

International diplomacy of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East: Strategies for strengthening regional leadership

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■ **Abstract.** The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is one of the key players in the Middle East and plays a major role in shaping the regional agenda. Its strategic rivalry with Iran poses new challenges to stability in the region, so an analysis of the changes in economic and foreign policy activities carried out by the country's leadership in the 2020s is relevant to understanding the development of the political situation in the Middle East. The purpose of the study was to analyse the main principles and changes in the KSA's diplomatic strategies, as well as to study the mechanisms and tools used to ensure stability and strengthen its position in the region. The research was conducted using the methods of analysis, synthesis, comparison, and specification of information. The study found that an important factor driving changes in the KSA's policy is the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This strategy focuses on diversifying the economy, reducing dependence on oil and stimulating growth in sectors such as tourism and renewable energy. The KSA is also actively expanding its foreign policy ties, seeking new partners and reducing its dependence on the United States. Within the six-country Gulf organization, there are internal contradictions that lead to conflicts, including the 2017 diplomatic crisis with Qatar, but the KSA is changing its approach, which helps to resolve such conflicts. The KSA plays an important role in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the United Nations, promoting its interests at the global level. The results obtained allow us to understand the actions of the KSA in the context of regional and global politics, and can be used to develop strategies for interaction with this country

■ **Keywords:** Middle East region; foreign policy strategy; diplomatic crisis in Qatar; Gulf Cooperation Council; Saudi Vision 2030 programme

■ Introduction

The study of the international diplomacy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) reveals the problem of the complexity of relations in the Middle East, where religious, political and economic interests of different states intertwine. These factors have led to rivalry not only between the KSA and Iran, but also within the broader regional context, which includes the struggle for political and economic influence, resource allocation, and interaction with external actors. The KSA occupies a leading position in the Middle East due to its strategic location, large oil reserves, which make it one of the richest countries, and religious significance. The

reforms introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman are aimed at economic and political modernization of the country to strengthen its regional leadership. Against the backdrop of growing tensions and competition with Iran, the role of the KSA is becoming critical to ensuring stability and security not only in the region but also globally. Therefore, the study of changes in the KSA's economic policy and diplomatic strategies is of great interest to many scholars.

The study by K. Czornik (2020) analyses the factors that allow the KSA to maintain its status as a regional power and assesses the effectiveness of reforms aimed at shaping

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the country's new image. The author notes that one of the key elements of the transformation is changes in the religious sphere. In particular, the KSA has limited the powers of the religious police, allowing greater social freedoms, such as the reopening of cinemas, music concerts, and the gradual granting of rights to women. Thus, the changes in the religious sphere were demonstrated, but it was not indicated how this affects relations with other countries.

In particular, F.J. Hasanov *et al.* (2020) analysed the Saudi Vision 2030 state programme and pointed out that its main goal is to significantly increase non-oil exports to 50% of gross domestic product (GDP). This study analyses the impact of key factors on KSA's non-oil exports in the context of reforms and changes in the oil market. The author's modelling to 2030 highlights the importance of industrial production, the financial sector and transport. However, this study focused exclusively on economic factors, without taking into account geopolitical aspects.

B.R. Pridham (2020) examines various aspects of the relationship between the Gulf states and the Western powers, focusing on historical, economic, cultural and international aspects. It provides a view from both sides – both from a Western perspective and from the perspective of the Gulf states. One important aspect of this topic is the conflicts between Arab countries, but the book focuses on the position of all Arab countries, without a detailed analysis of the KSA.

S. Parvathy (2021) focused on the 2017 diplomatic crisis between Qatar and several Arab states, including the KSA, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt, which led to the severance of diplomatic relations and the imposition of economic sanctions. The coalition led by the KSA accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and violating the agreements of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The criticism also concerned the role of Al Jazeera and Qatar's relations with Iran. Various world powers supported the diplomatic settlement. The author examines the topic of resolving the diplomatic crisis in general, without a detailed review of the role of the KSA's changing approaches in solving this problem.

T. Borck (2024) offers a new analytical framework for understanding the concept of stability and its impact on the foreign policy of the Gulf states, demonstrating that declarations of stability do not always lead to strategic coherence. However, his book did not address the economic factors that play an important role in the current policy of the KSA and the Middle East in general. It was also important to study the issue of relations between Iran and the KSA. In one of the articles by S.U. Jalal *et al.* (2023), the authors analyse the recent reconciliation between these countries after a long period of confrontation. The article examines the causes of the conflict, the negotiation process in Baghdad, the role of Oman and China as mediators in reconciliation, and the changing geopolitical situation in the Middle East. This study clearly describes the influence of foreign countries in the context of resolving conflicts between Iran and the KSA, but does not focus on the key factors of the confrontation between these countries.

A review of existing studies shows that, despite the considerable interest in politics and reforms in the KSA, they either do not focus on the topic of international relations of the KSA, but rather examine a single component in detail; or the study of international politics is carried out without analysing structural components, such as economic strategy, problems of regional organisations, etc. This study aims to examine the issue of KSA's diplomatic strategies in the Middle East region.

The purpose of this study was to analyse the main principles of the KSA's foreign policy in the Middle East, aimed at strengthening the country's position as a regional leader. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to study the changes in the KSA's economic and foreign policy strategy; the activities of the GCC; the role of the KSA in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC); the conflict with Iran, including its causes and current state.

■ Materials and Methods

At the beginning of the study, the method of document analysis was used. In particular, the initiative "Saudi Vision 2030" was analysed, which provides for economic, political, social and religious reforms. A detailed analysis of the document allows us to understand to a large extent the changes in the directions of the KSA's activities. In particular, we are talking about plans to change the economic structure of the kingdom, and develop tourism and international relations. In addition, the content analysis examined the founding documents of the KSA's cooperation with the United Nations (2020).

The historical method was used to study individual events. In particular, it was applied when considering the Qatari diplomatic crisis. The events that took place during the confrontation between Qatar and the KSA were described, and the positions of each country and their actions to resolve the conflict were examined. This allowed us to fully understand the causes of the diplomatic crisis and its subsequent resolution.

The comparative method was used to analyse the KSA's policies and actions in the context of confrontation with Iran and other countries in the region, such as the UAE and Qatar. This made it possible to identify differences and similarities in their approach to regional security, economic and political reforms, strengthening their status among other states and consolidating their position as a leading power in the Middle East. The article analyses the economic competition between the KSA and the UAE. The comparison was based on the analysis of economic and diplomatic steps within the GCC organization, which allowed assessing the effectiveness of KSA's cooperation within regional initiatives and studying the global policy of the state, which is at the forefront among other Arab states in the Middle East, as well as its communications in the international arena from the perspective of a state that is updating its status among other developed countries.

An important method was the analysis of statistical data. The study used data from the international analytical

company S&P Global on oil exports and non-oil GDP growth (Gnana, 2022). This made it possible to examine how economic reforms, such as economic diversification and reduced dependence on oil, were the main indicators that influenced the country's position. In addition, a synthesis of the results obtained in the course of the study was used to formulate generalized conclusions. This made it possible to identify the links between the KSA's economic and political reforms, its international diplomacy, and strategies for conflicts in the region, including the confrontation with Iran at various levels of activity of both countries claiming leadership.

Another important method was the case-study method. Its essence lies in the detailed study of a particular element of the topic in order to reach new conclusions. In this study, this method was used to examine the topic of the KSA's confrontation with the Gulf countries, such as Qatar, the UAE, and Iran, the KSA's participation in the settlement of regional conflicts and its influence on international organisations. The forecasting method is used to assess the prospects for the development of diplomatic relations between the KSA and its future influence on regional leadership.

■ Results

Key aspects of political and economic reforms in the KSA

To understand the latest political innovations in the KSA, it is important to pay attention to the Saudi Vision 2030 programme. The main goal of this programme is to strengthen the KSA's position in the global transition to clean energy sources through economic diversification. Reducing dependence on exports of natural resources, in particular oil, which accounts for 74% of the country's total exports, has long been on the agenda. This issue has become even more important after the economic turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, when oil prices fell to record lows (Hasanov *et al.*, 2022). The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on KSA's oil exports is demonstrated in Figure 1, which shows the dynamics of KSA's oil exports over the period 2014-2020.

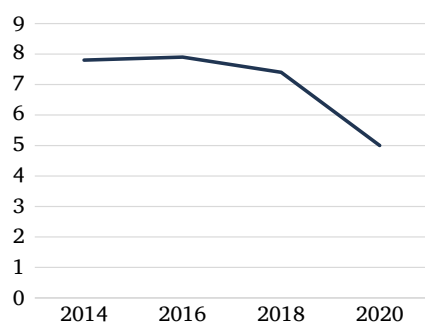


Figure 1. KSA oil exports in 2014-2020, MM bbl
Source: compiled by the author based on J. Gnana (2022)

Thus, it is important for the KSA to develop various sectors of the economy so that it is not dependent on a single oil sector, which, as demonstrated by the pandemic, can be unstable. In order to expand non-oil economic

activities, KSA is taking significant steps towards economic diversification. One of the proofs of this is that the Vision 2030 Strategy envisages intensive involvement of the KSA's sovereign wealth fund, worth USD 700 billion, to invest in the development of non-oil sectors. These include renewable energy, sports, tourism, entertainment, and artificial intelligence (Guendouz & Ouassaf, 2020). Key initiatives include privatization efforts, increasing private sector contributions, and attracting foreign investment. Ambitious infrastructure projects such as NEOM and The Line focus on sustainability and smart technologies, and the kingdom is also investing heavily in renewable energy and clean hydrogen production. These reforms and projects are transforming the KSA economy and positioning it for a diversified, sustainable future.

To support economic diversification, the Crown Prince has initiated a series of reforms aimed at opening up the KSA's conservative society, focusing mainly on the social and cultural spheres. In particular, these reforms include the promotion of a more tolerant interpretation of Sunni Islam, replacing the traditional Wahhabi approach, religious, and labour reforms aimed at empowering women, including the elimination of religious police, allowing women to drive vehicles, and abolishing the requirement to obtain a guardian's permission to work or travel (Czornik, 2020; Al Zomia *et al.*, 2024). Such reforms are of great importance for the development of international policy, as the move away from dogmatic Islamism creates more favourable conditions for attracting foreign investment to the country and for the development of international relations in general.

To expand its foreign policy relations, the government organized several events that provide the basis for future dialogue with various world powers. In particular, the KSA held a series of summits with the participation of the GCC, as well as representatives of the United States, China, and Central Asian countries. In addition, the KSA took part in the sixth Russia-GCC Joint Ministerial Meeting on Strategic Dialogue held in Moscow (Lima, 2023).

The first-ever Sino-Arab Summit was held in Riyadh on 9 December 2022 with the participation of representatives of 21 Arab League countries and China. President Xi Jinping proposed "eight joint actions" for cooperation, and the summit concluded with the Riyadh Declaration to build a Sino-Arab community of shared destiny. The summit emphasized strengthening ties in areas such as development, peace and mutual prosperity.

On 19 July 2023, the KSA organized the first Gulf-Central Asia Summit, dedicated to strengthening strategic and political ties between the Gulf and Central Asian countries. Discussions focused on economic cooperation, investment, culture and trade, with a particular emphasis on energy partnerships and infrastructure projects. The summit marked a shift in geopolitical dynamics, highlighting the growing importance of Central Asia for the Gulf's foreign policy and economic strategy (Lima, 2023).

KSA's relations with the United States play an important role. Over the past 20 years, there has been a certain

distancing of the KSA from its long-standing strategic partner. The KSA's desire to distance itself from the United States is due to several factors. The kingdom is seeking greater autonomy in its foreign policy and regional leadership, partly due to disappointment with past US decisions, such as the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran and its reluctance to intervene in Syria. In addition, the KSA is cautious about Washington's changing priorities, such as the US pivot to Asia and America's reduced dependence on Middle Eastern oil. The kingdom has also faced criticism from the US over its human rights record and involvement in Yemen, which has further strained relations. This distancing reflects the KSA's efforts to diversify its alliances, exploring stronger ties with states such as China and Russia, while maintaining a certain level of cooperation with the United States to protect common interests (Melkumyan, 2024).

However, it should be understood that relations between the United States and the KSA are at a high level, as evidenced by the preparation of a major agreement between the two countries. Its essence is to create a comprehensive pact that covers strengthening bilateral defence cooperation, economic and technological initiatives, and support for the KSA's civilian nuclear programme. The key component of the agreement is the normalization of relations between the KSA and Israel, which should go hand in hand with the identification of a reliable path to the creation of a Palestinian state. This agreement, which should reduce Iran's regional influence, is part of a broader US strategy to stabilize the Middle East and strengthen the alliance with Riyadh amid growing activity of Russia and China (Anderson *et al.*, 2024).

As part of this agreement, the United States lifted the ban on the sale of offensive weapons to the KSA, resuming supplies. This step is aimed at strengthening the regional alliance with Riyadh, curbing Iran's influence, and ensuring stability in the face of threats from other states, including Russia and China. The United States seeks to complete the deal before the presidential election to record diplomatic achievements and strengthen its position in the Middle East (Pamuk *et al.*, 2024a).

The problems between the US and KSA in signing a major agreement arise from geopolitical instability and divergent priorities. The KSA demands that Israel accept conditions for normalizing relations, including ending the conflict in Gaza and finding a reliable path to the creation of a Palestinian state, which the Israeli government is not yet ready to do. At the same time, the kingdom has alternative options for cooperation with China and Russia, which weakens the US negotiating position. The difficulties are also related to the fact that any formalised agreement will require the approval of the US Senate, which may block it without normalizing KSA's relations with Israel. This creates a risk of a breakdown in negotiations and forces the US to seek a compromise approach, in particular through defence agreements that bypass the need for Senate ratification (Pamuk, 2024b).

Thus, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a profound transformation through economic diversification, social reforms, and an active foreign policy agenda. In particular, Riyadh is strengthening ties beyond its traditional partners, including the United States, by fostering relationships with China, Russia, and Central Asia. However, balancing these relationships remains challenging, especially as Riyadh negotiates a significant agreement with Washington, which is contingent on sensitive regional issues such as relations with Israel and Palestine. Through these efforts, Saudi Arabia seeks to redefine its role on the global stage as a diversified, progressive, and geopolitically influential state.

KSA's regional leadership policy in the Middle East

The KSA primarily seeks to play a key role in the region and maintain its leadership. The main platform for this is the GCC. It is a regional intergovernmental organization that functions as a political and economic union. It consists of six countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The organization is headquartered in Riyadh, the capital of the KSA (Yousef & Abdel Ghafar, 2022). The KSA plays a leading role in the organization, as it is the largest country among the Council members by area and population, and has significant energy resources, making it a leading force in the organization's political and economic issues. The Kingdom is actively promoting joint defence and security initiatives, especially in view of regional threats such as Iran, and supports a collective response to challenges in the Persian Gulf. In addition, the KSA plays an important role in energy policy issues aimed at stabilizing oil markets.

An important point is that the KSA advocates the integration of GCC members' efforts to develop economic cooperation, including initiatives to create a common market, customs union, and a single currency in the region (Pridham, 2020). As the largest country in the region, the KSA is actively promoting key initiatives and programmes aimed at integrating and unifying policies in various sectors, such as religion, finance, trade, customs, and tourism, as reflected in the decisions of the GCC Supreme Council. In addition, the GCC aims to increase the region's competitiveness, with a focus on promoting scientific and technological progress. The Kingdom is actively investing in the creation of research centres, scientific research and technological innovations, especially in the areas of mining, agriculture, water management and livestock, and the development of joint ventures. The KSA also encourages the active participation of the private sector in the development of the economy and social ties between citizens of the GCC member states, which contributes to the integration and development of the region as a whole. Besides, the KSA initiated the formation of the joint armed forces "Shield of the Peninsula" to ensure collective regional security and joint rapid response to threats. Efforts were also aimed at promoting cooperation with the private sector and strengthening social ties between citizens of member states (Grabowski, 2019).

At the same time, there are quite strong contradictions between the GCC members, which lead to frequent regional conflicts, with the KSA playing a leading role in their course and resolution.

KSA's disagreements with the countries of the Middle East (Qatar, UAE, Iran)

The diplomatic crisis in Qatar (2017-2021) was caused by regional geopolitical contradictions that escalated after the Arab Spring. The key reason was Qatar's multi-vector foreign policy, which contradicted the strategic interests of the KSA and other GCC countries. Qatar supported revolutionary changes, while the KSA sought to maintain the status quo (Albasoos *et al.*, 2021). Tensions between the two countries were exacerbated by the activities of Al Jazeera, which provided a platform for covering protests in the region, perceived by the KSA as a threat to stability. Qatar's deepening cooperation with Iran also caused concern in the KSA, as Tehran was considered a strategic rival (Aljassar & Rosenson, 2022). Historical tensions were exacerbated by Qatar's support for Islamist movements, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, which the KSA considered a threat (Gibran, 2023).

The KSA took measures that led to Qatar's isolation, including a blockade and ultimatums, including demands to close Al Jazeera and limit ties with Iran. Qatar rejected these demands, considering them a violation of sovereignty (Gibran, 2023). In the international context, the crisis caused concern, and Qatar received support from Turkey and Iran, which increased their supplies of goods. The situation began to change in early 2021, when the KSA, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt agreed to lift the blockade of Qatar during the GCC summit in Al-Ula. This decision was the result of lengthy negotiations and an awareness of the need for Arab unity in the face of common threats (Parvathy, 2021). The diplomatic crisis ended with the restoration of relations, but left deep divisions in regional politics.

The rapprochement between the KSA and the UAE was driven by several political and geostrategic factors. One of the main reasons for this rapprochement was the common threat that both countries perceived in Qatar's support for Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In June 2017, the KSA, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar in an effort to isolate it and force it to stop supporting radical groups that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi believed could threaten the stability of the region. This decision helped strengthen ties between the KSA and the UAE, which was also reflected in their foreign policy cooperation (Van Slooten, 2019).

In addition, the UAE and KSA formed a new political and military alliance, which was announced at the GCC summit in December 2017. This contributed to the formation of their joint strategy in the region, which emphasized their common interest in maintaining stability in the Middle East. This alliance seemed to be a response to the crisis within the GCC caused by disagreements between the members of the organization.

Soon after the initial rapprochement between the KSA and the UAE, disagreements over the situation in Yemen emerged. The main disagreement was over the KSA's support for the Hadi government, while the UAE financed local militias with different goals. Particularly important was the difference in approaches to the Islamist movement Islah: the KSA cooperated with it, while the UAE categorically rejected the Muslim Brotherhood.

Economic competition between the KSA and the UAE intensified significantly in 2019-2021, causing serious disagreements between the two countries. Both states, being the most influential members of the GCC, are actively working to diversify their economies, which has led to increased rivalry at various levels (Parvathy, 2021). One of the key aspects of economic competition is attracting foreign investment. The UAE has been a leader in this aspect due to its attractive business environment, developed infrastructure, and liberal economic laws. In 2022, the UAE attracted a record USD 23 billion in foreign direct investment, which was significantly higher than the KSA, where investment inflows fell by 59% to USD 7.9 billion (Coates Ulrichsen, 2024).

The KSA, in response to the UAE's success, has begun to implement policies aimed at increasing the competitiveness of its economy. One example of such measures was the restrictions on imports from the Gulf countries introduced in 2021, which effectively limited duty-free access for goods produced in free economic zones, which are located mainly in the UAE. This decision of the KSA can be perceived as a direct challenge to the economic interests of the UAE.

The KSA is actively working to attract major international players to do business in its territory. In December 2022, the country introduced new rules prohibiting government agencies from cooperating with companies headquartered outside the KSA. This measure is aimed at encouraging multinationals to open their regional offices in the KSA rather than in the UAE. The KSA aims to attract up to 480 companies to establish their regional headquarters in the country by 2030 (Coates Ulrichsen, 2024).

Based on the material presented, it can be summarized that the KSA is trying to establish relations with its neighbours when there are disagreements over the support of certain social movements or positions on certain events, as was shown by the example of the settlement of the diplomatic crisis in Qatar. Instead, it should be understood that the KSA has clear economic priorities, and the actions taken by Riyadh often contradict the UAE's priorities. Thus, it can be assumed that conflicts between the KSA and the UAE will continue.

In general, within the GCC, the KSA is actively working to overcome conflicts with other members of the organization, as demonstrated by the diplomatic crisis with Qatar. Although formally the KSA maintains friendly relations with the UAE, there is a risk of new conflicts in the future due to the difference in the economic priorities of these countries.

The contradictions between the KSA and Iran are a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that includes regional, political and economic aspects that affect bilateral relations between these countries. Firstly, the main reason for the disagreements between the KSA and Iran is religious differences, which lead to deep geopolitical differences. Conflicts between the KSA and Iran are deeply rooted in religious differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam. Since the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, relations between these countries have remained tense due to their opposing political and ideological positions. The KSA, as a Sunni monarchy, actively opposes the Shiite influence promoted by Iran. This leads to support for different sides in numerous regional conflicts, such as the civil war in Yemen and the war in Syria. These religious differences are reflected in their impact on the Muslim world, as Iran actively supports Shiite groups and governments in the region, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. This support is a cause for concern in the KSA, which seeks to maintain its leading role among Sunni countries.

Secondly, the geopolitical ambitions of the KSA and Iran come into conflict in a number of strategic aspects. Iran's involvement in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, as well as its support for regional allies, is perceived by the KSA as a threat to its security and stability. In Yemen, the conflict between government forces backed by the KSA and Houthi rebels backed by Iran has become an important element of the dispute. The Houthis, a Shiite group, regularly attack Saudi territories and commercial shipping in the Red Sea, which negatively affects the security and economic interests of the KSA.

Thirdly, disagreements between the countries also affect their economic interests. For example, the disputes over the Dorra oil and gas field in the Persian Gulf reflect not only territorial but also resource disputes that complicate cooperation between the KSA and Iran, which has different positions on resource allocation (Haidar & McGrin, 2018).

In Syria, Iran actively supports the government of Bashar al-Assad, while the KSA supports various opposition groups, which also contributes to the escalation of the conflict between the two states. An important role in this context is played by Iran's support for Shiite groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, which exacerbates disputes with the KSA, which sees these actions as a threat to its security (Mabon, 2022).

In the early 2020s, efforts were made to ease tensions, including the restoration of diplomatic ties between the KSA and Iran. In March 2023, the two countries agreed to restore diplomatic relations after a seven-year break, which was an important milestone in the normalization process. These discussions took place in Beijing, marking a significant change in Middle East diplomacy, which has been marked by hostility since 2016. The agreement includes commitments to respect sovereignty and a renewed security cooperation pact, indicating a potential shift towards regional stability. Both countries reopened their embassies and held high-level talks, and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Riyadh in November 2023 (Jalal *et al.*, 2023).

However, despite these diplomatic achievements, significant contradictions continue to exist. Firstly, this concerns issues of security and influence in the region. For example, the conflicts in Yemen and Syria, as well as the disputes over the Dorra oil and gas field in the Persian Gulf, continue to be sources of tension. Disagreements over Iran's policies in the region, including its support for regional allies such as Hezbollah and its influence on Shiite groups that the KSA views as a threat, are an obstacle to full normalization of relations (Jalal *et al.*, 2023).

Thus, although recent steps in the diplomatic sphere indicate some progress, the deep contradictions between the KSA and Iran in religious, political and economic aspects remain significant and continue to determine the nature of their relations. And in the future, these factors may cause new conflicts. In view of this, the KSA is changing its approaches to geopolitical activities in order to increase its influence in the region. By engaging in a dialogue with Iran, the KSA demonstrates its commitment to diplomacy over confrontation, which can contribute to joint efforts to address common security challenges. In addition, its partnerships, especially with China, demonstrate a balanced approach to foreign policy that takes into account both regional interests and global economic dynamics.

The role of the KSA in international organisations OPEC and the United Nations

The KSA seeks to play a leading role not only in the Middle East region, but to be a significant player in the world. Firstly, the KSA seeks to gain a leadership position in OPEC due to its strategic role as the largest oil exporter and an influential player in the global energy arena. In the context of growing competition among oil-producing countries and dynamic changes in the global market, KSA is aware that ensuring oil price stability and maintaining unity within OPEC are critical to protecting its economic interests. At the same time, the KSA's aspiration for leadership in OPEC is also linked to its intention to strengthen its geopolitical influence in the Middle East and to assert its role as a key player in shaping global energy policy.

OPEC is an international association of oil-producing countries founded on 14 September 1960 in Baghdad by five countries: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, KSA and Venezuela. OPEC unites 12 countries that account for approximately 30% of global oil production, of which 38% is accounted for by the organization's member states as of 2022. In addition, OPEC members hold about 79.5% of the world's proven oil reserves, of which 67.2% are located in the Middle East.

In 2014-2015, OPEC countries exceeded their oil production limits, while US oil production doubled due to hydraulic fracturing. This led to a reduction in US oil imports, an increase in global reserves, and a drop in oil prices until early 2016. The KSA, under the leadership of Minister Ali Al-Naimi, refused to cut production in an effort to maintain its market share and displace shale oil producers. In 2016, prices began to rise amid the production cuts, and in 2017,

OPEC and countries including Russia agreed to a production cut known as OPEC+.

In 2017-2020, KSA continued to play a key role in OPEC, promoting its economic and foreign policy interests. The period was marked by challenges, including lower demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic and growing competition from other oil-producing countries, especially Russia. KSA actively participated in the negotiations on the OPEC+ agreement, coordinating production cuts with countries such as Russia. Cooperation with Russia was important geopolitically, but often led to disagreements: conflicts of interest led to a short-term price war in early 2020, which affected the oil market (Alsahlavi, 2021).

After 2020, OPEC faced serious challenges due to internal conflicts among members caused by different national interests and economic strategies. KSA, as the largest oil exporter and OPEC leader, tried to balance its interests with the need to maintain the unity of the organization. The main conflict arose over the OPEC+ agreement to cut oil production in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The KSA insisted on a cautious approach to resuming production, while the UAE sought to take advantage of favourable market conditions as soon as possible. This led to tensions within OPEC that threatened to derail the deal. The KSA's role in conflict resolution caused dissatisfaction among some member states, making it difficult to reach a consensus.

After 2022, the KSA's position on reducing oil production became a key aspect of its energy policy and significantly affected relations with the United States. KSA continued to play a leading role in OPEC, focusing on stabilizing oil prices and maintaining a balance between supply and demand. However, these aspirations for stability have often run counter to the interests of the United States, which has sought to reduce oil prices to support its economy and fight inflation (Rudiany & Kusumawardhana, 2023).

One of the key aspects of the KSA's post-2022 policy was the decision to cut oil production under the OPEC+ deal. This decision was made amid fears of a possible oversupply of oil on the market, which could lead to a sharp drop in prices. KSA, as a leading OPEC member, advocated production cuts to maintain prices at a stable level. This decision caused dissatisfaction on the part of the United States, as high oil prices put additional pressure on the US economy, contributing to rising inflation and worsening the economic situation.

Conflicts between the KSA and the United States in this context escalated when the Joe Biden administration publicly expressed its dissatisfaction with the OPEC+ policy, accusing the KSA of contributing to the rise in world oil prices at a critical time for the global economy. The KSA, for its part, stressed the need to maintain a balanced approach to oil production, emphasizing its role in maintaining the stability of the global oil market. Relations between the two countries deteriorated, as the KSA believed that its decisions were in line with economic realities and strategic interests, while the United States saw this as a threat to its economic interests.

As a result, the KSA's position after 2022 on reducing oil production became an important factor in its foreign policy, which led to conflicts with its traditional ally, the United States. However, it is worth noting that the KSA successfully uses its position in OPEC not only for economic development, but also to increase its influence in the Middle East.

The development of KSA's international relations within the United Nations is of great importance for this state, since in its foreign policy activities, KSA focuses on openness to new investments and the development of peaceful relations. In view of this, cooperation within the United Nations as one of the world's largest international organisations, of which the country has been a member since 1945, is of great importance.

Now, the KSA cooperates with 23 United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, including regional offices. All of these organisations operate within the United Nations Development System under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator, contributing to the achievement of results that support the implementation of strategic initiatives such as Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Programme, as well as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 (Lima, 2023).

The partnership between the KSA and the United Nations is formalised in the form of a five-year Framework for Sustainable Development Cooperation, which is based on the United Nations Development System Reform. As part of this agreement, the United Nations Country Team has identified four strategic priority areas that are aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda. These priorities cover the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the 5Ps concept: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership (Table 1).

Table 1. Priority areas for the development of the SA in the context of cooperation with the United Nations

| Priority area | Explanation |
|-----------------------|--|
| People | The focus is on the principle of "Leaving No One Behind", which ensures that every person has the opportunity to fulfil their potential with dignity, justice, and equality in a healthy environment |
| Planet | Protection against degradation through the use of sustainable consumption and production methods, effective management of natural resources and the implementation of urgent measures to combat climate change |
| Flourishment | Aimed at developing social policy so that people have an equal right to develop their personal well-being |
| Peace and partnership | Focused on promoting the development of peaceful, just and inclusive societies, as well as mobilizing the necessary resources to realize these goals |

Source: compiled by the authors based on United Nations (2020)

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women unanimously elected the KSA to chair its 69th session in 2025, with Ambassador Abdulaziz Alwassil appointed to the post. This decision has been criticized by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which accuse the KSA of systematic discrimination against women and persecution of female activists. In particular, Amnesty International Deputy Director Sharyn Tadros stated that the KSA's appointment as head of the commission contradicts its history on women's rights and indicates a disconnect between the realities in the country and the commission's goals. Instead, the KSA argues that the appointment confirms its commitment to expanding women's rights and supporting international efforts in this area. In response to the criticism, the KSA government emphasises that its development strategy, Saudi Vision 2030, aims to ensure equal opportunities for women and integrate their abilities at all levels of society (Al Muhanna & McNally, 2024).

Thus, it can be argued that the KSA's cooperation with the United Nations is carried out within a clearly defined programme and the principles set out in it coincide with the principles of the current KSA policy. However, there are contradictions in some aspects, as illustrated by the example of women's rights. Overall, such activities have contributed to a positive global perception of the KSA and the development of its relations with many countries.

■ Discussion

As noted in the results of the study, since the late 2010s, the KSA has been actively changing its geopolitical vectors and ways of interaction with other states in the Middle East. This topic includes numerous aspects that have been studied by a number of scholars.

C. Georgios (2024) argued that terrorist activity in the Middle East causes a consistently negative reaction to the economic performance of the states of the region, including the KSA. In the conclusions to this scientific work, the author noted that the countries of this region need to focus on cooperation to counter terrorism rather than building up military power. It is worth agreeing with the author that increased military spending has a negative impact on economic performance. It should also be agreed that the conclusion that the most effective way to solve the problems of terrorism is to unite the countries of the Middle East is superficial, since, as already noted in the results of this study, the KSA has conflicts with a number of countries that are its neighbours, and in the course of these conflicts, ambiguous actions are taken against terrorist groups. Thus, the creation of a counter-terrorism strategy for all countries in the Middle East region is an effective solution to counteract this phenomenon and promote economic growth, provided that all states are united.

Q. Zhang *et al.* (2024) emphasised that energy is a key factor in ensuring the stability of national economies, and the role of the KSA in the global energy market remains extremely important. As one of the largest oil exporters, the

KSA shapes the global energy landscape and determines oil prices, which affects the economies of many countries. However, in order to reduce its economy's dependence on oil exports, KSA is reviewing its geostrategic priorities, focusing on cooperation with Asian countries and the introduction of innovative green energy technologies. This strategy not only contributes to economic diversification, which is one of the KSA's key priorities, but also has the potential to change the global energy situation. The introduction of green energy technologies and reduced dependence on fossil fuels may lead to a shift in energy priorities in the world, including increased investment in renewable energy sources. Thus, the KSA can not only strengthen its position in the international arena, but also become an important player in the transition to a sustainable energy future, which, in turn, will affect the structure and dynamics of the global energy market.

D. Wearing (2024) argued in his study that the British political discourse around the KSA Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman often highlights his "reforms". This narrative unfolds within the framework of orientalist notions, where the progressive and modern West is contrasted with the allegedly backward Arabia. In this context, the Arab "reformer" is portrayed as an ideal ally of the West, seeking to bring his society closer to Western standards, particularly in terms of women's rights. This racial narrative is used to justify British support for authoritarian regimes in the Gulf, helping to maintain the political economy of these international relations at the political level. Thus, it argued that the current Prince of KSA cannot be seen as a promising ally because his reforms are fictitious, and he is actually committed to reformist policies. One should disagree with these theses of the author, since, as shown in the study, the KSA has several goals to reform its own system in order to develop international relations. The government's strategy is not only economic reforms, but also a revision of Islamic values that help to reduce the rigid religious factor. In addition, the Saudi Vision 2030 envisages the expansion of women's political and civil rights in the country.

T. Borck (2024) argued in his book that in the 2010s, the Middle East underwent significant transformations and conflicts that culminated in the Arab uprisings and the global pandemic. During this period, the KSA, the UAE and Qatar, the three leading countries in the region, declared stability as the main goal of their policies. However, instead of uniting them, this common goal of stability has revealed hidden differences between their competing strategies. Although all three Gulf monarchies agreed that the Middle East had witnessed unprecedented instability in the wake of the Arab uprisings, their assessments of the causes and nature of the unrest differed significantly. This has led to different and sometimes contradictory approaches to regional policy and the role of external forces in maintaining stability. The absence of a single definition of stability has led to the creation of an analytical framework that links the concept to the idea of order, providing a valuable perspective for understanding the foreign policy of the Gulf

states. The author believed that in order to avoid further conflicts, these countries should develop an effective diplomatic strategy of cooperation that can ensure a high level of stability in their relations. This point of view can be confirmed by looking at the relations between Qatar and the KSA, where diplomatic concessions during the 2017-2020 crisis helped resolve the conflict. However, in the case of conflicts between the KSA and the UAE, the economic strategies of each country are the main reasons for disagreements, and therefore a solely diplomatic approach may not be sufficient to resolve them.

A. Moghadam *et al.* (2023) noted that in recent years, the Middle East has faced large-scale socio-political upheavals and numerous conflicts. The leading countries of the region, instead of direct interstate confrontation, preferred to implement their strategic goals through the use of proxy forces. The geopolitical struggle for spheres of influence has led to complex security dilemmas, forcing states to use different methods to protect their interests. Proxy actors have become key elements of their security strategies. In this context, there are five main players in the Middle East: Iran, Qatar, KSA, Turkey and the UAE, which actively use proxies in regional conflicts. The study shows that the growing dependence of these countries on proxies to achieve strategic advantages and strengthen national security increases the sense of insecurity and rivalry, which in turn contributes to the consolidation of complex and protracted conflicts. These conclusions are convincing, as the use of proxies is one of the main characteristics of instability in the Middle East region, and it is important to counteract this phenomenon.

In general, the issue of KSA's foreign policy is a rather complex and extensive topic that includes a number of aspects that may cause discussions. However, it should be understood that the KSA is currently doing a lot of work to change its imperatives and develop comprehensive international activities.

■ Conclusions

The study found that the main factor behind the changes in KSA's policy was the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030, developed by the Crown Prince in 2016. The strategy prioritizes economic diversification, reducing dependence on oil and promoting growth in new sectors such as tourism, renewable energy, sports and artificial intelligence. In addition, KSA is developing ambitious infrastructure projects such as NEOM and The Line. The KSA is also expanding its diplomatic relations, focusing on strengthening ties with neighbouring countries, resolving regional conflicts, and increasing its influence globally. At the same time, the country is working to reduce its dependence on the United States by diversifying its international relations. However, the level of cooperation between the KSA and the United

States is quite high, as evidenced by the preparation of a major agreement that provides for the development of nuclear, defence and economic cooperation, and which aims to strengthen the US position in the Middle East and develop the security sphere in the region.

The GCC, which comprises six Gulf states, is a key platform for political and economic cooperation between these countries. However, the organisation faces numerous internal contradictions that sometimes escalate into open conflicts. A striking example of such disagreements is the diplomatic crisis with Qatar that began in 2017, when the KSA and its allies broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism. Despite the severe restrictions imposed by the KSA against Qatar, the conflict was resolved due to changes in the KSA's priorities. Although the KSA and the UAE actively cooperate in many areas, economic differences still exist between them, especially in attracting foreign investment, which increases competition. The KSA tries to maintain good relations with the UAE, but economic interests may lead to new conflicts in the future. In general, the KSA successfully uses its activities within the GCC to strengthen its influence in the region.

The conflict between the KSA and Iran has deep historical, religious and geopolitical roots. It is a rivalry for regional leadership in the Middle East between two countries representing different branches of Islam – Sunni KSA and Shiite Iran. The combination of these factors creates a complex and multifaceted situation that continues to affect stability and security, both in the region and beyond. Accordingly, the KSA is focused on the development of international relations to strengthen its economic position and expand its influence in the region. The KSA plays a significant role in international organisations such as OPEC and the United Nations. It uses these platforms to promote its economic and political interests on the world stage and to expand international relations with other states.

The main limitation of this study is its broad scope, which concerns general trends in the evolution of KSA's international relations. Given the complexity of the topic, a more detailed analysis of each specific aspect under consideration is needed. In addition, given the dynamic nature of international relations and the possibility of changing priorities over time, it is necessary to update the study regularly to accurately track the progress of KSA's global partnerships.

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■ Conflict of interest

None.

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Міжнародна дипломатія Саудівської Аравії на Близькому Сході: Стратегії для посилення регіонального лідерства

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■ **Анотація.** Королівство Саудівська Аравія (КСА) є одним з ключових гравців на Близькому Сході і відіграє основну роль у формуванні регіонального порядку денного. Його стратегічне суперництво з Іраном створює нові виклики для стабільності в регіоні, тому аналіз змін економічної та зовнішньополітичної діяльності, які проводить керівництво країни у 2020-х роках, є актуальним для розуміння розвитку політичної ситуації на Близькому Сході. Метою дослідження став аналіз основних принципів та змін у дипломатичних стратегіях КСА, а також вивчення механізмів і інструментів, що використовуються для забезпечення стабільності та зміцнення її позицій у регіоні. Для проведення дослідження було використано методи аналізу, синтезу, порівняння та конкретизації інформації. Дослідження виявило, що важливим фактором, який зумовлює зміни в політиці КСА є реалізація ініціативи “Саудівське бачення 2030”, запровадженої спадкоємним принцом Мухаммедом бін Салманом. Ця стратегія зосереджена на диверсифікації економіки, зменшенні залежності від нафти і стимулюванні зростання в таких секторах, як туризм і відновлювана енергетика. КСА також активно розширює свої зовнішньополітичні зв'язки, шукаючи нових партнерів та зменшуючи залежність від США. Всередині організації з шести країн Перської затоки, існують внутрішні суперечності, що призводять до конфліктів, зокрема дипломатичної кризи з Катаром 2017 року, проте КСА змінює свої підходи, за рахунок чого вдається вирішувати такого роду конфлікти. КСА грає важливу роль в Організації країн експортерів нафти (ОПЕК) і United Nations, просуваючи свої інтереси на глобальному рівні. Отримані результати дозволяють розуміти дії КСА в контексті регіональної та світової політики, та можуть бути використані для розробки стратегій взаємодії з цією країною

■ **Ключові слова:** Близькосхідний регіон; зовнішньополітична стратегія; дипломатична криза в Катарі; Рада співробітництва арабських держав Перської затоки; програма “Saudi Vision 2030”