

Saudi Arabia and the Security Council

By [Paul Blower](#)

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Saudi Arabia has taken the unprecedented decision of turning down a seat on the United Nations Security Council, becoming the first country ever to renounce this endorsement. The move surprised members of the international community and even members of the Kingdom's own representative at the UN in New York who, a day before the country's foreign ministry announced it would not take up the position, issued a contradictory statement thanking the UN for the "new responsibility" it had been given.

Election to the Security Council is highly sought after and usually follows a period of intense lobbying over several years. The result is even more surprising from a country like Saudi Arabia, whose measured and predictable approach to diplomacy usually makes certain it can keep Washington as undisturbed and content as possible.

In reasoning their decision, Saudi officials have cited a discontentment with the effectiveness and behaviour of the Security Council, saying "the mechanisms of action and double standards existing in the Council prevent it from performing its duties and assuming its responsibilities towards preserving international peace and security."

They believe that the inefficacy of the Council to properly resolve conflicts, stop human right violations and rid the Middle East of weapons of mass destruction shows a Council that is not worth being a part of. Sixty-five years without coming to a just solution for the Palestinian cause and sitting by whilst Bashar al-Assad slaughters the people of Syria are situations that prove "the Council's inability to carry out its duties and assume its responsibilities", according to the Gulf kingdom.

Commentators in the Gulf have approved of the decision, saying that it is better for them to withdraw than to engage in what is "mere political debate" about a region of pressing unrest. Ali Al-Mousa said, "If it had accepted the seat, Saudi Arabia would have had to take firm positions on issues such as the Arab Spring and the Iranian nuclear program, on which the UNSC might not deliver. This would eventually jeopardise its interests in the region. But now, there will be no political repercussions from the Kingdom's decision."

Western diplomats suggest that Riyadh's frustration with the US has more to do with Syria and Iran than

resolving Israeli-Palestinian tensions. Saudi's indignation seems to have boiled over when the US backed out of military strikes in Syria. They regard defeating the Assad regime as vital to their interests because of the Iran's involvement in backing the current regime. The Kingdom also fears that the rekindling of US-Iranian relations for the first time since 1979 may lead to a "grand bargain" on Iran's nuclear program, which would leave Gulf states at a disadvantage.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief, told diplomats that his country's decision is part of a plan to scale back cooperation with the US. He said, "This was a message for the US, not the UN." Nawaf Ubaid, a Saudi academic at Harvard University, concludes that declining a seat at the UN was "a powerful gesture", one that will set the tone for a transformed foreign policy approach, ready to see Saudi to take on a more assertive role in ensuring the stability of its region. Referring to the diplomatic achievements of newly assertive Bahrain and Yemen, he believes the only way the security ambitions of the region can be realised is through broader local cooperation and Saudi Arabia taking a firmer diplomatic stance.

Saudi hopes that by assuming this contentious stance of turning down a UN seat, the amount of influence it can exert across the region and beyond will increase and its voice will be heard more clearly, but playing games with its old ally; the United States could turn out to be testing relations a little too much.



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