

# Policy Report

## Special Issue

*Young Leaders' Perspectives on Potentials and Prospects for Saudi-German Cooperation*

No. 1

# Germany and Saudi Arabia's Strategic Outlook in a Multipolar World

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## Contextualisation

Shifts in the international system in the 21st century have led to an increasingly multipolar world order in which the United States does not have the same level of hegemonic power as it did at the beginning of the century. As countries who rely on US security guarantees and middle powers in their respective regions of Europe and the Middle East, this change has led Germany and Saudi Arabia to re-evaluate their national security strategies and calculations. Saudi Arabia has been increasingly concerned in recent years that the US is not as reliable as it was in the 1990s in providing protection against external threats. From Riyadh's perspective, what played a role in this perception was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran in October 2015, then-President Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia'<sup>1</sup>, and the lack of a strong US response to the 2019 attack on Aramco oil facilities in Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> As for Berlin, the repeated calling into question of US commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) by former – and potentially future – US President Donald Trump has led many in Germany to conclude that Washington's security guarantees are not as ironclad as once imagined. This, together with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has instigated a lively debate about overhauling Germany's strategy for national security and defence, policy domains that successive governments following the country's reunification had allowed to slip into irrelevance, based on the dual assumptions that war in Europe had become an impossibility and the United States would not hesitate to defend the Federal Republic in the event of an attack by foreign adversaries.

In this context, as both Germany and Saudi Arabia find themselves needing to re-vamp their respective strategic outlooks, there is new potential to upgrade their bilateral relations from trade and economic ties – Germany is the fourth-largest supplier of goods to Saudi Arabia – to more robust dialogue and co-operation in the security domain.<sup>3</sup> This policy report will explore how Saudi Arabia and Germany, despite often pursuing divergent foreign policy approaches, share common interests, particularly a strong preference for robust institutions, rules, and norms that uphold the international system, thus enabling

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sustained economic growth and prosperity. While Saudi Arabia may prioritise strategies aligned with its geopolitical interests and Germany emphasises multilateralism, both countries share a preference for diplomacy in their foreign policies; what differs is the rhetoric and their perception of how to achieve their shared goals. This misalignment of approaches can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements, causing them to "argue past each other" rather than finding common ground, which hinders effective cooperation between the two countries.

The example of both countries' approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially in light of the attacks on 7 October 2023 and the ongoing war in Gaza, serves as a poignant illustration of this dynamic. Though both countries are committed to the two-state solution, condemn violence, provide humanitarian assistance, and engage in diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful resolution, their rhetoric regarding the crisis differs significantly. Saudi Arabia regularly denounces Israeli violations of international law while reaffirming its commitment to the conditions for a two-state solution proposed by the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Germany, on the other hand, emphasises Israel's right to defend itself following Hamas's attack on the country on 7 October 2023, framing its criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza as excesses taking place within the context of an operation that is fundamentally legitimate.

The policy report proceeds as follows. First, it examines the international environment and how both Saudi Arabia and Germany have adapted their foreign policies in a multipolar and evolving world order. The policy report then delves into the two countries' interests and approaches to the war in Gaza, and finally assesses the broader implications for Saudi-German relations.

## International Environment

While Saudi Arabia and Germany face similar challenges in an increasingly multipolar and insecure world, they navigate this dynamic in different ways: Riyadh has shown flexibility and eagerness to embrace a shifting world order, proactively pursuing a regional leadership role, a foreign policy of multi-alignment, and a desire to steer clear of great power competition.<sup>4</sup> Berlin, in contrast, finds itself in a traditional alliance framework based on its integration in NATO and the European Union (EU). In the NATO context, Germany tends to follow the policies of its partners and that of the alliance as a whole, while in the EU, the country has been described as a "reluctant hegemon"<sup>5</sup> that assumes leadership in times of crisis only "with hesitation and delay."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, what Saudi Arabia and Germany have in common, as regional economic leaders, is a strong interest in a stable international environment that allows them to pursue export-led growth and attract foreign investment. This importance of economic interests is reflected in both countries' external relations and foreign policy decisions.

In the post-Covid period since late 2021, Saudi Arabia has begun to more actively position itself as a key regional leader by spearheading diplomatic initiatives, fostering economic partnerships, and playing a central role in mediating conflicts, all while leveraging its strategic influence to shape the political and security dynamics of the broader Middle East. Saudi Arabia's outreach to other powers is tied to growing and persistent concerns about the overall commitment of the US to territorially defending the Kingdom and the wider Gulf region, which has damaged the trust of the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Washington as a partner and security guarantor. In this context, Saudi Arabia has taken steps towards developing a greater understanding with Iran and China, for example. Whether with Beijing, Washington, or countries in between, the Kingdom views deeper, more diversified ties on the regional and global stage as win-win relationships, allowing it to choose the partner that best aligns with its interests and delivers the most benefits. This became clear in the choice of China as the facilitator for the Iran-Saudi rapprochement and Riyadh's move towards BRICS. Rather than aligning itself fully with a

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single geopolitical bloc as the world becomes more multipolar, the Kingdom seeks to maintain proximity to all poles of the emerging global order, a position that it interprets to promise economic dividends and the potential to exercise influence as an interlocutor with pronounced ties to all great powers.

Berlin, in contrast, continues to follow a conservative course in its foreign policy. Germany has often based its foreign-policy decisions on domestic pressure or pressure from allies, in addition to drivers such as international agreements, normative values and history. Moreover, Germany had embraced the idea of liberal interdependence<sup>7</sup> and tended to prioritise economic growth over potential security concerns. This was made possible by “cheap energy imported from Russia, trade with China, political stability in Europe... and security delegated to the US.”<sup>8</sup> From 1990 to 2022, Berlin pursued a foreign-policy strategy that divorced energy and economic concerns from the larger security context. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered this perception and forced Germany to confront this new reality. Three days after the Russian attack, Chancellor Olaf Scholz proclaimed a *Zeitenwende*, or epochal shift, in a speech to the German Bundestag that outlined the need to recalibrate Germany's security and foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> Berlin even developed its first National Security Strategy and declared that the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) shall in the future be the strongest conventional military force in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Two years on, Germany has hit NATO's benchmark of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defence<sup>11</sup> and provided more military aid to Ukraine than any other European country.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the policy of sending arms to Kyiv has come under increasing domestic scrutiny as the war approaches the three-year mark with no signs of abating, while the trend of waiting for allies to take the lead in determining which weapons to deliver – and when to deliver them – constitutes a continuation of the conservative status quo ante.<sup>13</sup>

## The War in Gaza

Looking at the current war in Gaza, Saudi Arabia and Germany share a vested interest in achieving peace and stability in the Middle East and seek an end to the hostilities. Furthermore, both Berlin and Riyadh advocate for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, their approaches and especially their rhetoric in pursuit of this goal differ significantly.

Over the past few months, Saudi Arabia has played a pronounced role in convening and chairing diverse fora to discuss developments in Israel and the Palestinian Territories and chart a path forward. Consecutive emergency meetings in Riyadh, Brussels and more recently New York – when Saudi Arabia chaired the ministerial consultative meeting of the six-party Arab Committee to discuss developments in the war in the Gaza Strip – along with extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summits hosted in Riyadh, highlight the Kingdom's efforts to mobilise Arab and international partners to calm the situation and provide support for international humanitarian relief efforts. At these meetings, Saudi Arabia has consistently stressed the importance of pursuing political solutions to end the crisis in line with relevant United Nations resolutions.

Riyadh's active involvement has bolstered efforts to convince countries across the world to immediately recognise a Palestinian state, underscoring the Kingdom's commitment to leveraging political pressure to make the two-state solution a reality. On the sidelines of the 79<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly high-level week in September 2024, for instance, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan announced the creation of the 'International Alliance to Implement the Two-State Solution.' The alliance brings together Arab, Muslim, and European countries to discuss and coordinate political steps intended to realise the objective of an independent Palestinian state, with initial meetings slated to take place in Riyadh and Brussels.<sup>14</sup> In this context, Prince Faisal explicitly called for nations to align with the

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international consensus represented by 149 countries that recognise a Palestinian state.<sup>15</sup> One of the stragglers in this regard is Germany, which at present does not recognise a state of Palestine.

The Kingdom also emphasises that it will not normalise relations with Israel without the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, as stated by His Royal Highness Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman at his annual address to the Shura Council in Riyadh on September 19, 2024.

Nevertheless, the Kingdom's efforts to galvanise support and shape collective action to durably resolve the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict still face considerable roadblocks. Most significantly, a ceasefire to end the ongoing wars in Gaza and Lebanon is yet to be achieved, while the recognition of a Palestinian state by Western countries like the US and Germany is unlikely to occur in the short term. However, the Kingdom applauded the decision taken by Norway, Spain, Ireland, and more recently Slovenia to recognise the State of Palestine.<sup>16</sup>

Germany, in contrast, chose initially to stand by Israel "unequivocally"<sup>17</sup> and abstained from a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in December 2023.<sup>18</sup> Germany has a unique relationship with Israel and considers its Middle Eastern ally's security *Staatsräson* (Reason of State).<sup>19</sup> The Federal Foreign Office describes this close relationship as "rooted in Germany's responsibility for the Shoa, the systematic genocide of around six million Jews in Europe during the National Socialist era."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, Berlin emphasised Israel's right to defend itself in the weeks and months following Hamas's attack on 7 October 2023. When it has criticised aspects of Israel's military response in Gaza, the German government has framed these actions as excesses taking place within the context of an operation that is fundamentally legitimate. Furthermore, Germany provides military aid to the Israel Defence Forces<sup>21</sup>, while Berlin came to Tel Aviv's defence after South Africa accused Israel of violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in a case brought before the International Court of Justice in December 2023.<sup>22</sup>

Differentiating this seemingly one-sided picture, however, are Germany's sizable humanitarian support for the Palestinian people and diplomatic efforts focusing on bringing an end to the fighting in Gaza. In addition to committing 221 million euros in additional funding to support humanitarian efforts in Gaza<sup>23</sup>, the German government reaffirmed that the country "firmly believes in two States, Israel and Palestine, for two peoples in the Middle East. We [the government] share the goal of a Palestinian State. We fully support Palestinians' right to self-determination."<sup>24</sup> Though unlike its European partners Spain, Ireland, and Norway, Germany did not choose to couple this statement of intent with immediately recognising Palestinian statehood, the country has nonetheless engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity aiming to bring the conflict in Gaza to an end. In this regard, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stated that the "nightmare" of the conflict must end and called for "a humanitarian ceasefire that will lead to the release of the hostages and put an end to the deaths."<sup>25</sup> The Foreign Minister's visit to Riyadh on 5 September 2024 was her 11th to the region since 7 October 2023, underlining the importance accorded to engaging with partners across the Middle East to achieve a ceasefire and work towards durably resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. In this regard, it can be said that despite differences in rhetoric, Germany and Saudi Arabia both accord similar value to leveraging diplomacy to achieve their shared goal of a ceasefire followed by a two-state solution. This convergence of interests is underemphasised and represents a possibility for deeper cooperation between the Kingdom and the Federal Republic.

Despite their divergent rhetoric, moreover, Berlin and Riyadh have cooperated more closely since the war in Gaza began. After blocking the sale over concerns related to the Saudi government's involvement in the war in Yemen, Germany's governing coalition allowed the delivery of Eurofighter Typhoon jets to

Saudi Arabia in January 2024. In support of this decision, Foreign Minister Baerbock cited Saudi Arabia's role in providing security for Israel by shooting down missiles and drones launched at the country by the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>26</sup> The Kingdom has also received high-level visitors from Germany since 7 October, highlighted most recently by Foreign Minister Baerbock's visit in September 2024. For these overtures to translate into constructive cooperation with respect to political challenges in Gaza and beyond, politicians and the public in Germany and Saudi Arabia must recognise the breadth of shared interests between the two countries, along with the ability of each to complement the other in a global geopolitical environment increasingly defined by multipolarity and great-power competition.

### Policy Recommendations

The policy report has argued that Germany and Saudi Arabia face similar challenges in an increasingly multipolar world and share an interest in achieving a peaceful and stable Middle East. Despite past disagreements and diverging rhetoric concerning current challenges, the potential for closer German-Saudi relations exists and could benefit both countries. Specifically, direct cooperation in defence and security issues would help the two countries achieve their mutual goals.

Here, Saudi Arabia and Germany could play a more cooperative role and work in tandem to reach regional de-escalation. As a first step, both governments could introduce a regular, meaningful, in-depth political dialogue to analyse and comprehend the most important issues facing the Middle East. Such a format would help both nations overcome polarisation, misunderstandings, and contrasting perceptions. It is crucial to establish a bilateral Saudi-German format because it would foster deeper relations by engaging both government and society, ensuring broad support for stronger ties. The added benefit of incorporating parallel Track I, Track 1.5, and Track II formats lies in creating multiple channels for dialogue, which helps both nations better understand each other's perspectives and priorities, enhancing mutual cooperation at all levels. Accordingly, this approach can foster both broader and deeper ties based on personal relationships between Saudi and German stakeholders across politics, diplomacy, academia, research, media, culture, sports, and business, thus equipping both sides with the necessary tools and experiences to better manage expectations, find common ground, and develop mutual understanding while avoiding misunderstandings.

Another approach could be to assemble a multidisciplinary team comprising experts, academics, and decision-makers from both countries, ensuring a comprehensive representation of perspectives. These representatives would be tasked with creating a bilateral dialogue format akin to a task force hosted in Berlin and Riyadh, focusing on diverse themes relevant to Saudi and German priorities encompassing domestic and foreign policies. For example, the task force could focus specifically on foreign policy and security issues, such as the conflict in Gaza and escalation in the Middle East, or engage in more profound exchanges on the ways in which Berlin and Riyadh can leverage their influence in their respective regions to shape global governance. In areas of significant disagreement, furthermore, such a format would lend itself to discussing these sensitive topics in a trusted and confidential environment.

Moreover, fostering a youth dialogue between Germany and Saudi Arabia would also promote cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and collaboration among young people from both nations. Ideas for such a dialogue could include a diplomacy simulation, in which participants role-play as diplomats, negotiating and resolving simulated international crises and conflicts. This interactive exercise encourages critical thinking, diplomacy skills, and intercultural dialogue while deepening participants' understanding of global issues and different perspectives towards these topics. Another way to facilitate youth dialogue

could be language exchange programs as well as hosting online debates and forums that allow the discussion of topics of mutual interest and encourage engagement with other points of view.

Institutional actors in both Saudi Arabia and Germany can play a pivotal role in supporting and organising these initiatives. Diplomatic institutes from both countries could facilitate youth simulations, fostering a new generation of leaders familiar with bilateral issues. Think tanks in Saudi Arabia and Germany can also contribute by organising and hosting dialogues at the Track-I, Track-1.5, and Track-II levels, providing platforms for in-depth discussions and expert exchanges that enhance mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation across multiple sectors.

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