

EVOLVING SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY POST ARAB SPRING

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia remains a major player in the politics of an uncertain Middle East. Being a strong ally of the US and a major player in the region, its foreign policy would be a major factor affecting the stability of the region. According to observers like David Schenker, Saudi foreign policy has changed or become proactive following the ascendance of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to the royal seat.¹ In the post-Arab Spring era, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated an increased involvement in regional affairs.

Following the Iran nuclear agreement with world powers, Saudi approach towards the issue became more robust. Owing to its strained relationship with Iran, the Kingdom fears the Iran nuclear agreement would be a destabilising factor for the Middle East. Riyadh considers post-agreement Iran a threat to the Kingdom and other Gulf States. Similarly, from Yemen to Syria to Lebanon, Riyadh is now pursuing a policy that at times clashes with US policies in the Middle East.² This is in reaction to the Obama Administration's diplomatic negotiations with Iran which, according to Saudi Arabia, would allow Iran to meddle in regional affairs. In March 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia

launched airstrikes targeting the Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen. In Lebanon, too, Saudi Arabia is demonstrating a reinvigorated interest in the proxy war against Iran. These developments do not necessarily signify a shift in Saudi foreign policy doctrine under King Salman. Rather, the new government is taking a lead in foreign policy to respond to what it considers a highly uncertain environment.

In Saudi Arabia's neighbourhood, countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya are all in a state of flux. A more pragmatic, rational, multilateral and multidimensional Saudi foreign policy is a consequence of these changing regional dynamics and was triggered in the aftermath of the Arab Uprising, also known as the Arab Spring, of 2011.³ It was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East in early 2011. The uprising originated in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread quickly across Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. In March 2011, during the uprising, Saudi foreign policy had a proactive stance when military and police units of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), primarily from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, marched into Bahrain.⁴

Although these developments signify patterns of continuity as a legacy of former King Abdullah, they also imply some changes in the country's foreign policy being pursued under the leadership of King Salman. This study will

analyse the dynamics of contemporary Saudi foreign policy and the extent to which it has changed under the new leadership, allowing for a better comprehension of Saudi foreign policy.

In order to analyse contemporary Saudi foreign policy, the paper will explore regional dynamics post 2011 uprising and how these developments are shaping the Kingdom's contemporary foreign policy. The study seeks to answer these questions: Why has Saudi foreign policy become more proactive? What are the factors pertaining to regional dynamics which compelled Saudi Arabia to adopt a more diligent foreign policy? What are the indicators of change 'if any' in Saudi foreign policy under King Salman? Secondary sources of data collection would be used, primarily from published journals, books and newspaper articles, from both print and online publications. The study will focus only on Saudi foreign policy in the post 2011 Arab uprising era. Literature on the foreign policy of the current regime is unavailable. Western perspective dominates most of the available literature. In order to determine whether there is a shift in Saudi foreign policy, an analysis of the historical background of Saudi foreign policy is a requisite.

Historical Perspective

Saudi Arabia is considered one of the most significant states of the Muslim world and the Middle East due to its geostrategic, geo-

cultural and most importantly geo-economic characteristics. Under the rule of the oldest kingdom of the Arab world, Saudi Arabia has been following a policy dependent on oil and the West.⁵ This meant security assurances for the Kingdom in exchange for its oil. A study of regional politics in the post-World War I era and the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would help understand foreign policy behaviour of the Kingdom.

Towards the end of World War I, three major rulers were competing for control of the Arabian Peninsula: Abdul Aziz of Najd, Saud Ibn Rashid of Jabal Shammar, and Sharif Hussein of Makkah. The British and the Turks were in competition for the support of these local rulers, initiating great power politics in this region.⁶ Ibn Rashid sided with the Turks and the Germans, while Ibn Saud and Sharif Hussein chose to side with the British. By the end of the war, Ibn Saud had defeated Ibn Rashid while maintaining peace with Sharif Hussein. However, once the Treaty of Lausanne dissolved the Ottoman caliphate in July 1923, Sharif Hussein seized the opportunity to proclaim himself “King of the Arabs” and claimed precedence over the House of Al Sa’ud.⁷ This led to Ibn Saud’s invasion of Hijaz, and by January 1926, he had forced the Hashemites into exile. After conquering Hijaz, Abdul Aziz al-Saud declared himself the king of Hijaz and the Sultanate of Najd, and by the year 1932, the two areas were consolidated as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

After years of exile in neighbouring Kuwait, King Abdul Aziz had regained his family's traditional kingdom, which dates back to the late eighteenth century. His major accomplishment, however, was unifying the country and laying the foundations that still govern the state. The founder of the Al Sa'ud dynasty was Amir Muhammad Ibn Saud (1704–1792), ruler of Dariyyah, a small oasis town located in central Najd. In 1744, Amir Muhammad became the patron of Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a religious revivalist who had been driven from his home due to his strict religious beliefs. Both Amir and sheikh formed a bond that has provided religious and political cohesion for Saudi Arabia to date.⁸

King Abdul Aziz was able to transform Saudi Arabia from a tribal state into a modern monarchical state through a process of conquests, the spread of Wahhabi doctrine and courting the leaders of tribes. He skilfully utilised the Ikhwan Warriors to fight his opponents while maintaining close relations with the British Empire.⁹ The restoration and consolidation of the Kingdom brought temporary peace to Saudi Arabia. However, the Ikhwan Warriors became critical of Abdul Aziz's dealings with the West and eventually grew angry about his adoption of Western technology. A major uprising broke out led by Ikhwan warriors. King Abdul Aziz successfully defeated the uprising and assumed unquestioned authority. He maintained a

balance between the traditional religious establishment authority and the political authority, as well as between the conduct of domestic and foreign politics.¹⁰

In the domain of its foreign relations, Saudi Arabia made alliance with the US which remains a key foreign policy relationship that it maintained through the years. This alliance remained at the centre of regional politics for over 60 years. Traditional Saudi Arabian foreign policy has been determined by four basic objectives. These are the preservation of an Islamic way of life in both domestic and foreign settings, the maintenance of territorial integrity, national prosperity, and the continuation of the royal regime.¹¹ Security, political, and economic needs of the country have been provided in the framework of these four factors. However, because the Saudi Kingdom possessed little influence and military strength during its initial stages, protection from global power was usually sought in the form of partnerships with the US and the United Kingdom.¹²

During the Cold War era, Saudi Arabia aligned itself with the Capitalist West against the Communist Soviet Bloc and opposed the reformist Egypt under the leadership of Nasser and other Soviet collaborators.¹³ These partnerships, together with its vast oil wealth, have enabled Saudi Arabia to grow in strength. In the early 1930s, US' interest in Saudi oil brought a partnership between the two states.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia was given explicit

promise of American military protection in return for the free flow of oil. This was confirmed when President Franklin D. Roosevelt met the Saudi King at the Great Bitter Lake on the Suez Canal in mid-February 1945, also marking its advent as a regional power.¹⁵

For Saudi Arabia, the alliance meant that it could resist other potential hegemonies in the Middle East including Egypt, which it forced into defeat and military withdrawal from Yemen in late 1967.¹⁶ The Iranian revolution of 1979 also worried Saudi Arabia. It was concerned about Iranian claims to revolutionary religious hegemony and also because of the threat this implied to American regional control. When the Gulf Cooperation Council was created in 1980 as a mechanism designed to exclude both Iraq and Iran from regional security, Saudi Arabia saw the organisation as a platform to exercise its own regional dominance. The partnership between the US and Saudi Arabia was further strengthened in the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Saudi Arabia alongside other Gulf states supported Iraq against Iran.

Even when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the Kingdom opposed it through support mobilisation for the mujahideen. With covert American financial and military support, Saudi Arabia encouraged thousands of mujahidin to join the Afghan resistance, which ultimately had adverse consequences after the Soviet

withdrawal. So, it can be argued that historically, the US-Saudi relationship was cemented upon three pillars. The first was the sale and safe passage of oil from the region to the global market. The second was shared geostrategic objectives, such as the continuation of regional stability and the containment of post-1979 Iran. And finally, since the 1990s, the two states have shared a powerful commitment to security policies in response to the threat of transnational terrorism. From the mid-2000s, Riyadh has acted more as a regional hegemon and deployed its financial and military power in the pursuit of its national interest.¹⁷ Although foreign policy in the Kingdom is an elite-driven process, because the country is a monarchy, the king possesses disproportional influence.

The events of September 11, 2001 brought a shift in how the West looked at Saudi Arabia. Since the executors of the attacks were mostly Saudi Arabian citizens, Saudi Arabia, one of the closest regional allies and strategic partners of the US, became for the first time the subject of discussion in the American media and political circles. The American perception and the general image of the country were significantly changed. Saudi Arabia experienced a significant restructuring in its relations with the US after this event, which is considered as a milestone for all Middle Eastern states.¹⁸

Certain phenomena at the international level brought a change in the foreign policy

behaviour of Saudi Arabia. 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US brought a shift in the political landscape of the international system. This event largely affected the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's traditional competition with Iran also played a significant role in determining its relations with the West. Another development that took the centre stage at global politics was the phenomenon of 2011 Arab Uprising which, according to analysts, brought a shift in the Saudi foreign policy. In order to understand the evolution of Saudi foreign policy through these years, it is pertinent to analyse the foreign policy of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud as he was governing the Kingdom while the events of Arab Spring unfolded in 2011.

Foreign Policy under King Abdullah

King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud took power in 2005 after the death of King Fahd. He served a long time as the head of the National Guard, therefore, he gave greater focus to solidifying power at home, and raising Saudi Arabia's profile in the region.¹⁹ Two sets of events brought concern for King Abdullah: Iran's increasing advances throughout the region in places such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen; and the Arab Uprising that started in 2011. Both posed significant threats to Riyadh. The US-Iran nuclear negotiations also alarmed the Kingdom, whose leaders did not believe that the US shared their concern with Iran's growing regional role. King Abdullah

strived to raise Saudi Arabia's profile and construct a more independent foreign policy as he believed he could not count on US support to help shape the region in favour of the Kingdom.

Therefore, since the ascendance of King Abdullah to power, Saudi Arabia has been trying to integrate with international society and to open its society, politics, and economics to the world. It started to sign and internalise more international documents such as the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and the Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organisation. The significant increase in the visits of Saudi authorities to other states and visits of foreign officials to the country since 2005 indicated the Saudi integration with international society. In 2006, an important change in the Kingdom's foreign policy was achieved, with the transformation, diversification, and restructuring in both domestic and foreign policy.²⁰ The Saudi Kingdom initiated a multidimensional and interdependent foreign policy in order to secure self-sufficiency, and to decrease its dependence on foreign powers. Saudi Arabia gave impetus to its foreign political activities in order to achieve some goals. These included: maintaining its national security and territorial integrity, containment of likely Iranian regional hegemony, thwarting the emergence of any challenging power in the Gulf directed to its regional hegemony, avoiding conflicts or tensions with the US,

maintaining its status in the Arab world, and preventing any radical political change in the region.²¹

Crown Prince Saud Al-Faisal mentioned in one of his interviews that Saudi Arabia began to follow a multilateral and independent foreign policy.²² For example, the country started diversifying its weapon sources. Al-Faisal attributed this to three rationales: “First, we do not want to depend on one source. Second, we want to buy the most sophisticated weapons for our armed forces. Third, we want to transfer information technologies.”²³ This means that Riyadh was trying to get rid of its traditional Western dependency by finding new political and economic partners and by initiating a new process of cooperation. To materialise the above-mentioned policies, King Abdullah initiated foreign visits.²⁴

The King made a 14 day visit to four important Asian states: China, India, Pakistan and Malaysia in January 2006. He became the first king to visit both China and India in five and Pakistan in three decades respectively. He also made official visits to Spain, France and Poland in June 2007. This highest-level visit to Spain was the first in 27 years. He also became the first Saudi king to visit Poland. He visited four European countries including England, Italy, Vatican and Germany in November 2007. During these visits, instead of members of Saudi Dynasty, leading businessmen of the country accompanied the king. This demonstrates the change in foreign

policy understanding as well as the domestic political mindset. King Abdullah adopted an active foreign policy in order to make Saudi Arabia effective in multilateral and international platforms and to end its dependency on the US and oil.²⁵ He attempted to secure a respectable position for his country in the Middle East and in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Due to the rising prices of oil and its membership in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2005, Saudi Arabia underwent a favourable and dynamic economic period. King Abdullah tried to use the prosperity brought by these two developments in a different direction. Saudi Arabia's relatively open economic foreign policy allowed for diversification of the Kingdom's economy in terms of both production of goods and finding new trade partners. As a result, Saudi Arabia became more integrated with the world in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. Several significant multilateral meetings organised by King Abdullah can be considered as indicators of his active, multidimensional and multi-layered foreign policy. The King arranged an international conference called the "International Islamic Dialogue Meeting," which brought 600 state representatives, thinkers, and scholars together to discuss inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue among Muslims.²⁶ The King established the Dialogue of Followers of Religions and Cultures, a platform aspiring to improve the culture of dialogue in the world.

Furthermore, the King called for a World Dialogue Conference, held in Madrid, in which academics and leaders from different religions in 54 countries discussed the culture of tolerance.²⁷ These two meetings in the cultural sphere are politically significant since the Kingdom began to embrace other thoughts, ways of life, and civilisations. The King also organised the International Energy Conference in Jeddah in June 2008, in which 36 countries, including the leading oil exporters and importers in the world, discussed the stability of the global energy market.²⁸

An Active Role in the Arab World

Saudi Arabia also took significant steps to play a more active role in the Arab world. Riyadh began to develop an “Islamic” and “traditional” Arab identity to strengthen Arab unity. It emphasised taking a common attitude in regional countries such as Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq.²⁹ For instance, the Kingdom revitalised the Peace Plan prepared by King Abdullah regarding the Palestinian problem. The Kingdom took initiatives in regional and global developments such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons, international terrorism, energy supply, the Palestinian issue, the Iraqi invasion and the Lebanese crisis.³⁰ As a result, the Kingdom became an active regional player and an influential representative of the Arab world in global platforms such as the G-20.³¹

Saudi Arabia always emphasised Iraq's security, stability, independence and territorial integrity. Demanding the continuation of Iraq's stability, Riyadh had to take an anti-American stance time to time to oversee regional balances and promote Iraq's territorial integrity.³² Since the first day of the Iraqi invasion, the Kingdom followed a balanced policy toward all sides of Iraqi politics. It asked for a common administration in Iraq comprised of Sunnis, Shi'as, and Kurds, rather than a predominantly Shi'a government.³³

Saudi Arabia provided the biggest material support to Palestinians and offered the most concrete political proposal for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also mediated between the conflicting sides in spite of American and Israeli opposition to the formation of a unity government. King Abdullah mediated between Hamas and Al-Fatah during the 2006 Palestinian civil war. As a result of his efforts, Al-Fatah leader Mahmud Abbas and Hamas leader in-exile Khaled Mashal reached an agreement in February 2007 and declared the "Makkah Declaration" to arrange the main principles of a unity government. King Abdullah's plan stipulating the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab states in exchange for the withdrawal of Israel from all occupied territories and the return of all Palestinian refugees to their homes was unanimously accepted in the Arab League Summit Meeting held in 2007.³⁴

Similarly, on the Lebanese domestic conflict, Saudi Arabia followed an active policy. Riyadh wanted an independent country with a stable and strong central government and insisted on a dialogue between the opposing sides to maintain stability.³⁵ Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal prepared a plan to end the tension between Lebanon and Syria. King Abdullah attempted to end disputes not only between the pro-Western government and anti-Western Hezbollah, but also between Sunni and Shi'a groups.³⁶ It can be said that Saudi Arabia aspired for political and economic leadership of the Arab world.

Saudi Arabia continued its Arab opening until the break of the Arab Spring. The Kingdom had improved its relations with Assad Regime in Syria and the Lebanese government and tried to cooperate with other Arab countries to preserve the regional status quo. This could be a reason it supported the Yemeni government during its struggle against Shi'a Houthi militants and Sunni Al-Qaeda militants. The Saudi administration intervened and the crisis transformed into an international problem.³⁷ Upon the failure of the Saudi and Yemeni armed forces, American forces intervened on the side of the governments in January 2010.³⁸ In 2011, a wave of demonstrations and rebellions spread across the Arab world which brought a change in the tone of Saudi foreign policy. As discussed in the following section, the Kingdom was forced to indulge in the politics

of both competition and cooperation in the region.

Arab Spring and Saudi Foreign Policy

During 2011 a wave of popular protests and growing opposition to authoritarian governance began to sweep the Middle East and North Africa. The phenomenon was known as the “Arab Spring” and it led to the fall of longstanding presidential regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. It also posed a challenge to leaderships in Yemen, Syria, Libya and Bahrain. The size and spill over effects of these uprisings revealed the magnitude of the socio-economic and political challenges facing the region. They also revealed the weaker social base of support underpinning longstanding authoritarian rulers.³⁹ These developments posed a threat to the stability of Saudi Kingdom and the region.

Traditionally, in order to maintain regional stability and the internal security of the Kingdom, Saudi Arabia had exercised a consensual and cautious foreign policy that avoided open confrontation and favoured accommodation. Its dependence on external security guarantees led it to rely on policies of balance and manoeuvre to maintain security. The uncertainty and polarisation in the form of Arab Uprisings brought Saudi Arabia out of its comfort zone. The tone of Saudi foreign policy changed substantially, becoming much more assertive.⁴⁰ Another outcome was the increasing Iranian influence in the region,

especially in Syria and Lebanon. As early as May 2011 Saudi academics and ambassadors started writing that ‘a tectonic shift has occurred in the US-Saudi relationship because of the US’ unreliability vis-a-vis Iran’ and that Saudi Arabia would have to take security matters into its own hands rather than continuing to rely on the US.⁴¹ Articles argued that Saudi Arabia was in the throes of a complete policy overhaul that would see it ‘take a far more proactive and assertive role in maintaining stability and security in the Middle East and North Africa’, develop a new national security framework, and take up its rightful role as regional leader.⁴² As part of the change, Saudi Arabia would increase its support for the Syrian rebels and provide backing for Lebanon and Jordan. It was time for Arab powers to take care of business in their neighbourhood, and this would include greater unity and a collective security framework.⁴³

The 2011 uprisings created a sense of vulnerability in Saudi Arabia. In response to what it saw as Iranian attempts to achieve regional hegemony, Saudi Arabia attempted to bolster alliances with friendly states, Jordan and Egypt most notably, in an effort to craft a ‘Sunni axis’ to counter the perceived Shi’a alliance.⁴⁴ In 2011 Riyadh was surrounded by instability, with uprisings in Bahrain to the east, Yemen to the south, Syria to the west and instability in Iraq to the north contributing to Saudi fears of over-spill, particularly taking into account the sectarian

dimension and the restive Shia minority population in its Eastern Province. The increasing production of shale gas in the US, and the consequent reduced dependence on Gulf oil, as well as the US rebalancing to Asia, deepened Saudi fears that its special relationship with the US, based on an exchange of oil for security, would change.⁴⁵

Since 2011, there has been a shift in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The Kingdom's traditional soft power tools of diplomacy, use of certain media outlets and financial incentives, have been overshadowed by the actual use of force in Bahrain and supply of funds and weapons to rebel groups in Syria. A further symptom of Saudi Arabia's anxiety was its vocal criticism of the US, especially regarding Washington's failure to act in Syria. It also signalled its disapproval of the advanced negotiations with Iran, which it sees as Western acceptance to Iranian regional hegemony.⁴⁶ The US attempted to reassure Saudi Arabia regarding US-Iranian negotiations by backing its efforts for regional leadership through greater integration of Gulf military capabilities in the framework of the GCC.

In late 2011, King Abdullah proposed the greater integration of GCC members into a Gulf Union. But at a specially organised GCC summit to discuss union plans in May 2012, the decision was postponed given the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the rest of the GCC states.⁴⁷ GCC members remained unable to

agree on a common currency, or on a common market, or on common tariffs and trade policies toward the outside world. Consensus among the Gulf states about Iran, the Arab Uprising, and the regional order remained difficult.⁴⁸ Another development which remained significant in the era of King Abdullah and especially in the wake of the Arab Uprising was the growing competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This competition for regional dominance has had numerous effects on Saudi foreign policy and regional stability as discussed in the following section.

Competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in recent years have been characterised by religious-ideological antagonism, competing political and geostrategic interests, and an ongoing competition for regional hegemony.⁴⁹ Regional geopolitical dynamics unfolded to be defined by competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for the dominant geopolitical role, as played out in third states through military, financial, and ideological support.⁵⁰ Saudi actions in Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon could be seen within the context of countering Iranian influence in the region.

With the onset of the Arab Uprising, the hostility between the two states intensified, especially as the regional revolutionary wave arrived in Bahrain and Syria, creating a direct

clash between Saudi and Iranian interests and policies.⁵¹ Moreover, the revolutionary potential of the Arab Uprising, along with what Riyadh perceived as Iranian attempts to gain regional influence, took Saudi Arabia out of its relative unassertiveness in foreign policy and led it to attempt to promote a new Arab alignment as a potential counterweight to the perceived Iranian threat.⁵²

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Saudis, generally known for their role as a pro-status quo regional power, have at times acted as a revolutionary force, while at others have played the role of a counter-revolutionary one, depending on their interests. For instance, Saudi Arabia was heavily involved in the crisis in Yemen and engineered the deal that led President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down in exchange for immunity from prosecution. The Kingdom also played an important role in building regional political support for external intervention against Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya.⁵³

On the other hand, Saudi efforts as a counter-revolutionary force were also observed, with the country employing military force to crash protests and keep the al-Khalifa regime in place in Bahrain.⁵⁴ The Kingdom also played a reactionary role when it came to Egypt.⁵⁵ At first, in the early days of the revolution, Riyadh supported Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Later, the Saudis allocated billions in aid to the military regime, both before and after the brief reign of Muslim Brotherhood

President Muhammad Morsi. This firm support for counter-revolutionary forces in Bahrain and Egypt can be contrasted with Saudi activism in the case of Syria, where the country has assumed a remarkably anti-status quo position and has focused on supporting the military and political opposition to President Bashar al-Assad and his regime.⁵⁶ These variations in Saudi foreign policy with respect to the Arab Uprising are best explained in terms of the deeply troubled relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as the main security and political threat in the region for several reasons.⁵⁷ The first relates to Tehran's desire to promote a security system in the Gulf, free of foreign involvement, and to contain the Iranian presence in the areas it perceives as being part of its natural sphere of influence. In this sense, Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons and the potential impact it could have on shaping the regional agenda also threatens Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom faces a dilemma with Iran's development of nuclear energy and weapons of mass destruction issue. Although Riyadh finds anti-Iranian measures proposed by the US problematic in terms of regional stability, it claims that a nuclear Iran will cause more instability. From the Saudi perspective, Iran's ambitions and its military capabilities might be used to further Iranian influence over the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and over the Shi'ite minority population in the Saudi Kingdom.⁵⁸ This

current security and political conflict also builds on complex historical relations and deep ideological animosity between the two states. The convergence of this deep ideological and historical rivalry with current competing geostrategic and political interests helps explain Saudi and Iranian strategy and interests in Syria and their role in fuelling sectarianism in the region.

There could be possibilities of cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the face of growing threat from Daesh. Despite the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, their relations have not always been so confrontational. In the 2000s, they maintained more normal diplomatic relations despite continuing to compete for influence in the region.⁵⁹ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's overtures and the Saudi response, the political vacuums in Syria, and Iraq invite intervention from both the countries preventing against any cooperation.⁶⁰ Therefore, any future cooperation will depend largely on the political will of the leaders or on a cost-benefit analysis that tilts the balance towards more cooperative and moderate regional policies. The June 2014 incursion by Daesh in Iraq and Syria, which continues to destabilise the region and represents a grave danger for both states, might just prove to be reason for improved relations towards the restoration of regional stability.

Saudi preoccupation with Syria is also a function of its concern over Iran's rising

influence in the region. Since 2006, Iran has been getting closer to the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia believes that a friendly regime in Syria will give it influence over Iraq and bolster its standing in Lebanon. This would allow Saudi Arabia to consolidate its influence in these areas, and re-establish a more favourable regional balance of power.⁶¹ The Syrian uprising offered the Saudis an opportunity to undermine Iran and regain an ally.⁶² After some initial hesitation, Saudi Arabia became the most vocal advocate of the arming of the Syrian opposition and the ouster of Assad.

Saudi Foreign Policy on Syria

Saudi Arabia's relations with Syria, Iran's main Middle Eastern and Arab ally, quickly deteriorated following Assad's violent suppression of the initially peaceful political protests which began in March 2011, and with the subsequent civil war that followed. Saudi Arabia's current policy with respect to Syria constitutes a significant change in the Kingdom's attitude toward the Assad regime. After 2008, the Saudis went from isolation to engagement in an attempt to drive a wedge between Damascus and Tehran. The relations between the two countries did not turn into a solid political alliance, partly because Riyadh's attempts to downgrade the Syrian-Iranian alliance never materialised. Since then, relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia cooled off gradually and the protests in Syria sparked a more severe competition between the two states. As the unrest in Syria grew

and the regime's brutality in handling the mobilisations became clearer, Saudi Arabia swiftly shifted from an initially cautious stance to one of outright condemnation, with the Kingdom recalling its ambassador to Riyadh as early as August 2011.⁶³

Riyadh's anti-Assad stance, along with Saudi support and direct military intervention to end Shi'ite protests in Bahrain, provided an evidence that the Kingdom had decided to stand up to what it perceived as growing Iranian influence in the Arab Middle East.⁶⁴ By weakening the Assad regime, the Saudis hoped they would reduce the power of the Assad-Iran alliance.⁶⁵ Since the beginning of the Arab Uprising, Saudi Arabia along with Qatar has taken action in order to further weaken the alliance. The two nations, for example, cooperated to suspend Syria's membership in the Arab League and continue to provide financial and military support to various elements within the Syrian opposition.⁶⁶ These measures reflect the approach Saudi Arabia has adopted since the beginning of the Arab Spring, which is more assertive than in the past.

The uprising against Bashar al-Assad gave the Saudis a new opportunity to weaken Iranian influence in the area through his ouster. Since then, Saudi Arabia, alongside the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, has been aiding all rebel forces it regards suitable for the anti-Iranian cause in Syria. The strategic goal of overthrowing Assad has been driving Saudi

Arabia's foreign policy.⁶⁷ Towards this end, Saudi Arabia has been providing material and financial assistance to the Syrian opposition. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has been officially opposed to funding the more radical sectors of the opposition, and it has declared both Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front, and Daesh as terrorist entities since March 2014.⁶⁸

The Kingdom also remains suspicious of Daesh. Although belonging to the same Islamic sect, Daesh views the Gulf's ruling families as illegitimate. This is worrisome for Saudi Arabia, which is also concerned about the growing sectarianism within its borders and the potential increased appeal of local jihadists. In the early summer of 2014, Saudi officials arrested sixty-two suspects, including thirty-five Saudi nationals, accused of being part of a Daesh cell that was planning to assassinate officials of the regime and to target government installations.⁶⁹ At the same time, this policy has not prevented private donations from the Gulf States, notably Kuwait and the UAE, to reach the more radical Sunni rebel groups. In addition to directly assisting anti-Assad forces, Saudi Arabia has been calling for greater international pressure against Assad, while encouraging the US to take a more active role. Yet, the Saudi calculation may underestimate the dangerous potential and regional consequences of the rise of radical elements operating in Syria and Iraq. The risk that some of these groups may plan to operate in

the Gulf and could therefore upset stability between Shi'ite and Sunni communities in Iraq, Kuwait, and the Saudi Kingdom itself cannot be disregarded.⁷⁰

There is a more cautious, pro-stability camp that has been increasingly alarmed at the possibility that by funding fighters abroad, they might also be fuelling the growth of extremist and radical groups such as Daesh.⁷¹ Such groups have become a concrete threat to the Kingdom, with their ability to attract new recruits from the region and globally, along with its growing financial resources and experience on the battlefield. Moreover, the prospects of a new generation of mujahideen returning home and perpetrating terrorist attacks in the Saudi Kingdom and across the Gulf is very worrisome to Riyadh. Therefore, the rise of Daesh and the expected disintegration of Iraq add more danger for the Kingdom.

Reprioritisation under King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud

Immediately after King Abdullah's death, his successor, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, made major decisions affecting key positions in the structure of the political system. It appeared that Salman was restructuring the government.⁷² The restructuring was carried out after deputy crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman announced a series of economic reforms under the banner of the Saudi Vision 2030. Various

questions have been raised about whether the major changes in the structure of rule and government will be associated with parallel changes in Saudi foreign policy. The events in Yemen have brought concern for the Kingdom. The Houthis in Yemen have seized control of most of the northern territory and thus opened the region to Iranian influence. The Saudis' response, Operation Decisive Storm, is further evidence of Saudi's changing priorities.⁷³ However, these responses are not a shift from the previous foreign policy objectives, rather a reprioritisation of the issues combined with more assertiveness in the regional affairs.

Immediately following Salman's accession, rhetoric toward the Muslim Brotherhood changed, as the Kingdom officially stated that the group as a whole was not viewed as a terrorist organisation. Further, relations between Qatar and Turkey improved at the expense of those with Egypt and the UAE. The Iranian nuclear agreement and rise of Daesh have been key influences in these decisions. The Kingdom views these threats as posing a greater threat to it than that of democratic Islamists. It fears an Iranian resurgence after the nuclear agreement, especially as this may undermine its regional influence. Daesh on the other hand has been active in Saudi Arabia, claiming bombings on Mosques frequented by Shi'a and special forces.

Salman has thus moved to adopt a policy of tolerance toward more democratic Islamists,

with leaders from Ennahda and Hamas, both visiting Saudi Arabia in 2015.⁷⁴ Further, the Kingdom has formed a coalition to confront Iran and Daesh. It stepped up coordination with Turkey and other countries to support and arm opposition groups in Syria, while in December 2015 it initiated the creation of an 'anti-terrorism' coalition together with thirty-four other, mainly Sunni, countries. The coalition excluded Iraq and Syria in light of their governments' close ties to Iran, even though Iraq and Syria were designated as two of the coalition's main areas of focus. In addition, in January 2016, the Kingdom severed diplomatic and trade ties with Iran following the storming of the Saudi embassy by Iranian protesters angered by the execution of influential Saudi Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Nimr's execution seemed calculated to coincide with the unfreezing of Iranian sanctions and was an unsuccessful attempt to stall the improving relations between Iran and Western states.

Another important manifestation of Saudi Arabia's proactive foreign policy could also be seen in Yemen. As the crisis unfolded in Yemen, Saudi Arabia started to perceive a greater threat from the Iran-aligned Houthi militia. King Salman responded to the situation with his assertive and pro-active policy, in an attempt to contain the perceived Iranian threat.

Crisis in Yemen

Yemen has provided the best example of Salman's reprioritised foreign policy. Being angered over Iran's support for Houthi (Ansarullah) rebels, and fearing that Iran would now be in control of four Arab capitals, in March 2015, Saudi Arabia commenced air strikes on Houthi positions. The strikes were part of a ten-member Saudi-led coalition and were without initial US endorsement. The Yemeni Islah party has been empowered, especially in its attempts to consolidate control of the city of Taez, and a coalition ground force, consisting of around 5,000 troops has since been deployed.⁷⁵ So far, the effort has had some successes; the administration of Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi has re-established control over Taez and much of the country's south and has been gaining ground in and around Sana'a. However, Houthi fighters, in coalition with military units loyal to Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, remain in Sana'a and many northern regions.

Salman's renewed relations with democratic Islamists constitute tolerance and not necessarily rapprochement. Although Salman has had warm relations with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the previous Emir of Qatar Hamid bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the decision to re-engage democratic Islamists is more the result of Riyadh's belief that these groups have been weakened and no longer pose an immediate threat to the

regime's survival.⁷⁶ Moreover, the regime has concluded that these Islamists possess some influence regionally, and that this influence will be useful in combating Iran and Daesh. It is notable that Salman has utilised similar means to those of Abdullah in implementing Saudi regional aspirations. Financial and military assistance has been provided to sympathetic parties, and Salman has not held back from endorsing direct military action. Further, US–Saudi relations have largely remained apprehensive since Salman's accession.

Implications for Saudi Arabia

Regionally the main consequences of the shifts in foreign policy under Abdullah and reprioritisation under Salman will see an intensification of regional conflicts, especially those involving Iran or its proxies. Finding political solutions to the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts will thus become difficult. Yemen peace talks have yielded no fruit so far. In Syria, also, no settlement has been achieved between rebels and the regime. This will result in the worsening of conditions for civilians trapped in the middle of this battle, which increasingly resembles a regional cold war. Salman's ambitions will however be constrained by various factors. First, coalition formation in the region is difficult. The balance of power is influenced more by domestic factors than a state's hard power resources, making coalition formation improbable and short term in nature. The

UAE, for example, is more fearful of domestic Islamists than it is of Iran, making it unlikely that the country will defer totally in a coalition with the Saudis. This is currently being observed in Yemen, where the Emirates is sceptical of Islah and has thus refused to finance and arm the party.⁷⁷ Moreover, economic ties are likely to ensure that coalition formation is loose and more issue specific. The UAE and Oman have important economic ties with Iran, while Qatar and Iran jointly share the South Pars / North Dome gas field. All three of these countries refused to fully follow the Saudi lead and sever diplomatic relations with Iran after the Saudi embassy attack. Qatar and Oman maintained the same level of diplomatic engagement with Tehran, while the UAE downgraded relations but did not fully sever diplomatic ties. Further, Turkey is dependent on Iranian gas, especially since Ankara now has tense relations with Russia, and has thus offered to play a mediating role between Saudi Arabia and Iran, despite the Erdogan regime's opposition to Iran's interests in Syria.

Second, the drop in oil and liquefied natural gas prices will put a constraint on the Kingdom's attempts to use its vast oil wealth to influence other, poorer regional states.⁷⁸ Last, the country will increasingly be required to focus internally. Following the uprisings, it made efforts to deter domestic voices through increased social spending and utilised over a hundred billion of its reserves for this purpose in 2011 alone.⁷⁹ However, issues like

unemployment still remain, especially within the country's youth population.

Things however can change quickly, and there are chances for miscalculations, especially in light of the complex regional and international alliances involved. Moreover, opposition to Salman's policies from within the royal family is evident; the allegiance council did not unanimously endorse the appointment of Mohammad bin Salman as deputy crown prince and de facto prime minister. However, for the time being, while King Salman is still governing, Riyadh's foreign policy will mainly be concerned with confronting Houthis, Iran and Daesh. Relations with democratic Islamists will improve as the regime seeks to create a bloc to balance Iran, consequently intensifying conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and inflaming sectarian tensions in the process. Saudi Arabia has historically viewed Yemen with enormous concern. The border between the two countries has been traditionally porous, and Saudi Arab has fought skirmishes there throughout its history.⁸⁰ Saudi Arabia interprets events in Yemen through a sectarian lens. Yemen will be Salman's first international crisis and the US is similarly worried. A mutual concern about events in Yemen will provide US and Saudi leaders the opportunity to engage each other directly and immediately.

Conclusion

Since its inception, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has pursued a foreign policy dependent on oil and its close relations with the US. However, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Saudi-US relationship was affected in a way that compelled the Kingdom to adopt a more independent foreign policy based on its national interest. Preservation of the royal regime, its territorial integrity and containment of Iran are the foremost interests of the Kingdom.

Certain regional developments and US' policy towards the region induced distrust and unease in the Saudi foreign policy, which brought a change in the foreign policy behaviour of the Kingdom. Following the ascendance of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to the royal seat, Saudi Arabia sought an independent and open foreign policy, which meant that it could no longer be solely dependent on the US to secure its interests. The growing Iranian influence in the region and the US-Iran nuclear negotiations necessitated the transformation and restructuring of the Kingdom's domestic and foreign policy. Saudi Arabia initiated a multidimensional and interdependent foreign policy in order to secure self-sufficiency, and to minimise its dependence on foreign powers. The Saudi Kingdom also pursued an active role in the Arab world, for example, it was active towards devising a peace plan for the Palestinian problem and also it offered help in

the Lebanese domestic conflict whereby the Kingdom insisted for dialogue between the opposing parties.

The phenomenon of Arab Spring forced the Kingdom to change its foreign policy and adopt a more proactive policy based on both cooperation and competition. Saudi Arabia became more assertive in its policy towards the region as it feared a spill over of the Arab rebellious movements into the Kingdom and also the increasing Iranian influence in the region. Soon after King Salman bin Abdulaziz came to power, he ordered a restructuring of the government and made major changes to the key government positions. A certain degree of change was observed in the Saudi foreign policy. King Salman moved on to adopt a policy of tolerance towards democratic Islamists like Ennahda and Hamas. Saudi Arabia formed an Islamic alliance against terrorism especially Daesh. A Saudi-led coalition also intervened militarily in Yemen against the Houthi rebels. These developments depict a more assertive foreign policy during the era of King Salman. This assertiveness could not be called as a change in the foreign policy of the Kingdom, rather it was a reprioritisation of the foreign policy.

The legacy of King Abdullah's active and interdependent foreign policy based on multilateralism was carried into the era of king Salman. The shift in Saudi foreign policy was brought during the era of King Abdullah where the events of Arab Uprising coerced the

Kingdom into adopting a proactive and assertive foreign policy. Hence the Saudi foreign policy is characterised by both continuity and change.

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