The Role of Saudi Arabia as a Diplomatic Mediator

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Summary

In early 2025, Saudi Arabia became a key venue for US, Russian, and Ukrainian talks on a partial Ukraine ceasefire and Black Sea security.

Article

In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia (KSA) has emerged as an increasingly significant mediator in some of the world's most intractable conflicts. In February and March 2025, the Kingdom hosted bilateral talks between Russian and United States (US) officials to discuss prospects for a partial ceasefire in Ukraine and the safety of shipping in the Black Sea. The KSA also hosted talks between US and Ukrainian officials following a public disagreement between Trump and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office. The fact that these high-stakes negotiations took place in Saudi Arabia, rather than in Europe or another traditional diplomatic hub, underscores the Kingdom's growing influence as a neutral intermediary in global conflicts. Beyond Ukraine, Riyadh has also become a meeting place for summits of the Arab League to discuss the ongoing crises in Sudan and Gaza, further solidifying its role as a regional and international power broker. To many, this choice is a curious one: why choose the KSA over other nations?

The illusion of neutrality: Saudi Arabia's balancing act

The KSA's mediation strategy in the Ukraine conflict reflects a nuanced balancing act. While the kingdom refrained from joining the West's criticism and sanctions against Russia, it has simultaneously provided Ukraine with substantial humanitarian aid and medical support worth millions of dollars. The KSA still cooperates with Russia to manage oil prices within OPEC+. This approach has allowed Riyadh to position itself as an "acceptable" intermediary to both sides, even as its long-standing security partnership with the US tilts its strategic interests toward the West.

Moreover, the choice of Saudi Arabia has been made by the US, particularly at the request of Donald Trump, who, during a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 24, argued that reducing oil prices could play a key role in resolving the conflict in Ukraine and stated his intention to call on Saudi Arabia and other OPEC members to take measures toward that goal. This dual posture – maintaining economic ties with Russia while sustaining strategic partnerships with key Western powers – has enabled the KSA to cultivate an image of pragmatic neutrality. Unlike European nations, which are viewed as firmly embedded in NATO's strategic orbit, or countries like China and Iran, which openly challenge Western influence, the KSA occupies a more flexible geopolitical position.

Vision 2030 and the quest for a new global image

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 has been a driving force behind Saudi Arabia's diplomatic turn. Seeking to diversify the Kingdom's economy and global influence beyond oil, the government has actively pursued a role in conflict mediation as part of a broader effort

to rehabilitate its international image. The 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist for The Washington Post, had left Saudi Arabia diplomatically isolated. UN and US investigations linked the state of Saudi Arabia to the murder, and it is even suspected that Mohammed bin Salman himself gave the order. By positioning itself as an indispensable mediator, Riyadh has managed to shift attention toward its geopolitical utility.

This form of image management, which some view as whitewashing, seeks to obscure the Kingdom's contentious human rights record and domestic repression. This rebranding aligns with the Kingdom's economic ambitions, as demonstrated by its push for foreign investment and high-profile summits like the Future Investment Initiative (FII). Mediation in Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza enhances Saudi Arabia's soft power and serves dual strategic purposes. On one level, it reinforces the Kingdom's claim to religious leadership in the Muslim world – a historic competition primarily with Iran that has shaped regional dynamics for decades. On another level, these mediation efforts represent Saudi Arabia's entry into a new arena of diplomatic competition, where it now contends with middle powers like Türkiye that have established themselves as effective crisis mediators.

In addition to its mediation efforts, the KSA has invested heavily in global branding initiatives to reshape its international image, through initiatives like sports sponsorships and major investments in entertainment and tourism. All of these efforts are not only part of foreign policy but also contribute to fulfilling the broader goals of Vision 2030: attracting foreign investment and integrating Saudi Arabia into the global economy.

Saudi Arabia's mediation strategy compared to other Gulf countries

Today, the Gulf states – Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, the KSA, and the UAE – outwardly project a vision of mutual cooperation, regional stability, and synergy since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, beneath this surface unity lies a competitive undercurrent, particularly among the KSA, UAE, and Qatar, as these states have shifted their focus from addressing post-Arab Uprising civil unrest to securing their places as influential global economic and diplomatic players. It is against this backdrop that the KSA's recent turn toward mediation reflects broader efforts toward Saudi hegemony within the GCC.

Since the 1990s, Qatar has carved a niche for itself as an intermediary, hosting US-Taliban negotiations and facilitating peace deals across Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza in recent years as well. Oman as well, has played a key behind-the-scenes role, most notably in brokering US-Iran backchannel talks that led to the JCPOA. By contrast, the KSA is relatively new to this role. Saudi's rise as a mediator follows a similar path to Qatar and Oman, but with distinct advantages. Qatar's mediation over the years had already established some sort of reputation. While it remains a soft and neutral approach, this has come to backfire against them. Qatar has been critiqued for its ties with Hamas and the Houthis, to some breaking the 'neutrality' stance in this regard. In contrast, Saudi Arabia's mediation – such as its

hosting of Ukraine peace talks – has not attracted comparable scrutiny, despite its own ties to Russia. This contrast may stem from Riyadh's lack of direct entanglement with groups that Western powers consider hostile, which could explain the relative absence of criticism from the West–particularly from the US–regarding Saudi involvement.

New geographies of conflict resolution: the decline of Western mediation dominance

Saudi Arabia's rise as a mediator underscores a broader shift in the global order, where traditional Western diplomatic centers are losing their dominance. Europe, once the default venue for international negotiations, has found itself sidelined in the Ukraine conflict due to its unequivocal support for Ukraine. Thus, Europe is also diplomatically losing the ability to make its mark in international politics. The continent sides with Ukraine in the war against Russia and therefore cannot be the neutral player on the world stage. As a result, neutral or non-aligned states, including Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and China, have stepped in to fill the void.

This trend mirrors Cold War dynamics, where non-aligned nations played important mediating roles between the US and Soviet Union. Today, as geopolitical competition between the US and China intensifies, middle powers like Saudi Arabia are exploiting their ability to engage with both blocs, positioning themselves as indispensable to conflict resolution. The decline of Europe's diplomatic influence is particularly striking, as the continent's alignment with Ukraine has rendered it an ineffective mediator in the eyes of Moscow and its allies.

At the same time, this geopolitical reordering provides Gulf states–especially the KSA–with new opportunities to assert their diplomatic relevance on a global scale. This reflects a broader transformation in the international system: the gradual erosion of a Western-centric, unipolar world order and the rise of a more multipolar landscape, where regional powers increasingly shape the dynamics of conflict resolution. As influence disperses across multiple centers of power, states like Saudi Arabia are stepping into roles once reserved for Western actors, not only due to their geographic positioning and political leverage, but also because of their ability to maintain ties with a wide array of actors—including those considered adversaries by the West. In this new reality, traditional Western diplomatic practices are being challenged by alternative approaches that emphasize pragmatic engagement and regional legitimacy, positioning actors like Saudi Arabia as key intermediaries in the post-Western diplomatic order.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic involvement in recent years signals a major transformation in the Kingdom's foreign policy, driven by economic diversification goals and a desire for greater (geo)political influence. While its mediation efforts in Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza have strengthened its international standing, they remain

inherently transactional – tied to securing foreign investment, countering regional rivals, and advancing Vision 2030 goals.

The broader implication of this development is a world where mediation is no longer the exclusive domain of Western powers or international institutions but is increasingly shaped by middle powers pursuing their own strategic interests. For Europe, this shift presents a challenge: as it loses its role as a neutral arbiter, it must either adapt to the new multipolar reality or risk diplomatic irrelevance. For Saudi Arabia, the fundamental question is whether its mediation efforts represent an actual transformation in its approach to international relations – moving beyond transactional diplomacy toward becoming an institutionalized peacemaker – or whether they will remain a tactical instrument for consolidating geopolitical influence. On the global stage, this raises the larger question of whether we are witnessing a permanent shift in how international conflicts are mediated – with traditional Western institutions being supplemented by new regional power brokers – or merely a temporary rebalancing of diplomatic channels. As middle powers like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gain prominence, the true test will lie in whether they can move beyond symbolic gestures and tactical aims to chart a meaningful course within an increasingly fluid world order.

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