

U.S. Must Build on Rising East Med-Gulf Cooperation

Jonathan Ruhe
Director of Foreign Policy

The Saudi crown prince's recent visit to Athens highlights the two countries' geostrategic importance – both for reducing Europe's dangerous dependence on Russian energy and, in conjunction with Greece's vital roles in growing Israel-Gulf ties, as security providers supporting regional stability and U.S. interests in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. The Biden administration should encourage and capitalize on these developments by explicitly supporting greater trans-regional cooperation among its Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf partners, including by encouraging Greece's continued development as a renewable energy and natural gas hub.

What Happened?

- On July 26-27, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) [visited](#) Athens to meet with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.
- During MBS' visit, the two countries [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to deepen security, economic, and energy cooperation, including possible Saudi electricity exports to Greece.

Why Is It Important?

- MBS' visit and the MOU highlight Greece's increasing [importance](#) as an energy import and distribution hub for Europe, particularly in the wake of Russia's Ukraine invasion.
 - » In parallel to developing capacity for importing and distributing liquefied natural gas (LNG) throughout southeastern Europe, which historically has depended almost entirely on Russian energy, Greece is building the EuroAsia Interconnector to import electricity from Israel and Cyprus as well as the Euro-Africa Interconnector to import electricity from Egypt.
 - » The new MOU could potentially expand Greece's role as an energy hub further by linking Saudi energy exports into this growing network of subsea electricity cables.

- Though no specifics were announced, the MOU’s provisions on security cooperation underscore growing geostrategic linkages among U.S. partners in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, all of whom are assuming greater burdens for regional security and energy cooperation in the face of acute challenges from Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey.
 - » In this regard, Greece has become an increasingly crucial diplomatic leader and reliable security provider in recent years, particularly given uncertain future U.S. presence.
 - » In addition to the Greco-Cypriot “trilaterals” with Israel and Egypt focused on energy and military cooperation, Athens has helped fill a void in the Gulf, where strained ties with the United States raise the risks of strategic inroads by Russia and/or China.
 - Since November 2020, shortly after the historic Abraham Accords that normalized Emirati and Bahraini ties with Israel, Greece and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have significantly deepened defense [cooperation](#) and joint energy [investments](#).
 - In March 2021, Saudi and Greek air forces [conducted](#) combined military exercises at Souda Bay on Crete, which also hosts U.S. and other NATO forces.
 - In April 2021, Saudi Arabia and Greece [signed](#) a deal for Greece to lend a Patriot air defense battery to Saudi Arabia. This filled a key capability gap in Saudi defenses against heightened Iran-backed missile and drones attacks from Yemen, following the [withdrawal](#) of a U.S. Patriot battery from the kingdom shortly before.
 - In February 2021, Greece [convened](#) the first Philia Forum to further coalesce this growing security and economic overlap between the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, with representatives from Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE meeting in Athens to develop closer diplomatic and energy ties.
 - » The new Greece-Saudi MOU also could [strengthen](#) Greece’s pivotal role in bolstering NATO force posture to counter Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, as PM Mitsotakis touted the possibility of Saudi investment in vital rail and road infrastructure around the strategic port of Alexandroupolis in far northeastern Greece on the northern Aegean.
 - The port, which already has seen an influx of U.S. forces and military equipment since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, is central to NATO plans for projecting power into the Eastern Balkans and Black Sea littoral.
- Coming on the heels of President Biden’s mid-July trip to Jeddah, MBS’ visit to Greece (and subsequently France) further underlines Saudi Arabia’s pivotal role in global energy security after U.S.-led attempts to isolate the kingdom in the wake of the Khashoggi killing.
 - » The Greece-Saudi MOU’s provision on economic cooperation also could contribute to MBS’ concerted and ambitious efforts to diversify the Saudi economy and reform the country’s society more broadly, perhaps in turn paving the way toward ultimately joining the Abraham Accords and normalizing ties with Israel.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Biden administration should take account, and advantage, of the growing opportunities for valuable security and energy cooperation among U.S. partners that increasingly connects the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.
 - » This means ensuring U.S. bureaucratic distinctions, particularly with the departments of State and Defense, that divide the two regions are not allowed to hinder America’s ability to foster coalitions that cross these geographic boundaries.
 - » The United States also should focus on Greece’s growing role as an incubator and hub for this growing cross-regional cooperation, including by supporting Athens’ efforts to toward further energy and security cooperation among like-minded U.S. partners from both regions.
- Most urgently, in light of the Ukraine war, the administration should harness the rising energy and security cooperation among its Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf partners by explicitly supporting Athens’ efforts to become an energy import and distribution gateway for Europe, including through its expanded cooperation with Saudi Arabia.
 - » Though Greek-Saudi cooperation comports with the administration’s emphasis on promoting “clean” and “renewable” energy sources for the region – particularly the potential for Saudi electricity exports via Greece to Europe – Washington should make clear it also supports Athens’ efforts to become a natural gas hub as well.
 - » This could include appointing a Special Envoy for the Eastern Mediterranean to advance Greek-led efforts to peacefully develop regional energy resources and expand related infrastructure, including electricity interconnectors from the Middle East to Europe.
 - » Toward this end, President Biden should expand on his recent Jeddah visit by reassuring Saudi Arabia and the UAE of America’s commitment to their security and their efforts to help promote energy alternatives to Russian oil and natural gas.

This brief was made possible by the support of the Gettler Family Foundation and a portion of the research was conducted on the [Benjamin Gettler International Policy Trip](#).