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## India-Saudi Arabia Relations in 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### ABSTRACT

The Saudi Arabia and India are two growing powers; the active members of G-20 and key players in Middle East and the South Asian regions. However, India and the Saudi Arabia boosted their global status in accordance with their performance of strong economic ties, they are growing and recognized as an arriving of the global players. Saudi Arabia is India's fourth-largest trading partner, supplying over 20% of India's crude oil and 30% of its natural gas needs. In FY 2022-23, bilateral trade reached \$52.76 billion. Economic cooperation is supported by Saudi Arabia's pledged investments in India, reflecting mutual interest in long-term energy and financial stability. On the strategic front, both nations collaborate closely on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and defense training. The creation of the Strategic Partnership Council and agreements on cyber security, space cooperation, and de-radicalization efforts further demonstrate the depth of this evolving relationship. As two regional powers, India and Saudi Arabia are aligning their strategic priorities to enhance regional stability, economic growth, and global cooperation in a rapidly changing world order.

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Saudi Arabia and India are emerging as influential global powers, active in the Group-20 and prominent country in Middle East and South Asia. Their growing global prominence is largely due to strong economic ties and strategic partnerships aimed at fostering regional stability and economic development. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has played a pivotal role in India's outreach to the global stage, particularly through active engagement with the Arab world. New Delhi's historical relationship with Islamic regions have been marked by periods of mutual benefit and economic cooperation. Indo-Saudi relations have increasingly taken on a strategic dimension, driven by mutual concerns over security threats such as jihadist terrorism. Both countries also recognize substantial economic opportunities, with India seeking to ensure energy security and explore significant investment prospects in Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup>

Both the countries; enjoy the cordial relations showing it's the centuries old cultural and the socio-economic ties between the two countries. Since the year 1947, development of the diplomatic relations which was attributed with the high-level visits by the both countries. King Saudi had paid his visit to India in year 1955. Subsequently, India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru paid his visit the Saudi Arabia in the year 1956. In the year 1982, Smt. Indira Gandhi Prime Minister of India also paid her visit to Saudi Arabia to enrich the bilateral relations between the two countries.<sup>2</sup> Few years back, Saudi King visited India in the year 2006. The two countries signed the 'Delhi Declaration', which gave a new momentum in the India-Saudi relations. This visit has given a blue print for making a cooperation in the areas of mutual interest.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Manmohan Singh; the then P.M. of India had visited to Saudi Arabia in the year 2010 and raised the level of bilateral engage in the 'Riyadh Declaration' and the 'Strategic Partnership' which was signed by both of the countries during the visit to boost up the cooperation in the areas of the economic, political stability, ensuring the security and defence.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, Mohammed bin Salman was come to India on official visit and inked agreements in the commercial, energy, and defence sectors. Narendra Modi, the P. M. of India; paid his two days visit to Saudi Arabia in April, 2016; as a result, most of the major thrust was forward in the bilateral relationship. During this visit, a Joint Statement issued the two-fold wishes for harnessing the other's potential for the mutual benefits. Saudi Arabia honored Indian Prime Minister with its highest civilian distinction of the Kingdom by King Salman, underlining the importance Saudi Arabia put on its relations with India. Both the leaders were showed their interest to grow the cooperation in varied areas like economic, cultural, defence and energy security, education, investment and trade, research & development, transfer of technology. Both the nations are also agreed to pursue the cooperation in the various fields such as the use of space for the peaceful purposes, cyber and oceanic security, combating the terrorism & extremism and



lastly, the de-radicalization.<sup>5</sup> Feb. 2019 Mohammad bin Salman visited to India and his visit marked a significant acceleration in bilateral relations. Through this visit, six Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) were signed covering diverse sectors such as investment, tourism, housing, exchange of audio-visual programs, and cooperation within the International Solar Alliance (ISA), an initiative spearheaded by Indian Prime Minister. The Kingdom also pledged a substantial investment of approximately \$100 billion in India. In October 2019, Indian Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Modi visited second time to Riyadh, the two nations elevated their relationship by signing the Strategic Partnership Council (SPC) Agreement. This established a high-level council aimed at guiding and deepening Indo-Saudi relations. The visit saw the signing of twelve additional MOUs and agreements spanning key sectors such as energy, security, defense manufacturing, civil aviation, medical products, strategic petroleum reserves, support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and diplomatic training. During his stay, PM Modi also delivered the welcome address at the 'Third Future Investment Initiative Summit', reinforcing the commitment of both nations to strengthen economic and strategic ties.<sup>6</sup> September 2023 Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister visited New Delhi for G-20 meeting. On 11 September Indian and Saudi Prime Minister held the first Leaders Meeting of Strategic Partnership Council, bilateral talk between both the leaders focused on energy, railways, freight corridor, highways, gas grid, optical fiber and information technology. Eight pacts inked and two joint working groups created during this visit.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the emerging trends in Indo-Saudi Arabia relationship is given emphasis on the growth of economic and the strategic relations.

### **Economics Relations**

Trade practices are one of the most effective components for promoting the mutual understanding between India and the Saudi. Presently Saudi Arabi is 4<sup>th</sup> largest business ally of India. Amongst the major suppliers of energy; India imports over 20 percent of its crude oil requirement and 30 percent of its natural gas requirements from the Kingdom. Since the year 1990s, the economic liberalization of India has assisted to boost up economic activities between India and the Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has annual supplied 0.175 billion barrels crude oil to India. Indian economy is growing fast at the rate of 7-8 % annually during last few years and India has secured the required demands and regulates the crude oil supply for sustainable economic growth. During the 2020-21, both the countries have shared their national experiences and supported each other to ensure steady flow of medicines, food and other essential goods and services. In this pandemic period, in February, 2021, there were two separate consignments; having 4.5 million COVISHIELD vaccine to Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, during the second wave; a relief material was sent to mitigate this World-wide pandemic. There has been good cooperation was given by



the Saudi Arabia during this grim-situation.<sup>8</sup> No doubt energy resources particularly crude oil has been the critical factor to boost up the ties between India and the Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabia is having its crude oil reserves; being a largest GCC crude oil producer is an ideal option for India. In the Financial Year 2022-23, the mutual trade was taken place with its evaluated at the sum of 52.76 billion US dollar. Through this corresponding period, India's imports were touched 42.03 billion US \$ and India's exports to Saudi Arabia was reached to 10.73 billion US \$, a registered growth of 23.11 percent in total trade during this year. India-Saudi Arabia total trade shares its volume by the 4.53 percent of Indian total trade in Financial Year 2022-23.<sup>9</sup> The periodic distribution pattern of Indo-Saudi Arabia Trade is tabulated figures as follows:

**Table-1****Periodic Distribution Pattern of Indo-Saudi Arabia Trade (in US\$ Billions)****(2010 -202)**

Year	Imports from Saudi Arabia	Exports to Saudi Arabia	Total Volume of Trade	% of growth in Indian imports	% of growth in Indian exports	% of growth in bilateral trade
2010-11	20.39	4.67	25.06	19.24	19.91	19.36
2011-12	31.81	5.67	37.48	56.09	21.33	45.59
2012-13	34.00	9.79	43.79	6.86	72.18	16.76
2013-14	36.40	12.23	48.63	7.08	24.87	11.06
2014-15	28.11	11.17	39.28	-22.82	-8.86	19.24
2015-16	20.33	6.37	26.70	-27.71	-42.72	31.98
2016-17	19.95	5.14	25.09	-1.87	-19.71	-6.13
2017-18	22.07	5.42	27.49	10.51	5.81	9.57
2018-19	28.49	5.56	34.05	29.05	2.63	23.34
2019-20	26.86	6.24	33.10	-5.74	12.19	-2.9
2020-21	16.19	5.86	22.05	-39.73	-6.10	-33.39
2021-22	34.10	8.76	42.86	110.67	49.56	94.43
2022-23	42.03	10.73	52.76	23.27	22.48	23.11

Source: Department of Commerce GOI and <https://www.eoiriyadh.gov.in/page/india-saudi-business-relations/>



## Strategic Relations

Indo-Saudi Arabia strategic relationship is sole based on its common relating to security. The trajectory of better tie between the Indo-Saudi Arabia strategic relations was begun with in the year 2008. On the contrary, the varied degree of cooperation existed prior to the period but 26/11 attack on Mumbai had felt a major adverse effect and compelled India to acquire the intelligence in a better way by sharing the information with the Gulf nations to put an adequate check on terrorism activities and terror funding. Saudi Arabia and India signed an extradition treaty in the year 2010. On January 15, 2009, Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud (Chief of intelligence) visited New Delhi to enhance intelligence cooperation and coordinate efforts in security areas. This visit marked a milestone in the strategic relationship. During Indian Prime Minister's visit to Riyadh, a protocol was signed between both states, laying the groundwork for a closer bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and India. While the focus was predominantly on areas other than defense cooperation, such as economic ties and cultural exchanges, this protocol underscored the growing significance of their diplomatic engagement.<sup>10</sup>

The Riyadh Declaration was established in 2006, marking an important diplomatic milestone. Subsequently, the "Delhi Declaration" was signed during Saudi Kings's visit to New Delhi, representing the first significant bilateral agreement between Saudi Arabia and India. This declaration laid the foundation for a new era in their bilateral relations. In 2012, the defense cooperation between India and Saudi Arabia gained momentum as a critical area of focus for both nations. That same year, a joint meeting on defense cooperation was convened in New Delhi, where both countries expressed mutual interest to enhance cooperation on strategic issues.<sup>11</sup>

During the tenure of the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government in India, significant strides were made in enhancing cooperation in security and defense areas with Saudi Arabia. This period saw an improvement in bilateral relations, particularly in strategic and defense-related engagements between the two countries. Efforts were focused on strengthening intelligence cooperation, coordinating security measures, and fostering military exchanges. These initiatives contributed to bolstering the overall relationship and laying a foundation for deeper collaboration in security and defense matters between India and Saudi Arabia. Indian Defence Minister was visited Saudi Arabia to boost up strategic relations in Feb. 2012 and become the first Indian Minister for Defence who paid the visit to the Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> On this occasion, from two sides agreed on imparting the military personnel training, organizing a committee on the Joint Defence Cooperation, imparting the mountain warfare training for the Saudi armed forces,



and taking initiation of joint defence manufacturing programme.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, after the two years, Saudi Arabia and India had signed a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation in the matter of the defence in New Delhi. This Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) resulted from the visit of Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Defence Minister of Saudi Arabia, to India. En extensive discussions between both sides on bilateral issues, marking a significant step in their strategic partnership and cooperation. According to the MoU, both countries agreed to exchange defence-related information, collaborate on military training and education, and enhance cooperation in areas ranging from hydrography and security to logistics. This agreement underscored the deepening defense ties between India and Saudi Arabia, reflecting their shared commitment to strengthening bilateral relations in various strategic domains.

In context of counter terrorism areas, both the sides have made remarkable progress. Both countries showed serious concern about the dangers created by the terrorist group ISIS. The intelligence agencies are collaborating closely to exchange data, gather real-time information, and monitor suspects' movements, as well as track the flow of funds in money laundering activities. An Extradition Treaty and an Agreement on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons have been signed by the two countries. Riyadh has extradited over a dozen suspects to India, including Abu Jundal, for their alleged involvement in various terror-related incidents. Additionally, both nations are actively seeking strategies to combat extremist ideologies. They have also struck important pacts to combat terror financing and money laundering. The MOUs signed by Indian Defence Minister during his visit demonstrated that both the nations were highly determined to elevate strategic cooperation.<sup>14</sup>

The BJP government has placed a high priority on enhancing cooperation in defense and security matters. This was underscored by the appointment of Ahmed Javed, former Chief of Mumbai Police, as ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Regular interactions and visits between Indian and Saudi officials, including National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Syed Asif Ibrahim, former Chief of India's Intelligence Bureau, further solidified this cooperation. In April, 2016 India's Prime Minister visited Saudi Arabia and this visit played a significant role to strengthen the relations of both states. During this visit, both nations committed to strengthening efforts and cooperation in combating terrorism, recognizing the growing security threats posed by jihadi terrorists in South Asia and the Middle East. In November 2017, both states JCDS (Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation) met in India, marking a significant step forward. India agreed to host officials from the Royal Saudi Armed Forces for professional training, with the first group of Saudi cadets beginning a three-year training program at the National Defence Academy (NDA) in Pune, Maharashtra,



starting in December 2017. This initiative underscores the commitment of both countries to building a robust partnership to combat terrorist activities in their respective regions.<sup>15</sup>

The Saudi Arabia and India relations are improving from last decade and reached to top in present time. Both the countries are working to strengthen the economic and strategic relationship specially on security issues such as terrorism, cyber security, navel security, narco and drugs trafficking and peace stability building in Afghanistan.

India and Saudi Arabia have emerged as key global players, strengthening their bilateral relationship through deepening economic ties and strategic cooperation. Historically connected through centuries of cultural and trade exchanges, their diplomatic engagement intensified post-1947, marked by reciprocal high-level visits and landmark agreements such as the Delhi and Riyadh Declarations. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the partnership has expanded significantly across sectors including energy, defense, infrastructure, technology, and education.

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