

India – Saudi Arabia relations

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Manifest Pedagogy

West Asia as a region in general is important both from the World History and International Relations. Usually the region as a whole is focused on, but some important countries like Saudi Arabia, Israel can be standalone questions. Riyadh Declaration question has already been asked once!

In news

The Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, made a visit to India

Placing it in the syllabus

Bilateral relations of India

Static dimensions

1. History of India – Saudi Arabia relations
2. Riyadh declaration and Look West Asia policy

Current dimensions

1. Developments under the present Government
2. Saudi Crown Prince visit to India

Content

History of relations

- India and Saudi Arabia enjoy cordial and friendly relations reflecting the centuries-old economic and

socio-cultural ties. The establishment of diplomatic relations in 1947 was followed by high-level visits from both sides.

- In history, there have been 4 visits to Saudi Arabia by an Indian Prime Minister: Jawaharlal Nehru (1955), Indira Gandhi (1982), Manmohan Singh (2010) and Narendra Modi (2016). The two countries share similar views on combating terrorism.
- In recent times, the historic visit of King Abdullah to India in 2006 resulted in the signing of '**Delhi Declaration**' imparting a fresh momentum to the bilateral relationship. The visit provided the framework for cooperation in all fields of mutual interest.
- The reciprocal visit by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to Saudi Arabia in 2009 raised the level of bilateral engagement to '**Strategic Partnership**' and the '**Riyadh Declaration**' signed during the visit captured the spirit of enhanced cooperation in political, economic, security and defence realms.
- The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Riyadh in April 2016 could be seen as a turning point in our growing engagement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has taken an upward strategic direction.

Manmohan Singh Look West policy and Riyadh declaration 2009

- Former PM had launched the "**Look West**" Policy to boost cooperation with Gulf countries.
- The former Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, had authorized the **Union Commerce and External Affairs Ministries** to begin negotiations with the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** to conclude a India-GCC Free Trade Agreement.
- He had also approved negotiations with individual **member countries of GCC**, namely, **United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia** for a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement covering

services sector and investment.

- Former PM Manmohan Singh had mentioned that, “the Gulf region, like South-East and South Asia, is part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all our neighbours in our wider Asian neighbourhood. India has successfully pursued a Look East” policy to come closer to the countries of South-East Asia. We must, similarly, come closer to our western neighbours in the Gulf.”
- **Riyadh declaration 2009:** India and Saudi Arabia signed the Riyadh Declaration to put their seal of approval on rapidly growing ties that were moving towards a **strategic partnership** covering security, economic, defence, technology and political areas and including **joint combat of terrorism**. With this declaration, the two sides agreed to enhance cooperation in exchange of information relating to terrorist activities, money laundering, narcotics, arms and human trafficking and develop joint strategies to combat these threats
- **Initiatives with Saudi Arabia under the present government**
- India and Saudi Arabia have, in recent years, shared a healthy bilateral equation based on mutual interests – extensive trade, energy imports, cultural contacts, and growing security cooperation.
- Though India-Saudi ties began to strengthen with high-level visits from either side during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) years (2004-14), an Indian inertia did remain in terms of outreach to the
- vital Persian Gulf country, given its significance for the region and India’s interests in it. Since taking power in 2014, the Modi government has inherited and reinvigorated this bilateral warmth and has prioritized key areas of mutual benefit. In fact, by visiting the four major Persian Gulf countries since August 2015–UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar–Modi has revitalized India’s relations with the entire belt.

- Currently, India-Saudi relations revolve around two important areas:

1. Trade and investment and
2. Defense and security cooperation.

- India's elevating strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia affirms New Delhi's priorities in the region. In July 2018 when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Riyadh and met King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud. **Five key agreements were signed** that addressed issues ranging from anti-money laundering to drug trafficking. Both the countries also agreed on the need to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation primarily through the exchange of visits by experts and military officials and suggested conducting joint military exercises and supplying arms and ammunition.
- India successfully participated as 'Guest of Honour' in the 32nd edition of the prestigious **Saudi National Heritage and Cultural Festival Janadriyah, 2018** in February.
- Currently, Saudi Arabia is the **4th largest trade partner** (after China, USA and Japan) and is a major source of energy as we **import around 17 % of our crude oil** requirement from the Kingdom.
- It is important to acknowledge that Modi is building on the legacy of his predecessors – Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. Balancing relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel or Qatar is never easy, but New Delhi has managed to do it with considerable success.
- **Recent visit by the Saudi king and important agreements**
- The **Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman**, made a visit to India during his journey to many Asian countries in **February, 2019**. The crown prince met the Indian prime minister as well as a number of high officials in India. The main aim of the visit was to improve the historical ties between the two countries.

- Both sides have showed serious concern towards terrorism.
- During his visit, the two sides agreed on increasing trade relations between them. Moreover, the number of Indian pilgrims performing Hajj in Saudi Arabia has been increased to 200,000 every year.
- The Saudi prince expected that the Saudi investment in India may reach \$100 billion in the next two years.
- **Saudi Arabia's relationship with Pakistan and the impact on India**
 - During the visit to Pakistan by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, The Saudi Foreign Minister stated that Riyadh is committed to “de-escalating” tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir must not be read as an endorsement of the Indian stand but as an attempt to intervene in the dispute rather than accept its bilateral nature.
 - **New Delhi should, therefore, not be overly optimistic that growing Saudi-Indian relations in the economic sphere will succeed in prying Riyadh away from Islamabad.**
 - There are **various reasons** that lead to this conclusion, they are:
 1. Pakistan is far too important to Saudi Arabia for internal security reasons for Riyadh to sacrifice its stake in Islamabad in order to appease New Delhi. The Pakistan Army has more than once acted as the Saudi rulers' praetorian guard and given the uncertain hold of MBS on his country, despite impressions to the contrary, he may need the services of Pakistani mercenaries in the near future.
 2. Afghanistan has been a point of strategic convergence for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia going back to the 1980s when the Saudis used Pakistan as a conduit for material assistance to the Islamist forces fighting the Soviet Union and its proxy government in Kabul. With U.S.

withdrawal from Afghanistan and the consequent expansion of Taliban influence very much on the cards, Pakistan's strategic value as the Taliban's patron has grown exponentially. Saudi Arabia is interested in curbing Iranian influence in Afghanistan and needs Pakistan to contain Tehran's ability to influence events in that country after the American withdrawal through its Tajik and Hazara allies.

- In the context of this strategic and economic nexus between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, it will be unwise for New Delhi to seriously believe that it will be able to wean Saudi Arabia away from Pakistan. India should take advantage of any benefit that accrues from India's economic relations with Saudi Arabia but should not pin much hope on Riyadh in the political-strategic sphere.
- **Saudi Arabia's relation with Iran and the impact on India**
- **Iran is Saudi Arabia's chief adversary in West Asia.** The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is being played out across the region, from Syria to Yemen.
- The modern rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia began just after the 1979 Iranian Revolution when Iran called on Muslims across the Middle East to replace their governments with theocratic regimes like its own. Tehran's zeal for revolution rattled Saudi Arabia, which began to back Sunni groups to counter it. By bankrolling Iraq's bloody invasion of Iran in 1981, the Saudis and their Arab Gulf allies set the tone for the bitterness that has lasted to the present.
- Though sanctions on Iran by the USA, India has maintained a balance between the two hence it is also necessary to be maintained with respect to Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- Given that the rivalry between Saudi and Iran could eventually lead to war—endangering India's interests in the Middle East, where it sources most of its energy and

where millions of Indian emigrants live—New Delhi must carefully navigate the growing divide in the Persian Gulf. If it does so successfully, it can avoid getting entangled in regional tensions and consolidate its position as a key player in the Middle East.