

Why Armenia and Saudi Arabia need each other in the new world order



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The visit of Armenia's then-President Armen Sarkissian to Saudi Arabia in October 2021 was a historic turning point in relations between the two countries, which since the demise of the Soviet Union and the re-establishment of Armenian independence in 1991 had failed to establish diplomatic ties¹.

This first official visit in 30 years was an unprecedented foreign-policy development for Armenia, adding significant momentum to the state's developing Middle Eastern diplomacy.

For Saudi Arabia, the visit may represent an important step toward strengthening its standing in the Caucasus region against the backdrop of a rising competitive multipolar order in global politics.

This report seeks to examine the spectrum of shared interests that might serve as a solid background for a sustained and strategic long-term partnership between Saudi Arabia, the leading power of the Arabic and Islamic world, and Armenia, a small but ambitious and future-oriented state in the Caucasus, which, having secured the support of the Kingdom, may aspire to developing a "small but smart state" strategy².



The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should not undermine Armenia's formal relations with other countries, including Saudi Arabia



VIEWING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE PAST FOR A BETTER FUTURE

Academic and analytical sources that sought to explain the absence of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Saudi Arabia almost unanimously agreed that the main cause was the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan — another former Soviet republic that gained its independence in 1991 — which flared up in the late 1980s over the historically disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. With Azerbaijan a fellow member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Saudi Arabia, "with its regional and global heavyweight value and Islamic-oriented stance, sought to support Azerbaijan's right on the issue³."

Weight was also given to other arguments, including that the conflict was of a religious nature, pitting Muslim Azerbaijan against Christian Armenia, that the close ties between Armenia and Iran were a stumbling

A woman stands in front of a destroyed house after shelling during the ongoing fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. AFP

block for Saudi Arabia, and that diplomatic efforts by Armenia had been insufficient to establish relations.

However, careful analysis suggests those views are more interpretational than factual, and demonstrates why there is now a need to make up for all those years of inaction.

First, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the world's more complex ethno-political disputes, with complicated multilayer, underlying processes and the involvement of major powers. As a legacy of the Soviet colonial past, similar to conflicts in Ukraine, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria, the Nagorno-Karabakh region, with its majority ethnically Armenian population, is still in a quest for a sustainable peace and a dignified future.

The conflict should not undermine Armenia's formal relations with other countries, including Saudi Arabia, which could play an important mediating role and have a strong presence in the South Caucasus. Turkey, which remains fully



The President of Armenia, Armen Sarkissian, and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the FII in Riyadh. SPA

supportive of Azerbaijan, was one of the first countries to officially recognize Armenia's independence in 1991. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, supports the right of Palestinians to self-determination, a right which is at the core of Nagorno-Karabakh people's struggle for survival and security.

Second, Turkey and Iran are also members of the OIC, and Saudi Arabia's policies toward these countries have been very prudent and circumspect on a number of sensitive issues, but it did not prevent Riyadh from building some bridges with both of them. Moreover, Iran is a Shiite country seeking to expand its religious dominance in the region and beyond. Azerbaijan, while having a secular constitution, has the second-highest percentage of Shiites in its population in the world after Iran. Many Christian Armenians, meanwhile, are proud citizens of a number of Muslim countries, including the hundreds of Armenian families that live and work in Saudi Arabia.

Third, the nature of Armenian-Iranian relations, as perceived from Saudi Arabia, is exaggerated, has no strategic depth and contains no military or security cooperation elements. Russia and the US have always shared some concerns over Armenia's possible closeness with an Iran under heavy

sanctions. Armenia's diplomatic approach was to strike a reasonable balance, acceptable to the big powers, in its relations with Iran, a country that supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity against Armenia's interests^{4 5} and strategically never sided with Armenia during more than 30 years of conflict.

Armenia's ties with Iran are based mainly on trade and infrastructure, and are of a strictly pragmatic economic nature, developed as a reaction to Armenia's closed borders from both the Azerbaijani and Turkish sides. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, maintains much deeper and more strategic relations with Iran and with Israel, where it buys most of its modern weaponry and military technology. Azerbaijan's strategic closeness with Iran and Israel did not prevent Saudi Arabia from establishing good relations with it, at the expense of a relationship with neighboring Armenia.

Fourth, the narrative about the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan being religious in nature, widely disseminated by Azerbaijan to disorient the international community and collect the support of Muslim countries, especially in the framework of the OIC, is baseless. The practice of religion was almost completely banned in the former USSR, and

The establishment of Armenia-Saudi Arabia relationships could become a game-changing factor in the regional configuration vis-a-vis Turkey and Iran

those nations that spent almost 70 years under Soviet rule were forced to forget their religious affiliations, identities and heritage. The only "religion" was Bolshevism/Communism⁶, and the suggestion that there is a religious element in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two former Soviet republics, is without foundation. Besides, Armenia cherishes its good relations with a number of Muslim countries, including some members of the Riyadh-headquartered Gulf Cooperation Council, which has become home for many Armenian refugees who fled the Ottoman Empire.

Fifth, the Armenia of the early 1990s, while being involved in a war with Azerbaijan, was still suffering the consequences of a devastating earthquake that struck in 1988. Simultaneously it was facing huge socioeconomic tensions due the demise of the whole Soviet system, and lacked the professional diplomats, resources and appropriate communication to reach out to and establish relations with Saudi Arabia. From time to time, Armenia showed its readiness to establish relations, but the Saudi government remained silent, aside from sending a couple of congratulatory letters to Armenian leaders and publishing analytical material about the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Incidentally, in 2019, the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon made an important visit to the Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia and the Armenian Genocide Memorial near Beirut to pay tribute to the memory of the 1.5 million victims of the massacre⁷.

NEW START, NEW VISIONS, NEW INTERESTS IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, aiming also to decisively undermine the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic integrative tendencies, has intensified the global standoff between the divergent poles — namely the US-led collective West, Putin's Russia, and China — making the system of international relations even more confrontational and anarchic, with a range of regions being contested by conventional or emerging poles.

In this light, US President Joe Biden's recent visit to Saudi Arabia, and the large and ambitious bilateral agenda that emerged as

a result⁸, paved the way for Riyadh to arise as an emerging power with agenda-setting ambitions, both on global and regional dimensions. Importantly, the Kingdom has gained the necessary political mass to position itself as a potential center of gravity, and as an important pole power in the newly emerging multipolar world, not only in its familiar strategic environment of the Arabian Peninsula, but also beyond its traditional sphere of interest and influence.

Riyadh's lack of diplomatic relations with Armenia not only creates strategic gaps, which are instrumentalized by other actors, opposed either to Armenia or Saudi Arabia, but also constitutes an obstacle for the Kingdom, preventing it from projecting sustained influence in adjacent regions, such as the Caucasus. Moreover, the lack of a relationship with Armenia inevitably implies Riyadh's abstention from communication with the large Armenian diaspora, Armenia's yet-to-be wielded tool of soft power, which has strong influencing potential in the Middle East and North Africa region, Russia and the West.

Most importantly however, the absence of relations with one out of three Caucasian states significantly narrows the scope for Saudi Arabia to develop its niche influencing in the region crisscrossed by the interests of other pole powers — Russia, Iran and Turkey, which have their traditional standings and geopolitical interests in the geopolitics of the Caucasus. In other words, the absence of relations with Armenia may lead to a situation in which Saudi Arabia may not only have negligible capacity to partake in the wider geopolitical game of the Black Sea-Caucasus-Central Asia axis, but also may not become a full stakeholder in regional processes, in effect excluding itself from an opportunity to gain geopolitical and geo-economic dividends in that part of the world.

On the other hand, the establishment of Armenia-Saudi Arabia relationships, reinforced by appropriate political and economic substance, could become a game-changing factor in the regional configuration. In combination with Saudi-Georgia and Saudi-Azerbaijan relations⁹, the establishment of Saudi-Armenia relations could alter the Caucasus politico-economic landscape and expand the Kingdom's geopolitical influence in the region.

UNEXPLOITED POTENTIAL OF SAUDI ARABIA-ARMENIA RELATIONS, FROM GEOPOLITICS TO BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY AND TOURISM

The development of sustained ties between Saudi Arabia and Armenia might give geopolitical weight to the former in the eyes of its main allies in the Middle East and, most importantly, in the West, the influence of which is in decline in the Caucasus, due to the rising tandem ambitions of Russia and Turkey, and is concerned to preserve its stake in this geopolitically pivotal area.

From this perspective, Saudi Arabia could occupy a strong position in the strategic calculations of the Euro-Atlantic community, as a trustworthy new regional actor with whom it is important to coordinate policy in order to subtly expand the influence and economy projecting abilities of the West, thanks to the potential of the economic and political inroads the Kingdom could make in the region. Furthermore, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Yerevan may create opportunities for Saudi Arabia to foster an additional leverage in its balancing game vis-a-vis Turkey and Iran on the regional stage. It may also pave the way for new geopolitical arrangements and political bargaining between Riyadh and Moscow, as well as Riyadh and Washington.

In a dynamic and geopolitically fragmented region such as the Caucasus, where the high interplay of contrasting interests of several pole powers is in place, the lack of diplomatic relations of an emerging power with a small state of the region may cause a political and economic vacuum. Meanwhile, establishing relations permits Saudi Arabia to enter the region and fill those “cracks.”

The smartness of the small state is to be in a position to adjust the polar configuration that existed in its environment. Such asymmetric interaction between a small and smart proactive state and a rising ambitious power creates the “win-win” situation of a unified agenda. It permits the small to diversify its political and economic environment by utilizing the influence of the rising power as a source for the enhancement of its autonomy, while allowing the rising power to capitalize on its footprint and politico-economic standing in the territory

of the small for geopolitical purposes.

Geopolitics aside, Armenia has untapped potential in economics, trade, renewable energy, water resources and green technology, which Saudi Arabia could benefit from considerably in the course of advancing bilateral relationships. Armenia’s intellectual potential in terms of high-tech and AI could be a solid groundwork for a long-lasting agenda of bilateral cooperation. Saudi involvement and systematic investment in Armenia’s different sectors could be framed as a joint strategic planning agreement between Riyadh and Yerevan, to synergize efforts for gaining a leading or niche role in the emerging Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Armenia has the potential and ambition to become a connecting hub for biotechnology and bioinformatics in the region and beyond. With the help of numerous prominent Armenian scientists, businessmen, academics, influencers and global thinkers, in and outside Armenia¹⁰, it would be possible to set up an Armenian-Saudi investment agency or Saudi-Armenian agency of development, joint research centers, a chamber of commerce, AI laboratories, an energy investment fund, and a high-tech investment fund to contribute to growth in trade, transportation, scientific and academic cooperation, innovation, the creator economy, fintech, SaaS, blockchain technology, cultural exchanges, tourism, etc.

POWER OF SHARED HISTORIES

Having common historical legacies and narratives, sharing tragedies or successes of the past, can also help nations to overcome misunderstandings, build bridges, and begin generating new shared interests or crystalizing existing ones.

Armenians and Saudis are no exceptions. In the past, both nations were part of the Ottoman Empire and victims of the empire’s genocidal policies. Those events are internationally acknowledged as the Armenian genocide of 1915, recognized by most of the big powers and other states, and the Seferberlik, or “mobilization,” another major tragedy suffered by Muslims from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and the city of Madinah, who were exiled during the First World War to other parts of the Ottoman Empire, where most perished^{11 12}.



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The powerful story of Hussein bin Ali Al-Hashimi is another example of the ties found in history. Al-Hashimi was the sharif and emir of Makkah from 1908 and, after proclaiming the Great Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire, king of the Hejaz from 1916 to 1924. He was a 37th-generation direct descendant of Muhammad, as he belonged to the Hashemite family. Al-Hashimi condemned the massacre of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and called on the Arab population to “defend and protect them as you protect yourselves¹³.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Summing up the current state of affairs and the palpable prospects of Armenia-Saudi relations, it seems reasonable to emphasize the following to-do list.

First, Armenia’s decision-takers need to demonstrate more consistency and proactivity, follow the bargaining logic and start building strategic relations with countries other than Russia, namely Saudi Arabia, exploiting the untapped scope of common interests. Yerevan’s recent offer to support Saudi Arabia’s hosting of the World Expo 2030¹⁴ laid the groundwork for enhancing the limits of practical engagement toward a strategic partnership. Establishing cooperation between Armenian and Saudi universities, think tanks, as well as businesses, could be an effective start.

Second, on its part, the Kingdom ought to be

Referendum for Armenia independence in Russia on September 21, 1991. Getty Images

less hesitant and more assertive in strategic terms toward setting up a comprehensive dialogue with Yerevan about the role of Saudi Arabia in Armenia’s domestic and external environment, expecting Armenia’s role assumption in return. Armenia and Saudi Arabia have a lot to offer each other and, driven by this, the long-lasting political stereotypes that Armenia is allegedly Iran’s strategic partner and, hence, there is little in common should be dispelled by proactive bilateral engagements and commitments.

Third, from a geopolitical point of view, the evolving Saudi presence in the Caucasus, and especially in Armenia, could be a game-changing factor.

The setting up of the Saudi Embassy in Yerevan, as well as an Armenian embassy in Riyadh, and the influx of Saudi investment reinforced by bilateral agreements may not only improve the geopolitical dynamics in the Caucasus but also make the Kingdom one of the extra-regional players, thereby contributing to Riyadh’s role as a key actor of international politics. Above all, establishing diplomatic relations may entail geopolitical dividends and prestige to Saudi Arabia in terms of its geopolitical standing, expanding its scope of foreign-political bargaining with other pole powers, not to mention the obvious reciprocal incentives and maneuvering capabilities derived from technological and wider politico-economic cooperation with Armenia.

FOOTNOTES

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