
UZBEKISTAN – SAUDI ARABIA RELATIONS: A NEW STAGE OF COOPERATION

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Abstract: This article explores the evolving diplomatic, economic, cultural, and strategic relations between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the past three decades. It examines key milestones in bilateral cooperation, including high-level visits, signed agreements, and multilateral initiatives such as the Central Asia–Gulf Cooperation Council summits. Special emphasis is placed on the alignment of national development strategies—“Uzbekistan-2030” and “Vision 2030”—as a foundation for expanding collaboration in energy, technology, education, and religious tourism. The study argues that the current trajectory of Saudi–Uzbek relations reflects a deepening of mutual interests rooted in long-term regional stability, strategic integration, and shared cultural values. The article concludes that this partnership is poised to contribute significantly to geopolitical balance, economic modernization, and interregional connectivity in both Central Asia and the Gulf.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, bilateral relations, Vision 2030, Uzbekistan-2030, Central Asia, Gulf Cooperation Council, energy cooperation, strategic dialogue, pilgrimage tourism, regional stability, economic partnership, cultural diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION: In recent years, diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia have been developing significantly. The strengthening of political, economic, and cultural ties between the two countries, the signing of strategic agreements, and high-level official visits not only reflect Uzbekistan’s growing importance in Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy, but also highlight Saudi Arabia’s increasing significance in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. This mutually beneficial cooperation is entering a new phase and is closely linked to geopolitical shifts in Central Asia and the Gulf region, ongoing global and regional integration processes, Uzbekistan’s open foreign policy strategy, and Saudi Arabia’s evolving foreign policy agenda.

It is important to note that the current warm phase in Arab–Uzbek relations is not a new phenomenon. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan have existed since the early 1990s, when Uzbekistan began to establish its place among the nations of the world as an independent state. The independence of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics marked a turning point in the history of international relations with the Gulf countries. The Central Asian states actively sought to develop political relations with all Muslim countries, including multilateral ties based on mutual interests.

On December 30, 1991, Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to officially recognize the independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The beginning of formal relations between the two

countries was marked by the historic meeting of the two nations' leaders on February 19, 1992, when the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia paid a visit to Uzbekistan. This meeting represented a historic phase in bilateral cooperation and laid the foundation for political, economic, cultural, and social collaboration between Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia. Following this, Uzbekistan opened a consulate in Jeddah in November 1992 and later established an embassy in Riyadh in May 1995. In 1997, the opening of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Tashkent signaled a further strengthening of mutual diplomatic relations. Despite these diplomatic efforts, there were no significant developments in Arab–Uzbek relations until 2017.

Many Arab and Uzbek scholars describe the period from 1991 to 2017 as a phase during which the countries of the region were mainly engaged in studying each other's unique characteristics and exploring possible opportunities, with only limited engagement and cooperation.

In 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev initiated a new foreign policy strategy aimed at enhancing Uzbekistan's international relations. This strategy placed particular emphasis on the Central Asian region and its immediate neighbors.

President Mirziyoyev's visit to the United Arab Emirates in 2017 marked the beginning of a new stage in Arab–Uzbek relations. The current phase of cooperation is significantly more dynamic than in the past and is characterized by a stronger focus on economic collaboration. The two countries have, by now, come to understand one another sufficiently and are currently strengthening their cooperation in the fields of economy, culture, education, and religion.

The partnership between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan must first and foremost be considered in a regional context. A clear example of this is the first summit of leaders from Central Asian countries and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, held on July 19, 2023, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. During this summit, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev delivered a speech emphasizing the importance of strengthening relations between Central Asia and the Gulf region. He highlighted the historical depth of these ties, noting that close trade relations, shared values and traditions, and the foundation of the Islamic faith form the basis of these interregional connections.

Speaking about the current state of relations between the countries of the two regions, President Mirziyoyev noted that despite surrounding threats and challenges, both Central Asia and the Gulf have remained zones of peace, stability, and development. He also emphasized the vital role played by the Gulf countries, with their vast economic, natural, and intellectual resources, in ensuring global stability and energy security.

In addition, the President of Uzbekistan put forward a number of initiatives and proposals aimed at expanding regional cooperation in several key areas. These included broadening political dialogue in various formats, enhancing cooperation in high technology and investment, strengthening trade and transport connectivity, addressing environmental and climate change issues, and developing the tourism sector

In conclusion of his speech, the President of Uzbekistan expressed confidence that the outcomes of the first summit of the “Central Asia – Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)” leaders would undoubtedly serve to elevate the multifaceted relations between the two regions to an entirely new stage.

On April 15, 2024, the second Joint Ministerial Meeting of the Strategic Dialogue between the Gulf Arab States and Central Asian countries was held in Tashkent. The meeting focused on strengthening the partnership between the GCC and Central Asian states, deepening mutual trust and understanding, developing transport routes, expanding robust logistics and trade networks, addressing security issues, and enhancing cooperation in the fight against climate change.

Furthermore, participants endorsed Uzbekistan’s proposal to establish a liaison group to prepare for the second summit of the GCC and Central Asian state leaders, which is planned to be held in Samarkand in 2025 as part of the ongoing strategic dialogue. The significance of both summits clearly demonstrates the elevated status of Uzbekistan in Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy priorities.

When discussing Saudi-Uzbek cooperation, particular attention must be given to the state visit of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Saudi Arabia on August 17, 2022. This was President Mirziyoyev’s first official state visit to Saudi Arabia following his election. The high-level talks during this visit revealed a strong convergence of views and shared aspirations between the two countries. The successful implementation of Saudi Arabia’s national development program “Vision 2030” was highly praised, and it was noted that the goals and objectives of Uzbekistan’s own development strategy, “Uzbekistan – 2030,” aimed at transforming all spheres of national life, align closely with those of “Vision 2030.”

Special emphasis was placed on both countries’ commitment to advancing the principles of the digital and “green” economy. It was also noted that both sides are interested in expanding cooperation in the energy and petrochemical sectors. Uzbekistan has launched major energy projects with Saudi Arabia’s “ACWA Power” worth a total of \$2.6 billion. In addition, cooperation with the “SABIC” company was identified as a promising area of partnership.

On August 18, 2022, agreements and contracts worth over \$14 billion in fields such as energy, chemicals, infrastructure development, healthcare, electrical engineering, agriculture, information technology, pharmaceuticals, and transport were signed during the latest meeting of the Uzbekistan–Saudi Arabia Business Council.

The meeting also emphasized the strengthening of cultural and humanitarian ties, with particular mention of the fact that more than 10,000 students in Uzbekistan are studying the Arabic language, one of the official languages of the United Nations. Security cooperation was also discussed during the visit.

One of the most important outcomes was the signing of 15 cooperation documents between the governments and ministries of both countries, covering areas such as customs, civil aviation, tourism, healthcare, energy, and labor relations.

Regarding the visit, President Mirziyoyev stated:

“I am confident that today’s historic meeting will enrich our cooperation with tangible results and serve as a strong signal for business relations. Entrepreneurs from both countries are eagerly and enthusiastically awaiting the outcomes of our dialogue” .

Cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan has now spanned nearly 33 years. During this period, the two countries have exchanged visits at various levels and across multiple sectors. Based on the steady and mutually beneficial dialogue that has characterized their relationship, it can be anticipated that their partnership will continue to develop at an accelerated pace. A number of agreements and strategic partnerships have already been signed, many of which are in the process of implementation or have already commenced operations.

The dynamic growth of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan indicates that their economic, geopolitical, and cultural relations are increasingly being consolidated on the basis of long-term strategic interests. In addition, expanding collaboration in pilgrimage tourism, culture, and education, as well as simplifying access to Hajj travel, may serve to optimize future migration and transportation systems.

Looking ahead, this partnership is expected not only to open up new opportunities in trade, economics, and technology, but also to contribute positively to regional stability and development.

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