has helped make it a palatable venue for such negotiations, resulting in a major win for the kingdom's campaign to become a legitimate global mediator.

Regional Implications

Riyadh is not the only Gulf actor that has tried to increase its diplomatic profile—Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have sought global mediator roles as well. Doha has filled the niche of mediating with unpalatable actors like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Taliban, and Iran, seemingly content with taking a backseat to Riyadh's bigger ambitions. For example, although Qatar was the lone Arab League holdout against normalizing relations with the Assad regime, it has let the Saudis lead engagement with the new Syrian government—perhaps out of a desire to focus on avoiding renewed friction with its neighbors (like the tension that led to the 2017 Gulf blockade against Qatar) rather than vying for top mediator status.

A Saudi diplomatic rivalry with the United Arab Emirates seems more likely, however. The two nations are already **competing** (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/25/the-hidden-rivalry-of-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae/>) for foreign investments, so seeing them vie for global diplomatic prestige would come as no surprise. So far, the UAE has asserted a leading role by forging the Abraham Accords with Israel, hosting the Negev Forum to advance Arab-Israeli cooperation, brokering key regional agreements like the 2018 Eritrea-Ethiopia deal (notably, with Saudi help), and **facilitating** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c938x3v148yo>) a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine.

Yet their mutually growing influence could create friction between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi down the road, potentially destabilizing broader Gulf dynamics. One possibility may come after the Gaza war winds down, when Saudi Arabia will likely resume exploring what incentives it can get for normalizing relations with Israel. If Riyadh's package is better than what the UAE received for the Abraham Accords (e.g., a **mutual defense treaty** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-saudi-defense-cooperation-next-steps>)), tensions could rise.

U.S. Policy Priorities

Overall, the kingdom's emerging regional leadership has the potential to advance U.S. interests, but Washington will need to stay wary of those instances where U.S. and Saudi interests diverge. Officials must also be mindful not to play favorites when balancing Gulf relationships. Indeed, the United States should take great pains to avoid overreliance on any one Gulf country, since this could complicate other priorities in the region. A better approach is to leverage existing relationships and identify potential mediation opportunities for different Gulf countries based on which roles align best with their strengths and interests—and with U.S. interests.

In Saudi Arabia's case, the kingdom has demonstrated the desire and ability to play a bigger diplomatic role, and such actors are necessary for resolving chronic problems in the Middle East—not least the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Washington should therefore support these aspirations while ensuring that Riyadh contributes constructively to other aspects of regional stability. By leaning in to engage and encourage Saudi leadership, the United States can help Riyadh—and, by extension, the regional partners it pulls in—to become more self-reliant and proactive in addressing conflicts.

On the world stage, turning to Saudi mediation during crises like the Ukraine war can serve the twin goals of improving the chances for a favorable resolution and providing the kingdom with the vote of confidence it needs to grab the brass ring of global legitimacy. Indeed, a stable, prosperous, and helpful Saudi Arabia aligns well with the paramount U.S. interests of promoting security and economic prosperity in the Middle East and beyond. By placing

more trust in partners who have been working with America for years, Washington can let regional powers assume greater responsibility without compromising U.S. influence or strategic interests.

Elizabeth Dent is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and former director for the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula at the Pentagon. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Resetting U.S. Relations with the Palestinian Authority?](#)

Mar 12, 2025

◆
Ghaith al-Omari

(/policy-analysis/resetting-us-relations-palestinian-authority)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Enough with the Hand-Wringing: Al-Sharaa Is Better Than Assad](#)

Mar 11, 2025

◆
David Schenker

(/policy-analysis/enough-hand-wringing-al-sharaa-better-assad)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Short-Lived U.S.- Hamas Talks Are a Cautionary Tale for Washington and Jerusalem](#)

Mar 11, 2025

◆

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Great Power Competition \(/policy-analysis/great-power-competition\)](/policy-analysis/great-power-competition)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-states)