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Providing 'Good Services': Saudi Arabia's Role as a Facilitator in US-Russian Talks on the Ukraine War

by Sebastian Sons

After the announcement by US President Donald Trump to enter talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Saudi Arabia aiming to initiate peace talks on the Ukraine war, high-ranking delegations from both countries convened in Riyadh on 18 February 2025 to prepare for the leaders' bilateral meeting. The Saudi government welcomed the idea of hosting a US-Russian summit.

Why does it matter?

For Saudi Arabia, this summit represents a significant milestone in advancing its role as a platform for conflict resolution. The kingdom had been active in various initiatives regarding the Ukraine war since it began in February 2022. Notably, the Saudi leadership facilitated prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and Russia. Additionally, Saudi Arabia, alongside the United Arab Emirates (UAE), played a crucial role in securing the release of US basketball star Brittney Griner from a Russian prison in exchange for Russian national Viktor Bout in December 2022. The kingdom has also provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, organized an emergency summit in Jeddah, and extended an invitation to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in May 2023. With regard to its relations with Russia, Saudi Arabia has maintained its agreement within the framework of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+), prioritizing its own oil policy and avoiding measures that could undermine Russian oil deals. Against this backdrop, the Trump-Putin meeting can be viewed as a major achievement for Saudi Arabia and serves as the outcome of its “prisoner diplomacy” during the Ukraine war.

What is the big picture?

By offering its ‘good services’, Saudi Arabia pursues three objectives: (1) consolidating and balancing close personal ties with both Trump and Putin; (2) strengthening business relations to support the kingdom’s economic transformation; and (3) reinforcing its credibility as an ‘honest broker’ by representing the non-Western ‘Global

South.’ Furthermore, Saudi engagement in diplomatic initiatives serves as an avenue to counter potential strains with the Trump administration over US policy on Gaza. The Saudi leadership has strongly opposed Trump’s proposal to “clean out” Gaza and relocate the Palestinian population to Egypt or Jordan, viewing such rhetoric as a direct challenge to Saudi Arabia’s longstanding support for a two-state solution and solidarity with the Palestinian cause. In light of the Gaza war, prospects for Saudi normalization with Israel have significantly diminished. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government of committing “genocide,” and the latter’s proposal to establish a Palestinian state within Saudi Arabia was firmly rejected by Riyadh. However, any serious rift between Saudi Arabia and the US would threaten the kingdom’s broader geostrategic and geoeconomic ambitions. Hence, the Trump-Putin summit also provides an opportunity to bolster US-Saudi relations.

In similar fashion, Saudi officials have expressed their willingness to assume a facilitating, if not mediating role in diplomatic efforts between Iran and Europe, as well as between Iran and the US. This offer is not merely a diplomatic PR stunt, as some critics might suggest, but rather a reflection of Riyadh’s strategic priority to prevent new conflicts in its immediate neighborhood.

Whether or not this initiative will be well-received in Tehran, however, remains uncertain. Although diplomatic ties have been restored, the historical legacy of deep-seated rivalry and, at times, outright hostility may hinder Iran’s willingness to accept Saudi Arabia as a mediator in its relations with Western powers. But Riyadh’s strategic doctrine is clear: regional stability is a prerequisite for national progress, and national progress is essential for political survival.

What comes next?

Saudi Arabia will leverage the US-Russia summit to further enhance its diplomatic credibility. As part of its multi-aligned approach, Zelensky stated that he will also travel to Riyadh in order to advocate for Ukraine's position. This underlines Saudi Arabia's role as a facilitator in the conflict. It remains to be seen whether Saudi Arabia, in contrast to the US, will actively seek to integrate European countries into its strategic initiatives. Strengthened bilateral relations, alongside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the European Union (EU) strategic partnership, may provide Riyadh with a viable platform to pursue such engagement.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia outbidding the UAE to host the Trump-Putin meeting represents a symbolic achievement beyond regional dynamics around the Arabian Peninsula, and reflects Riyadh's growing global influence. Nevertheless, as both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh enjoy close relations to Trump and Putin, they could also seek more diplomatic cooperation to further enhance their collective diplomatic leverage and influence in global affairs. Here, perspectives for joint diplomatic efforts could improve.

About the Author

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