Armenia and Saudi Arabia: Potential Diplomacy in Complex International Relations

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## Table of Contents

Abstract 6
Introduction 7
Saudi Foreign Policy in the Caucuses 8
International Relation of Armenia 10
Armenian Genocide and Seferberlik in Contemporary Politics 14
Armenian–Saudi Rapprochements? 16
Concluding Remarks 20
Abstract
As a part of series of reports on the Saudi bilateral relations in the southern Caucasus, and following the first report on Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia (2019), this report analyzes the prospects of Armenia and Saudi Arabia, potential diplomacy, and current barriers. First, the report introduces the historical background and highlights Saudi foreign policy in the southern Caucasus. Second, it explores Armenia’s international relations and geopolitical strategies. And third, it focuses on potential Armenian–Saudi rapprochement while considering regional barriers. In the end, while this report finds some events that may lead to the rapprochement between the two countries, like proactive foreign policy, exchanges of letters on national days between head of states, and regional and political challenges, it also identifies some barriers, like Armenian foreign policy toward the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and its cooperation with Iran in particular. Considering these trends and barriers, the potential diplomacy and relationship may be more valuable to Armenia regarding the reality of local politics and complex international relations.
Introduction

This report aims at analyzing the potential bilateral diplomacy between the Republic of Armenian and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in respect of international relations and geopolitical and socio-economic developments. The history and international relations of Armenia, a former Soviet republic, which gained its independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on September 20, 1991, shows how the country’s capital Yerevan has been trying to maintain good, diplomatic, and friendly relations with every country in the world. In return, the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, since its establishment, has focused on international cooperation and maintaining diplomatic and bilateral relations with regional and global powers such as the United States of America, the European Union, the People’s Republic of China, and the Russian Federation.

While Armenia succeeded in establishing bilateral relations with Western powers and many other countries, including Russia, the Republic of Georgia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and China, it has had tensions and unestablished relations with its western neighbor, the Republic of Turkey, and has even been at war at some times with its eastern neighbor, the Republic of Azerbaijan, mainly over two issues; the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and Armenian control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, around 1,700 square miles (4,400 km²) along its border with Azerbaijan.\(^{(1)}\) In addition, because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia has neither bilateral relations nor conflict with several countries in the Middle East, mainly Saudi Arabia, who represents an active influence in the Middle East and the world. Although Armenia, along with Saudi Arabia, has been on good terms with international powers such as the United States, Europe, and Russia, the two countries do not yet have any formal ties established.

Armenia’s foreign policy tends to focus on its economic prosperity with all foreign nations while cautiously engaging with regional and international developments and conflicts, especially those in the Middle East, caring for its national, historical, and identity heritage, diasporas, promoting recognition of the Armenian Genocide, and backing its control over Nagorno-Karabakh.\(^{(2)}\)

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Amidst regional and global developments in the Middle East in the past two decades, including Iranian destabilizing policies, US and Russian engagements, and, Turkey’s expansionist foreign policy, one question remains complicated to answer: Will Armenia and Saudi Arabia establish bilateral relations? In order to answer this question, this report seeks to analyze the current context through Saudi foreign policy in the Caucasus and beyond, Armenia’s international relations, and the ongoing economic and political perspectives between and around the two countries.

**Saudi Foreign Policy in the Caucasus**

The Saudi foreign policy toward Southern Caucasus and Central Asia since the times of the Cold War and before, during, and after the demise of the Soviet Union was supportive, along with Americans and Europeans, to the independence of former Soviet republics. In February 1992, Saudi Arabia’s then Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal’s visit to the countries of central Asia, mainly the Republic of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, the Republic of Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, paved the way for recognition and establishment of formal relations with the former Soviet republics. However, Armenia was not among them.(3) Thus, it is imperative to ask why Saudi Arabia does not have formal ties with Armenia?

Saudi Arabia, with its regional and global heavyweight value and Islamic-oriented stance, sought to support Azerbaijan’s right on the issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh region on one hand while also maintaining diplomacy with all sides of the conflict. In addition, Azerbaijan and Turkey are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an international organization that has shown support to the right of Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh through its international meetings and press releases.(4) Armenia has been largely supported by and dependent on Iranian support for economic and security benefits such as countering its western and eastern neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Thus, Saudi foreign policy seemed to be

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refraining from developing political relation with Armenia because some considerations for its regional leadership among members of the OIC, and Armenian warm and close relation with Iran. However, while several countries and members of OIC, such as Malaysia and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, recognize Armenia, the position of OIC organization has condemned and declared itself against Armenian control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. (5) Although Armenia seems to have established relations with many states in the Middle East, it has no diplomatic ties with two important neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan, nor with Saudi Arabia, a major regional player in the Middle East. (6)

Amid international and regional changes and development of politics, state foreign policy is subject to change or is altered based on political gains, economic reasons, and the pragmatic changing roles of states. Considering the history of Saudi foreign policy, and in particular the era of the present King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz, Saudi Arabia is seen as playing proactive roles, motivated by national interests, and strategically supported by pragmatic rationales. (7) Thus, should there be a motive for bilateral diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and Armenia, the Saudi role must be considered for potentially contributing to resolving the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and mediating between Azerbaijan on one side and Armenia on the other. In fact, following the recently resumed conflict with Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian President, Armen Sarkissian, wrote to King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appealing to them to use the Kingdom’s authority and connections in the international arena to stop the violence by peaceful and diplomatic means. (8) In this regard, it is important to refer to one example of many regarding Saudi mediations for resolving some regional conflicts is the Accord of Taif in 1989, which ended the long 15-year civil war in Lebanon. (9)


International Relation of Armenia

Being blocked from west and east since its independence, Armenia has open borders only with Georgia to the north and Iran to the south. This has allowed Armenia to connect with the outside world and benefit logistically from these two countries.(10)

![Map of Armenia](image)

*Figure 1 Map of Armenia*

The foreign policy of the small state Armenia has always been focused on its national security, mainly determined by two issues; first its control over Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan-Turkey’s blockade, and second, the influence and the support of foreign powers, mainly Iran and Russia.(11) With respect to the first issue, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been unstable since the independence of the two countries, and the conflict over this region between Armenia and Azerbaijan continued to escalate from September 2020 until a ceasefire, mediated by Russia and signed in early November by both parties of the conflict.(12)

(10) It is worth noting that 80% of Armenia’s border are blocked, which makes the country in a rare position compared to most other countries.


(12) Since the beginning of the conflict in September and until the declared ceasefire, Azerbaijan has retaken some parts of southern Nagorno-Karabakh, like Shusha. However, the ceasefire will make Armenian withdraw from other western regions like Kalbajar and Lachin. See the details of the ceasefire in the following source: President of Russia, “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation”. November 10, 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384.
Following occasional military clashes and drone shootings in past years between the two neighbors, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh escalated again in September 2020, with each country accusing the other of initiating military attacks. This sudden eruption and clashes have caused regional and international reactions. For instance, Turkey has accused Armenia of initiating this conflict and called for an end to its occupation, in full support of Azerbaijan. Another country, Pakistan, has also called for a halt in the conflict and expressed support for the Azerbaijani side. While the UN has expressed its grievances, the OIC has condemned Armenia and voiced support for Azerbaijan. Others, like the US, EU, Russia, and Iran have called for peaceful communication between the two sides of the conflict. Saudi Arabia, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has called for ceasefire between Armenian and Azerbaijan and a resolution of the conflict according to earlier UN resolutions.

Russia has been the most strategic ally to Armenia since its independence, as evidenced in both security and economical bilateral relations. Armenia is a member of many Russian-led organizations, including Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organizations (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Partnership (EAEU). In addition, Armenia has been dependent on Russian military and security since 1990s as Gyumri, located in the northwestern side of Yerevan, has been hosting a Russian military base, including 5,000 personnel, and a bilateral treaty was signed recently to give Russia access to the base until

In addition, Russia remains the largest trade partner to Armenia as their trade volume was $1.9 billion. This shows clearly how far Armenia and Russia’s cooperation has gone, and suggests that their bilateral relations will continue in the future.

Besides Russia, Armenia needs to continue to build good relations with other countries and neighbors, Iran, and Georgia. Yerevan has been improving bilateral relation with Iran, which is seen as a stable ally in security arenas, such as providing a power counterbalance against Turkey and supporting Armenia in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia also possesses good and prosperous economic relations with Iran, especially in the energy sector, as both countries have oil and gas pipelines, giving Iran the benefit of exporting and Armenia of importing. Armenian-Iranian cooperation could be summed up in energy sources, transportation, and constructions, and the last year’s trade volume reached $363 million, a record since the independence of Armenia. While Armenian benefits mostly from importing goods, Iran benefits from exporting many of its products and commodities while maneuvering around international and US sanctions. In addition to Iran, Georgia is seen as another important partner in Armenia’s foreign policy, as indicated in the country’s national security strategy. In comparison to Iran, Georgia achieved $140 million in trade volume with Armenia. Both Georgia and Iran provide a hub for the transportation of goods for Armenia, thus avoiding the Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade. However, Armenia has been diversifying its international relations and cooperation, as seen in its bilateral relations particularly with China and to a lesser extent India. Armenia has improved its relation with China noticeably since 2015, and at the time of writing the latter is the third trade partner after Russia and the EU. Thus,

(19) Ibid.
this diversification may encourage Armenian to think of breaking away, even a little, from its reliance on the EU and Russia in its foreign policy. Even though Armenia has relied on strategic relations with Russia on one side, and focused on neighborly cooperation with Iran and Georgia on the other side, it has maintained warm relations with the EU and Western powers, which conceptualizes a complementary foreign policy.\(^{(26)}\)

In addition, Armenia enacted an internal political change that became known as the Velvet Revolution in mid-2018, whereby the earlier government of the then prime minister, Serzh Sargsyan, gave way to the post-Velvet Revolution’s government, led by prime minister Nikol Pashinyan.\(^{(27)}\) While this political change was internally important inside Armenia, it has not done much change to the foreign policy of the country, especially concerning its major strategies: national security; independence for Nagorno-Karabakh; and a strategic alliance with Russia while maneuvering diplomatic relation with the EU. Thus, the current political and economic context of Armenia has been a key factor in any policy adopted by whichever government in Yerevan, which leaves the ability to make other changes in its foreign policy, such as relations with Russia, very limited.

Beyond the Caucasus, Armenia has sought to form good political and diplomatic relations in Middle East and North Africa. Most countries recognize Armenia and have diplomatic and formal representation, including Israel and a number of Arab countries that early on announced their recognition, like the Lebanese Republic, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Federal Republic of Somalia, the Republic of Iraq, the Kingdom of Morocco, the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria. Other countries followed later, the Republic of Tunisia, the State of Libya, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.\(^{(28)}\) In addition, Armenia has formal ties with all members of the GCC, the State of Kuwait, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Sultanate of Oman, except for Saudi Arabia. Beside states, Armenia has had positive relations with the Arab League, as it was granted an observer status in 2004 and signed a memorandum of understanding in 2005.\(^{(29)}\)

\(^{(27)}\) Markarov and Davtyan, “Post-Velvet Revolution Armenia’s Foreign Policy Challenges”.
Thus, Yerevan has considered the countries in the Middle East, particularly Arab and GCC countries, in its foreign diplomatic relations beyond its situation in the Caucasus, which has given it better regional and global recognition.

Armenian Genocide and Seferberlik in Contemporary Politics

As suggested earlier in this report, Armenian foreign policy is driven by backing its control over Nagorno-Karabakh and preserving its cultural heritage and recognition of the Armenian Genocide, which is currently recognized by 30 countries, among them only two Arab countries, Lebanon and Syria. However, in recent years, some Arab countries have begun parliamentary and state efforts and processes for recognizing the Armenian Genocide, like Egypt and Libya. Moreover, some countries, including, for instance, Saudi Arabia, among others, like the UAE, have not come to any official conclusions on the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Regardless, the media in the last two mentioned countries, have been active in reporting on the April annual memorial of the Armenian Genocide, which includes critical references to the Ottoman Empire and its inheriting entity, the Turkish Republic. While making reference to the Armenian Genocide in the Arab context, especially Saudi Arabia, the Seferberlik 1913–1918 immediately comes to mind, representing as it does a drastic mobilization by the Ottoman Empire to enlist and transport young men from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and the Saudi city of Medina to warzones to defend Ottoman territories between the Balkan Wars and WWI.
Thus, and regardless of the different severity of both events in the collective memory of both nations, the remembrance and coverage of the Armenian Genocide in the Saudi context is seen as having a resemblance to the experiences of Seferberlik, both of which were conducted by the Ottomans and which occurred over the same period.\(^{(35)}\)

International relations with Armenia and the recognition of the Armenian Genocide have been pressured and have been confined mainly to the Turkish stance and the Azerbaijani position regarding any rapprochement with these two issues. This is understandable as Armenia is smaller than Turkey and lies between Turkey to its west and Azerbaijan to its east. Armenia is less influential in regional and international competition, conflicts in the Middle East, and the global economy compared to other countries like Turkey, Iran, and Russia. However, Armenia could be an attractive and welcoming country for those who experience tensions with Turkey since any development of diplomacy with Armenia and/or recognition of the Armenian Genocide will clearly undermine Turkey’s position on one hand, and on the other hand increase the recognition of Yerevan among regional partners and global powers. Although Turkey declared the political slogan of ‘zero problem with neighbors’ many years ago, it did not prove to be totally true, at least in the last decade.\(^{(36)}\) To the contrary, Turkey’s foreign policy has put many of its neighbors into problematic contexts, like Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Greece. The policy of the Turkish state and in particular the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the speeches and comments of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan concerning heads of state, high-ranking officials, and countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Greece have damaged Turkish state relations with these countries. This means that Turkey’s international relations with its neighbors are not very good and makes its cooperation with some countries like Saudi Arabia and others very limited.

\(^{(35)}\) Turkey has given a different narrative about both events through its officials and state organizations at a variety of national, regional, and international occasions.

Armenian–Saudi Rapprochements?

There are a few trends in international and regional politics that make this report wonder whether there would ever be Armenian–Saudi rapprochement. As suggested earlier, the confinement of the Armenian bilateral and diplomatic relationship to Turkey is a significant factor to consider while evaluating any foreign approach toward Armenia, whether positive or negative. Saudi Arabia and other countries like Syria, Iraq, and Egypt have found themselves at odds with Turkey, beginning with the Arab Spring 2011, Syrian civil war, and Gulf Crisis.(37)

As a result, Saudi foreign policy appeared to be heading in a direction interpreted as rivalry and competition with Turkey at regional and international levels, and vice versa. One example is the visit of Saudi Foreign Minister to the Republic of Cyprus in August 2019,(38) which paved the way for improving official ties and sending a Saudi ambassador to Nicosia.(39) Saudi Arabia expressed its support to Nicosia and its interest in developing economic and political relations. In this respect, it is important to refer to the internal problems of border conflict between the southern part (Republic of Cyprus) and northern part (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), which is supported and recognized only by Turkey.(40) From a Turkish point of view, Saudi Arabia’s recently formed alliance with the Republic of Cyprus could be seen as undermining Turkey’s presence in the Mediterranean, and increases the Saudi diplomatic influence in regional countries, like Greece and Republic of Cyprus. This latest development of the diplomatically improved Cyprus–Saudi relations could potentially lead to a case where Armenian–Saudi relations are established. A few additional incidences, discussed below, could support the possibility of such an Armenia–Saudi rapprochement.

(37) Hüseyin Işıksal and Oğuzhan Göksel, eds, Turkey’s Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring (New York: Springer, 2017).


The first is that historically, Armenia and Saudi Arabia both suffered Ottoman interventions and shared a similar stance against the Turkish Republic, especially when reference is made to the events of the Armenian Genocide and Seferberlik. As discussed earlier in this report, both countries seem to have a shared historical narrative on the similarity of the two tragedies. This shared historical narrative could only bring the two countries into a closer position with respect to the past and present. Another significant development initiated by Saudi Arabia, which could be seen as related to the Armenian cause and people, is 2019’s visit of the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon during which he visited the Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia and the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Antelias (north of Beirut).\(^{(41)}\) The visit of the Saudi ambassador to such an important Armenian memorial, and even his meeting with the head of Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, Aram I Keshishian, shows an evolving and warm stance toward the Armenian cause, which could lead to a further development on a state level. Although there are no formal bilateral ties between Armenia and Saudi Arabia, the last three Saudi Kings—King Fahad, King Abdullah and King Salman, also including his son, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—kept sending congratulatory messages to Armenian presidents on Armenian national days.\(^{(42)}\) In addition, Saudi Arabia receives congratulatory messages from Armenia’s President Armen Sarkissian on the occasion of the Saudi national day.\(^{(43)}\) This warm communication continues and reciprocal exchange of messages between head of states not only shows a historical acknowledgment of each other, but also reflects possible political and contemporary alignments between the two counties.


The economy is an important factor for preceding, during, and continuing formal ties of any two independent states, such as the case of Armenia and Saudi Arabia. The bilateral economic scope, though it is modest, is worth mentioning regardless of limited resources concerning the prospects of the two countries. In this respect, the trade volume between Armenia and Saudi Arabia was as low as $399,000 in 2003, and continued until it exceeded $5 million in 2010, almost doubling to $9 million in 2016. However, this bilateral trade volume has reverted to less than $5 million in the past three years. Thus, the economy between Armenia and Saudi Arabia is very limited. Beyond the economic and statistical facts, only small numbers of the Saudi private sector manage some business in Armenia. Another interesting point between Armenia and Saudi Arabia is the establishment of renewable energy projects. Fotowatio Renewable Ventures, which is a Saudi-owned company, has won an Armenian solar project in Masrik, a city located in the eastern area of Armenia, to generate and provide green electricity for more than 20,000 houses in an area exceeding 100 hectares. In addition, another Saudi company manages some retailing businesses in Armenia. See Sam Bridge, “Unit of Saudi Energy Firm Wins Armenia Solar Project Contract,” Arabian Business, July 04, 2019, https://www.arabianbusiness.com/energy/400035-unit-of-saudi-energy-firm-wins-armenia-solar-project-contract; “ALJ Energy bags Armenia project,” Arab News, July 03, 2018, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1332901/corporate-news; Tuqa Khalid and Saeed Azhar, “Fawaz Alhokair’s M&S Deal in Saudi Ends, Still Partners Elsewhere,” Reuters, August 21, 2019.
and Saudi Arabia is that in 2012 they signed an agreement concerning financial control.\(^{(46)}\) Thus, there could be some cooperation needed in finance security and combating financial terrorism.

For Armenia, bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia would reinforce its regional position, especially with a significant and major country that is a member of various organizations such the OIC and G20. It would also open additional and considerable economic opportunities in the trade and tourism sectors. In addition to these gains, Armenia may have to propose initiatives in order to get the attention of Saudi Arabia’s policy makers and that could come from resolving the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh with its neighbor Azerbaijan, and limiting its relation with Iran.

For Saudi Arabia, bilateral relations with Armenia may not be as valuable as it is for Armenia, but it could improve Saudi diplomacy in the Southern Caucuses region.

Speculation about Armenian–Saudi potential diplomacy or relationship, if it were to be established prior to resolving the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, could lead to a few regional consequences. One is Turkey’s disappointment, as has already happened with recent Saudi moves toward the Republic of Cyprus, which could make Turkish–Saudi relations more fragile. Then, Azerbaijan may find itself questioning Saudi moves and rationales and side further with Turkey, especially on the subject of Nagorno-Karabakh. Internationally, OIC may have to consider more complexity in its roles with respect to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, particularly concerning its members Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and to a lesser extent, Pakistan.

While this report has investigated the history and politics of potential diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and Armenian, if such a scenario were to come true then it may be developed through the efforts of the GCC and its diplomatic channels. It is important to note that potential diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Armenian should undermine neither Saudi roles at regional and international level nor its relations with Azerbaijan, since the latter already maintains good relations with many countries who enjoy very warm relations with Armenia, like Russia and to a lesser extent, other Arab countries, including the members of the GCC. But Saudi Arabia’s

potential relations with Armenia and involvement in the mediation between the two sides of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh may increase the potential peaceful means for resolving the issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

**Concluding Remarks**

The analysis of this report has investigated the international relations perspectives, mainly from the Armenian side, and the geopolitics surrounding the potential Armenian–Saudi relationship. There is no doubt that Armenia and Saudi Arabia are not enemies, but officially they do not have bilateral representation between Yerevan and Riyadh on a formal level. The main objective of the report, besides historical and contemporary analysis of Armenia and Saudi Arabia, is the question of whether there could be a formally political relationship or not. While the question is complicated, so is the answer.

From one side, there is potential rapprochement between the two countries once the following points are considered. The proactive Saudi foreign policy ushers more diversification in its diplomatic and political relations, such as the development of Cypriot–Saudi relations. In addition, there is a regular exchange of letters between heads of both countries on national days and urgent events. Also, there is a trend in the Saudi press and media covering the Armenian Genocide to blame the Ottomans and the Turkish Republic and its historical atrocities and compare it with Seferberlik, which could imply common ground between the Armenians and the Saudis with respect to each other’s negative historical experiences with the Ottomans. Saudi consideration for the Armenian cause is evident through the visit of the Saudi ambassador to the Armenian Catholicosate and the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Lebanon.

However, from another side, there could be reasons hindering the potential for Armenian–Saudi rapprochement. First and foremost is Armenian politics toward Nagorno-Karabakh and its involvement in the conflict. Its reliance on Iran for economic and security purposes is another reason, as is the bilateral economic potential, which is modest, and the bilateral trade volume. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that bilateral trade occurs between countries that do not have a formal relationship, which leads to the expectation that if those two countries
were to establish bilateral relations, then the economic scope would definitely increase. In the end, while this Armenian–Saudi rapprochement could bring the two countries into potential diplomacy, Armenian foreign policy and complex international relations could remain barriers for any bilateral development.
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