

Russia and Saudi Arabia: Old Disenchantments, New Challenges

by John W. Parker and Thomas F. Lynch III



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Cover: Vladimir Putin presented an artifact made of mammoth tusk to Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud in Riyadh, October 14–15, 2019 (President of Russia Web site)

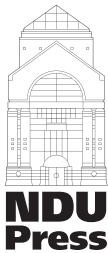
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Executive Summary

The Joseph Biden administration can manage its recalibration of relations with Saudi Arabia without unwarranted fear that Riyadh will view Russia as a safe-harbor alternative to the United States on a myriad of state-to-state interactions that are most important to the Kingdom. While Russia's transactional approach to foreign partners has at times given it advantages in some areas over the more value-based framework of U.S. foreign relations, there clearly have been limits to the Russian style of dealing with Saudi Arabia in this century. For now, Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to have lost his bet on Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) as a resolute Russian strategic partner. However, Putin will continue to do business when necessary with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) on a transactional basis given its role as a key player in the region, particularly in the Expanded Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC+). U.S. foreign policy during the Biden administration will do best to recognize that the Russia-Saudi partnership is a transactional one that will endure, but not at the highest order of broad functionality, including at times within OPEC+.

It was not just their clash over oil that spoiled Putin's ties with MbS in the spring of 2020. Dealings between Riyadh and Moscow were already frayed, and the February–March 2020 collision between the two countries at the OPEC+ talks in Vienna simply reflected that relationship trajectory. Putin's visit to Riyadh in October 2019 already had made clear that there would be no breakthrough in bilateral relations, and the OPEC+ connection was not sufficient to build bilateral relations to a truly comprehensive level of cooperation.

Actually, the October 2019 Riyadh summit brought a pause to 6 years of efforts by both sides to advance the Russian-Saudi relationship. The trend toward warmer ties gained momentum in 2013 as Riyadh and Moscow reacted to secret talks between Washington and Tehran that explored prospects for a nuclear deal. It was reinforced in Riyadh by President Barack Obama's decision in August 2013 not to respond militarily to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against its own people. Then, the February–March 2020 OPEC+ oil price row between Russia and the KSA made conspicuous the important setback in this once-budding partnership.

Relatively soon after King Salman succeeded King Abdullah in January 2015, candidate and later President Donald Trump's calls for withdrawing U.S. Soldiers from Syria and his mercurial declarations of readiness to meet with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani encouraged Riyadh to prioritize further improvement in relations with Moscow. Saudi unease over President Trump's statements motivated Riyadh to continue the movement toward closer ties with Moscow in an array of areas, including coordinating with Russia to prop up global oil prices.

The Russian Federation and the KSA both played up common interests despite important divisions over Syria, differences over Ukraine and Yemen, competing global energy interests, and longstanding mutual distrust.

As the Biden administration takes the stage in Washington during 2021, U.S. strategy must continue to factor Saudi Arabia's pursuit of ties with today's contemporary great power states: Russia and China. The Saudi-Russian relationship is certain to evolve again as the Biden team recalibrates relations with Riyadh and Moscow. Within this context, and even before the Biden administration, Saudi acquiescence to the fall 2020 Abraham Accords appeared to reflect a growing appreciation by Riyadh and its closest Gulf allies that Israel is increasingly a more reliable security hedge than the United States against Riyadh's longstanding security rival, Iran.

Early in 2021, the Biden administration strongly signaled a far less positive relationship with Riyadh than during the Trump years or even in prior U.S. administrations: suspending Trump administration arms shipments to Riyadh; commencing a formal review of the long-standing Saudi-led war in Yemen; offering renewed nuclear weapons talks to Iran; allowing release of a U.S. intelligence report explicitly finding Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman responsible for the brutal killing and dismemberment of expat journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018; and President Biden's insistence on calling directly to King Salman, not MbS, for official conversations. If the Saudis and Russians had reached a comprehensive strategic partnership by the end of 2020, these Biden administration moves might merit great scrutiny and fears that Washington was pushing Riyadh more deeply into Russian arms. Thus, a fact-based determination that the Russia-Saudi relationship did not consummate in such a close manner is an important assessment for the pursuit of U.S. foreign policy in the Gulf.

Clearly, critical factors in the Saudi-Russian relationship are different in 2021 than in 2020. After the raucous OPEC+ disagreements in Vienna in March 2020, Moscow and Riyadh both welcomed President Trump's face-saving intervention to reconvene negotiations and help shape their outcome. The Biden administration has other concerns and priorities that make any future such specific interventions highly unlikely, but team Biden has a historic opportunity. By properly recognizing the inherent limits to Russian-Saudi strategic cooperation, the Biden administration can pursue a combination of competitive and cooperative strategies to address the security challenge from Iran in the region, decrease turbulence in world energy markets, buffer the United States from Russian and Saudi market pressure, and better prepare America for the eventual post-fossil fuel era—and all without worries that a tight Russia-Saudi partnership might somehow stand in the way.

Introduction

The international political landscape of 2021 is turbulent. Trends occurring before the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated during 2020 and into 2021. Three global great powers—the United States, China, and Russia—now vie for primacy across a host of economic, political, and ideological fields.¹ Once-predictable bilateral relationships between these three and other less powerful states have evolved during the past decade, stressed by the strategic rise of China, the assertion of Russian rights as a great power, and the relative and growing angst in the United States about the costs of leading an international order on terms it has grown accustomed to since the end of World War II.

Among the bilateral relationships in flux, the one between Russia and Saudi Arabia is noteworthy. Over the past decade, that bilateral relationship has run through multiple twists, permutations, and reformations. Decades-long strategic mistrust and downright animus between Moscow and Riyadh faded by the end of the 2000s. What emerged in the 2010s was a mosaic of complex tactical accommodations, intermediate arrangements, and fluid interactions across the fields of geo-petroleum management, the ebb and flow of jousting for Middle East political ascendancy, and the management of relations with the United States in the region and globally.

For many observers, the Russia-Saudi relationship is opaque and largely indecipherable. Moscow and Riyadh alternatively joust and collaborate over oil production quotas. They support similar Middle East countries on some issues but then back opposite countries on other ones. Russia and Saudi Arabia tack for position with the states in the Middle East that vie for power and predominance: Iran, Egypt, and Turkey. They have agreed that Sunni jihadism is a mortal threat to each regime and must not be allowed to grow domestically in either state, but they have worked against each other's interests when fighting Salafi jihadi terrorists in places such as Syria and Iraq. And Riyadh and Moscow have pursued vastly different interests and objectives in relationships with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As 2021 unfolds, each of these Russo-Saudi relationship complexities seems certain to evolve yet again. As COVID-19 recedes and the Biden administration succeeds that of Trump, the calculations and interactions between Moscow and Riyadh must adapt in some areas even as they remain constant in others. Deciphering whether and how this bilateral relationship will evolve, and what that evolution means for U.S. interests and policies today and into the Biden era, is the purpose of this monograph.

This report focuses on description and analysis of the main strategic relationship permutations and fluctuations between Russia and Saudi Arabia over the last decade in four main areas:

- geo-petroleum supply and pricing decisions
- the conduct of counterterrorism actions against the Sunni Salafi jihadist movement, particularly in Syria
- the jousting for Middle East power ascendance between Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, with special attention to the competition with Iran and the nuclear weapons concern
- the management of U.S. presence and influence in the wider Middle East.

The report traces the most critical events and their context between Moscow and Riyadh during the last decade (2010–2020) impacting these four main relationship areas. It briefly establishes the dawn of Russia-Saudi diplomatic openings during the 2003–2007 period, then concentrates major analysis on the seminal events and activities for the relationship that began in 2013. The report evaluates the most salient features of the bilateral relationship in 2021 and its likely trajectory beyond. It ends with special attention to the implications of contemporary Russian-Saudi relations for the Biden administration's approach to relations with the Kingdom and in the wider Middle East.

The report narrative is largely based on the perspectives of Moscow toward its relationship with Riyadh. The bulk of the primary source research for this report was conducted via interviews with Russian sources and interlocutors during 2019.² No similar direct interviews were conducted with any Saudis. Cogent, concise summaries of key Saudi perspectives are provided throughout the report based on secondary source research.

Historical Baggage

Contemporary Russian distrust of Saudi Arabia is strongly tied to Moscow's view that Saudi Arabia invested much in defeating the Soviet army in Afghanistan in the 1980s, that Saudi donors gave generously to the Chechen independence movement and Muslim revival in the post-Soviet 1990s, and that Riyadh helped bankroll Muslim forces in Bosnia during the breakup of Yugoslavia.³ When the Syrian crisis developed in 2011, Russians suspected a reprise of earlier Saudi Arabian tactics against Moscow in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia: Riyadh-led efforts to drag the United States and the West into a conflict essentially to help do the dirty work for the Saudis against Syria's Russian partner.⁴

Post-Cold War Kremlin overtures toward improved relations with Riyadh did not garner much enthusiasm in Moscow or traction in Saudi Arabia or neighboring Gulf monarchies until

well into the post-Soviet period. Saudi policy toward Russia first began to change after 2003 with the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The post-Saddam political emergence of Iraq's Shia majority and the series of revelations about the Islamic Republic of Iran's 18-year-long secret nuclear program sparked deepening fears of Iran in the region. Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Muslim Gulf states had an interest in constraining Shia Muslim Iran, in part by dangling incentives for Russia to distance itself from the Islamic Republic.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, then the Crown Prince, broke the ice with a visit to Moscow in September 2003 some 6 months after the U.S.-led military coalition invaded Iraq against Saudi counsel. The two countries tried to put the Chechen issue behind them. Abdullah expressed "our conviction" that the "Chechen question" was "Russia's internal affair."⁵ The Crown Prince and President Putin pronounced their "determination to step up the fight against terrorism . . . including collective efforts."⁶ These efforts reportedly included the establishment of a bilateral working group to fight terrorism.⁷ Saudi Arabia also looked favorably on Russia's bid to be embraced by the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Two years later, it championed the organization's decision that gave Russia permanent observer status at the end of June 2005.⁸

In 2006, Iranian activities and actions through its proxies put nerves on edge throughout the region. During the July–August war in Lebanon, Iranian-backed Hizballah forces stalemated the Israeli army. Iran that year also defied the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)—including Russia—by resuming and expanding nuclear enrichment and reprocessing after a "voluntary" 2-year suspension. At the same time, Iran fed extensive sectarian violence across Iraq. Tehran's adventurism sparked fear in the region of a U.S. or Israeli strike on Iran.

By 2007, the Gulf monarchies seemed to be worried as much by Iran's nuclear ambitions and muscle flexing as they were by the possibility that the United States or Israel might try to solve the problem militarily. Russia already had endorsed referral of the Iranian nuclear file to the UNSC in 2006. At the same time, however, it began to support a series of resolutions calling on Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment program while creating UNSC procedural barriers to using military force against Iran. At this point, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) seemed to view Russia as an independent actor with the potential to restrain both Washington and Tehran.⁹

Putin's First Visit

Against this background of heightened regional tensions, Russian President Vladimir Putin broke new ground with the Arab Gulf powers when he visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan in February 2007. Putin was the first-ever Russian or Soviet leader to visit their capitals.



During first-ever visit by a Russian leader to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi King Abdullah meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin at Royal Palace in Riyadh, February 11, 2007 (UPI Photo/Anatoli Zhdanov)

Signaling his intentions to claim Russia's "rightful" place at the great power table in Arabia and the wider Middle East, Putin pitched Russian arms, oil investments, nuclear reactors, and satellite launches with host sheiks and princes.

In 2007, the United States remained central to the security of the Saudis and the GCC. However, the U.S.-Saudi relationship by that point was half a decade into a rather deep chill. Riyadh still chafed at America's rebuff of its 2002–2003 warnings against toppling Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and quietly blamed Washington for enabling and emboldening Iran across the region.¹⁰ As the United States dug itself deeper into the morass of battling the confluence of Saddam's leftover loyalists and Salafi jihadist extremists in Iraq, the Saudis were looking for another potential influential partner to assist with its interests in constraining Iranian regional power.¹¹

The Saudis did not angle for a Russian strategic military intervention during Putin's 2007 visit. But they did try to entice greater Russian appreciation for Saudi regional security concerns with Iran. Riyadh dangled the lure of substantial potential arms contracts to engage Moscow's attention. Subsequently, during the visit of Saudi National Security Council head Prince Bandar bin Sultan to Moscow in July 2008, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed a military-cooperation agreement that reportedly could result in "several large arms contracts." Subsequent negotiations on deals reportedly worth between \$2 billion and \$6 billion seemed designed to sweeten the pot for a decision by Moscow to downplay relations with Iran. Ultimately, little of this panned out (see table).¹²

In December 2011, the United States announced that American and Saudi negotiators had signed contracts for \$30 billion of the \$60 billion in weapons purchases approved by Congress in 2010. Then, it became clear in Moscow that there would be no sizable contracts for Russia from the Saudis. This bitter outcome coincided with Putin's dramatic reversal of Russia's essentially passive attitude toward the impact of the Arab Spring in Syria.

The turnaround of Russia's policy toward Syria was sparked by several developments and trends, some of which were connected to the bitter relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. First, there was the killing in Libya of President Muammar Qadhafi in October 2011. With a well-developed phobia about claimed Western-inspired "color revolutions," Putin appeared determined to prevent the "Libyan scenario" from repeating in Syria. Second, with his popularity sagging prior to elections to regain the presidency during 2012, Syria became the perfect foreign policy issue for Putin to use to pose as a strong leader fighting postulated U.S. inspired and directed color revolutions across former Soviet states, now including Russia, as well as a repetition of the Libyan scenario in Syria.¹³

Third, there was a sharp increase in October and November 2011 in Israeli and U.S. threats to strike Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities. Moscow feared that any attack on Iran would soon escalate into regional war and chaos with unforeseen but frightening consequences for Russian interests. This added to Moscow's sense of urgency in preaching the "principle" of foreign nonintervention in Syria. Fourth, there was a spike in Saudi—as well as Qatari and Turkish—resistance and armed activism against the Bashar al-Asad regime in Syria during late 2011. Arab encouragement of this armed resistance to Asad—resistance that Moscow feared might ultimately be aimed toward undermining Iran—nudged Putin ever closer to considering a stronger physical presence on the ground in Syria.¹⁴

In any event, on top of growing disagreements over Syria, Saudi Arabia's failure to follow through with any significant arms contracts with Russia deepened the view in Moscow that

since the Saudis had only tricked and double-crossed Russia over the years, they were not reliable diplomatic or business partners. Although Putin perhaps did not totally share this view, he now had nothing to lose in challenging Saudi Arabia—and many other nations—over their desire to oust Asad from power in Damascus. With the Russian leader's growing commitment in late 2011 and early 2012 to prevent the toppling of the Asad regime, diverse threats directed at Iran and Syria pushed Moscow and Tehran closer together. Yet Tehran could not rest easy as it viewed Russia's growing interest in possible contacts with regional rival Riyadh.

Riyadh had its own concerns with the turn to civil war in Syria. Long opposed to Syria's Alawite-led, Shia-sympathetic minority government for both its religion and its critical role as a bridge for Shia Iran's strategic activities across the Middle East and into Lebanon, the Kingdom had no love for the Asad regime. However, the Saudis were not initially interested in striking a match to the tinder of democratic-inspired revolution in the region. That preference changed when the Asad regime turned to wholesale military and police attacks against Syrian Sunni communities in a bid to crush a growing insurrection. Riyadh openly condemned the Asad brutality and began quiet support for nongovernmental and some covert government indirect aid to Syrian Sunni Salafi jihadist militia groups to fight back. KSA involvement quickly got complicated by its rivals Turkey and Qatar and their support for Sunni militias associated with the despised Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵ And then, Saudi and other Gulf Arab states' involvement grew even more complex as the most prominent Sunni Salafi jihadist groups got overwhelmed by a virulent so-called Islamic State (IS) revolutionary cadre with an ideology aimed at toppling the regime in Saudi Arabia soon after taking Baghdad and Damascus.¹⁶ Riyadh abhorred Iran's role in defending and enabling Asad, but it did not want IS to win a short, sharp war in Syria and then take aim at the Kingdom. Riyadh wanted a break on the Iran-Syria-Shia nexus and needed bigger outside partners to help in this venture while simultaneously checking the dangerous rise of IS.¹⁷

As the Syrian conflict escalated around these complexities with a core featuring proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, there reportedly was a quiet debate in Moscow over policy in the Middle East: should Russia rely on what it widely viewed as the arc of Shi'ite stability as an extension of Iran's "natural barrier" to Sunni extremism pushing north into majority Muslim regions in Russia and the former Soviet Union, or should it try to repair relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Sunni monarchies—and, if so, how much effort should be expended?

As the Arab Spring played itself out, Russian interests in Syria evolved as its intervention in Syrian affairs deepened. At first, Putin could insist that Russia had no interests in Syria. In June 2011, and several times thereafter, he argued that "a special relationship did exist at one time—

in the Soviet era, not now.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Syria was a venue in which Putin could demonstrate that Russia was an independent power with which the United States and other Western powers had to deal as an equal. As such, Syria played an important role, along with the annexation of Crimea, in pumping up and keeping Putin’s domestic popularity high. By 2016, however, Russia had prospects for substantial oil, gas, and pipeline interests, as well as increasingly impressive military real estate interests in the country. The Hmeimim airbase and Tartus port in Syria gave Russia increasing leverage in the region, and it would seek to improve these facilities over the years.¹⁹ The war in Syria had potential as not only a testing ground for advanced Russian weapons, but also a showroom for prospective regional and world clients. By 2020, this strategic military potential was fulfilled in a regional context as well, as Russia flew more than 300 flights out of Hmeimim airbase in support of some 2,000 Wagner Group Russian mercenaries helping to pursue Russia’s economic, political, and geopolitical interests in Libya.²⁰

Russia wanted productive contacts and profitable weapons and economic contracts with all countries in the Middle East, but Moscow had not liked what it viewed as aggressive Saudi efforts to influence politics in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Nevertheless, for Putin, it was not just about money, Russian analysts stressed. There was also the issue of Sunni Salafi terrorism, which long predated the onset of the Arab Spring and which then–Crown Prince Abdullah’s September 2003 visit to the Russian capital had addressed but never totally put to rest. In Moscow, the belief persisted that Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states continued to provide money to militant Salafist and Wahhabi cells in Sunni Muslim districts of the Russian Federation’s North Caucasus and central Volga territories. The Russian leadership and public were equally jaundiced on this point.²¹

Turning Point

Despite mutual concerns and worries about the other during 2011–2012, neither side let ties developed between 2003 and 2007 lapse totally. They were then encouraged to enhance relations further by two key developments in 2013. First, although the impetus for the eventual revitalization of Russian-Saudi contacts is a matter of speculation, the most likely candidate was the sudden mutual concern in 2013 over a potential rapprochement between Washington and Tehran on the basis of a nuclear deal. Riyadh’s confidence in Washington had been shaken by President Obama’s decision in early 2011 to withdraw support from Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak. However, any Saudi turn to Russia for support and for messaging displeasure to Washington during 2011 was impeded by sharp differences with Moscow over the Syria crisis.

Yet the prospect of closer ties between Washington and Tehran appeared to incentivize both Riyadh and Moscow to explore more seriously the possibilities of a rapprochement of their own.

The United States and Iran had begun secret contacts in March 2013, when then–Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and Vice President Joseph Biden’s top foreign policy advisor, Jake Sullivan, met with Iranian officials in Muscat, Oman. In apparent reaction, the pace of contacts between Riyadh and Moscow soon quickened.²² Although not publicly stated, Russia and Saudi Arabia both appeared to be reacting to a perceived U.S.-Iranian interest in overall rapprochement that would gain strength should sanctions on Iran be lifted following an agreement limiting Iran’s nuclear program.²³ Attentive to the beginnings of these U.S.-Iranian negotiations that eventually led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in summer 2015,²⁴ the thinking of some in Moscow (and perhaps also in some quarters of Riyadh) seemed to be that any growing U.S.-Iranian axis might be counterbalanced by a new Russian-Saudi axis—a truly new opportunity.²⁵

The second development was the weak U.S. response to the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons. President Obama’s August 2013 decision not to back up his chemical weapons “red line” warning with military action distressed Middle East leaders. The affair reinforced the earlier Saudi inclination to court Russia more actively because of the start of secret U.S.-Iran talks in Oman. Riyadh and other capitals began to look to Putin as a steadier hand playing a weightier role in the region. They also reached out to him to signal Washington not to take Saudi Arabia for granted and to encourage Moscow to put greater distance between itself and Tehran.²⁶

Sochi Olympics and Ukrainian Crisis

Moscow did not hesitate to follow up on the indications of Saudi interest in exploring a closer relationship. Although serious differences over Syria continued to divide Moscow and Riyadh, the keep-in-touch line seemed to have the upper hand in both capitals. In 2013, Prince Bandar met with Putin in July and December—meetings that provoked much speculation.²⁷ The opinion was widespread among analysts in Moscow that Riyadh had offered Putin \$15 billion in arms contracts and a guarantee of no terrorist attacks to spoil his prized upcoming Sochi Winter Olympics in exchange for the dropping of Russian support for Asad.²⁸ Many in Moscow assumed that the Gulf monarchies had sponsored the recent terror attacks in Volgograd (one in October and two in December 2013). In this context, Bandar’s mixing of monetary blandishments and implicit security threats in his reported approach to Putin was entirely believable to observers in the Russian capital.²⁹

Given the personal prestige that Putin had invested in the Sochi Olympics, however, it was also reasonable to speculate that due diligence on behalf of security for the games prompted the Russian president to touch base with Riyadh during the last half of 2013. As earlier noted, bilateral discussions of this subject reportedly occurred as far back as then-Crown Prince Abdullah's visit to Moscow in September 2003. Now, according to one Russian press story, Putin's meetings with Bandar led to Riyadh agreeing to set up an intelligence office in Moscow to help Russia track extremist Chechens. A year later, discussing his talks with Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal in November 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov would state, "We have agreed to step up our joint efforts in combating terrorism and to this end form a bilateral working team."³⁰

In any event, the Sochi games in February 2014 took place under completely unanticipated conditions of local peace and quiet. This calm was disrupted after the games by the sudden political turbulence in Ukraine and Russia's swift annexation of Crimea. Saudi Arabia was one of the 100 nations that voted against Russia on the March 2014 UN General Assembly resolution that declared Russia's annexation of Crimea illegal.³¹

But Russia's invigorated status in the Middle East weathered this diplomatic storm and the subsequent flares following Russian support of secessionists in southeastern Ukraine. If anything, Russia's Middle East stature improved. The general perception in the region was of a weakening of American resolve pursuant to Obama's inconsequential 2013 red line and the ongoing denouement of U.S. military involvement in Iraq. Post-Ukraine conflict friction between Moscow and Washington provided more room for maneuver for capitals in the Middle East. Even if they still recognized that the United States remained the most formidable power in the region, all Middle East countries had little incentive to spite Russia publicly over Ukraine.

By summer 2014, Russian analysts attributed the greatest importance for the continuation of Russian-Saudi contacts to regional unhappiness over the slow U.S. response to the rise of IS across Iraq and Syria. Saudi-Russian rapprochement was a paradox, commented one analyst, because it was not a rapprochement among friends. But there was a weakening of traditional U.S.-Gulf State alliances because of the policies of the Obama administration. If America had been firmer abroad, Saudi Arabia would not have been as interested in gestures toward Russia. But U.S. weakness required the Saudis to look for other support bases, even among unfriendly powers. Saudi Arabia saw a strong Putin, and Riyadh respected strength.³²

Saudi Succession, U.S. Election

Meanwhile, common concerns over energy markets began to push forward as a natural platform on which to develop closer—and even strategic—Russian-Saudi ties in this commodi-

ties sector so critical to each country. The Saudis entered this dimension of the relationship with Russia pursuant to Riyadh's failed attempt to drive American shale oil producers out of the market in late 2014 and early 2015. Riyadh's gambit was that by expanding national production and driving down global prices, it could diminish profit margins for shale oil, which was more expensive to produce. That policy failed as technological advances lowered production costs for shale producers.³³ This unhappy outcome increased pressure on both Saudi Arabia and Russia to cooperate on restraining production in order to stabilize and raise prices.

On the Russian side, Putin initially appeared receptive, or at least less suspicious than others, in leading Russian energy circles, to dealing with Saudi Arabia on oil production.³⁴ However, opposition from Igor Sechin, a long-time Putin associate who had risen to head Rosneft, Russia's largest oil producer, appeared to stifle any deal-making with the Saudis.³⁵ Sechin feared losing global market shares and profit margins should Russia cut production in the process of dealing with the Saudis.³⁶ On the Saudi side, then-Energy Minister Ali al-Naimi was equally skeptical to begin with. He did not hide his disappointment with the Russians, "who have not kept their promises."³⁷ These prominent skeptics in each government appeared to thwart any Russia-Saudi agreements on energy production until late 2016 with the Saudi-led OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries).

Just as pressure for Russian-Saudi coordination on oil production levels began to develop, King Abdullah died in January 2015. Abdullah was succeeded by the aging King Salman, the last in his generation with a direct line to the royal throne. Thus, Riyadh was quickly enveloped in political maneuvering as Salman began to advance his favorite son, Mohammed bin Salman (widely referred to as MbS) into positions strengthening his posture as obvious heir to the throne, naming him defense minister. By June 2017, Salman named MbS Crown Prince and afforded him an increasingly powerful voice in all major Kingdom decisions. As defense minister, MbS took the lead when Saudi Arabia launched its first airstrikes in Yemen as Houthi rebels, perceived to be supported by Iran, advanced toward Aden on March 26, 2015.

The year before, Riyadh had not welcomed Russia's move on Crimea and thus supported a UN General Assembly resolution against Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of southeastern Ukraine. At the same time, the Saudis avoided any overt public chastisement of Moscow for Russian actions there.³⁸ Now Russia called for a political settlement instead of a military campaign in Yemen, all the while treating Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Riyadh's Arab League partner in the Yemen operation, as worthy diplomatic partners. Lavrov referred to Russia's Saudi "colleagues" and asserted that "we really value our relations with Saudi Arabia and other participants of the coalition."³⁹

The new Saudi leadership quickly reached out to their Russian counterparts. According to the Russian account of the conversation, King Salman called Putin on April 20, 2015, to discuss enhancing mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation. Salman reportedly “praised” Russia’s abstention on April 14 in the UNSC vote to adopt Resolution 2216 addressing the Yemen crisis. Putin in return invited the new Saudi leader to visit Russia.⁴⁰ The Russian leader soon after had a wide-ranging first meeting with then–Deputy Crown Prince MbS in Saint Petersburg on June 18, 2015. During this visit, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and the Saudi sovereign wealth Public Investment Fund (PIF) announced a partnership to invest in projects in Russia, with the PIF pledging \$10 billion of seed money.⁴¹ MbS also conveyed to Putin a reciprocal invitation from the King to visit Riyadh. Four months later, Putin met again with MbS, this time in Sochi on October 11, 2015.⁴²

One could speculate that during these 2015 high-level interactions, King Salman and MbS courted Putin to encourage restraint in Russia’s diplomatic approach to the Saudi-UAE war in Yemen. At the same time, Russia was determined to keep courting the Saudis despite differences over the Yemen conflict, probably in part to assure reciprocal Saudi restraint on Crimea and Ukraine—in many ways a mirror image of the Saudi effort toward Russia on Yemen. While Saudi Arabia had been an early proponent of ousting Asad in Syria, as time passed Riyadh became more focused on defeating the Houthi rebels in Yemen who the Saudis believed were supported by the Iranians. By this time, the Saudis perceived the Iranian threat in Yemen as more important than the one in Syria, where the Saudis had never engaged with their own forces as they were now doing in Yemen.⁴³

But as in previous high-level Saudi-Russian contacts, Russian internal security issues seemed to have been in play. A month after their first meeting in Saint Petersburg, an anonymous article in a major Russian newspaper asked, “Will Russia and Saudi Arabia become allies?”⁴⁴ Its thesis was that the expansion of IS was forcing the two countries to cooperate more actively. A series of jihadist terrorists acts against Saudi Arabia in May 2015 were followed by the Salafi jihadist extremist Caucasus Emirate’s declaration of subordination to IS, which effectively set up an affiliate of IS in Russia’s northern Caucasus territories. Saudi “nongovernmental” sources had been historically major funders of Islamic fighters in Chechnya and Dagestan. Now these fighters were switching their allegiance to the IS—the newly sworn enemy of the Saudi monarchy. Riyadh thus was ready to discuss sharing with Russia information about specific fighters, recruitment channels, and money flows. A “host” of Saudi special services heads was said to have accompanied MbS on his June 2015 visit to see Putin.⁴⁵

In addition, the anonymous author of this newspaper article asserted that Putin at this June 2015 meeting had proposed to MbS that Saudi Arabia join Russia and the Asad regime in an international coalition against IS. Citing the London-based pro-Saudi newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*, the author wrote that the Saudis were ready to live with the Asad regime as long as it did not include Asad himself. The article encouraged the Kremlin to regard the Saudi response as positive.⁴⁶

On June 29, 2015, Putin had pitched to Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem a broad international anti-IS “coalition” or “alliance,” to include Saudi Arabia—an effort Moallem ridiculed as a “very big miracle.”⁴⁷ Russia subsequently courted Saudi Arabia’s good offices and contacts with the Syrian opposition. Saudi Arabia participated in the October 30, 2015, discussions on Syria that produced a nine-point statement known as the Vienna Document, which Saudi Arabia signed.⁴⁸ Moscow thereafter praised Riyadh’s efforts to unify the various Syrian opposition representations—the so-called Riyadh, Cairo, and Moscow platforms—and get them to the negotiating table.⁴⁹

In Sochi on October 11, 2015, Putin reportedly told MbS—as he had Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Moscow on September 21—that if Riyadh lent Russia its support in Syria, Russia would help the Saudis contain Iran in the region.⁵⁰ Russian contacts with the new leadership in Riyadh under King Salman and MbS developed despite vocal Syrian and, presumably, Iranian objections even as Russia ramped up its air operations in Syria during the fall of 2015. In context, Syrian and Iranian protests lacked gravitas in 2015 as both they and their Lebanese Hizballah surrogates were suffering untenable battlefield losses against Syrian jihadist and insurrectionist groups and desperately needed Russian military assistance.⁵¹

The backdrop for Saudi-Russian relations changed significantly in November 2016 with the surprising election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, which the Saudis welcomed. Despite Trump’s worrisome campaign comments about wanting to sit down with the Iranians, the Saudis particularly appreciated Trump’s total rejection of the JCPOA nuclear deal laboriously negotiated by the Obama administration and its P5+1 partners (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) with Iran. This deal, much despised in Riyadh, went into force in June 2015. The Saudis smelled an opportunity to woo the United States from the many Obama policies Riyadh disliked, such as the support of JCPOA, the flagging U.S. support for the Saudi military adventure in Yemen, and the ongoing Obama military drawdown of forces from the IS fight in Syria. King Salman and his court received President Trump with great pomp during his May 20–21, 2017, visit to Riyadh, the first major overseas stop by his new administration. At the same time, Riyadh took care to swiftly pair Trump’s visit with an MbS

visit to Putin in the Kremlin on May 30, 2017, right after the Trump visit to Riyadh and just weeks before MbS's elevation to Saudi Crown Prince. Both sides touted the meeting, and it laid the groundwork for King Salman's visit to Moscow 4 months later.

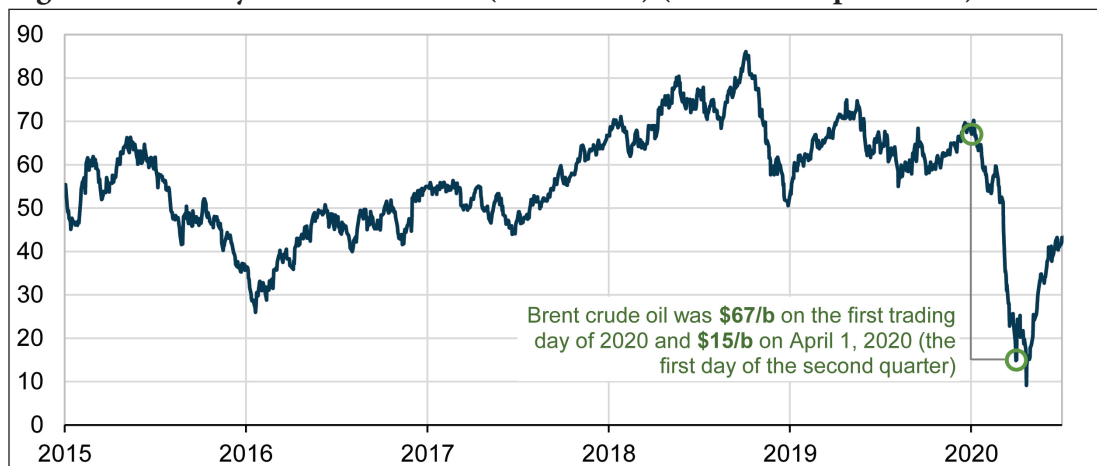
Saudi overtures to Trump's team saw mixed results from their perspective. They were pleased with his firm disdain for JCPOA and his promise to see the United States quit the deal. They also were relieved to hear of the Trump administration's commitments to military hardware and munitions sales for the Kingdom in a manner that promised to reverse Obama administration and U.S. Congressional limitations put in place due to reservations about Saudi conduct of the war in Yemen. They also benefited from the Trump administration's quiescence to the diplomatic row MbS led the GCC to pick with Qatar in mid-2017 and the much-publicized MbS house arrest of scores of wealthy Saudi royals and political opponents that same year.⁵²

Yet Saudi leaders were disappointed by President Trump's continuation of the Obama policy of pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq and Syria. The Saudis saw this as leaving the field in Syria to the Iranians. In turn, this gave the Saudis a continuing incentive to move ahead with efforts to diversify their options by cultivating closer relations with Russia. Riyadh was impressed by the increasingly central role that Russia was coming to occupy in Syria, both on the battlefield and in diplomatic negotiations in Geneva, Astana, and other venues. With great diplomatic tact, Moscow invited and praised Riyadh's efforts to unify the various Syrian opposition representations. Later, Russia would avoid becoming enmeshed in the aforementioned Saudi-led GCC dispute with Qatar over Doha's ostensible ties with Iran and alleged sponsorship of terrorism.⁵³

A Bed of Their Own

Almost 2 years after senior Saudi and Russian oil officials pumped the brakes on bilateral energy market coordination, chronically low oil prices during 2015 and 2016 increased the pressure on Saudi and Russian national budgets and ever more insistently suggested their coordination on oil production cuts. On December 10, 2016, after negotiating on behalf of nine other non-OPEC countries, Russia and this group joined the cut-and-cap production agreement reached 10 days earlier by the Saudi-led OPEC.⁵⁴

In Moscow, credit for the creation of OPEC+ was given to the "mutual understanding" developed between Putin and MbS and to the "level of trust" achieved in their many meetings by energy ministers Aleksander Novak and Khalid al-Falih. Al-Falih had replaced Ali al-Naimi, known for his skepticism about dealing with Russians, as Saudi oil minister in May 2016. Al-Falih would develop the reputation in Moscow as the "architect" of OPEC+.⁵⁵

Figure 1. Monthly Crude Oil Prices (2015–2020) (U.S. dollars per barrel)

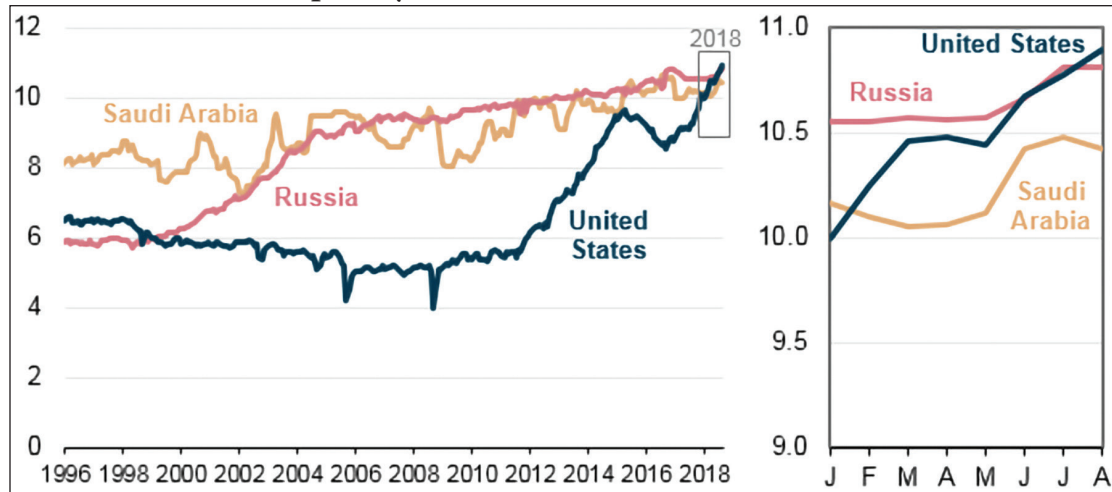
Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2020.

In late 2016, after two years of effort, increasingly de facto Saudi ruler MbS rolled out—with much fanfare—“Saudi Vision 2030.”⁵⁶ This was the prince’s controversial plan to move the Kingdom away from its historically comprehensive dependence on oil and gas for economic status and into a post-fossil fuel economic future. The vision rested on a reasonable understanding of the fragile nature of fossil fuel prices in the near term and their future uncertainty given the growing imperatives of climate change and slowly dwindling Saudi petroleum reserves.

As MbS called on Putin in the Kremlin at the end of May 2017, their two countries extended the December 2016 OPEC+ agreement, which was then repeatedly prolonged until the 9-month extension agreed in Vienna on July 2, 2019, just after Putin again met with MbS at the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan. In Vienna, OPEC+ participants, again led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, also negotiated a draft charter of cooperation on managing oil markets.⁵⁷ Russia and the KSA ceremonially signed this Vienna Charter during Putin’s state visit to Riyadh in October 2019.⁵⁸

Unlike the Saudis, who replaced their Russophobic oil minister in May 2016, Russia’s de facto oil minister and Saudi skeptic—Rosneft Oil Company chief executive officer (CEO) Igor Sechin—remained in place. But from late 2016, Putin seemingly had overruled Sechin’s objections to the repeated extensions of OPEC+.⁵⁹ At the same time, Sechin’s views and those of other Russian oil barons evidently succeeded in keeping Russian production cuts minimal while allowing Russia to set its own pace for the agreed OPEC+ cuts and at times even ignoring them.⁶⁰ Rosneft did not really cut production; instead, it tended to cap output and forgo the expansion that Sechin saw as necessary to undercut U.S. shale production and recapture global market share.

Figure 2. Monthly Crude Oil Prices (January 1996–August 2018) (U.S. dollars per barrel; million barrels per day)



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2018

Nevertheless, elements of Saudi market logic combined with Putin's geopolitical ambitions to drive formal Russian-Saudi cooperation toward the mutual goal of dampening production in order to raise and stabilize prices at a level that would disadvantage North American shale production. At the same time, Russia's high-profile energy relationship with Saudi Arabia was of significant reputational value to Putin. It helped Putin refurbish Russia's global status—damaged by the annexation of Crimea, invasion of southeast Ukraine, and air intervention on behalf of the Assad regime in Syria—as a worthy and necessary partner in important global economic partnerships.

As their energy management partnership began, the Saudi state budget reportedly needed oil to stabilize in the \$70 to \$80 per barrel range, while Russia could balance its books at \$45 to \$55 per barrel.⁶¹ By this math, the Saudis needed Russia more than Russia needed Saudi Arabia to achieve the higher prices so critical to their state budgets. The Saudis benefited from formally associating Russia with Saudi-led OPEC production cuts because the size of Russian oil production gave these declared cuts-and-caps more market credibility and therefore greater potential to push the price of oil toward the \$70-plus per barrel range. The Saudis were therefore willing to tolerate Moscow profiting more from the OPEC+ arrangement than Riyadh,⁶² with Russian producers making relatively small or no cuts on their own schedules, sometimes described as free riding.⁶³

Table. Summary of Saudi Arms Purchase Promises and Outcomes*

Date of Arrangement	Dollar Value of Munitions Procurements	Key Weapons/ Elements of Procurement Arrangement	Eventual Outcome of Arrangement
July 2008: Prince Bandar meets with Putin in Moscow.	Military cooperation agreement reportedly signed that could lead to contracts valued at \$2 billion to \$6 billion.	Deals reportedly covered helicopters, tanks, infantry combat vehicles, and S-400 and Antei-2500 air defense systems.	Only several smaller-than-expected contracts were reportedly signed in 2010, the same year that the Saudis inked more than \$100 billion in weapons contracts with the United States that were mostly consummated.
July and December 2013: Prince Bandar meets with Putin in Moscow.	Widespread press speculation that Bandar offered Putin \$15 billion in arms contracts.	No details emerged to provide substance to the speculation.	No known outcome; doubtful that any weapons or payments were exchanged.
October 2017: Putin-King Salman summit in Moscow.	Reportedly around \$3 billion to \$3.5 billion in potential contracts.	A nonbinding agreement in principle that KSA would purchase no fewer than four divisions of the S-400 Triumf air defense missile system, worth around \$2 billion.	The two sides reportedly concluded 2017 negotiations on a contract for the S-400, but it was not in force as of early 2021 because Saudis never signed it.
		An actual contract to purchase and manufacture Kalashnikov assault rifles in Saudi Arabia.	As of February 2021, a contract for the first stage of joint production of Kalashnikovs had been signed and was undergoing interstate approval, but it had not yet entered into force.
		MOU on acquisition and local manufacture of some elements of the TOS-1A heavy flamethrower system.	In April 2021, social media began to report Saudi use of the TOS-1A in Yemen.
		MOU on acquisition and local manufacture of some elements of the Kornet-EM antitank missile system and AGS-30 grenade launchers. Perhaps related, Saudi military personnel (including cadets) reportedly arrived in Russia shortly after the October 2017 summit for training on the use of these weapons.	First deliveries of unspecified weapons and military equipment—possibly a reference to the Kornet and AGS-30 systems—reported to Saudi Arabia in June 2019.

*See page 69 for table sources.

In December 2018, Sechin wrote Putin that expanding U.S. market share had become a “strategic threat to Russia’s oil industry development.”⁶⁴ All the same, Putin’s geopolitical ambitions benefited from Russia’s formal association with the Saudi-led OPEC cut-and-cap strategy and outweighed any objections from Rosneft’s Sechin. Of course, when it came to overall relations with Saudi Arabia, Russia understood that it was always a “ménage à trois”—in the words of one Russian observer—since the United States was ever-present and the dominant power.⁶⁵ In OPEC+, however, Russia could operate as a great power with Saudi Arabia in a venue that they need not share directly with the United States—one with great appeal in Moscow. While it lasted, the arrangement enabled Russia and Saudi Arabia to deal with growing oil production pressure from the United States and the impact of this increase on world markets more effectively.

“Axis of Love”

The manifest and high-profile improvement in Russo-Saudi relations by the dawn of 2017 was the result of a prolonged, if sometimes bumpy, courtship between Moscow and Riyadh. Even before King Salman’s October 4–5, 2017, visit to Moscow—the first ever by a reigning Saudi monarch—some began to refer to the Russian-Saudi connection as an “axis in oil affairs” and even an “axis of love.”⁶⁶

Repeated Saudi dangling of prospects for substantial arms sales earlier in the bilateral courtship, which in the end always petered out, had made Moscow cynical (see table). Riyadh always concluded impressive arms contracts not only with Russia but also with the United States, including some \$110 billion announced at the conclusion of President Trump’s visit to Riyadh in May 2017.⁶⁷ Now, however, OPEC+ cooperation was becoming more important than the uncertainties surrounding King Salman’s promise of \$3 billion–\$3.5 billion in arms sales made during his 2017 visit to Moscow.⁶⁸ At the October 2017 summit, the two sides also touted the \$10 billion investment fund that had been announced during Mohammad bin Salman’s June 2015 visit to Saint Petersburg for talks with Putin, with \$2.1 billion already invested.⁶⁹

Some of the hopes raised in Russia after Salman’s October 2017 visit were premature. Sergey Chemezov, director general of the Rostec state corporation (the State Corporation for Assistance to Development, Production, and Export of Advanced Technology), stated within 2 weeks of King Salman’s visit that the two sides had concluded negotiations on a contract for S-400 air defense systems and that all that remained for it to enter into force was for the Saudis to sign it.⁷⁰ By May 2018, however, an expert on weapons transfers noted that there had been no further movement on the S-400 negotiations. The only solid thing was a deal to assemble Kalashnikov assault rifles in Saudi Arabia. Separately, a long-time observer saw relations at a

standstill. Disappointment but not surprise over weapons agreements with Riyadh returned in Moscow. But Russian commitment to the OPEC+ agreement would hinge on cold-blooded market factors, not other ones. Putin seemed to understand that the major bilateral relationship factor was a mutual shared interest in the OPEC+ arrangement with no big geopolitical content. Russia could easily let the OPEC+ agreement die if it no longer held economic advantage.⁷¹

Thus, both sides had a common interest to hype the economic benefits of their relationship, particularly in OPEC+. They both faced the threat of U.S. shale oil production driving down world oil prices and capturing market share. They also faced energy competition from Iran. However, Iran's energy strong suit was gas, not oil, and even then not as a very large gas exporter compared to Russia and Qatar.⁷² Iran also was a member of OPEC, but Saudi Arabia was clearly its leading member. With OPEC+, leading members Russia and Saudi Arabia could demonstrate to Iran that it was a secondary energy power when it came to oil, unlike Russia and Saudi Arabia, who now set market terms in OPEC+.

For King Salman and post-2017 Crown Prince MbS, their relationship with Putin increased leverage and diminished vulnerability to human rights proponents and other critics in Washington and other Western capitals. Official Moscow did not berate Riyadh for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, for example.⁷³ Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia now refrained from criticizing Russia's heavy-handed or manipulative policies in Muslim-dominant regions of Russia. A historic point of acrimony, Chechnya instead became a diplomatic and religious bridge between the two countries. Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov regularly visited Saudi Arabia with Moscow's assent,⁷⁴ and the Saudis paid their respects in Grozny.⁷⁵ The issue of Saudi-sponsored terrorism there with Muslim communities had receded as the benefits of OPEC+ and the Syrian *modus vivendi* came to dominate the relationship.⁷⁶

These growing ties with Russia were not intended to supplant the longstanding—though frequently frustrating—Saudi relationship with the United States. In Riyadh, the U.S.-Saudi security bond remained paramount.⁷⁷ Unlike Turkey, the Saudis had done little to follow through on their stated interest in the Russian S-400 air defense system. Nevertheless, in 2018, some 300 Saudi cadets were reportedly enrolled in four-year courses at Russian military schools while 2 years earlier, there had been none (and Russia still has none from Iran).⁷⁸

The growing Russian-Saudi connection was meant to serve as a reminder to Washington that Riyadh had other geopolitical partners through which to pursue its interests in the region and on the world stage. It also reflected the judgment in Riyadh that Russia under Putin was a more consistent and predictable actor than the United States in the Middle East.⁷⁹ At the same time, Riyadh wanted to encourage Moscow to put greater distance between itself and Tehran.⁸⁰

For Putin, his standing in Riyadh gave Russia additional stature as an independent and influential power in the Middle East and, by extension, on the world stage. Dealing with OPEC was a decidedly more attractive—and profitable—way to trumpet Russia's regained global stature than participating in the bloody war in Syria, propping up the regime of Bashar Asad, and coordinating in Syria with Iran. To the extent that the formal OPEC+ arrangement might be more about reputation and less about economic benefit for Russia, it was of instrumental value in touting Russia's great power status and suggesting that others must take Russia's interests into account.⁸¹ From the beginning of Putin's increased activism in the Middle East, this instrumental value had been more important to Russia than any increased trade and weapons sales.⁸²

Shocks on the Road to Riyadh

In Moscow on June 10, 2019, for talks with Russian counterpart Novak, Saudi Energy Minister Falih stated that the long-bruited summit with Putin in Riyadh would take place in October.⁸³ Falih's revelation concerning the summit's timing came just weeks before the 9-month extension of OPEC+ production quotas was made official on July 2, 2019. In both capitals, prospects for a sustainable Saudi-Russian relationship no longer seemed to hinge exclusively on shaky arms deals, temporarily coinciding interests in world energy markets, or Saudi pique over U.S. policies in the region. Both sides appeared to have reached a point where they valued buttressing the relationship for its own long-term geopolitical sake and for the leverage it gave each side on a variety of issues.

Relationship continuity was expected at this point of mid-2019 even though bilateral trade was estimated at a paltry \$1 billion in 2018.⁸⁴ This was even lower than Iranian-Russian trade.⁸⁵ Twenty months later, there had been "little to no progress" on the agreements signed during King Salman's October 2017 visit to Moscow.⁸⁶ All the same, both sides seemed intent on giving at least the impression at the upcoming summit that they were determined to increase the weight of their trade relationship and highlight progress on the broader bilateral agenda laid out during the October 2017 Moscow summit.

In fact, in August 2019, the Saudis eased pest-damage restrictions on Russian grain imports.⁸⁷ According to a Russian grain trade expert, this policy change meant that Russia could gain half of the Saudi wheat market by 2020–2021.⁸⁸ Then, in early October 2019, Russian Energy Minister Aleksander Novak stated that 30 agreements and memoranda of understanding would be signed at the summit.⁸⁹ Kirill Dmitriev, the CEO of the RDIF, forecast deals worth hundreds of millions of dollars in the oil industry, agriculture, tourism, and petrochemical sectors during the upcoming summit. He teased an unspecified "very exciting" big project that

would be announced during the visit.⁹⁰ A week later, Dmitriev announced that RDIF had opened the first-ever Russian investment office in Saudi Arabia. He added that RDIF and the Kingdom's sovereign Public Investment Fund had invested more than \$2.5 billion in over 25 joint projects.⁹¹

In September 2019, two shocks tested the main pillars of the relationship, which held steady. First, on September 7, King Salman appointed Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman to replace OPEC+ "architect" Khalid al-Falih as energy minister. The move came on the eve of the departure of Russian Energy Minister Novak from Moscow for Jeddah to coordinate arrangements for Putin's visit, provoking great uncertainty. Novak's visit went forward, and he met with his new counterpart, the fourth son of King Salman and a long-time Saudi OPEC delegation member, on September 11, 2019.⁹² Novak's meeting with Abdulaziz seemed to go off without a hitch, continuing coordination with Russia in OPEC+.⁹³

A second, much greater shock came on September 14, when drones and cruise missiles struck two critical Saudi facilities in the northeastern part of the country, temporarily knocking out half of the country's oil production. Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen claimed responsibility. Iran denied any role in the attack, but forensics pointed to the weapons being of Iranian origin and most likely launched from Iran. Among the more solid evidence were "pristine circuit boards" from a cruise missile that did not reach its target.⁹⁴

The well-planned September 14 oil field attack eluded Saudi defenses, including six battalions of U.S. Patriot missile defense systems. The fact of ineffective U.S. missile defenses coupled with President Trump's June 2019 about-face on making any retaliatory strike against Iran for shooting down a U.S. military drone on June 20 raised questions about the U.S. commitment to protect the free flow of energy from the region.⁹⁵ As it had in 2013 after President Obama's "toothless" red line in Syria, American "softness" on a Saudi adversary again became part of the backstage scenery for a Saudi-Russian engagement, this time Putin's first summit in Riyadh since February 2007.

Many defense experts believed that the strikes would have been difficult for any modern country to detect and defeat even if armed with the Russian S-400 air defense system.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, after meeting with presidents Hassan Rouhani and Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on September 16, Putin asserted that Russia was ready to assist Saudi Arabia once its leaders took a "wise decision," as had Iran in buying the S-300 system and Turkey the S-400. Either, suggested Putin, "would offer reliable protection for any Saudi infrastructure facilities."⁹⁷

Putin's statement provoked open laughter from both Rouhani and Erdogan at the press conference in Ankara.⁹⁸ It cast a shadow on ties with Riyadh and signaled longstanding irritation

in Moscow with repeated Saudi failures to follow through on statements of intent and contracts to purchase Russian arms. Coming after Energy Minister Novak's consultations in Jeddah on the upcoming summit, Putin's tongue-in-cheek comment suggested that he had not yet fully moved on from the unconsummated October 2017 Saudi S-400 purchase contract. Putin may instead have intended to put pressure on Saudi Arabia to spend an equivalent sum—some \$2 billion—on purchases of other Russian weapons systems, perhaps even the Pantsir system then believed effective in defending against low-altitude drone and cruise missile attacks.

Shortly after the Riyadh summit, Rostec head Sergey Chemezov elaborated at the Dubai Airshow 2019 that the KSA might be interested in the Pantsir and Tor short-range air defense systems. They could defeat attacks such as those the KSA had suffered in September on its oil facilities, he asserted.⁹⁹

The September 14 strikes into KSA and the ongoing Yemen conflict combined to set the conditions for Putin potentially to advance his omnibus peace initiative for the Middle East during his Riyadh visit. Moscow began advertising its "Concept for Collective Security in the Persian Gulf" in July 2019.¹⁰⁰ Russian spokesmen, including Andrey Baklanov, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, had been describing it as a regional analog to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. One of its features was reportedly a system for monitoring violations of security in the region. "If this system already worked," Ambassador Baklanov had asserted, "we would already be able to say who is behind the strikes on Saudi Arabia."¹⁰¹ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on October 2 called MbS's positive response to a Houthi proposal for a ceasefire and talks cause for "cautious optimism."¹⁰²

In a phone call on September 18, Putin reportedly highlighted to MbS the need for an international investigation of the attack on the Saudi oil facilities but went no further. MbS reciprocated in that call with no reported request for Russian kinetic military intervention as an attack response. Both leaders signaled their intent to continue working together to stabilize global oil prices.¹⁰³ Soon after this phone call, Russian Direct Investment Fund CEO Dmitriev put the value to date of OPEC+ for the Russian state budget at over \$100 billion.¹⁰⁴

Then a third regional shock hit before Putin's Riyadh summit. President Trump unexpectedly and dramatically rocked the region with a sudden announcement of the withdrawal of the U.S. presence on the ground in northeastern Syria. On October 6, 2019, after a phone call with Turkish President Erdogan, Trump declared that "United States forces, having defeated the IS territorial 'Caliphate,' will no longer be in the immediate area" and "will not support or be involved" in Turkey's impending "long-planned operation into Northern Syria."¹⁰⁵ In Jeddah, the head of a Saudi think tank opined a week later that "having chosen a strategy of withdrawal and

retrenchment,” Washington had “no right to condemn the region’s countries if they choose to forge relations with other powers in order to protect their interests.”¹⁰⁶

As the drawdown and a new Turkish military operation against U.S. coalition Kurdish anti-IS allies in northern Syria began to unfold, Putin set the tone for the impending summit in Riyadh with an extensive interview released on October 13, 2019, the day before his arrival in the Saudi capital.¹⁰⁷ The “quality of our relations has changed dramatically” since Soviet times, he said, and Russia now considered Saudi Arabia “a friendly nation.” He personally now had “very good relations with both the King and the Crown Prince,” and together they had been “making good headway practically in all fields.” The main goal of the two sides was to “stabilize global energy markets.” OPEC+, Putin asserted, had been MbS’s initiative, and Russia had simply seconded it.

Putin also stated that MbS had “raised the need for broader defense cooperation, and we have a good plan of joint activities in that area. . . . Hopefully our collaboration will continue to expand going forward.” Touching on the subject elsewhere in this October 13 interview, Putin asserted that “we are fostering a partnership in the trust-based, sensitive area of military and defense cooperation. We have been negotiating for a long time.” Putin did not mention the S-400 issue in the interview.

Putting in a plug for Russia’s Persian Gulf collective security concept, Putin recognized that some thought the initiative premature. He condemned the strikes on Saudi oil facilities but called for a “thorough investigation” before blaming anyone for them. Russia could appreciate Saudi and UAE concerns about Iran, but it was up to them to resolve their bilateral differences.¹⁰⁸ On negotiating a Syrian settlement, the Russian leader several times underscored the importance of Moscow’s Astana process partners Iran and Turkey. Each time, however, he paired his remarks with a word of appreciation to Saudi Arabia for its “support” and “contribution” toward achieving “a positive trend.”

Meager Summit Results

Having thus set the stage for the long-awaited summit with his lengthy October 13, 2019, press interview, Putin arrived in Riyadh with a sizable retinue of state ministers and business oligarchs.¹⁰⁹ Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, was also in the party and later claimed to have invited MbS to visit Chechnya during what he described as the “epochal” summit.¹¹⁰ The advance preparation of all the summit’s “deliverables” made possible a whirlwind schedule compressed into just a few hours that resembled a diplomatic version of “speed dating.” Putin’s pre-summit interview probably took longer than his actual talks in Riyadh.¹¹¹



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Arabia's King Salman before signing ceremony in Riyadh, October 14, 2019 (President of Russia Web site)

According to the official accounts, Putin told King Salman that Russia saw coordination with Saudi Arabia “as an indispensable element for ensuring security in the Middle East and North Africa.” The Russian president stated he was “convinced that without your country, it is hardly possible to achieve a just and long-term settlement of any problem in this region.”¹¹² In their separate meeting, Putin thanked MbS for his efforts to promote joint plans aimed at “peace and security, and stabilizing the world energy market.”¹¹³ The Crown Prince in turn underscored “the importance of continuing the cooperation and building the strategic partnership between the two friendly countries.”¹¹⁴ Putin was never reported to have used the “strategic partnership” formulation.

Putin and King Salman witnessed the signing of 21 documents. None were financial contracts; instead, they consisted of often vague protocols, programs, and agreements on cooperation, memoranda of understanding, and declarations of intent.¹¹⁵ In pride of place at the top of the signature pile was the charter of cooperation agreed at the OPEC+ meeting in Vienna in early July 2019.¹¹⁶ In addition, Russian and Saudi business and state agency representatives were said to have signed some 20 other documents of various sorts before Putin’s arrival. These reportedly included 10 deals worth \$2 billion, but there was no transparency, clarity, or specificity

on what they were. Nevertheless, Economic Development Minister Maxim Oreshkin predicted that bilateral trade would increase from \$1 billion to \$5 billion annually by 2024 and to double digits by 2030.¹¹⁷

Absent from these documents was any text advancing or elucidating the status of the unsigned October 2017 contract for the S-400. Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the two sides had indeed discussed military and technical cooperation in Riyadh. But on the S-400 specifically, Peskov admitted that “there is nothing to say yet, but there are plans. We are hoping that this military cooperation dialogue will be continued.”¹¹⁸ However, during this summit or some earlier negotiation, MbS reportedly had told his Russian interlocutors that he could not agree to a deal over Saudi investments in Russia and Moscow’s actions in Syria because he did not want to alienate Washington.¹¹⁹ Presumably, the same applied to the S-400 deal. Evidently, despite Trump’s decision not to retaliate against Iran’s downing of an American drone in June, the United States had subsequently sufficiently increased security-related deployments to Saudi Arabia and the wider region to reassure a nervous Riyadh.

In Moscow, veteran Saudi watchers were underwhelmed by the results of Putin’s visit to Riyadh.¹²⁰ The absence of any mention of the status of the S-400 negotiations was widely noted. The S-400 was a crazy idea, asserted one Russian regional observer, who said that “the Saudis won’t buy it.” It was a political issue. Russia had tried to put military-technical issues on the agenda for the summit, he continued, but there was nothing to discuss. The Saudis always profess interest, but rarely anything concrete, and then only in a few items. In general, expert observers of defense matters consulted in Moscow for this monograph during late 2019 concluded that the S-400 contract had been in effect “aborted.”¹²¹

Also unfulfilled during Putin’s October 2019 Riyadh summit was Russia’s initiative for a Persian Gulf collective security concept. While Russian observers thought the expectations had been high for the announcement of this initiative, the results turned out quite modest. Among Moscow analysts, the reason for Putin’s silence was clear. None of the Gulf states wanted or were interested in Moscow’s initiative.¹²²

On economic ties, several Russian analysts noted that bilateral trade at just \$1 billion was not at all serious. Kirill Dmitriev of RDIF had spoken expansively ahead of the summit about hundreds of millions of dollars in new deals. This was understandable; Dmitriev was part of the modest lobby in Moscow striving to attract Saudi money to Russia. However, cooperation in OPEC+ was not producing huge investments anywhere. In the end, Dmitriev’s assertions were regarded across Moscow as little beyond words, with analysts also skeptical about the \$2 billion in new contracts asserted by some reports.¹²³ Economic Development Minister Oreshkin’s

projection of bilateral trade rising to \$5 billion a year by 2024 was also viewed by sober Russian analysts as pie in the sky.¹²⁴

Observers in Moscow attributed the apparently meager summit trade and finance results to minimal Saudi interest in investing in the Russian economy. Russia was under multiple sanctions, and the Saudis were choosy investors. In addition, one commented, Saudi business counterparts had taken note of the arrests of American businessmen in Moscow, which added to Saudi fears of the Russian bureaucracy. But once the summit was on, the leadership on both sides had felt compelled to come up with agreements they could publicize, leading to the 20 documents headlined at the summit plus the 21 documents signed before Putin's arrival. Much was made in the Moscow press about how Putin was received in Riyadh, but little about the substance of the visit.¹²⁵

Post-summit, one Russian scholar expounded on the limits to cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia. First, there was still a high level of mistrust between the business classes of both countries. On the Russian side, long memories of Saudi financing of the Afghan mujahideen, separatist movements in the Caucasus, and the conflict in Bosnia remained hard to shake. Second, this same analyst in Moscow noted, the Saudis poorly understand the informal ties vital in Moscow and the rules of the game there. Saudis learn that they can reach agreements with one Russian official, but then it turns out he has no power. For example, Energy Minister Novak can reach an understanding with his Saudi counterpart, but then Rosneft chief Sechin will refuse to abide by it.

Third, this Russian observer continued, there have been sharp ups and downs in the relationship between Moscow and Riyadh over the years, Soviet and post-Soviet. The issues have included Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Syria, oil, and unconsummated weapons contracts. While they remained below the surface during the 2000s, these historic irritants limit the range of durable arrangements. Fourth, and related, the personal relationship between Putin and MbS is very important, just like the Putin-Erdogan relationship. Everything depends on their ties, their personal chemistry. But this means that there is always a danger that their ties will sour, and beneath them there is no solid foundation to stabilize the relationship between the two countries. As a result, Saudi businessmen fear that if they invest in Russia, and Putin and MbS quarrel, they will lose all their money. Since everything is driven from above, Saudi investors thus see big risks from investing in Russia that they do not see elsewhere.

Finally, according to this Russian scholar, Saudi business is wary of letting Russian business into the Kingdom. The Saudis already have multiple Western partners, contacts, and rela-

tionships. Russian business leaders see opportunities to make big money in the KSA, but they just get promises and little follow-through from their Saudi counterparts.¹²⁶

OPEC+ Collapse

After an unproductive Riyadh summit, early 2020 negotiations in Vienna loomed. These were necessary to update the OPEC+ cut-and-cap agreements of July and December 2019.¹²⁷ These February and March 2020 negotiations were contentious, dragging on to the last session on March 6. At the climax of the disagreement in Vienna, Putin and MbS were nursing mutual irritations and consumed by maneuvering to retain their power at home. Petroleum analysts could still argue that it was the usual case of hard Russian bargaining until the bitter end, when Moscow would settle for as good a deal as possible: minimal Russian cuts and leeway for ignoring even those in exchange for the appearance of OPEC+ solidarity with OPEC producers.¹²⁸ But these negotiations turned out very differently.

On top of the cuts already agreed through the end of the first quarter of 2020, Saudi Arabia insisted on even greater cuts through the end of 2020: a total of 1.5 million barrels a day—one million by OPEC members, half a million by non-OPEC producers—or no deal at all. Moscow's position was that it was too early to go beyond the cuts already agreed on until the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, then still only in its initial stages, was better understood. After flying back to Moscow for consultations, Energy Minister Novak returned to Vienna on March 6 to announce that though Russia had been willing to extend the existing cuts through the second quarter of 2020, it would not agree to the additional proposed cuts.¹²⁹ OPEC members then refused to extend even these preexisting early 2020 cuts, leaving all agreed OPEC+ production limits to lapse on March 31, 2020.¹³⁰

As big a shock as that was, more surprises followed after OPEC+ negotiators returned home. Rather than cutting production in an effort to bolster prices, Saudi Aramco on March 11 announced that it would slash prices and ramp up production to 13 million barrels per day as ordered by a royal decree, in effect dumping oil on an already saturated market.¹³¹ A day later, Energy Minister Novak responded that Russian oil majors would be able to up their production by 200,000 barrels per day already in April.¹³²

On top of the still underappreciated damage that the coronavirus would inflict on the world economy, that Moscow and Riyadh failed to find a compromise at this point can probably be explained in large part by an intimidating Rosneft head Sechin, an impulsive MbS, and a distracted Putin. Long a feared figure in Russian politics, Igor Sechin's influence reportedly had increased in early 2020.¹³³ The largest of several oligarch-led Russian oil companies (with 32.8

percent of total Russian production in 2019), Rosneft reportedly continued to call for putting an end to the OPEC+ arrangement after the inconclusive consultations in Vienna in February.¹³⁴

After the collapse of OPEC+ in March, Rosneft press secretary Mikhail Leontyev called the unanticipated Saudi proposal for additional cuts not “partner-like” and “lacking sense” for Russia. “By giving up our own markets, we are removing cheap Arab and Russian oil from them in order to make room for expensive American shale oil . . . and ensure the efficiency of its production.” This, concluded Leontyev, was “masochism.”¹³⁵

In retort, Lukoil Vice President Leonid Fedun on March 18 called that day’s fall in the price of oil to below \$25 a barrel “catastrophic.” Lukoil is Russia’s second biggest producer, with 14.7 percent of production in 2019,¹³⁶ and billionaire Fedun is a major stockholder in the company. Fedun asserted that there had been no discussion of Russia exiting OPEC+ at the meeting with oil company representatives that Putin had held on March 1.¹³⁷ According to one commentator, many of Russia’s most influential and rich agreed with Fedun that Sechin had gotten it wrong with his move against OPEC+, but they were afraid to say so publicly.¹³⁸ Fedun’s blast forced Sechin out of the shadows the next day. The Rosneft chief repeated to the press many of the points made earlier by Rosneft press secretary Leontyev in criticizing OPEC+ for sustaining rather than eliminating American shale oil production.¹³⁹ Sechin forecast that oil would be back up to \$60 a barrel by the end of the year should shale be forced out of the market.¹⁴⁰

Although the Saudi government offered no formal statement on its oil maneuvering, the decisive role of MbS in the surprise decision seems clear. In part, the Crown Prince appears to have seen Russia as a “junior partner” in the OPEC+ relationship he inspired and was thus aggravated that Russia refused to follow the Saudi lead at the February–March 2020 oil summit.¹⁴¹ As Moscow dragged its heels on agreeing to another round of deeper and longer production cuts, Saudi Energy Minister Abdulaziz bin Salman reportedly lobbied the Crown Prince toward the end to agree to cut production for only 3 months. MbS was said to have insisted that the cuts stay in place all year and then, as Russia continued to object, insisted on even deeper cuts.¹⁴² When Russia did not agree to this ultimatum, MbS reversed course and reportedly ordered his ministries to prepare for no OPEC+ deal and no production cuts even in the face of slumping demand.¹⁴³

In another respect, Mohammad bin Salman’s calculus changed from late December 2019 in a subtle but important way. Then, MbS had a substantial incentive in keeping Russia on board OPEC+ to keep the price of oil elevated as Saudi Arabia prepared the initial public offering (IPO) of shares in Saudi Aramco, the national oil company. His hope had been to generate substantial income—more than \$25 billion—through the IPO to help fund the many ambitious projects of

his “Vision 2030.” That IPO was now behind him, so MbS had less reason to go the extra mile to keep Russia on board an OPEC+ production agreement.¹⁴⁴

Then too, MbS had simultaneous challenges at home where his hard line and often impetuous instincts were on display. On March 6, the very day of the messy conclusion of OPEC+ in Vienna, MbS ordered the arrest of four senior Saudi royals, including the last surviving full brother of King Salman.¹⁴⁵ A coup seemed unlikely in response, but rumors abounded, and some observers suggested the arrests stemmed from growing anxiety on the part of MbS and “suspicion that his own kin may withdraw their oath of allegiance after the death of his father, King Salman.”¹⁴⁶

The Crown Prince’s pique over Russia’s hard bargaining in OPEC+ also may have been encouraged by the attention and face time that Putin had been lavishing on Turkish President Erdogan during the week of the Vienna talks. Long a rival with the KSA for ascendance in the Muslim world, Turkey’s long-standing support for the Muslim Brotherhood was a chronic feature of mistrust, as the Saudis regarded the Brotherhood as an intolerable threat to Saudi leadership of the Muslim world. In addition, Erdogan had been relentless in publicizing the role MbS played in the October 2018 murder in Istanbul of Saudi expatriate journalist Jamal Khashoggi.¹⁴⁷ And now Putin seemed to have lots of time for Erdogan and none for MbS. According to one Western media account, Putin would not take the call when the Crown Prince tried to reach him to resolve the deadlock in Vienna.¹⁴⁸

The Russian decision to reject the Saudi proposal for deep cuts is usually attributed to Putin, but it is far from clear that he was ever personally involved. The Russian president was to all appearances distracted and consumed by other international and domestic issues far more important to him as the OPEC+ talks in Vienna climaxed and crashed. On March 4, he convened government officials to discuss transportation issues and the coronavirus challenge and then the security council to prepare for talks with Erdogan the next day. On March 5, Putin met for 6 hours late into the evening with Erdogan to discuss an ongoing crisis in Syria’s Idlib province.¹⁴⁹ There was nothing on Putin’s public schedule on March 6—when Energy Minister Novak was in Moscow for consultations on the difficult OPEC+ meetings in Vienna—to indicate a meeting with Novak or Sechin or anything related to OPEC+. Not being able to see Putin, Novak likely had no choice but to take his guidance from Sechin. The Rosneft chief would subsequently make clear his satisfaction with the collapse of the negotiations and reportedly irritated Putin with his advice to pull out of OPEC+.¹⁵⁰

Putin’s March 6 agenda also included a phone call to Syrian President Asad to fill him in on the previous day’s talks with Erdogan and a trip to Ivanovo to talk up amendments to

the Russian constitution.¹⁵¹ Putin was probably consumed with gaming and fine-tuning one particular constitutional amendment—the one spelling out whether he could run again for president—for the next 3 days. This was the culmination of a constitutional process that had begun in December 2019.¹⁵² It climaxed on March 10 when Putin paid the Russian Duma a dramatic visit and endorsed the proposal to reset the counter on presidential terms. Subject to a foregone approval by a nationwide referendum, this constitutional amendment would allow him to run for two more terms and thus potentially to stay in office until 2036.¹⁵³

Sechin subsequently appeared to mount an effort to undercut Novak. The Rosneft chief was arguably behind the arrest on September 8, 2020, of Energy Deputy Minister Aleksandr Tikhonov on charges of embezzlement that had been brewing since March. Tikhonov's ties to Novak went back a decade and a half to when both had worked in the administrative apparatus of the Krasnoyarsk region.¹⁵⁴ Novak survived the hit, however, and was appointed deputy prime minister on November 10, 2020, while remaining Russia's top negotiator in OPEC+. ¹⁵⁵

Intensive Care

With the important Turkey-Syria and constitutional matters behind him, Putin refocused on the OPEC+ issue. Compounded by the swiftly accelerating coronavirus pandemic and collapsing global oil demand as pandemic-driven economic lockdowns began, oil prices at the end of March 2020 were half of what they had been at the beginning of the month and at their lowest since 2002.¹⁵⁶ Putin was clearly not willing to wait to see if Rosneft chief Sechin's prediction of a rebound to \$60 a barrel would prove true. Russia "blinked" first in the oil price war with MbS. Just a month later, at the end of April 2020, with an expanded novel OPEC+ agreement almost in hand, Lukoil's Fedun thanked Putin for his "political leadership" and "unprecedented involvement in the negotiation and organization" of the new deal and praised Novak for being "an active and effective negotiator."¹⁵⁷ If the Saudis had intended to force Russia back to the OPEC+ negotiations as quickly as possible by ramping up production and rolling out steep price cuts, they succeeded.¹⁵⁸

While not publicly naming Rosneft chief Sechin, Putin and Novak on April 3 both took aim at Sechin's long-held antipathy to U.S. shale production and OPEC+ coordination, asserting that Russia was not out to destroy America's shale oil sector.¹⁵⁹ The new deal completed on April 12 called for OPEC+ to cut production by 9.7 million barrels a day in May and June, 7.7 million from July to December, and 5.8 million from January 2021 to April 2022. In addition, it was estimated that production in the United States and elsewhere outside OPEC+, pummeled

by the spike in Saudi output and reduced demand, would drop as much as five million barrels a day by the end of 2020.

The drop in total production of roughly 15 to 19.5 million barrels a day was short of the early estimates of a 25 to 35 million barrel a day drop in worldwide demand. For the time being, nevertheless, the deal prevented the price of Russian and Saudi oil from dropping into the single digits.¹⁶⁰ An encouraging sign of the effectiveness of these production cuts, as well as the market-driven reductions by producers outside of OPEC+, was the rise above \$30 a barrel in oil prices that began the week of May 18, 2020.¹⁶¹

Nevertheless, the Kremlin's readout of the Putin-MbS phone call on April 10 was frigid. The only contacts the two leaders agreed to maintain were in the OPEC+ context.¹⁶² The relationship they had invested so much in since 2015 seemed to have hit a major impasse.¹⁶³ Saudi Arabia's PIF froze a high-profile deal to purchase shares in a Russian oil service company while buying up shares in four major European energy companies.¹⁶⁴ However, it was not the OPEC+ clash alone that spoiled Putin's ties with MbS and Moscow's relationship with Riyadh. The February–March collision in Vienna simply reflected the fact that Russia-Saudi ties were already frayed. Grigory Kosach, the dean of Moscow analysts of Saudi affairs, noted that the development of Russia-Saudi relations was far from reaching maturity, and they were now being rocked by the tempestuous, sharp-elbowed style of MbS.¹⁶⁵

In hindsight, the October 2019 Riyadh summit must have made clear to Putin that there would be no wide breakthrough on relations with Saudi Arabia. In 2020, not even the OPEC+ relationship was sufficient to restore earlier warmth. However, after 5 years of courting each other, Putin and MbS remained capable of sealing a difficult deal with each other when necessary. In August 2020, after the conclusion of the U.S. Presidential nomination conventions, analysts in Moscow speculated along traditional lines that should Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden win, an expected “softer” U.S. policy toward Iran would open up the possibility for a strengthening of Saudi-Russian relations. Saudi Arabia certainly would resist U.S. movement toward Iran and pursue a more “multivector policy,” presumably reinvigorating relations with Russia in an effort to constrain Tehran.¹⁶⁶

Rapprochement with Israel

Within a month, however, Moscow confronted the fact that there could be an alternative possibility for Riyadh in its struggle with Iran. The September 2020 Abraham Accords established formal diplomatic relations between some of the KSA's closest allies—the UAE and Bahrain—and Israel, altering the historical calculus. Instead of reanimating ties with Moscow,

these states began to put behind them decades of animus against Israel and to look toward Tel Aviv as a more potent and reliable security hedge than even the United States against Iranian threats in the region. Although Riyadh was not a charter member of the Abraham Accords, key Saudi figures suggested such a future play was feasible. In October 2020, influential Saudi Prince Bandar would make a powerful public argument against continuing to let the Palestinian cause—that had long held back Riyadh—keep the KSA from joining forces with Israel to resist Iranian power moves in the region.¹⁶⁷ This was the same Prince Bandar who had traveled to Russia for lengthy talks with Putin in July 2008 and June and December 2013 and had been the KSA's longtime ambassador in Washington.

Hosted by President Trump at the White House on September 15, 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords.¹⁶⁸ Sudan and Israel announced on October 23 they would do the same, and Morocco and Israel followed suit on December 10.¹⁶⁹

The Arab states that became party to the Abraham Accords welcomed the good offices of the United States in negotiating them but did not include Russia in the diplomatic action. Much the same dynamic was evident in separate discussions that began in September 2020 and culminated in early January 2021, when the KSA, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt agreed to resume diplomatic relations with Qatar that had broken off in June 2017.¹⁷⁰ Lavrov “welcomed” the decision when he met with his Saudi counterpart a week later, but Russia again had not been a party to the negotiations, while the United States, working with and through Kuwait, had been a major player.¹⁷¹

Bahrain's signature on the Abraham Accords strongly suggested Saudi support for the breakthrough, although, as noted above, Riyadh did not formally join in the fall of 2020.¹⁷² Although MbS had not met with Putin in over a year, it was widely reported that the Crown Prince met with Netanyahu and Mossad chief Yossi Cohen in Neom, Saudi Arabia, on November 22, 2020.¹⁷³ Less than a week after this, Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, was assassinated. The killing was widely assumed to have been orchestrated by Israel but has not been confirmed.¹⁷⁴ We do not know whether Netanyahu gave MbS a heads up if Israel was behind the assassination. But such an operation seemed designed to put in place speed bumps to slow down any movement by then-President-elect Joe Biden toward swift resumption of negotiations with Iran or rejoining the JCPOA. Slowing a Biden administration roll toward diplomacy with Iran was an Israeli priority that Riyadh would have shared and endorsed.¹⁷⁵

Even after the Trump administration overturned longstanding U.S. policy and moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Arab states did not jettison American regional

diplomacy. They accepted the United States as the public midwife of their moves to establish relations with Israel. Behind the pomp and circumstance of the signing ceremonies in Washington, however, Saudi Arabia and its allies seemed increasingly to appreciate Israel as a more reliable security hedge against Iran than the United States, to say nothing of Russia, as well as a brake against the new Biden administration restoring American adherence to the JCPOA and even advancing follow-on negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran on related security issues.¹⁷⁶ MbS also may perceive advantage to leveraging Israel in an effort to buffer what is certain to be a tougher Biden administration approach on the issue of murdered journalist Khashoggi.

The Saudi impulse toward exploring more formal ties with Israel probably began a year earlier. President Trump's failure to respond with force to the Iranian downing of an American drone in June 2019 and to Iranian strikes on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019 likely encouraged Saudi support for regional movement toward Israel.¹⁷⁷ Trump's October 2019 call for withdrawing U.S. personnel from northeastern Syria almost certainly reinforced the Saudi inclination to diversify its anti-Iranian partner relationships beyond those with Washington or Moscow.¹⁷⁸ Riyadh may have concluded that Israel's vaunted and tested air defense systems could provide the KSA with better protection against Iran than those of the United States or Russia.¹⁷⁹

Equally obvious in Riyadh, Israeli strikes against Iranian and Syrian and their proxy facilities, weapons warehouses, vehicles, and personnel in Syria remained a strong feature of Israeli security policy from 2016 to 2020. With almost-certain Russian acquiescence, these strikes began in 2016, and there had been hundreds of them since then.¹⁸⁰ In 2020 alone, there were an estimated four dozen, hitting upwards of 135 targets.¹⁸¹ One of the largest Israeli attacks into Syria in years took place on January 12–13, 2021.¹⁸²

By permitting these Israeli strikes against Iranian objectives in Syria, however, Russia actually had strengthened the security and business attractiveness of Israel for Saudi Arabia and its Arab Gulf allies. In September 2015, as we have seen, Putin had pitched Russia's value to Israel and Saudi Arabia in restraining Iranian activities in Syria. Ironically, the Gulf states were now increasingly looking not to Russia but to Israel for credible action against Iranian and proxy adventurism in Syria and across the region, and for help in lobbying Washington on the Iranian nuclear issue and regional security. In what was perhaps a preview of things to come, Bahraini Crown Prince and Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa phoned Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on February 25, 2021, to raise these issues. It was the first Gulf Arab response to President Biden's earlier announcement that his administration would seek to revive the JCPOA.¹⁸³

Certainly, Riyadh and its allies still appreciate Russia's presence in Syria as a counterbalance to Iran and Russian green-lighting of Israeli strikes against Iranian-affiliated targets in Syria as key dimensions of countering Iran.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia must still cooperate with Russia on oil within OPEC+, a prospect more favorable to the Saudis since their win of the early 2020 price war tussle with Moscow. At the same time, it remains very uncertain that Riyadh will ever buy Russian antimissile systems—long a point of aggravation in Moscow.

At the early 2021 IDEX arms show in Abu Dhabi, Rostec director general Sergey Chemezov led reporters to conclude that negotiations with Riyadh for the S-400 air defense system were continuing.¹⁸⁵ The Biden administration's late February 2021 release of the U.S. intelligence report conclusion that MbS approved the Khashoggi assassination operation in Turkey during fall 2018 revived speculation in Moscow that pressure from Washington might finally push Riyadh back toward Russia and signing contracts for the air defense system.¹⁸⁶

However, should the Biden administration's early 2021 freeze on the Trump administration-approved sale of \$478 million in precision-guided munitions to the KSA turn out to be permanent, Riyadh is much more likely to turn to Israel or some other country as an alternative supplier than to Russia.¹⁸⁷ MbS may calculate that Israeli security and diplomatic help would be more effective than any from Russia. In Libya, for example, Turkish combat drones humiliated the much-touted Russian-made Pantsir air defense system in late spring 2020.¹⁸⁸ On March 17, 2021, Erdogan claimed that "Saudi Arabia is asking us for armed drones."¹⁸⁹ However, Riyadh is more likely to turn to Israel than to Turkey for defense assistance. In the months ahead, MbS may be sorely tempted to push the KSA finally to normalize relations with Jerusalem in order to purchase highly effective weapons from Israel.

Challenges and Recommendations for U.S. Policy

In his first major foreign policy address, President Biden called China "our most serious competitor."¹⁹⁰ The Biden administration came into office sharing the growing concern over China that developed during the Trump administration.¹⁹¹ President Biden also signaled a new U.S. approach to its other global great power rival, Russia, stating in an early February 2021 State Department address that "the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions—interfering with our elections, cyber attacks, poisoning its citizens—are over. We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interest and our people."¹⁹² U.S. strategy under President Biden will have to continue to contend with Saudi Arabia's pursuit of ties with states such as Russia and China to "hedge" the Kingdom's frequent frustrations and longstanding perception of dependency on the United States.

In a meeting in the Kremlin on June 27, 2018, Putin told then–National Security Advisor John Bolton that Russia did not need Iran in Syria and wanted it out. Nevertheless, the Russian leader stated that he did not think Russia could bring this about.¹⁹³ Not surprisingly, Riyadh cannot have any expectations that Moscow will serve as a kinetic security partner vis-à-vis Tehran. Moscow cannot simultaneously satisfy Riyadh's twin hopes that Russia put greater distance between itself and Tehran and apply greater pressure on Tehran to restrain attacks on Saudi Arabia.

Analysts in Moscow have been clear in their understanding that for Riyadh, cooperation with Russia is simply an additional line of international support, not the main one, and that China is in many ways more important to the KSA than Russia. Saudi trade with China is in the \$70 billion to \$80 billion range, dwarfing that with Russia, and substantially above that with the United States (just above \$48 billion in 2018).¹⁹⁴ Saudi Arabia continues to best Russia as the top supplier of crude oil to China.¹⁹⁵ And now Saudi Arabia may be secretly cooperating with China in developing as-yet-undeclared nuclear fuel sites.¹⁹⁶

The Russia-Saudi relationship will certainly continue, but it will remain tempered by the hard realities that played out from late 2019 through 2020 in the Riyadh summit and the OPEC+ oil price war. Riyadh will continue to remain wary of Moscow's contacts with Tehran even as Russia allows Israel to undercut Iran and Iranian proxy maneuvering in Syria. At the same time, Riyadh likely calculates relations with Washington will be even more uncertain during the Biden administration than under Trump. Thus, there will be all the more reason for Riyadh to look to Jerusalem as its new regional hedge against Tehran, especially until the United States examines the way ahead in dealing with Iran and the future of the JCPOA.¹⁹⁷ Elsewhere, as the Biden administration goes forward developing renewable energy more aggressively, Russia and the KSA will have greater incentive to coordinate with each other within OPEC+, but also to engage the United States jointly for the sake of market stability. Finally, the Abraham Accords have far from resolved all the sore points between Israel and the Palestinians. Thus, Russia and important circles within the Saudi royal court will want to continue to press Washington and other capitals in favor of the Palestinian cause.

As the Biden administration develops and executes its policy toward the Middle East in general and the nexus of issues impinged by the Saudi-Russia relationship, it will have to be mindful of the staying power not only of Crown Prince bin Salman and President Putin but also of Prime Minister Netanyahu. In 2020, Putin enabled constitutional reform that opened up the prospect that he might serve as Russian president through 2036. Netanyahu in early 2021 won

a fourth consecutive national electoral victory, but by a margin so narrow that as of this writing it was unclear how long he would be able to carry on as Israeli prime minister.

In the wake of the signing of the 2020 Abraham Accords, the House of Saud appears divided. MbS is pushing forward and is unwilling to let the issue of Palestinian statehood impede his national and regional designs, including formal diplomatic, business, and military relations with Israel. He may try to use the potential of the KSA formally normalizing relations with Israel to manage relations with the Biden administration and push U.S. criticism—especially over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi—to the back burner. King Salman and other still influential royals, however, are hanging back and remain opposed to the recognition of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.¹⁹⁸ While the opacity of the Saudi decisionmaking system precludes outsiders from divining the final outcome of this struggle over future relations with Israel, it seems clear that MbS has found himself at least some leeway in early 2021 to seek business deals with Israel and to coordinate in some measure about security activities against Iran.¹⁹⁹

In Russia, Putin easily engineered the semblance of public approval necessary for changes to the constitution that will allow him to run for president again in 2024.²⁰⁰ More recently, he has faced widespread demonstrations in support of Alexei Navalny, the victim of a widely publicized regime poisoning attempt in August 2020.²⁰¹ Support for Navalny has come heavily from members of the younger generation, resulting in a sharp drop in support for Putin from that demographic. Nevertheless, Putin's overall approval rating in January 2021 still stood at 64 percent.²⁰² Pro-Navalny sentiment is unlikely to be able to force Putin from the scene in the foreseeable future.²⁰³ However, pro-Navalny demonstrations underscore the gradual erosion of the record level of Putin popularity—over 80 percent—after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the so-called Crimean Consensus.²⁰⁴

In Israel, the outcome and timing of Netanyahu's long-running corruption trial are both uncertain, and the opposition parties appeared unable to defeat Netanyahu in a fourth consecutive narrow national election held in March 2021. The short-term outlook is for continued political deadlock.²⁰⁵ Even if Netanyahu is convicted and relinquishes national leadership, it is likely but not definite that Israeli policy toward its regional neighbors and toward Russia will remain the same.

Putin and MbS are both transactional in their approach to wielding power. In 2016, Putin even returned to dealing with the temporarily “untouchable” Erdogan after Turkey shot down a Russian jet over Syria.²⁰⁶ MbS is more impulsive and often even reckless. But both leaders are ruthless, and this has brought them similar problems in dealing with Western and other liberal democracies: MbS is viewed as ultimately responsible for the butchering of journalist Jamal

Khashoggi in October 2018, and Putin for the poisoning of critic Alexei Navalny in August 2020. When dealing with Saudi Arabia, Moscow's transactional approach to foreign partners has at times given it advantages in some areas over the more value-based approach of the United States. But there clearly have been limits.

Many in Moscow are likely skeptical of the ultimate success of Mohammad bin Salman's tilt toward Israel. Thus, the Russian leadership appears unlikely to abandon Russia's traditional verbal support for the Palestinian cause, judging that it still has widespread appeal on and off the street across the Middle East.²⁰⁷ Putin has lost his bet on the "reckless" MbS, opine some Russian observers, but likely remains "unperturbed" and will continue to deal with Saudi Arabia, "a key player in the region."²⁰⁸ Indeed, while the two leaders have not met since the October 2019 Riyadh summit, they still speak occasionally on the phone but focus almost exclusively on OPEC+ issues.²⁰⁹

Throughout the Gulf, Israel is increasingly seen as a heftier security hedge against Iran than is Russia, even with all the negative drag of Israel's opposition to the Palestinian cause, long supported by the Arabs.²¹⁰ For its part, Moscow has tried to use a warming Saudi connection to promote its image and role in the Middle East and the world. Yet Russia remains skeptical of the Saudis, recognizes their Western orientation, and has competing priorities in the region.

Russia and Saudi Arabia were both happy to keep the United States's nose out of the OPEC+ tent until the oil price crisis of March 2020, although there were never any illusions in Moscow of Riyadh's otherwise strong security and economic ties to Washington. However, despite the modest progress in developing ties with Russia in recent years, the KSA has continued to look to the United States as its primary security and diplomatic umbrella.²¹¹ Minister of State Adel Al-Jubeir in March 2021 characterized relations between Riyadh and Washington under both the Biden administration and its predecessor as "strong, dynamic, and multifaceted."²¹² For the Saudis, cooperation with the United States has remained the main line of policy, and Russia knows that it cannot replace the United States in the Middle East. Nevertheless, ties with Russia have been useful for the Saudis in attracting the attention of the United States to counter Iranian expansionism in the region.

The Russian-Saudi courtship intensity has receded but not gone away. Lavrov, for example, used Russia's month-long UNSC presidency in October 2020 to again pitch Russia's Persian Gulf collective security concept.²¹³ As we have seen, this had been the subject of a major initiative by Moscow in July 2019 that had found no takers as Russia prepared for Putin's summit in Riyadh in October 2019. A year later, in October 2020, Lavrov had no better luck in the UNSC, sparking little interest but much acrimony among the participants in the session, which

included the UNSC's 15 members, the GCC, the Arab League, Iran, and Iraq.²¹⁴ Lavrov tried advancing it again in his January 2021 talks in Moscow with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan.²¹⁵ Lavrov's Saudi counterpart called out Iran's "havoc and destruction" in the Middle East and categorically rejected the idea of interacting with it until Tehran revised its policies in the region and stopped spreading its ideology.²¹⁶ Undaunted, Russia will not tire of pushing its Persian Gulf collective security concept as a marquee initiative to orchestrate better relations among all states in the region.

Other than a modest comment about potential phase-3 clinical testing and production collaboration in Saudi Arabia for the Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V, Lavrov's comments to the press after his January 2021 Moscow meeting with Faisal bin Farhan left the impression that, aside from necessary interaction within OPEC+, there had been little real movement in the relationship since Putin's summit in Riyadh in October 2019.²¹⁷ Moreover, trade had grown 6 percent from January to October 2020, pushing toward \$1.5 billion. Although still low, this was an improvement over the \$1 billion in 2018 and the possible \$1.6 billion achieved in 2019.²¹⁸ But Lavrov's touting of \$2.5 billion in joint investments by the Russian Direct Investment Fund and the Public Investment Fund was merely a repetition of October 2019 claims and nothing to indicate new investments since then.²¹⁹ And there was no talk of weapons deals surrounding this early 2021 foreign ministers' visit.²²⁰ A month later in February 2021, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin issued instructions to the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Foreign Ministry to nail down a "military cooperation" agreement with the KSA. Some Russian press coverage loosely referred to this as a "military-technical" agreement that might advance Russian weapons sales to the KSA. However, the draft under discussion did not address weapons sales and was confined to cooperation in fighting terrorism and piracy, joint training of troops, rescue at sea, military medicine, history, culture, and sport.²²¹ It thus seems likely that Russian frustrations with Saudi military weapons deals will remain a relationship feature irrespective of this potential agreement.

When it comes to the current core of Saudi-Russian relations—that within OPEC+—having failed twice to drive American shale out of the market, resignation to living with it has probably replaced any appetite for a third try at shale oil eradication. The "Vision 2030" ambitions of MbS have been pushed back by the economic tailspin started by his price war misstep and then reinforced by the coronavirus pandemic.²²² In Moscow, Sechin did not manage to kill off shale, and the global pandemic and the energy crisis depressed Russia's economy and Putin's polling numbers.²²³ However painful OPEC+'s cuts have been for the KSA and Russia's energy sectors,

the alternatives over the next few years until world demand recovers and balances supply seem far worse.²²⁴

In the wake of the OPEC+ fireworks in Vienna in March 2020, Moscow and Riyadh both welcomed President Trump's face-saving intervention to reconvene negotiations and help shape their outcome.²²⁵ This dynamic opened a window of opportunity for the United States to play a leading role in devising and enforcing mechanisms that produce a more predictable environment for the American oil sector and move it away from its boom-bust history. In bolstering the nation's energy security, the Biden administration should pursue a combination of competitive and cooperative strategies to buffer the United States from Russian and Saudi market pressure and better prepare the nation for the emerging post-fossil fuel era.

The 2020–2021 oil crisis has at least temporarily focused political and industry minds. However, the outlook for a positive and long-lasting outcome to the quest for a stable global framework to balance demand and supply among nations and avoid price wars is not encouraging. The history of the past century of oil as the source of energy for the internal combustion engines prevalent around the world is replete with aborted, short-lived, politically poisoned, and economically imperfect results to such efforts.²²⁶

As the Biden administration pursues a clean energy agenda,²²⁷ it will still need to protect the many jobs in U.S. fossil fuel production during the transition. The American oil industry will remain vulnerable to Saudi and Russian production decisions and market prices. Therefore, when the leaders of countries with nationalized oil industries arbitrarily set production levels out of kilter with supply and demand, the Biden administration should forcefully engage and deploy whatever transactional leverage is at hand to bring them back in line with market supply and demand. In other words, there has to be blunt talk with Riyadh and Moscow when global energy markets demand it.²²⁸

In line with this, the Biden administration also should support development of a new global energy market paradigm that incorporates some prudent U.S. cooperation with Russia and Saudi Arabia through the OPEC+ framework, pairing that with hard-headed enforcement of any agreed understandings. U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm should explore development of sensible and government-to-government–focused lines of communication with her counterparts and chief negotiators in OPEC+: Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz Salman and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak (and his backup Energy Minister Nikolai Shulginov).

In Riyadh, there is undoubtedly a desire to deflate anti-Saudi pressure from American oil-producing states.²²⁹ Senators from these states during 2020 forcefully questioned why they

should support U.S. security assistance and military deployments to Saudi Arabia—and continue to protect the KSA from legislation seeking to pressure MbS in connection with the murder of Jamal Khashoggi—if Saudi Arabia was intent on driving shale oil out of business in their states.²³⁰

After the conclusion of negotiations at the OPEC+ meeting in early January 2021, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdul Aziz bin Salman announced a voluntary extra one million barrels per day cut in February and March 2021 by the KSA. He called this a “gesture of goodwill,” presumably to U.S. shale oil producers. This was a unilateral Saudi decision and not part of the package already agreed to by OPEC+. The announcement sparked an immediate jump in the price of oil to over \$50 per barrel, its highest level since February 2020,²³¹ and to \$60 a month later—back to its January 2020 pre-pandemic level.²³² Although there was no evidence of coordination with the incoming Biden administration prior to this KSA announcement, the impact of the cut provided a bit more profit margin incentive to the U.S. shale sector to increase production. This demonstrates a potential for the normalization of recurring contact and coordination between the Biden administration and Saudi oil management officials.

As was the case with their support for the Abraham Accords and for reestablishment of relations with Qatar, the Saudis made the January 2021 oil production cut without any negotiations with the Russians. While Russia is not about to abandon OPEC+, it is mindful of signs that American shale may be set to start recovering.²³³ For the longer term, however, some Russian observers believe that world oil demand will never surpass that of 2019 and that Russia’s own production has already seen its historical peak.²³⁴

American diplomatic and security strategy will continue to contend with Saudi Arabia’s pursuit of alternative ties to “hedge” its American dependency with supplementary relationships with Russia and China and now perhaps also Israel, given deep Saudi concerns over Iran filling the vacuum created by U.S. force and diplomacy drawdowns in the region. However, and as seen with the Abraham Accords, these hedge ties have developed a new level of complexity and subtlety, and not to Russia’s advantage.

The strategic implications for the United States from these recent Saudi energy initiatives and the signals of a stalled Russian-Saudi courtship merit emphasis. The Biden administration can move forward assured that the apparent strengthening of Saudi-Russian ties between 2013 and 2019 was not the bellwether of some new regional alignment supplanting long-standing U.S. security and diplomatic primacy with the KSA. In 2021, Washington has the space to recalibrate its relationship with the Kingdom in the knowledge that transactional Saudi-Russian interests remain primarily in the OPEC+ venue, but no tightly coupled partnership between

them is now present or in the offing. The Biden team can reframe a relationship with the Saudis that responds to shared security threats from Iran and violent nonstate actors while encouraging responsible KSA domestic reforms and demonstrably improved Saudi behaviors and policies where its recent domestic activities and regional adventures have jeopardized human rights and abetted humanitarian crises.

Notes

¹ For a detailed review of the three contemporary great powers, see Thomas F. Lynch III, ed., *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2020), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Strategic-Assessments-2020/>>.

² This report reflects conversations that co-author John Parker had in Moscow in November 2019 with Russian experts on the Middle East. In addition, its early portions draw extensively on Dr. Parker's previous works analyzing Russian policies in the Middle East. For a colorful recounting of fraught contacts since 1891 between Moscow and what is now the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, including the executions of the first two Soviet envoys to Saudi Arabia during Stalin's purges, see Marianna Belenkaya, "The red Pashas of the Saudi king. The ups and downs of Moscow-Riyadh relations" [Krasnye pashi saudovskogo korolja. Vzlety i padenija otnoshenij Moskvyy i Jer-Rijada], *Kommersant*, October 11, 2019, available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4119995?id1809025>>.

³ See Faryal Legari, "The Arab Connection to Chechen Conflict," *Khaleej Times*, March 21, 2006, available at <<https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/arab-connection-chechen-conflict>>; Michael Dobbs, "Saudis Funded Weapons for Bosnia, Official Says," *Washington Post*, February 2, 1996.

⁴ Colum Lynch, "Saudis to Push General Assembly Vote on Syria Intervention," *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2013, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/06/saudis-to-push-general-assembly-vote-on-syria-intervention/>>; Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013), 795–823.

⁵ Renat Abdullin and Aleksandr Korzun, "Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah: The Chechen Question Is Russia's Internal Affair" [Princ Abdalla: Chechenskij vopros—vnutrennee delo Rossii], *Izvestiya*, September 4, 2003, available at <<http://izvestia.ru/news/280837>>.

⁶ "President Vladimir Putin Held Negotiations with Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz al Saud, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia," President of Russia Web site, September 2, 2003, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/29294>>.

⁷ G.G. Kosach, "Russo-Saudi Relations: Political Aspect 1990–2015" [Rossijsko-Saudovskie otnoshenija: politicheskij aspekt 1990–2015 gg] (Moscow: Near East Institute, 2016), 18. See also Grigory Kosach, "Russia and Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Relations" [Rossija i Saudovskaja Araviya: jevoljucija otnoshenij], *Svobodnaya Mysl'* no. 6, December 2015, available at <<http://svom.info/entry/608-rossiya-i-saudovskaya-araviya-evolyuciya-otnosheni>>. Such Saudi-Russian cooperation at this early stage in the evolving relationship seems plausible given Crown Prince Abdullah's comments and what appears to have been similar Russian-Iranian cooperation in tracking down and killing Chechen resistance leader Shamil Basayev 3 years later. On this, see John W. Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Replay or Breakthrough?* Strategic Perspectives no. 9 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, March 2012), 32–33, available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-9.pdf>>.

⁸ Kosach, "Russia and Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Relations."

⁹ John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran Since the Fall of the Shah* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 261–263, 273–277, 289–292, 301–310.

¹⁰ Alan Philps, “Back Us Against Saddam or Else, U.S. Tells Arab States,” *The Telegraph*, August 18, 2002, available at <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1404739/Back-us-against-Saddam-or-else-US-tells-Arab-states.html>>; Hugh Pope, “Saudi Intelligence Veteran Warns Against a U.S. Invasion of Iraq,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2002, available at <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1027905985837495480>>; Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), available at <<https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG840.html>>; Simon Mabon, “After Years of Proxy War, Saudi Arabia and Iran Are Finally Squaring Up in the Open,” *Independent*, January 5, 2016, available at <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/after-years-proxy-war-saudi-arabia-and-iran-are-finally-squaring-open-a6797001.html>>.

¹¹ “Russia and Saudi Seal Key Energy Deal,” *al Jazeera*, September 4, 2003, available at <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/9/4/russia-and-saudi-seal-key-energy-deal>>; Suarav Jah, “Russia-Saudi Relations: The Kingdom and the Bear,” *World Politics Review*, November 9, 2009, available at <<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/4583/russia-saudi-relations-the-kingdom-and-the-bear>>.

¹² Primary Saudi considerations in weapons purchase plans are most often tied to the prospects for advanced technology transfers all or in part by the domestic production of the selling country’s weapons. These considerations most certainly impacted all Saudi-Russian arms sales deals. However (and especially from the Russian perspective), two decades of Riyadh purchase promises without much follow-through made the Saudis seem mainly to have been playing with Russia while they negotiated truly significant arms deals with the United States, like the one in 2010 estimated at \$60 billion. Subsequent reports mentioned only “several” Russian-Saudi weapons contracts in 2010, not the larger ones expected earlier, as well as possible Saudi investment in Russian infrastructure for the 2018 soccer World Cup. On Saudi aims for weapons technology transfers as a key element of procurement deals, see, “Saudi Arabia Buying New Missile Technology from China: Report,” *al Jazeera*, June 6, 2019, available at <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/6/saudi-arabia-buying-new-missile-technology-from-china-report>>; Agnes Helou, “Amid Western Arms Embargoes on Saudi Arabia, SAMI Has a Backup Plan,” *Defense News*, January 14, 2020, available at <<https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2020/01/14/amid-western-arms-embargoes-on-saudi-arabia-sami-has-a-backup-plan/>>. On Russian disappointments with Saudi weapons procurement practices, see, “Putin Thanks Saudi Arabia for Resolving Problems Quickly,” *Interfax*, July 14, 2008; “Medvedev Praises Dynamic Growth in Relations with Saudi Arabia,” *Interfax*, July 14, 2008; Nikolay Surkov, “Saudi Arabia Buys Arms from Russia,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 31, 2009; Nikolay Surkov, “Russia, Saudi Arabia Negotiating Price of Arms Contracts,” *Interfax-AVN Online*, December 3, 2009; “Russia, Saudi Arabia Finalizing Major Arms Deal—State Exporter,” *RIA-Novosti*, June 16, 2010; and “Russia, Saudi Arabia Sign Smaller Arms Deals Than Expected—Arms Exporter,” *Interfax-AVN Online*, October 26, 2010.

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¹⁹ "Putin Orders Holding Talks with Syria on Transferring More Real Estate, Water Territory to Russia's Possession," *Interfax*, May 28, 2020, available at <<https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/68879/>>; Maxim A. Suchkov, "Why Is Russia Seeking to Expand its Military Bases in Syria?" Middle East Institute blog, June 1, 2020, available at <<https://www.mei.edu/blog/why-russia-seeking-expand-its-military-bases-syria>>.

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²¹ Parker, conversations in Moscow, October 2013, and February, June, and September 2014.

²² Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al Faisal was in Moscow at the beginning of June 2013, and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov reciprocated on June 21 after a phone call between Putin and King Abdullah. Putin and Prince Bandar then met in late June in Moscow, and then again in early December. In between, there was a Lavrov-Bandar phone call in August and a Putin-Abdullah phone conversation in November. See John W. Parker, *Understanding Putin Through a Middle Eastern Looking Glass*, Strategic Perspectives 19 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, July 2015), 27–28, 54–59, available at

<<https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-19.pdf>>.

²³ The concern in Moscow was that Iran would be less interested in developing relations with Russia after a nuclear deal was reached with the United States. Indeed, 6 years later, a Moscow think tank director would recollect that Iranian officials were suddenly too busy to receive their Russian counterparts after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was signed in summer 2015 but were suddenly eager once again to do business after President Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement in summer 2018. Ruslan Pukhov, director, Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, presentation on “Russia-Iran Relations: Agreements and Disagreements,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, September 18, 2019, video, 34:40, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dRlrBCHEdY>>; “Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” The White House, May 8, 2018, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/>>.

²⁴ Michael R. Gordon and David E. Sanger, “Deal Reached on Iran Nuclear Program; Limits on Fuel Would Lessen with Time,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2015.

²⁵ Parker, conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014.

²⁶ Dennis Ross, “Why Middle Eastern Leaders Are Talking to Putin, Not Obama,” *Politico*, May 8, 2016, available at <www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/putin-obama-middle-east-leaders-213867#ixzz4848koUoy>; Jay Solomon, “U.S. Eyes Russia-Iran Split in Bid to End Syria Conflict,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2015; Vitaly Naumkin, “The Kremlin’s Unexpected Decisions,” *al-Monitor*, April 23, 2015, available at <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/04/kremlin-unexpected-syria-iran-yemen-israel-decisions.html>>.

²⁷ “Putin, Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan Discuss Bilateral Relations, Middle East Affairs,” *Interfax*, July 31, 2013; and “Russian President Discusses Iran, Syria with Visiting Saudi Intelligence Chief,” President of Russia Web site, December 3, 2013.

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²⁹ Kosach, “Russia and Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Relations”; “Russians Name Six Victims of Bus Bombing,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 22, 2013, available at <<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-volgograd-bus-bomb-investigation/25144295.html>>; Steven Lee Myers, “Bomb Attacks in Russia Echo Threats by Chechen Insurgent,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2013; John Parker, conversations in Moscow, October 2013 and February, June, and September 2014.

³⁰ “Opening Remarks and Answers to Media Questions by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Following Talks with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal Moscow, 21 November 2014,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 22, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>; “Joint Press Statement Issued by Sergei V. Lavrov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, and His Royal Highness Prince Saud al-Feisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation November 21, 2014.

³¹ Somini Sengupta, “Vote by UN General Assembly Isolates Russia,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2014. In all, 100 countries voted for the resolution, 11 countries voted against, 58 abstained, and 24 were absent. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262, available at <<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/68/262>>.

³² Parker, conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

³³ James Conca, “U.S. Winning Oil War Against Saudi Arabia,” *Forbes*, June 22, 2015, available at <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesconca/2015/07/22/u-s-winning-oil-war-against-saudi-arabia/?sh=5404d1871678>>.

³⁴ “Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Interview to TASS News Agency on 24 November 2014,” President of Russia Web site, November 24, 2014; and “News Conference of Vladimir Putin,” President of Russia Web site, December 18, 2014. The private Russian company Lukoil had been active in Saudi Arabia since at least 2009.

³⁵ Steven Mufson, “This Week’s OPEC Meeting Is the Most Important in Years,” *Washington Post*, November 25, 2014.

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³⁷ Yuriy Barsukov and Marianna Belenkaya, “The architect of the OPEC + deal has been sent into retirement. The reshuffle in Saudi Arabia occurred on the eve of Alexander Novak’s visit to Riyadh” [Arhitektork sdelki OPEK+ otpravlen v otstavku. Perestankovki v Saudovskoj Aravii proizoshli nakanune vizita Aleksandra Novaka v Jer-Rijad], *Kommersant*, September 8, 2019, available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4087086>>; Darya Korsunskaya and Olesya Astakhova, “Exclusive: Russia’s Sechin Raises Pressure on Putin to End OPEC Deal,” Reuters, February 8, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-opec-russia-rosneft-exclusive/exclusive-russias-sechin-raises-pressure-on-putin-to-end-opec-deal-idUSKCN1PX1R7?utm_source=applenews>.

³⁸ Saudi Arabia did vote in favor of UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262, adopted on March 27, 2014, which affirmed the General Assembly’s commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders and underscored the invalidity of the 2014 Crimean referendum. See “Territorial Integrity of Ukraine: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly” (New York: United Nations Digital Library, 2014), available at <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767565?ln=en>>.

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of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan,” President of Russia Web site, June 1, 2018, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57632>>; Mark N. Katz, “Riyadh and Abu Dhabi Draw Closer to Moscow,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, June 20, 2018, available at <www.agsiw.org/riyadh-abudhabi-draw-closer-moscow>.

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⁴⁴ “Will Russia and Saudi Arabia become allies? The expansion of the ‘Islamic State’ forces Moscow and Riyadh to establish more active cooperation” [Stanut li sojuznikami Rossija i Saudovskaja Aravija? Jekspansija ‘Islamskogo gosudarstva’ vynuzhdajut Moskvu i Jer-Rijad nalazhivat’ bolee aktivnoe sotrudnichestvo], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, July 27, 2015, available at <<https://www.kp.ru/daily/26411.5/3286176/>>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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⁴⁷ On June 29, 2015, when Putin suggested Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan as partners in such a coalition, Moallem complained that these countries were all supporters of the “terrorists” fighting Syrian government troops. In Moallem’s view, “An alliance with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United States would require a very big miracle.” See “Meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mu’allim,” June 29, 2015, President of Russia Web site, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49781>>.

⁴⁸ “Final Declaration on the Results of the Syria Talks in Vienna as Agreed by Participants,” European Union External Action, October 30, 2015, available at <<https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5960/final-declaration-on-the-results-of-the-syria-talks-in-vienna>>.

⁴⁹ See, for example, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Opening Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference with Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan on the Results of His Visit to the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, August 29, 2017,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, August 29, 2017, available at <www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2846895>; “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Statement and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Adel Al-Jubeir, Jeddah, September 10, 2017,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, September 10, 2017, available at <www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2857224>; “Telephone Conversation with King of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud,” President of Russia Web site, November 21, 2017, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56144>>.

⁵⁰ According to this same account, Putin told Netanyahu that an expanded Russian role in Syria could dampen Iranian and Iranian-supported Lebanese Hizballah Syrian-based operations against Israel. See Jay Solomon, “U.S. Eyes Russia-Iran Split in Bid to End Syria Conflict,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2015. See also Saheb Sadeghi, “Why Iran and Russia Aren’t as Closely Aligned on Syria as You Might Think,” *al-Monitor*, November 10, 2015, available at <<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iran-russia-syria.html>>.

⁵¹ Kareem Hunt, “String of Losses in Syria Leaves Assad Regime Increasingly Precarious,” *The Guardian*, June 11, 2015, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/11/syria-losses-east-assad-regime-precarius>>; Ali Anfoneh and Michael Eisenstadt, *Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention*, Policy Watch 2585 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 11, 2016), available at <<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-casualties-syria-and-strategic-logic-intervention>>; Chafic Choucair, *Hezbollah in Syria: Gains, Losses and Changes* (Doha, Qatar: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, June 1, 2016), available at <https://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/articles/reports/documents/694b753fbf784a838e3c81673f2996ce_100.pdf>.

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⁶⁵ Pukhov, presentation on “Russia-Iran Relations: Agreements and Disagreements,” September 8, 2019, video, 56:00.

⁶⁶ Dmitry Zhdannikov and Vladimir Soldatkin, “‘Axis of Love’: Saudi-Russia Détente Heralds New Oil Order,” Reuters, June 1, 2017, available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-opec-russiasaudi-idUSKBN18S3Y3>; “Petro Diplomacy: Navigating the New Oil Era,” conference program, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), September 25, 2017. See description of the afternoon panel on “Political and Economic Flashpoints for Oil Markets,” 23, available at <www.agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Petro-Diplomacy-2017-ONLINE.pdf>. See also the excellent scene setter for this conference: Diane Munro, “Navigating the New Oil Era,” Issue Paper 10 (Washington, DC: AGSIW, September 22, 2017), available at <www.agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Munro_Petro-Scene-Setter-2017_ONLINE-1.pdf>.

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⁶⁸ They included a nonbinding agreement in principle (memorandum of understanding) on Riyadh’s purchase of no fewer than four divisions of the S-400 Triumf air defense missile system, worth around \$2 billion; an actual contract to purchase and manufacture Kalashnikov assault rifles in Saudi Arabia; and memoranda of understanding on acquisition and local manufacture of some elements of TOS-1A heavy flamethrower system, Kornet-EM antitank missile system, and AGS-30 grenade launchers. A “large group” of Saudi military personnel reportedly arrived in Russia shortly thereafter to train to use the weapons they were expected to acquire soon. See Ivan Safronov and Aleksandra Dzhodzhevich, “Riyadh to Get Fire, Missiles, and Grenades” [Jer-Rijad poluchit ognja, raket i granat], *Kommersant*, October 6, 2017, available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3429985>>; Sergey Ptichkin, “First of all—flamethrowers. As many experts expected, during the visit of a high-ranking Saudi delegation to Moscow, an agreement was reached on how to begin arms exports to the previously closed to Russian military equipment Kingdom” [Pervym delom—ognemety. Kak i predpolagali mnogie jeksperty, v hode vizita vysokopostavlennoj saudovskoj delegacii v Moskvu dostignuto soglasenie o tom, s chego nachnetsja oruzhejnyj jeksport v ranee zakrytoe dlja rossijskoj voennoj tehniki korolevstvo], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, October 9, 2017, available at <<https://rg.ru/2017/10/09/rossiia-postavit-v-saudovskuiu-araviu-oruzhie-na-35-mlrd-dollarov.html>>.

⁶⁹ Nikolay Surkov, “Adel al-Jubeir: ‘Politically, Our Positions Are Closer Than Many People Think’ [Adel’ al’-Dzhubejr: ‘Politicheski nashi pozicii blizhe, chem mnogie dumajut’], *Izvestiya*, October 9, 2017, available at <<https://iz.ru/655707/nikolai-surkov/adel-al-dzhubeir-politicheski-nashi-pozicii>>.

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⁷⁰ “Rostec: The Contract for the Supply of the S-400 to Saudi Arabia Is Ready.”

⁷¹ Parker, conversations in Moscow, May 2018.

⁷² Together with Russia, Iran is a leading member of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), in which the KSA did not participate. Nevertheless, despite suggestions—including from Russia—that the GECF transform itself into a cartel à la OPEC, the lack of a single gas market had worked against the GECF being able to set and coordinate gas production and price levels in a way that OPEC could do with a single global oil market. See Michael Ratner, “Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF): Cartel Lite? 7-5700 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 2, 2018), available at <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10939.pdf>>; and Nikos Tsafos, *Is It (Finally) Time for a Gas OPEC?* CSIS, December 6, 2019, available at <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/it-finally-time-gas-opec>>.

⁷³ “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club. Vladimir Putin took part in the plenary session of the 15th anniversary meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” President of Russia Web site, October 18, 2018, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848>>.

⁷⁴ “Saudi Crown Prince Meets with Visiting Chechen Leader Kadyrov,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 22, 2018, available at <<https://WWW.rferl.org/a/saudi-crown-prince-meets-with-visiting-chechen-leader-kadyrov/29447299.html>>.

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⁷⁶ Irina Tumakova, “Saudi Arabia enters Russia through Kadyrov. What did the President of Russia and the King of Saudi Arabia agree on, which country needs cooperation more and what does Kadyrov have to do with it—the Arabist Grigory Kosach explained it to ‘Fontanka’” [Saudovskaja Aravija vhodit v Rossiju cherez Kadyrova. O chjom dogovorilis’ prezident Rossii i korol’ Saudovskoj Aravii, kakoj strane nuzhnee sotrudnichestvo i pri chjom zdes’ Kadyrov—‘Fontanke’ ob’jasnil arabist Grigorij Kosach], *Fontanka.ru*, October 8, 2017, available at <<https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/10/08/027/?mobile=false>>.

⁷⁷ See Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, RL 33533 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 18, 2020) 2–3, 44, available at <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>>.

⁷⁸ Pukhov, “Russia-Iran Relations: Agreements and Disagreements,” video, 30:00. Pukhov encountered several Saudi cadets when he visited a military school in Blagoveshchensk in October 2018 (see its Web site at <<https://dvoku.mil.ru/>>). For a photograph, see CAST@CentreAST, “Members of the Public Council of the Ministry of Defense visiting the Far Eastern Higher Combined-Arms Command School. Together with cadets from Mali, Swaziland, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, South Ossetia etc.,” Twitter, October 25, 2018, available at <<https://twitter.com/CentreAST/status/1055402335176925184>>. The number of Saudi cadets might have been higher: from 300 to 500, some of whom were training to handle air defense systems that the KSA might acquire (Parker, conversations in Moscow, November 2019). As noted in the table, a “large group” of Saudi military personnel had reportedly arrived in Russia for training shortly after King Salman’s summit with Putin in Moscow in October 2017.

⁷⁹ David Ottaway, "Is the U.S.-Saudi Security Alliance in Trouble?" October 2017, Wilson Center, *Viewpoints* 120, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/is_us_saudi_security_alliance.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Grigory Kosach, "Saudi Arabia today. Changing power, changing politics" [Saudovskaja Aravija segodnja. Menjajushhasja vlast' menjajushhasja politika], *Svobodnaya Mysl'* no. 2, March 2018, available at <<http://svom.info/entry/801-saudovskaya-araviya-segodnya-menyayushasya-vlast/>>.

⁸¹ Yury Barmin, "Russian FM Puts Politics Above Economics on GCC Tour," *al-Monitor*, March 5, 2019, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/russia-lavrov-gulf-gcc-tour-saudi-arabia-kuwait-uae-qatar.html?utm_campaign=20190306&utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Daily%20Newsletter>.

⁸² Parker, conversations in Moscow, February 2014.

⁸³ "Russia's Putin to Visit Saudi Arabia in October, Says Falih," Reuters, June 10, 2019, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-opec-putin-saudi/russias-putin-to-visit-saudi-arabia-in-october-says-falih-idUSKCN1TB108>>. Some analysts in Moscow would suggest that the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi on October 2, 2018, had earlier caused Putin to defer his visit to Riyadh (Parker, conversations in Moscow, November 2019). However, not long after Khashoggi's murder, the Russian president showed no reservations in putting on a public show of affection toward Mohammed bin Salman, widely suspected of having ordered the murder. On November 30, 2018, in a widely commented scene, Putin and Crown Prince Salman had greeted each other with broad smiles, laughter, and high fives at the beginning of the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires. See Mark Landler and Peter Baker, "Dodging Allies While Dogged by Woes on Global Stage," *New York Times*, December 1, 2018.

⁸⁴ Marianna Belenkaya, Vladimir Putin is expected in Saudi Arabia in October. Several agreements are expected to be signed during the visit [Vladimira Putina zhdut v Saudovskoj Aravii v oktjabre. V hode vizita ozhidaetsja podpisanie neskol'kih soglashenij], *Kommersant*, June 10, 2019, available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3998167>>.

⁸⁵ Tumakova, "Saudi Arabia Enters Russia through Kadyrov." Russian-Iranian trade in 2018 amounted only to \$1.7 billion, no higher than in 2017. See "Commentary of the Department of Information and Press of the Russian Foreign Ministry on the visit to the Russian Federation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran M.D. Zarif" [Kommentarij Departamenta informacii i pečhati MID Rossii v svjazi s vizitom v Rossijskuju Federaciju Ministra inostrannyh del Irana M.D. Zarifa], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, May 7, 2019, available at <http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3636900>.

⁸⁶ Yury Barmin, "Russian FM Puts Politics Above Economics on GCC Tour," *al-Monitor*, March 5, 2019, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/russia-lavrov-gulf-gcc-tour-saudi-arabia-kuwait-uae-qatar.html?utm_campaign=20190306&utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Daily%20Newsletter>.

⁸⁷ Maha El Dahan and Polina Devitt, "Exclusive: Saudi Boosts Russia Ties with Welcome for Black Sea Wheat," Reuters, August 8, 2019, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-wheat-exclusive-idUSKCN1UY0ZW>>.

⁸⁸ Yekaterina Burlakova, "Russia will be able to supply wheat to Saudi Arabia. In the future, Russian grain may account for up to half of imports to this country" [Rossija smozhet postavljat'

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⁸⁹ Taha Abdulwahid, "Russia Anticipates 'Major Deals' During Putin's 'Historic' Visit to Saudi Arabia," *Asharq al-Awsat*, October 3, 2019, available at <<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/1929666/russia-anticipates-major-deals-during-putin%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98historic-visit-saudi-arabia>>.

⁹⁰ Frank Kane, "'Very Exciting' Project to Be Unveiled During Putin Visit to Saudi Arabia," *Arab News*, October 3, 2019, available at <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1563286/business-economy>>.

⁹¹ "RDIF Opens its 1st Overseas Office in Saudi Arabia," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, October 9, 2019, available at <<https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1938061/rdif-opens-its-1st-overseas-office-saudi-arabia>>. At that point, there may have been only an agreement to open, not an actual opening. This may have later been scheduled for fall 2020, according to Irina Alpatova, "The East is getting closer. Russia will open a trade mission in Saudi Arabia" [Vostok vse blizhe. Rossiya otkroet v Saudovskoj Aravii torgpredstvo], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 4, 2020, available at <<https://rg.ru/2020/02/04/rossia-otkroet-v-saudovskoj-aravii-torgpredstvo.html>>. Earlier, Dmitriev had put the investment figure at \$2.7 billion. See Abdulwahid, "Russia Anticipates 'Major Deals' During Putin's 'Historic' Visit to Saudi Arabia."

⁹² "Prince Abdulaziz Bin Salman . . . The Oil Diplomat," *Asharq al-Awsat*, September 14, 2019, available at <<https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1901971/prince-abdulaziz-bin-salman%E2%80%A6-oil-diplomat>>; "OPEC 176th Meeting Concludes."

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⁹⁴ Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, "Trump Orders Troops and Weapons to Saudi Arabia in Message of Deterrence to Iran," *New York Times*, October 11, 2019>.

⁹⁵ David D. Kirkpatrick and Ben Hubbard, "Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities Tests U.S. Guarantee to Defend Gulf," *New York Times*, September 19, 2019.

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¹⁰⁰ *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area* (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, July 23, 2019), available at <http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA&_101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA_languageId=en_GB&utm_campaign=20190816&utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Daily%20Newsletter>.

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¹⁰² "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club's panel on Russia's policy in the Middle East, Sochi, October 2, 2019," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, October 2, 2019, available at <https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/3826083>.

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¹⁰⁴ Abdulwahid, "Russia Anticipates 'Major Deals' During Putin's 'Historic' Visit to Saudi Arabia."

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¹⁰⁶ Mohammed Al-Sulami, "U.S. Must Accept Consequences of its Middle East Policies," *Arab News*, October 14, 2019, available at <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1568831>>. See also Liz Sly, "The Hasty U.S. Pullback from Syria Is a Searing Moment in America's Withdrawal from the Middle East," *Washington Post*, October 16, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ "Interview with Al Arabiya, Sky News Arabia and RT Arabic. In advance of his visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Vladimir Putin answered questions from Al Arabiya senior presenter Mohammed Tomaihi, Sky News Arabia senior presenter Mohannad Khatib and RT Arabic Public and Political Programmes Department Head Salam Musafir," President of Russia Web site, October 13, 2019, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61792>>.

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¹¹⁰ “Kadyrov announced that the crown prince of Saudi Arabia intends to visit Chechnya” [Kadyrov zajavil, chto naslednyj princ Saudovskoj Aravii nameren posetit’ Chechnju], TASS, October 14, 2019, available at <https://tass.ru/politika/6999976?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2Fnews>; “Ramzan Kadyrov: Putin’s visit to Saudi Arabia was historic” [Ramzan Kadyrov: vizit Putina v Saudovskuju Araviju stal istoricheskim], MK.RU, October 16, 2019, available at <<https://kavkaz.mk.ru/social/2019/10/16/ramzan-kadyrov-vizit-putina-v-saudovskuyu-araviyu-stal-istoricheskim.html>>.

¹¹¹ According to long-time Kremlin pool reporter Andrey Kolesnikov, Putin’s meeting with King Salman lasted only 15 minutes, followed by a half-hour reception hosted by the king. Then came 15 minutes for witnessing the signing all the documents, after which gifts were exchanged, with Putin presenting the king with a falcon. By this time, the meeting in an adjoining hall between the many oligarchs from each side was already under way and ended despite barely having started. Putin’s meeting with Mohammed bin Salman was also brief, according to Kolesnikov, “but, judging by the appearance of its participants, not at all routine.” See Andrey Kolesnikov, “Political Falcon Recitative. What and With Whom Did Vladimir Putin Come to Saudi Arabia” [Politicheskij krechetativ. S chem i s kem v Saudovskuju Araviju priehal Vladimir Putin], *Kommersant*, October 15, 2019, available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4125588>>.

¹¹² “State Visit to Saudi Arabia,” President of Russia Web site, October 14, 2019, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61799>>.

¹¹³ “Russian-Saudi Talks,” President of Russia Web site, October 14, 2019, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61802>>.

¹¹⁴ “HRH Crown Prince and Russian President Co-Chair 1st Meeting of the Saudi-Russian Economic Committee,” Saudi Press Agency, October 14, 2019, available at <<https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1982260#1982260>>.

¹¹⁵ For the list of 21 with full details, see “Documents signed during the state visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” [Dokumenty, podpisannye v hode gosudarstvennogo vizita v Korolevstvo Saudovskaja Aravija], President of Russia Web site, October 14, 2019, available at <<http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5447>>. For a list of 20, shorn of much detail, see Ruba Obaid, “Saudi Arabia and Russia Sign Up to Closer Ties with 20 New Deals,” *Arab News*, October 15, 2019, available at <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1569046/saudi-arabia>>. The list of 20 provided by *Arab News* does not include the agreement on cooperation in joint projects in the fertilizer field listed as number 21 in the Kremlin document.

¹¹⁶ “State visit to Saudi Arabia,” President of Russia Web site, October 14, 2019, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61799>>; “Russia, Saudi Arabia seal key oil deal dur-

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¹¹⁷ Suchkov and Belenkaya, “In Riyadh, Putin Receives Czar-Like Reception.” For more on the discussions and agreements endorsed at the Riyadh summit, see “State visit to Saudi Arabia”; and Marianna Belenkaya, “Breakthrough in relations.” What Russia and Saudi Arabia agreed on during Vladimir Putin’s visit [‘Proryv v otnoshenijah». O chem dogovorilis’ Rossiya i Saudovskaja Aravija vo vremja vizita Vladimira Putina], *Kommersant*, October 14, 2019, available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4125657>>; Belenkaya, “Should the United States Be Worried about Russian Activity in the Gulf?”

¹¹⁸ Suchkov and Belenkaya, “In Riyadh, Putin Receives Czar-Like Reception.”

¹¹⁹ Summer Said et al., “Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Tanked Oil Markets. Here’s the Back Story,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2020, available at <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabias-crown-prince-tanked-oil-markets-heres-the-back-story-11583957095>>.

¹²⁰ However, a more jaded long-time observer argued that the summit had been a failure. “What relations?” he asked. The shortness of Putin’s visit had said it all. He was hardly a day in Riyadh, and this expert could find only one Saudi commentary on the visit (Parker, conversations in Moscow, November 2019). See concluding passage in the English version: “Riyadh’s relationship with Washington is still strong, but is no longer exclusive”; Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, “Riyadh: Between Moscow and Washington,” *Arab News*, October 15, 2019, available at <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1569236>>. The Arabic language version is available at <<https://aawsat.com/node/1945686>>.

¹²¹ Parker, conversations in Moscow, November 2019. Russian Middle East expert Marianna Belenkaya described the Saudi approach to the S-400 issue as one of “tactful silence,” though there had been progress in recent months on previously negotiated deliveries of TOS-1A Solntsepek multi-barrel rocket launch systems and Kalashnikov rifles. Also see Belenkaya, “Should the United States Be Worried about Russian Activity in the Gulf?”

¹²² John Parker, conversations in Moscow, November 2019.

¹²³ Belenkaya, “Should the United States Be Worried about Russian Activity in the Gulf?”

¹²⁴ Parker, conversations in Moscow, November 2019.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ At the July 2019 OPEC+ meeting, the participants agreed to maintain through the first quarter of 2020 the cuts agreed at their previous meeting in December 2018: 1.2 million barrels per day, with OPEC members contributing 800 thousand (a 2.5 percent cut in production) of this and non-OPEC “voluntarily” contributing another 400 thousand barrels (a 2 percent cut) per day cut. OPEC, “The 5th OPEC and Non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting Concludes,” No. 28/2018, Vienna, December 7, 2018, available at <https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/press_room/5279.htm>; Reed, “Russia and OPEC Draw Closer on Oil, Joining Other Producers to Manage Market.” At the November 2019 meeting, OPEC+ participants agreed to an additional 500,000 barrels a day cut through the end of the first quarter of 2020 (until March 31), though an exclusion for natural gas condensate meant that Russia might not have to cut at all. (Clifford Krauss, “OPEC and Russia Agree to Cuts in Oil Production to Push Up Prices,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2019. In addition, anxious to keep prices as high as possible in advance of the IPO for the Saudi state oil company Aramco, Riyadh undertook to take an

additional 400,000 barrels a day cut through the same time period. This meant a total cut of 1.7 million barrels a day beyond the production levels agreed by OPEC+ in late 2018, or 2.1 million barrels a day including the additional Saudi pledge of 400,000 barrels. See Dmitry Kozlov, "Saudi Arabia removed the quota from itself. Riyadh to take the brunt of new oil production cuts" [Saudovskaja Aravija otorvala kvotu ot sebja. Jer-Rijad voz'met osnovnuju tjazhest' novogo sokrashhenija dobychi nefi], *Kommersant*, December 7, 2019, available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4186769>>; "Saudi Arabia, Russia Push Through Deeper New Oil Cuts," *Arab News*, December 6, 2019, available at <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1595101/business-economy>>.

¹²⁸ Stanley Reed, "OPEC Proposes a Large Cut in Oil Output," *New York Times*, March 5, 2020.

¹²⁹ "Russia did not support the proposal of OPEC+ partners for a new reduction in oil production. OPEC+ is waiting for an alternative proposal from Moscow to reduce oil production on March 6" [Rossija ne podderzhala predlozhenie partnerov po OPEK+ o novom sokrashhenii dobychi nefi. OPEK+ zhdet ot Moskvy al'ternativnogo predlozhenija po sokrashheniju dobychi nefi 6 marta], TASS, March 4, 2020, available at <<https://tass.ru/ekonomika/7901841>>; Reed, "OPEC Proposes a Large Cut in Oil Output."

¹³⁰ Rania El Gamal, Alex Lawler, and Olesya Astakhova, "OPEC's Pact with Russia Falls Apart, Sending Oil into Tailspin," Reuters, March 6, 2020, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-opec-meeting/opecs-pact-with-russia-falls-apart-sending-oil-into-tailspin-iduskbn20t0y2>>; Stanley Reed, "How a Saudi-Russian Standoff Sent Oil Markets into a Frenzy," *New York Times*, March 9, 2020.

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¹³² Sergey Tikhonov, "Novak: Moscow sees no prospects for a new OPEC+ deal [Novak: Moskva ne vidit perspektiv dlja novoj sdelki OPEK+], *Kommersant*, March 13, 2020, available at <<https://rg.ru/2020/03/13/aleksandr-novak-rossiia-ne-vidit-perspektiv-dlia-novoj-sdelki-opek.html>>.

¹³³ Todd Prince and Mike Eckel, "Russia's Energy Czar, Disliked and Feared, Catches Blame as Oil Prices Collapse, Venezuela Deals Crumble," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 1, 2020, available at <<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-s-energy-czar-disliked-and-feared-catches-blame-as-oil-prices-collapse-venezuela-deals-crumble/30587152.html?ltflags=mailer>>. Among many cut-throat deeds, Sechin had been instrumental in the expropriation of Yukos, then Russia's largest oil company, after the arrest and jailing of its owner Mikhail Khodorkovskiy in 2003 (Anders Aslund, "Russia Is Out of Control: The Dangerous Mr. Sechin," Atlantic Council blog, March 23, 2020, available at <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-is-out-of-control-the-dangerous-mr-sechin/>>). More recently, Sechin had conspired in 2017 to entrap and send to a harsh penal colony economic development minister Alexey Ulyukayev, who had opposed a major oil deal pushed by Sechin. See Andrew E. Kramer, "Fancy Sausages and a \$2 Million Bribe: A Trial Uncovers Kremlin Infighting," *New York Times*, December 15, 2017. Also, Mikhail Krutikhin, "Oil at \$30? Why Russia withdrew from the agreement with OPEC. Igor Sechin does not like American shale very much. But Donald Trump needs cheap oil before the election" [Neft' po \$30? Zachem Rossija vyshla iz soglashenija s OPEK. Igor' Sechin ochen' ne ljubit amerikanskij slanec. A vot Donal'du Trampu deshevaja nef' nuzhna pered vyborami], *Republic*, March 7, 2020, available at <https://republic.ru/posts/96101?utm_source=republic.ru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=morning>.

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Although Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin issued instructions to the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Foreign Ministry to nail down a “military cooperation” agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, this potential deal appears to focus on areas other than military equipment sales and is thus unlikely to alter the framework of arms sales frustration for Moscow detailed in this table.

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