

# MIXED OPTICS: SAUDI CROWN PRINCE'S INDIA VISIT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

As a standalone visit, the [day-long trip of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud](#) (MBS) to New Delhi will be regarded as a diplomatic success, given the numerous outcomes. After talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the two sides announced measures to upgrade the defence partnership, create a “Strategic Partnership Council” to coordinate on security issues, and institute regular talks between the two national security advisers to discuss counter-terrorism, intelligence-sharing and maritime security. Saudi Arabia has also expressed its interest in investing in infrastructure projects worth about \$26 billion. This is beyond its already committed investments in India of \$44 billion for the existing joint venture with the public sector oil undertakings and public fund investments of \$10 billion. The language on terrorism in the joint statement was something of a dampener for those who would have hoped there would be stronger condemnation of the terror attack in Pulwama. But it was significant that the Saudi government agreed to insert an extra clause calling on states to renounce the “use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy”. It also acknowledged that disputes between India and Pakistan must be resolved bilaterally. At the leadership level, Mr. Modi extended more than a personal touch to the visit by going to the airport and embracing the Crown Prince on landing. The prince repaid the compliment, agreeing to increase Haj quotas and release 850 Indians from Saudi jails after a plea from Mr. Modi.

These announcements and gestures would have been far more significant had it not been for the fact that MBS's trip came on the heels of his visit to Pakistan just after the Pulwama attack. As a result, his India visit is being measured against the statements made during his Pakistan visit, where he praised Islamabad for its fight against terrorism. He also announced \$20 billion worth of investments, in addition to previously announced aid of \$6 billion in cash and reserves. While such comparisons may be unwarranted, the visit to Delhi would have benefited in terms of optics if it hadn't been preceded so closely by the one to Islamabad. The Modi government also overplayed its expectations from the visit by billing it as part of a diplomatic offensive aimed at 'isolating' Pakistan in order to hold it to account for Pulwama. India and Saudi Arabia have steadily built bilateral relations and taken great care over the past two decades to 'de-hyphenate' them from ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. India-Saudi Arabia ties were strengthened into a strategic partnership announced in 2010 in the Riyadh Declaration when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid a visit, and were bolstered by King Salman's visit in February 2014 and Mr. Modi's 2016 trip to Saudi Arabia. Point-scoring with Pakistan, or attempting to compare the outcomes of the two visits, now only undermines the carefully built compact between New Delhi and Riyadh.

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