

REGIONAL PROGRAMME

GULF STATES

PHILIPP DIENSTBIER

DR MANUEL SCHUBERT

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Saudi-German Relations: Opportunities for Joint Cooperation

A ROUNDTABLE IN RIYADH PROMOTED DIALOGUE AND STRENGTHENED THE EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

Diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Germany date back to the 1950s. Particularly in the areas of economic cooperation and security cooperation, both countries have long been on a path of active exchange and close coordination. In addition to members of cabinet and parliament, Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel already visited the Kingdom three times. Similarly, the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir is a frequent guest in Germany. Despite this positive track record, bilateral relations between the two countries have recently also experienced diplomatic setbacks. Overcoming these developments remains a key challenge for the foreign policy of both countries.

Saudi Arabia and Germany are in many ways complementary partners. The regional position of both countries is now more than ever an important basis for bilateral cooperation. German politicians often emphasise Saudi Arabia's role as regional power in the Gulf region and the Middle East. As the origin of Islam and the location of its most holy sites, the Kingdom also has significant influence in the Muslim world. For its part, Germany is the most populous country and largest economy in Europe. In the aftermath of Brexit, it is assuming an increasingly important political role in the EU and is perceived as one of the most important international partners in Saudi Arabia. These key positions of both states create a potential for cooperation and mutual exchange which should be filled positively.

Strong ties at the political, economic, and cultural levels

On this basis, bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Germany have strengthened for decades. Saudi and German security agencies cooperate closely in countering terrorism and maintaining regional stability. For example, after the German Chancellor's last visit, the training of Saudi armed forces and border patrols by the German army and police were initiated. Economically, Saudi Arabia and Germany are also closely intertwined: Both countries are members of the G20, Saudi Arabia is Germany's second largest trading partner in the Arab world, while Germany's exports rank third in the Kingdom. Germany is also one of the most important investors in Saudi Arabia, with German companies employing around 40,000 Saudi employees in the country. The Saudi sovereign wealth fund PIF also holds several minority shares in Germany, which are envisaged to be increased in the future.

In addition, both countries signed a joint cultural cooperation agreement in 2006. The still relatively young cultural relations are characterised by language courses at the German Goethe-Institut and excavations of the German Archaeological Institute in Saudi Arabia as well as by several exchange programs. For instance, about 1,600 Saudis have studied in Germany in recent years.

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Challenges of the bilateral relations

Despite the successes in foreign policy, both countries are characterised by different national trajectories, cultural areas, and geopolitical contexts. Against this backdrop, socio-cultural misunderstandings and political disagreements between Saudi Arabia and Germany are prone to emerge. For instance, the Federal Republic is often perceived as too cautious in the Kingdom, especially with regard to its behaviour towards Iran, which is classified as a strategic threat in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, large parts of the public and some decision-makers in Germany regard Saudi Arabia as an ambivalent partner, while in German media, frequent criticism of the status of civil liberties and fundamental rights in the Kingdom and critique regarding the Saudi regional policy specifically in Yemen dominates. For this reason, the strategic potential inherent in the regional position of both countries has so far remained partially untapped.

Moreover, the diplomatic situation between Saudi Arabia and Germany was recently characterised by tensions. In November 2017, parts of a speech given by Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel during a visit of his Lebanese counterpart in Berlin prompted Saudi Arabia to withdraw its ambassador, H.R.H. Khalid bin Bandar Al Saud, from Germany. A return is still pending. In order to overcome this tense situation, it is therefore more crucial than ever to create a space for dialogue in order to answer pressing regional challenges and to discuss future bilateral relations.

Crisis and desired improvement

In this context, it is necessary to broaden established channels of bilateral dialogue with discussion formats on additional levels. On this occasion, the Prince Saud Al Faisal Institute for Diplomatic Studies (IfDS), the think tank and training facility of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, jointly organised a roundtable in Riyadh with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), during which Saudi-German relations were discussed. On two days, from 30 to 31 January 2018,

around 55 participants debated under Chatham House Rule throughout five panel discussions political, economic, and cultural aspects of Saudi-German foreign relations and the perspectives of both countries on the conflict in Syria and the Iranian nuclear agreement. In addition to the IfDS, other think tanks, consulting institutions, government agencies, universities, as well as members of the Shura Council and a member of the royal family took part from the Saudi side. In addition to KAS employees, German representatives further included representatives of the German Embassy and the German-Saudi Liaison Office for Economic Affairs. In the midst of the tense diplomatic situation, the event thus signalled great mutual willingness to communicate and thus created the basis for a more differentiated understanding of each other's positions in various subject areas.

Furthermore, a number of controversial subjects were raised. Especially the policy towards Iran and the strategy in the Syrian war confirmed differences in the views and assessments of both sides. The issue of Islamophobia in the West as well as distorted perceptions in the public and the media were also discussed objectively but critically. In addition, it became apparent that different assessments of the bilateral trade relations prevail, especially with regard to the question whether trade imbalances between both countries are reason for concern.

What also came to the fore, however, was a consensus on both sides that unfulfilled potential in Saudi-German relations can be exploited. This understanding was the driving force of all discussions during the event. Not only should existing cooperation successes, such as the joint fight against terror and intelligence cooperation, be emphasised more strongly, also political and diplomatic cooperation would have to be underpinned above all by a cross-social rapprochement. For instance, cultural cooperation, e.g. between museums and in the field of student and trainee exchanges, could be significantly increased, a view shared by the workshop participants. Also, the potential and possibilities of Vision 2030 - the ambitious re-

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form package of H.R.H. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud – would deserve greater attention. It was emphasised that collaborative potential would not only lie in investment and economic partnerships, but also in stronger social exchange, such as youth-to-youth meetings.

The importance of intensifying bilateral relations is also reflected in the fact that, under the umbrella of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has made Germany one of four Western countries whose bilateral relations should be upgraded into full-fledged strategic partnerships.

Building bridges and promoting social exchange

With the event, the IfDS and the KAS Regional Programme Gulf States were able to create a platform for discussion and encounter in which different perspectives were conveyed and mutual understanding could thus be formed. Hence, the roundtable provided an impulse to strengthen and expand the bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Germany.

Also in the future, similar formats should be used to inform politics and the (expert) public of both countries in a more differenti-

ated way. Both organisers pleaded to continue the discussion by constructively taking advantage of the special status of the IfDS and the KAS in Saudi-German bilateral relations. The networking capacity of both institutions should be used to continue to organise open and critical discussion formats in the future. On the one hand, it was agreed that subsequent events would place a stronger thematic focus on particular aspects of the relationship. Thus, in a separate event, challenges and potentials of economic and cultural relations will soon be discussed in more detail. On the other hand, the initiated dialogue could also be continued and complemented by similar formats in Germany.

In view of the currently strained diplomatic relations, the course and the results of the roundtable organised by IfDS and KAS are a great success. After all, only a continuous, inclusive dialogue can regain lost confidence and thus contribute to improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Germany. Considering the key positions that both countries play in the regional and international context and in view of the global challenges of a transformative, interconnected world, the potential for closer cooperation and increased exchange must be harnessed.



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Adenauer
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Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.
Regional Programme Gulf States

P.O. Box 831025
11183 Amman
Jordan

Phone:
+962 6 592 97 77
Email:
gulf@kas.de