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SAUDI ARABIA COUNTRY FOCUS



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

■ **Minister Masagos Zulkifli**
Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs

■ **Minister Tan See Leng**
Second Minister for Trade & Industry



FIRST OVERSEAS STATE
Visit by President Tharman
Shanmugaratnam to Brunei
Darussalam

INTERVIEW
H.E. Abdullah Mohammed
A. Almadhi Ambassador
of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



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Positive Start to 2024



In the world of diplomacy January 2024 saw many positive developments: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong crossed the causeway to commemorate the completion of the connecting span between Singapore and Malaysia for the Rapid Transit System Link viaduct and witnessed the signing of the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone MoU with the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Still in the neighbourhood, the month was distinguished by two key visits to Brunei Darussalam. President Tharman Shanmugaratnam's inaugural State visit from January 24th to 26th and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit from January 13th to 15th for the wedding celebrations of Brunei royalty.

Singapore welcomed the Crown Prince Al Hussein of Jordan to Singapore (January 10th to 12th), signaling Singapore's expanding diplomatic reach and its engagement with diverse global partners. Singapore's ties with the Middle East has been intensifying since the Island Republic established its first Strategic Partnership with a Middle Eastern country - the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia last October. In this edition we carry exclusive interviews with Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Health as well as Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli (page 6) and Minister of Manpower and Second Minister for Trade and Industry Tan See Leng (page 8) who shared with us the latest developments. Several multi-national companies in Singapore are engaging positively in the region and playing a part in the field of conservation; we bring you an inspiring report what Saudi Aramco is doing in this area.

We also welcome new ambassadors to Singapore: **H.E. Lisbet Quesada Luna of Cuba;** **H.E. Hong Jin-wook of Korea** and **H.E. Ibrahim Bileh Doualeh of Djibouti**. This month also saw the celebrations of Australia Day and India's 75th Republic Day in January (page 13). From this issue, going forward, we are going to feature Tourism Destinations. We kick this off with a report on the legendary Jammu and Kashmir, India. Please do share with us any news or media releases related to upcoming engagements for coverage.

For daily updates from Singapore's world of diplomacy visit www.indiplomacy.com

Happy reading!

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Presentation of Credentials

The following diplomats presented their letters of credentials to President Tharman Shanmugaratnam on 9th January 2024 at the Istana



The Ambassador of the Republic of Cuba
Her Excellency Lisbet Quesada Luna



The Ambassador of the Republic of Korea
His Excellency Hong Jin-wook



The Ambassador of the Republic of Djibouti
His Excellency Ibrahim Bileh Doualeh

Brief introductory bios available online at indiplomacy.com

FACETIME in January 2024



President Tharman Shanmugaratnam was on his first overseas State Visit to Negara Brunei Darussalam from 24th to 26th January 2024. President Tharman and Mrs Tharman were accompanied by HRH Prince Haji Al-Muhtadee Billah, the Crown Prince and Senior Minister at the Prime Minister's Office of Negara Brunei Darussalam, and HRH Paduka Seri Pengiran Anak Isteri Pengiran Anak Sarah to the Istana Nurul Iman, where they were received by HM Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Negara Brunei Darussalam, and HM Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Hajah Saleha.



Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, accompanied by his wife and a delegation comprising Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean and Foreign Affairs Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, visited Brunei Darussalam from 13th to 15th Jan 2024. They attended the wedding celebrations of HRH Prince 'Abdul Mateen and Yang Amat Mulia Pengiran Anak Isteri Anisha Rosnah binti Adam. The invitation for the visit came from His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, the Sultan and Yang di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam.



A 6-member U.S. congressional delegation visited Singapore on 22nd Jan 2024 led by Rep. Young Kim from California who is the House Foreign Affairs Committee Indo-Pacific Sub-Committee Chair Representative. They called on Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong and Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, they highlighted the strong defense and economic cooperation between the two nations and expressed eagerness for collaboration in new areas. They also met Singapore's Defence Minister, Dr Ng Eng Hen, and Minister of Trade & Industry, Mr Gan Kim Yong.



German Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock, was on a working visit to Singapore on 12th January 2024. She met Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and they both emphasized the multifaceted nature of the bilateral relations, particularly in finance, defence, science, technology, and education. As the EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (EUSFTA) and EU-Singapore Investment Protection Agreement (EUSIPA) are key pillars of Singapore's economic relationship with the EU Dr Balakrishnan welcomed more German companies to use Singapore as a gateway to Southeast Asia.



Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan made an official visit to Portugal from 3rd to 6th January 2024 to build on Singapore and Portugal's close cultural links and deepen cooperation in emerging areas including sustainable development, climate change and biotechnology. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, met Minister of Foreign Affairs of Portugal, João Gomes Cravinho. The meeting reaffirmed the strong bilateral ties between the two nations. The ministers noted the remarkable increase in trade between Singapore and Portugal, with 2022 seeing a 71.6% rise from the previous year, reaching S\$1.6 billion.



Senior Minister of State for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Development, Sim Ann, concluded a three-day visit to Hunan Province, China, on 9th January 2024. The visit was aimed at enhancing and exploring potential areas of collaboration between Singapore and Hunan. The discussions focused on the significant presence of Singaporean companies in Hunan, particularly in logistics, infrastructure development, sustainability, and education. They explored opportunities to deepen cooperation, especially in connectivity, urban development, and the green economy; the duo also sought to facilitate cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

Singapore and Saudi Arabia Going Forward as Strategic Partners

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to the KSA last October has put bilateral trade and ties between the two nations in high gear. The visit laid the groundwork for many Singapore businesses to go to the Kingdom to explore the opportunities on offer

PRIME Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Official Visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) was at the invitation of the Saudi Crown Prince and PM HRH Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud from the 17th to 20th October 2023.

Driven by the desire of the leadership of the two countries to enhance bilateral relations and cooperation, the two sides agreed to upgrade relations to a Strategic Partnership. This will allow the deepening and expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation across all fields.

Prime Minister Lee conveyed his appreciation to His Royal Highness for the support of Singaporean pilgrims performing the Haj. Singapore expressed its support for the Kingdom's bid to host the 2034 World Cup.

The two sides welcomed the good progress made by the Saudi - Singapore Joint Committee (SSJC). The SSJC held its third session in Riyadh on 17th October 2023, during which both sides discussed ways to enhance partnerships and cooperation in various fields such as connectivity, digital economy and innovation, energy, and industry.

In the economic, trade and investment fields, the two sides reviewed challenges in the global economy and discussed the common economic interests between the Kingdom and Singapore. The two sides welcomed the growth in the value of bilateral trade in 2022 by 51% as compared to 2021. They stressed the importance of mutual cooperation to enhance and diversify bilateral trade by tapping on and improving the Gulf Cooperation Council – Singapore Free Trade Agreement, as well as intensifying collaborations between their private sectors, in various fields including energy, digital economy, financial services, agricultural and food industries, and transport and logistics. The two sides affirmed the opportunities in investment partnerships provided by the programmes and projects of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 in various sectors, benefiting from the expertise and capabilities of Singa-



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Crown Prince and Prime Minister HRH Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud agreed to elevate relations to Strategic Partners - Singapore's first with a Middle Eastern nation

pore companies, and holding joint commercial and investment events.

With regard to the field of energy, the two sides emphasized cooperation in the fields of low carbon solutions and technologies, including clean and green hydrogen, as well as carbon capture, utilization and storage, electricity, renewable energy, energy efficiency and conservation, and innovation. This will be pursued under the Energy Cooperation Roadmap which is an implementation plan of the MoU in the Energy Field, signed between the Ministry of Energy of the Kingdom and the Ministry of Trade and Industry of Singapore. Both sides agreed on the importance of enhancing cooperation in the fields of oil and refined products, and petrochemicals, as well as developing innovative technologies for the uses of hydro-carbon resources and energy efficiency.

On the matter of Climate Change, Singapore welcomed the Kingdom's launch of the "Saudi Green" and "Middle East Green" initiatives and expressed its support for the Kingdom's efforts in the field of climate change, through the implementation of the Circular Carbon Economy approach, which

was launched by the Kingdom and endorsed by the Leaders of the G20 countries in 2020.

The two sides agreed to enhance cooperation in the defense and security fields and coordinate on issues of common interest, including combating crimes in all forms, which contributes to achieving security and stability in the two countries.

The two sides also expressed their aspiration to enhance cooperation and information sharing in the areas of fintech and innovation between the Saudi Central Bank and the Monetary Authority of Singapore.

The two sides also agreed to enhance cooperation in the following fields: (a) environment, water, agriculture and food security; (b) digital economy and innovation; (c) air, land, rail, port and

logistics connectivity; (d) tourism, culture, and youth; (e) education; and (f) health including the support of global initiatives to confront pandemics as well as current and future health challenges and risks.

In international affairs, the two sides renewed their determination to support and intensify efforts to maintain international peace and security. They exchanged views on issues of mutual concern in the regional and international arenas and reaffirmed their determination to enhance cooperation in combating extremism, fanaticism, hate speech and terrorism, along with promoting moderation, tolerance, and inter-faith harmony.

At the conclusion of the visit, Prime Minister Lee expressed his thanks and appreciation to His Royal Highness for the good reception and generous hospitality Prime Minister Lee and the accompanying delegation received. Prime Minister Lee looked forward to welcoming His Royal Highness on an Official Visit to Singapore at a mutually convenient date. His Royal Highness expressed his best wishes for health and happiness to Prime Minister Lee, and further progress and prosperity to the Singaporean people.

Gateway to Growth: Exploring Opportunities in the Saudi Market

The Saudi Ambassador to Singapore, H.E. Abdullah Mohammed Al-Madhi, shared his insights on marketing opportunities in Saudi Arabia at a conference organised by Singapore Business Federation on 31st January 2024



(Left): In Madinah at the entrance of the Prophet's Mosque with Singapore delegation members and Saudi hosts (Photo: MCI / Fyrol)
(Below): Quba Mosque, the oldest mosque in the world. The first stone is said to have been laid by the Prophet, and the structure completed by his companions (Photo: PM Lee)

The Saudi Arabia Ambassador, H.E. Abdullah Mohammed Al-Madhi spoke at the "Gateway to Growth: Exploring Opportunities in the Saudi Market Through GSFTA" conference.

The conference was organised by the Singapore Business Federation. The Saudi Ambassador shared key insights into Saudi Arabia's economic transformation. Post the recent visit of the Singapore Prime Minister, discussions gained greater momentum, highlighting the strategic importance of fostering stronger economic ties between the two nations.

Commencing with Saudi Arabia's economic renaissance under Vision 2030, the ambassador highlighted the Kingdom's shift towards a private sector-led economy, showcasing diverse investment opportunities. Notably, the Kingdom achieved an impressive 8.7% GDP growth in 2022, surpassing other G20 countries.

As a prominent G20 member, Saudi Arabia holds the position of the Middle East's largest economy. The Saudi Stock Exchange, Tadawal, has risen to global prominence, ranking among the world's top ten largest exchanges. The Kingdom aims to become a strategic hub connecting three continents, boasting a highly robust infrastructure, which includes an extensive railway network



as well as over 8,000 airports, 10 ports, and 14 industrial zones.

The ambassador emphasized Saudi Arabia's groundbreaking advancements in digital infrastructure, particularly in the Red Sea region. The Kingdom leads globally in FGR network speed, boasting 90% internet usage penetration and 97% coverage across its regions.

Tourism emerged as a focal point, with plans to position Saudi Arabia as a top tourist destination by 2031. Ambitious goals aim to attract 150 million tourists annually by 2030, contributing 10% to the GDP. The Saudi Green Initiative, targeting the planting of 10

billion trees, aligns with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's commitment to environmental sustainability.

Saudi Arabia's business-friendly environment, recognized by the World Bank, has undergone transformative reforms across various sectors, making it an attractive destination for global investors. The ambassador concluded by affirming Saudi Arabia's commitment to progress, innovation, and sustainable development. He extended a warm welcome to the Singapore business sector, inviting them to explore and engage in the myriad opportunities offered by Saudi Arabia, building on the positive momentum following the visit of the Singapore Prime Minister.



Minister Masagos: New Strategic Partnership Opens More Doors for Doing Business

The Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Health as well as Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Mr Masagos Zulkifli, was in Saudi Arabia in January for ministerial level meetings and to attend the Hajj and Umrah Services Conference and Exhibition. The Minister shared with IN Diplomacy his thoughts about developments related to cooperation with the Saudi government about the Haj and beyond

Singapore's Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Mr Masagos Zulkifli visited Saudi Arabia from 8th to 12th January 2024 to ratify the Haj and Umrah Agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and attend the Hajj and Umrah Services Conference & Exhibition in Jeddah.

The Minister was also accompanied by a delegation of Singapore companies led by Enterprise Singapore (EnterpriseSG) together with the support of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SMCCI). The delegation also took the opportunity to meet some Saudi trade agencies as well as to tour some supermarkets in Riyadh. These visits, said Minister Masagos, were also significant they go towards opening doors for more halal products certified by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) to be introduced in Saudi Arabia and vice-versa.

In an interview with IN Diplomacy magazine, Minister Masagos said "With our bilateral ties now elevated to Strategic Partnership following Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's official visit to KSA last October, we look forward to deepening and expanding collaborations across different fields beyond the Haj and Umrah sectors. For example, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding to mutually recognise the halal certificates of both countries and ensure high quality food products are exported to both destinations." Notably, this is KSA's first Halal MoU with a non-Muslim majority country that brings about extensive economic benefits to both KSA and Singapore.

An MoU was signed on 19th October 2023 between the CEO of the Saudi Food & Drug Authority (SFDA), Professor Hisham Saad Al-Jadhey, and Muis Chief Executive, Mr Kadir Maideen, to mutually recognise Halal certificates and marks. Singapore-based companies can export Muis Halal-certified products produced in Singapore to KSA. Correspondingly, products certified under SFDA which are produced in KSA will also be recognised by Muis for use by Halal-certified establishments in Singapore. Beyond mutual recognition, the MOU also covers various areas of cooperation on halal matters.

In Riyadh, the Singapore business delegation visited the popular Lulu and Carrefour supermarket chains which also have a



(From l to r): Dr Iman Al-Mutiari showed Minister Masagos and Mr S Premjith, Singapore Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia the one-stop Saudi Business Center

strong presence across the region. The Singapore Minister hoped that with the new Singapore-Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership more Singapore brands will be able to enter and find themselves on the supermarket shelves of the Saudi market. At Carrefour's headquarters the Singapore companies brought samples for the Carrefour officials to taste to get feedback on what might do well in the Saudi market!

The Singapore Minister also met the Saudi Assistant Minister for Investment Mr Ibrahim Al-Mubarak. He had highlight-

ed to the Saudi minister that Singapore companies are very keen to invest and export to Saudi Arabia. The new Strategic Partnership paves the way for both KSA and Singapore businesses to introduce and market their products such as halal meat and popular fast food restaurants. He said Singapore too wants to help KSA expand their businesses in the region by leveraging on Singapore as their key strategic base. Singapore's Ministry of Trade and Industry and Enterprise Singapore are working together to provide the necessary support and connections for businesses to benefit from this MOU.



Minister Masagos with five Singapore companies that were in the Singapore business delegation to KSA led by Enterprise Singapore and the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry



which won the Labbaitum Award for the Best Country Offices last year. Additionally, MUIS also won the Best Customer Satisfaction for Transaction Services at the Digital Services Awards 2023 for the MyHajSG portal.”

Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Mr Masagos Zulkifli signed the Haj agreement with the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, while attending the Hajj and Umrah Exhibition and Conference in Jeddah. Singapore was allocated 900 places for the 2024 Haj season. Minister Masagos met Minister Dr Tawfiq Al Rabiha of the Ministry of Hajj

& Umrah where they signed the agreement and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen bilateral ties and expand on their partnership to higher levels.

Regarding some of the key areas of collaboration that will benefit Singapore pilgrims this year Minister Masagos Zulkifli said, “The Singapore and KSA Governments are working closely to ensure a smooth experience for the pilgrims. These include planning for the charter flights to and from Jeddah, enabling Singapore to bring our medical team to Mecca and Medina as part of the Singapore Pilgrims’ Affairs Office (SPAO) medical support, and providing additional administrative and logistical support to SPAO and the Singapore travel agencies in KSA. Having our doctors and nurses at the Holy Land enables SPAO to provide the first line of defence and medical support and not overburden the KSA hospitals for manageable conditions. Such collaborations only serve to further strengthen our bilateral relations.”



(Top): Signing ceremony for the Ratification of the Haj and Umrah Agreement between Singapore and KSA. (Above): At the Hajj & Umrah Conference and Exhibition - for the first time, Muis was invited to set up a booth showcasing the PilgrimSG app.

Easier Now To Do Business

Minister Masagos Zulkifli was happy to hear from the Vice Minister of Commerce and CEO of National Competitiveness Center, Dr Iman Bint Habas Al-Mutiari, that the Saudi Government has developed a new strategy to enable businesses to set up their operations in Saudi Arabia easily. They can even do so when they are outside of the country, through virtual agents. Such developments and transformation in KSA have helped to encourage investments. Saudi Arabia has setup the one-stop Saudi Business Center modelled after Singapore’s system where one can start and register a business within minutes at the Center and get help with contracts or commercial agreements. Dr Iman shared that they have learned from the Singapore success stories of starting a business and have adapted it to create their own processes. There are currently 17 such Business Centers around Saudi Arabia.

Haj Agreement

The Singapore Minister also visited the Hajj & Umrah Services Conference & Exhibition that was held at the Jeddah Superdome from 8th to 11th January 2024. There were

more than 100 exhibitors. It was organised by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah and was a massive showcase of the latest developments and services that are meant to help improve the Haj pilgrim experience.

Minister Masagos said, “The Hajj and Umrah Service Conference and Exhibition in Jeddah showcased advanced technology such as Artificial Intelligence, Chat GPT and Virtual Reality to improve services for pilgrims. Similarly, MUIS too has been working hard to enhance pilgrims’ experience by harnessing technology. This year, for the first time Muis was invited to set up a booth showcasing the Singapore Pilgrims’ Affairs Office PilgrimSG app

More about the Hajj and Umrah Services Conference & Exhibition

The third edition of the Hajj and Umrah Services Conference and Exhibition 2024, titled “A Passage to Nusuk” was held from 8th to 11th January 2024. It was organized by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah in partnership with the Pilgrim Experience Programme - one of the programmes of Saudi Vision 2030.

The four-day conference in the Jeddah Superdome was attended by nearly 100,000 visitors representing about 100 countries.

During the closing ceremony, the Deputy Minister of Hajj and Umrah, Dr. Abdelfattah bin Suleiman Mashat announced the launch of a platform for training and licensing workers and creating a competitive atmosphere. The Conference honored the winners of the Sustainable Solutions Challenge competition, the investor presentations, the award for the best pavilion in the exhibition.

Number of Pilgrims in 2022

Pilgrims	Number		
	Male	Female	Total
Total number of internal pilgrims	77,776	66,877	144,653
Total number of external pilgrims	421,999	359,410	781,409
Total number of pilgrims	499,775	426,287	926,062

Source: KSA General Authority for Statistics

Minister Tan See Leng: Many Opportunities Exist for Growth in Trade and Investment Ties

The Minister of Manpower and Second Minister for Trade and Industry shares with IN Diplomacy Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, Ms Nomita Dhar, examples of sectors that Singapore companies are making moves to do business in the Kingdom



Minister Tan was also co-chair for the Saudi Arabia-Singapore Joint Committee (SSJC) with Saudi Arabia's Minister of Transport and Logistic Services Eng. Saleh bin Nasser Al Jasser. A total of seven MoUs were signed at the third session of the SSJC

Overall, how did you find your visit to Saudi Arabia? What were some of the highlights of your visit?

I had a fruitful visit to Saudi Arabia in October. One of the highlights from my visit was this year's Saudi Arabia-Singapore Joint Committee (SSJC), where Minister of Transport and Logistic Services Eng. Saleh bin Nasser Al Jasser and I reaffirmed our commitment to growing our countries' bilateral ties, particularly in the areas of Connectivity, Energy and Industry.

On the Connectivity front, we witnessed the signing of an agreement between Saudi Global Ports (SGP) and Saudi Ports Authority (Mawani) to establish a one-million square metre integrated logistics zone at the King Abdulaziz Port in Dammam. The development of the integrated logistics zone is one of SGP's partnerships with Mawani on its Vision 2030 roadmap to grow Saudi Arabia as a logistics hub.

On the Energy front, I was pleased that Minister of Energy Prince Abdulaziz Bin Salman and I signed the Energy Cooperation Roadmap. Through this, we will see closer cooperation in areas such as low-carbon solutions and technologies, renewable energy, energy efficiency and innovation for decarbonisation. Prince Abdulaziz Bin Salman and I also discussed our countries' commitment to our energy transition.

I was also encouraged to see the level of private sector interest to invest and do business in Saudi Arabia. At this year's SSJC, we were joined by representatives from the private sector from the Singapore Business Federation (SBF), Federation of Saudi Chambers (FSC) and a business delegation from Singapore. Five MOUs were also signed with the KSA Ministry of Investment to facilitate their entry into Saudi Arabia in sectors such as education, transport and logistics. An MOU was also signed

between the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) and Saudi Food and Drug Authority, which will allow for mutual recognition of halal certificates and collaboration in quality assurance of halal products. During my meeting with Saudi Minister of Investment Khalid Al Falih, I thanked His Excellency for the support that the Ministry of Investment has provided to our companies based in the Kingdom.

Another highlight of my visit to Saudi Arabia was the opportunity I had to visit the beautiful and historical cities of Madinah and Al Ula, where we saw sites such as the Quba Mosque, which is believed to be the first mosque in the world. With the Kingdom's aim to boost tourism in the country and to increase the number of travellers and pilgrims from Singapore to Saudi Arabia, I am confident that there is room for greater cooperation in these areas.



(Above): The members of the Saudi - Singapore Joint Committee. (Left): A thumbs up from Minister Tan for the progress and cooperation reached in the October round of the SSJC as investment and trade relations have been enhanced in the public and private sectors

Singapore companies are also interested to work together in the oil & gas, tourism and hospitality, urban infrastructure and education sectors. For example, Singapore companies such as Surbana Jurong have already established their offices in Riyadh, to work on design consultancy in NEOM, which is one of the key projects under Vision 2030.

EtonHouse has also signed an MOU with Saudi Arabia Ministry of Investment (MISA), to expand its early years and K12 education facilities in the Kingdom, which will also facilitate cooperation in human capital development of teachers and school leaders.

I am also glad that MISA has set up a Singapore office last year in September, to promote investments into the Kingdom and facilitate Saudi companies tapping on Singapore to expand into Asia.

With these developments, I hope that in the years to come, there will be greater presence by Singapore companies in the Kingdom, and that more Saudi companies will explore using Singapore as a launchpad into Southeast Asia. I encourage Singapore and Saudi companies to approach Enterprise Singapore or MISA to explore areas of collaboration.

“(Saudi Arabia) has seen new growth areas for Singapore businesses on many fronts, such as in logistics, transport and green energy. I had shared with H.E. Al Jasser of Singapore’s interests to deepen our cooperation in the ports and logistics sectors and Singapore companies’ interest to participate in projects arising from Vision 2030. Singapore companies are also interested to work together in the oil & gas, tourism and hospitality, urban infrastructure and education sectors”

- Mr Tan See Leng
Minister of Manpower and
Second Minister for Trade and
Industry

The rate and volume of trade growth between Singapore and Saudi Arabia is impressive. Are there key areas with business and investment opportunities between the countries?
In 2022, Saudi Arabia was Singapore’s second largest trading partner in the Middle East. Bilateral trade in goods between our countries was S\$14.1 billion in 2022, which was an increase of about 50% year-on-year. There are many opportunities for our countries to grow trade and investment ties.

With Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, the country has seen new growth areas for Singapore businesses on many fronts, such as in logistics, transport and green energy. I had shared with His Excellency Al Jasser of Singapore’s interests to deepen our cooperation in the ports and logistics sectors and Singapore companies’ interest to participate in projects arising from Vision 2030.

Singapore Can Be a Key Partner in Several Sectors

Mr Shamsher Zaman, Chairman of the Middle East Business Group at the Singapore Business Federation (SBF), says Singapore is ramping up efforts to engage with Saudi Arabia



(Below): The SBF business delegation at the SSJC where SBF signed two MoUs with the Ministry of Investment Saudi Arabia and the Federation of Saudi Chambers

In an exclusive interview with IN Diplomacy Mr Shamsher Zaman said Singapore should be prepared to see, "The deepening and expansion of mutually beneficial relations in all fields, enhancing investment, trade and economic cooperation, thanks to the upgrading in relations to a Strategic Partnership. The SBF led a group of 32 business leaders to see for themselves the developments and opportunities in Saudi Arabia during the same period with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit last October. Mr Shamsher Zaman shares his thoughts following the SBF visit last October in the following interview.

Overall, how successful did you find the above meetings?

SZ: The Saudi Arabia-Singapore Joint Committee (SSJC) Meeting is an annual platform, which was formed in 2021, with the aim of fostering closer relations between both Saudi Arabia and Singapore.

The recent 3rd SSJC meeting reaffirms the strong bilateral relations between both countries and reiterated the benefits of working together in areas of mutual interests in connectivity, digital economy and innovation, as well as energy and industry. In conjunction with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's official visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE), Singapore Business Federation led a group of 32 business leaders on a mission trip and they witnessed the developments and opportunities in Saudi Arabia first-hand.

Among the seven Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) that were signed at

SSJC, SBF inked two MoUs with the Ministry of Investment Saudi Arabia (MISA) and the Federation of Saudi Chambers (FSC). The MoUs reflect the continuous commitment of both countries, paving way for more future collaborations to come.

What is the impact on Singapore-Saudi relations following this visit?

SZ: During Prime Minister Lee's recent visit to Saudi Arabia, both Saudi Arabia and Singapore have agreed to upgrade the relations to a Strategic Partnership. This allows for the deepening and expansion of mutually beneficial relations in all fields, enhancing investment, trade and economic cooperation. Both countries stand to benefit from the exchange of opportunities and expertise between Singapore and Saudi Arabian companies in areas highlighted such as, trade and investment, green energy, digital economy, and public sector development.

What would you consider to be the most important highlights of the visit and leaders' meeting?

SZ: One of the key areas of commitment highlighted in this visit is the importance of cooperation to address the challenges in the energy markets, and the importance toward building efforts combating climate change. As such, it was announced during this visit that this effort is to be pursued under a planned Energy Cooperation Roadmap between the two countries. Singapore and Saudi Arabia share many complementary strengths that can work towards innovative solutions together for the renewable energy sectors; both

countries have also urged the global community towards implementing climate agreements by focusing on emissions rather than sources.

From your observations during this trip were there aspects of Social or Education or Manpower Development etc that you think Singapore can learn from the Saudi and vice versa? As of now in your opinion what are the best ways Singapore can contribute to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 blueprint?

SZ: The vibrant transformation we witness in Saudi Arabia today is driven by the nation's young agents of change, with 63% of its population under the age of 30 years old. The rapid pace of development can be seen and experienced throughout Saudi Arabia, as the country is rapidly building towards Vision 2030. The Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 is a comprehensive plan with key objectives in diversifying the country's economy and promoting social and cultural development.

The transformation is predicated on developing its social and education sectors, and Singapore is a key partner in working together towards developing the human capital and its education sector, built upon Singapore's experience and expertise in these fields. We are increasingly seeing Singapore companies in education and human capital development, which are keen to bring our expertise to Saudi Arabia and being a part of this transformation. This is a welcome sign of our willingness to impart and collaborate together on this growth.

Aramco Expanding Biodiversity Conservation Efforts in Southeast Asia

Aramco strives to create a culture that prioritizes understanding of ecological habitats, their plants and animals, and promotes their protection while creating value across the hydrocarbon chain



Aramco launched its Community-based Mangrove Conservation Programme in Buruk Bakul Village, in Bukit Batu, Riau, Indonesia, to restore four hectares of degraded mangroves in Indonesia

Aramco, through its Singapore office, has mobilised resources to generate opportunities and made a positive impact on more than 200,000 beneficiaries across Southeast Asia. Building on this momentum, Aramco has recently expanded its biodiversity conservation efforts to Indonesia and Vietnam.

Aramco Asia Singapore Managing Director Fai K. Aldossary said, "At Aramco, we strongly believe in protecting and restoring habitats to achieve sustainable development and protect the homes of local communities. By working with like-minded partners such as the government, non-profit organisations and local communities, we are confident that we can successfully preserve our environment for future generations."

Working with its long-term partner, Global Environment Centre (GEC) as well as Yayasan Gambut (YG) and the Sekat Bakau community of Buruk Bakul Village, Aramco launched the Community-based Mangrove Conservation Program in Bukit Batu, Riau, Indonesia to engage and empower local communities in the rehabilitation of four hectares of mangroves.

"At Aramco, we strongly believe in protecting and restoring habitats to achieve sustainable development and protect the homes of local communities. By working with like-minded partners such as the government, non-profit organisations and local communities, we are confident that we can successfully preserve our environment for future generations."

To kickstart the program, 100 volunteers from Sekat Bakau, local communities, schools, local government, YG, GEC and Aramco participated in a planting event in October last year. The program aims to restore degraded mangroves through the planting of 8,000 mangrove trees at Buruk Bakul and construction of a 100-metre wave breaker, to reduce wave energy and retain sedimentation.

Besides Indonesia, Aramco is also working with GEC in Vietnam, to plant 15,000 mangrove seedlings in Lower Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The Mekong Delta in Vietnam, home to the largest expanse of Vietnam's mangroves, is also vulnerable to the twin effects of climate crisis and coastal development. Aramco's support will go towards the rehabilitation of seven hectares of degraded mangrove.

In Singapore, Aramco is working with the Singapore National Parks Board (NParks) to trial the use of mineral accretion technology in the reef enhancement units to promote the growth of coral reefs in Singapore waters. This is the first time such technology is being used in Singapore, whereby corals are subjected to low-voltage electricity to stimulate their growth.

Aramco volunteers are also actively involved in doing their part for the environment, participating in coastal clean-up in different parts of Singapore such as East Coast Park and Bendera Bay on St. John Island. To learn more about the conservation of marine biodiversity, Aramco volunteers have performed coral nursery maintenance work at the Marine Park Outreach and Education Centre.

Visit of Crown Prince Al Hussein of Jordan to Singapore

Official Visit of Crown Prince of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan His Royal Highness Al Hussein Bin Abdullah II to Singapore



His Royal Highness Crown Prince Al Hussein Bin Abdullah II with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

In a significant diplomatic engagement, His Royal Highness Al Hussein Bin Abdullah II, Crown Prince of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, embarked on his first official visit to Singapore from January 10 to 12, 2024, at the invitation of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. This visit marked a new chapter in the long-standing relationship between Jordan and Singapore, underscoring their mutual commitment to deepening bilateral ties.

The Crown Prince received a ceremonial welcome, reflecting the high regard and warm relations shared by the two nations. A highlight of his visit was the call on Prime Minister Lee, where they engaged in meaningful discussions on various topics of mutual interest. The Singaporean Prime Minister also hosted an official lunch in honor of the Crown Prince, further solidifying the friendly ties.

During their discussions, PM Lee and Crown Prince Al Hussein explored avenues to enhance bilateral cooperation, particularly in public administration and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Emphasizing the importance of people-to-people exchanges, PM Lee acknowledged Jordan's support for the Singaporean student community in Amman and Irbid. The leaders also exchanged views on the Middle East's current situation, including the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

A significant outcome of this visit was the witnessing of the exchange of six Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), signifying a concrete step towards closer collaboration in various sectors.



The Crown Prince's itinerary included meetings with several key Singaporean leaders, including President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, and Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean. These interactions underscored the multifaceted nature of the bilateral relationship.

Furthermore, Crown Prince Al Hussein's visit to the Institute of Technical Education and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy highlighted the focus on human capital development, a shared priority for both nations.

Accompanied by Her Royal Highness Princess Rajwa Al Hussein and key Jordanian ministers, the Crown Prince's visit was not just a diplomatic formality but a testament to the growing partnership between Jordan and Singapore.

In his toast speech, PM Lee reminisced about the historical ties, including Jordan's



support for Singapore's UN membership in 1965 and the shared values of multilateralism and a rules-based global order. He fondly recalled his visit to Jordan in 2016 and the subsequent high-level exchanges that have fortified this relationship.

The visit of Crown Prince Al Hussein Bin Abdullah II is more than a ceremonial gesture; it is a reaffirmation of the enduring friendship and a stepping stone towards future collaboration between Singapore and Jordan. As these two nations look forward to a future of shared growth and mutual understanding, this visit will undoubtedly be remembered as a milestone in their diplomatic journey.



High Commission of India Celebrates 75th Republic Day

The High Commission of India celebrates India's 75th Republic Day with a splendid reception, attended by dignitaries, members of parliament, and representatives from various sectors



India's High Commissioner Dr Shilpak Ambule with Guest of Honour Minister Josephine Teo and her Parliamentary colleagues

The High Commission of India in Singapore recently hosted a magnificent reception to commemorate India's 75th Republic Day, marking a momentous milestone in the country's history. The High Commissioner of India, Dr Shilpak Ambule, welcomed a distinguished gathering of dignitaries, Members of Parliament, and notable figures from various sectors, underlining the significance of this national event.

The guest of honour, H.E. Josephine Teo, Minister for Communication and Information and Second Minister for Home Affairs of Singapore, graced the occasion with her presence. In her address, Minister Teo reflected on her positive experiences from past and recent visits to India, expressing optimism for the strengthening bilateral ties and engagement between Singapore and India. The event was also attended by Members of Parliament Mr. Don Wee and Mr. Melvin Yong, along with Chief of Navy RADM Sean Wat, showcasing the high level of interest and respect for India's Republic Day celebrations within Singapore's political and defense circles.

The reception on 29th January was not just a formal event but a vibrant gathering that highlighted the deep diplomatic, cultural, and economic connections between India and Singapore. The enthusiastic participation from the diplomatic community, the Indian diaspora, business leaders, government officials, and media representatives underscored the broad spectrum of relationships and mutual interests between the two nations.



The atmosphere of the event was charged with a spirit of camaraderie and cultural exchange, reflecting the rich diversity and vibrant culture of India. There was a cultural segment where local dancers showcased their talent and virtuosity in various Indian dance forms. The event provided an excellent platform for guests to engage in meaningful conversations, fostering deeper diplomatic ties and cultural cooperation. This grand celebration did not merely mark the passing of another Republic Day but also symbolized the ongoing commitment of both India and Singapore to mutual growth, prosperity, and understanding.

The series of events around India's 74th and 75th Republic Days, including cultural performances and the flag unfurling ceremony, showcased the enduring spirit of India and the strong bonds it shares with Singapore. These celebrations not only honoured India's past but also set the stage for future collaborations, highlighting a shared vision for progress and prosperity in the years to come.

Another meaningful souvenir shared that day with all the guests at the Republic Day event was the *IN Diplomacy INDIA Special Edition* magazine published by Sun Media the publisher of *IN Diplomacy*

magazine in collaboration with the High Commission of India in Singapore. The issue commemorated highlights of India's achievements on the international diplomatic stage during its Presidency of the G20 Summit last year.

A special interview was also given by High Commissioner Dr Shilpak Ambule to *IN Diplomacy*. He shared India's remarkable accomplishments during the G20 meetings as well as giving a comprehensive rundown of the major bilateral engagements between Singapore and India. He also paid tribute to all members of the Indian diaspora in Singapore for contributing to the growth of ties between both countries, He said, "In Singapore, we have a very vibrant Indian diaspora which is contributing to the Singaporean economy in various ways and to the larger India-Singapore ties. They have been instrumental in helping shape the world's perception of India. They have shown through their ingenuity, hard work and resilience that they hail from a great civilisation. I definitely plan to enthusiastically engage with them here through various platforms and continue to strengthen their role in the relationship. They are the real-time and on-the-field Ambassadors of India."



INDIA Special Note:

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EVENTS

Commemoration of Johor Bahru-Singapore RTS & MoU Signing of JS-SEZ

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visited Johor, Malaysia on 11th January 2024, for the commemorative ceremony for the Johor Bahru-Singapore Rapid Transit System (RTS) Link project and to witness the signing of a MoU on the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone (JS-SEZ).

Prime Minister Lee and Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Malaysia Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim attended the ceremony to commemorate the completion of the connecting span between Singapore and Malaysia for the RTS Link viaduct. The RTS Link will connect the Bukit Chagar station in Johor Bahru and the Woodlands North station in Singapore, with a peak capacity of up to 10,000 passengers per hour in each direction. It is expected to commence passenger service at the end of 2026.



Following the ceremony, both Prime Ministers witnessed the signing of the MOU on the JS-SEZ. The JS-SEZ aims to strengthen economic collaboration in the Iskandar development region by tapping into the complementary strengths of both countries and improving cross-border flows of goods, investments, and people.



Singapore at Tamil Nadu Global Investors Meet

Singapore is strengthening economic cooperation with the Indian state of Tamil Nadu through expanded investments into the state's sustainability and infrastructure sectors. These investments were announced at the Tamil Nadu Global Investors Meet (TNGIM) held in Chennai on 7th and 8th January 2024, where Singapore participated as a partner country. Altogether there have been about S\$5 billion in planned investments between Singapore companies and GuidanceTN, the investment promotion agency of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

The Singapore delegation was led by High Commissioner to India, Mr Simon Wong, with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), and Enterprise Singapore (EnterpriseSG). About 60 business representatives from the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) and the Singapore Indian Chamber of

Commerce and Industry were also present at the TNGIM. The SBF, supported by EnterpriseSG, set up a Singapore Pavilion showcasing Singapore companies with a strong presence in Tamil Nadu, including Sembcorp, CapitaLand, YCH and Blue Planet, in sectors such as renewable energy, waste management and logistics. Tamil Nadu is often the first port of call for Singapore companies looking at South India, given the cultural and historical familiarity between both states. It is the second largest contributor to India's GDP, behind the state of Maharashtra. Tamil Nadu has a population of more than 72 million people and a GSDP of US\$354 billion.



The Singapore Pavilion at the Tamil Nadu Global Investors Meet

Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2024



Visitors to the 10th edition of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit (VGGGS) from 10th to 12th January 2024 generally agreed that the event has set a new benchmark in global business forums. The Summit with the theme 'Gateway to the Future' saw participation from more than 28 countries and 14 organizations.

The Singapore Business Federation (SBF) led a delegation of over 60 business representatives from nine companies,

spanning sectors from technology and finance to infrastructure and environmental solutions. This delegation, participating in the Singapore Country Pavilion, highlighted Singapore's capabilities and intent to deepen business ties with Gujarat.

The Pavilion, supported by Enterprise Singapore, was officially inaugurated by Mr. Cheong Ming Foong, Singapore's

Consul-General in Mumbai, and Mr. Prasoon Mukherjee, Vice Chairman of SBF's South Asia Business Group. This participation underlines the significance of VGGGS as a global forum for business networking, knowledge sharing, and strategic partnerships aimed at inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The Singaporean delegation, led by Mr. Mukherjee and Mr. Kok Ping Soon, SBF CEO, met with Shri Bhupendrabhai Patel, the Hon. Chief Minister of Gujarat. This meeting was significant, not only for the exchange of business interests but also for the shared vision of developing Smart Industries Port Cities and allied infrastructure along the Gujarat coastline. Chief Minister Patel's invitation to Singaporean companies to invest in these projects highlights the mutual commitment to fostering economic growth and development.

Kashmir Tourism Revival Changing Lives Daily

Tourism in Kashmir is currently undergoing a significant resurgence. To understand the dynamics of this revival, IN Diplomacy sought insights from those directly involved. The feedback we received revealed a collection of inspiring comeback tales. We discovered that the combined efforts of local participants, supported by government initiatives, are laying the groundwork for a sustainable and flourishing future in Kashmir's tourism sector



(Clockwise from above left) 1: For Latif Ahmad his shikara is more than just a boat. 2 - 4: Kashmir in various seasons (photos by Sudeshna Majumdar). 5: Shankaracharya Temple 6: G20 delegates experiencing traditional hospitality and hands-on craft 7: Ms Neela Lad enjoying Kashmir

Latif Ahmad, a shikara boatman on the serene Dal Lake, encapsulates the essence of Kashmiri hospitality. To him, hospitality isn't just a service; it's an art form deeply embedded in his daily life. Each day, he readies his shikara, adorning it with vibrant colours and traditional decorations, preparing to ferry tourists across the famous lake. His smile, as bright and welcoming as the Kashmiri sun, is his constant companion.

For Latif, the shikara is more than just a boat; it's a vessel that carries not only people but also experiences and memories. He takes great pride in showing visitors the beauty of Dal Lake, often narrated with stories and insights that only a local like him could provide. The interaction with tourists from diverse backgrounds brings him joy and a sense of connection to the world beyond the lake's waters.

The recent revival of tourism in the region has been a boon for Latif. It's not just about the financial stability it brings; it's about the revival of his spirit and the joy of sharing his world with others. Each group of tourists brings new faces, new stories, and new opportunities to create lasting memories. For many visitors, the ride on Latif's shikara becomes a highlight of their Kashmir experience, and for Latif, each journey is an opportunity to showcase his homeland's beauty and culture.

Latif's story is a testament to the resilience and warmth of the Kashmiri people. In his smile and through his work, he embodies the spirit of revival and hope that is currently sweeping through the region. His satisfaction comes not just from making a living but from the immeasurable joy of making memories that visitors will cherish long after they leave the serene waters of Dal Lake.

Since the pandemic, Jammu and Kashmir have seen a remarkable increase in domestic tourism, fueled by enhanced air connectivity and significant infrastructure improvements. The region, now more accessible than ever, offers a diverse range of activities, appealing to various interests from serene retreats to adventurous escapades. This resurgence is not just a boost to the local economy but also a reaffirmation of the area's magnetic appeal, making it a top destination for Indian travellers seeking unique experiences within their own country.

In today's jargon, the most Instagrammable images of the valley are the neatly docked shikaras and the houseboats. The Chairman of Kashmir's Houseboats Owners Association (KHBOA), Mr. Manzoor Pakhtoon, shared his optimism about the industry's growth. KHBOA, established in 1934, plays a crucial role in preserving the region's unique hospitality. Offering more than just accommodation, these houseboats on Dal Lake, Nigeen Lake, River Jhelum, and Chinar Bagh provide an authentic Kashmiri experience. Houseboat owners double as hosts, guides, and local tour organizers, offering a range of activities and showcasing the region's beauty.

Infrastructure Upgrades

The local government and tourism authorities have made concerted efforts to upgrade the region's infrastructure. This includes better roads, enhanced tourist facilities, and the development of new attractions. These improvements have not only made travel smoother and more comfortable but have also opened up previously inaccessible areas to tourists.

A key factor in this resurgence has been the significant increase in daily flights to the region. Improved air connectivity has made travel to Jammu and Kashmir more accessible and convenient for domestic tourists. The region, once considered remote, is now just a flight away for millions of Indians, making weekend getaways and extended vacations more feasible.

Jammu and Kashmir attracted a record 20.2 million tourists in 2023, including over 50,000 international visitors, thanks to its diverse tourism offerings, especially in MICE tourism. The G20 Tourism Working Group meeting highlighted the region's potential in global event tourism, improving its appeal across various tourism sectors.

Local operators and houseboat owners like Manjoor Karnai and Ashraf Wangnoo have witnessed a surge in domestic tourism, attributing it to increased accessibility and the region's allure.

Kashmir Note:

Above are excerpts from *IN Diplomacy INDIA Special Edition*. To read the full feature online or to download it please visit: www.indiplomacy.com

how

can we deliver
one of the fuels
of the future?

Hydrogen could play a pivotal role in tomorrow's energy mix, but it is expensive to transport. At Aramco, we have developed a potential solution to transport hydrogen safely, cost-effectively, and at scale, by first converting it into blue ammonia.

Following a successful pilot program, shipping 40 tons of blue hydrogen to Japan in 2020, Aramco delivered 25,000 tons of blue hydrogen to South Korea—making it the world's first certified commercial shipment. With this, we aim to demonstrate that the transportation of hydrogen is not only possible, but vital as we work towards lower-carbon energy solutions at a commercial scale.

Discover how we are catalyzing new pathways to lower-carbon fuels at aramco.com/poweredyhow