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**King Salman's Visit to Moscow:
Affirmation of Russian Influence in the Middle East**

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The visit by Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz to Russia in early October was described by Saudi Arabia as historic, both because it was the first visit to Moscow by a reigning Saudi king (Salman visited Russia in 2003 when he was the Crown Prince) and because of the issues discussed during the visit. Moscow likewise attributed much significance to the visit, because it regards Saudi Arabia as a key Middle East state, and because it saw in it Riyadh's recognition of Russia's influence in the region. Beyond a series of economic agreements signed during the visit, it is unclear what political understandings, if any, were reached during the visit, but any agreements reached on the Syrian question could make a concrete contribution to shortening the civil war there.

Since Russia and Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations in 1991 following many years of hostility, there has been ongoing cooperation and much connection between the countries. President Vladimir Putin visited Saudi Arabia in 2007. Relations weakened in 2011 as a result of Russian support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and in 2015, when Russia became actively involved in the civil war on behalf of the regime. Over the past year, however, there has been a renewed rapprochement between Riyadh and Moscow, probably because Saudi Arabia realizes that its position is inferior in all matters pertaining to Syria. It is also possible that the trend toward improvement in relations is the result of uncertainty in Saudi Arabia concerning President Donald Trump's policy on the Middle East.

The improvement in relations is reflected in the volume of trade between the countries and the signing of a number of agreements concerning oil and defense procurement. Reciprocal visits also increased. Russian parliament chairman Valentina Matviyenko visited Riyadh in May 2017, at which time an official invitation was issued to King Salman to visit Russia. A prior visit to Saudi Arabia by Russian Minister of Energy Alexander Novak was devoted to discussion of agreements for reducing oil production. Current Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman also visited Moscow in May, where he discussed current energy,

security, and regional issues. Last September, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov visited Saudi Arabia in an effort to position Russia as a mediator in the crisis between Qatar and several of its Gulf neighbors.

The main issues on the Saudi-Russia agenda include:

- a. Shaping a future settlement in Syria: Saudi Arabia has a significant interest in playing an influential role in the regional theater, where Russia has become a key actor. Specifically, Saudi Arabia is interested in a Russian guarantee for the status of the Sunni population. The kingdom also seeks to convince Moscow to limit Iranian influence in Syria. For its part, Russia, which already has disputes with Tehran on Syria and other regional questions, wishes to avoid an exclusive reliance on Iran as a regional axis power, and is therefore focusing on promoting its relations with all the important Sunni countries. Saudi Arabia hoped that its economic resources would help it influence Russian policy in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular in two ways: through an effort to increase the price of Russian intervention in Syria, and by an attempt to offer the Russians various economic incentives in exchange for abandoning Assad. Both of these efforts failed, and Riyadh has now realized that the Assad regime and the forces loyal to it will survive and control the most important part of Syria for the foreseeable future. A readjustment by Riyadh of its current policy in the Syrian theater cannot be ruled out.
- b. The economic sphere: For the first time Saudi Arabia and Russia have reached understandings on a desirable oil production policy, and have signed an agreement (that will soon expire) to restrict oil production in order to ensure stable prices in this market. Saudi Arabia regards understandings on oil as leverage to influence Russia on political issues. Another question is Saudi Arabia's major interest in aid in nuclear technology. During Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit, it was announced that agreements were signed for technical projects amounting to \$10 billion. It was also reported that the Crown Prince signed a contract for civilian nuclear cooperation. In the background, Riyadh's main allies, headed by the United Arab Emirates, are also strengthening their economic and their defense ties with Moscow as a counterweight to Iran, although it is clear that for the foreseeable future, they will be unable to break up the Tehran-Moscow partnership, which inter alia is driven by anxiety about radical Sunni Islam.
- c. Armaments: Saudi interest in procuring weapons from Russian has been spoken of in the past, and it was reported five years ago that the two countries signed a \$20 billion procurement contract. This agreement, however, was never implemented, in part due to a dispute between Riyadh and Moscow about Iran's conduct in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. A large transaction is now involved, built around signing a memorandum of understanding on Saudi Arabia's procurement of the Russian S-400 advanced antiaircraft system.
- d. Global aspects: Russia, which regards Saudi Arabia as a key country in the Middle East, wishes to drive Riyadh away from Washington, although Moscow is aware of the

importance of the United States for the kingdom's security. For Saudi Arabia, the improvement in its relations with Russia is designed as possible compensation in case of an estrangement with the United States.

Until recently, Saudi Arabia was the main force in the Sunni axis in opposing Russia, even as Egypt and Jordan did not share this stance. In addition to the dispute between Riyadh and Moscow on the issue of Syria, there are still bones of contention from the past that make a rapprochement difficult, in part due to Saudi support for the mujahidin in Afghanistan and the Chechen rebels. At the same time, Riyadh and Moscow have a string of common interests, headed by the goal of stabilizing oil prices – an issue on which they are cooperating successfully – as well as procurement of armaments and nuclear technology and an interest in joint investments. Furthermore, Moscow realizes that not only will it be difficult to enhance its influence in the Middle East without improving its relations with Riyadh, but that Riyadh too still has considerable influence on the forces opposing Assad, and therefore on the chances of a settlement in Syria, as well as influence on Islamic forces in Russia itself.

As for Israel, Russia is keeping close track of the discourse about an Israeli-Saudi rapprochement as part of the formation of an anti-Iran regional front. The question of the Israeli-Palestinian political process also played a role, albeit probably a marginal one, in the talks that took place during King Salman's visit to Moscow, as part of Russia's efforts to jumpstart the process under its leadership, or at least with its participation.