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"Saudi Arabia as a Regional Actor: Threat Perception and Balancing at Home and Abroad"

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Essay

I. Introduction

Saudi Arabia, a "long-time aspiring leader of the Arab world" (Kamrava, 2011: 96), with a previous preference for cautious foreign policy, has used the Arab uprisings of 2011 for "unprecedented types of interventions" (Lynch, 2016) to further its regional position. The kingdom tried to contain the revolutions, while taking new steps to counter its arch nemesis Iran. Following a generational shift in leadership, Saudi foreign policy has become even more assertive. At the time of writing, the situation "has reached unusual heights of visceral and violent antagonism in the proxy wars between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran across the region" (Gardner, 2016), most visibly in Yemen.

As the new Saudi leadership tries to strike a balance between the interlinked objectives of domestic regime stability and regional security, this essay will try to answer the following question: *how does domestic and regional threat perception shape Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour?* The following will review the sources of Saudi foreign policy and analyse the role of threat perception, notably in the regime's response to the 2011 uprisings and their outgrowths. Overall, it will be argued that Saudi threat perception has created increasingly complex policy dilemmas.

II. Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy

To explain Saudi foreign policy behaviour, one must consider both internal and external dynamics. Saudi rulers have pursued the goals of domestic regime stability and external security in tandem – in fact, "the way in which the second is pursued is to a large degree determined by the first" (Nonneman, 2005: 318).

With the modern Saudi state having been "built by conquest" (Gause, 2002: 199), its role conception in the Gulf has traditionally been that of a regional hegemon, while many smaller neighbours remain suspicious of Riyadh's intentions (ibid).

To maintain domestic legitimacy, the Saudi regime leverages oil rent, the Al Saud family tradition and its Islamic identity, tied to guarding the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (Ennis & Momani, 2013). Saudi Arabia portrays itself as an Islamic and Arab leader and consensus-builder across the Middle East, and is wary of potential Arab challengers and Iran (Kamrava, 2011).

Riyadh has compensated for its comparative military weakness by relying on its vast oil reserves and strategic location as bases for a long-standing strategic alliance with the United States – although at the risk of domestic and regional de-legitimisation (Cordesman, 2009; Nonneman, 2005). As US support appeared to become less reliable, Saudi Arabia has also tried to increase self-sufficiency through expanding military spending (Gaub, 2016).

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Foreign Policy as a Family Affair

States are hardly ever truly unitary foreign policy actors, due to various competing interests at the domestic level. Yet few states appear to be as "polymorphous" as Saudi Arabia (Mann, 1986, in: Halliday, 2005: 305), whose closed-off authoritarian character obscures these internal workings even further.

In the 1960s and 1970s, King Faysal consolidated a centralised Saudi state, funded by increasing oil revenues. As Faysal concentrated power and kept potential challengers in check, the "Saudi state became a one-man state" (Al Rasheed, 2008: 11). However, "when the king is not a forceful personality, the decision-making circle widens" (Gause, 2002: 204). Under subsequent rulers, Saudi Arabia "parcelled out foreign policy to different factions" of "princely quasi-states" within the state (Halliday, 2005: 52). Competing power centres around individual royals emerged, often built around key ministries such as defence. As each actor vies for influence and consolidation of his own position, the changing "dynamics of intra-family politics" introduce "fluidity" to the decision-making process (Gause, 2002: 204).

By 2005, when Abdullah formally succeeded Fahd, who had been incapacitated by a stroke since 1996, the king had become but "one player in a circle of powerful princes" (Al Rasheed, 2008: 13). Therefore, when it comes to policy decisions, Saudi Arabia can find itself in a "state of inertia" and may have to adopt contradictory approaches to appease various constituencies (ibid: 24). This internal management and balancing gave Saudi foreign policy a relatively cautious character. For example, King Abdullah had to walk a fine line between domestic and foreign, particularly American, pressures in the post-9/11 era, appeasing the main international security guarantor without alienating domestic hardliners or the wider Arab world (Nonneman, 2005).

King Salman's succession of Abdullah in January 2015 appears to have ushered in a more assertive policy, at a time of increased domestic pressure given "historically low oil prices and ever-growing demographic problems" (Gaub, 2016: 2). The shift has been driven notably by his son, Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman, who commands significant influence to the extent of upstaging the new Crown Prince and Interior Minister, Mohammed bin Nayef (Gardner, 2016). It is the "political gambler" Mohammed bin Salman, apparently "buttressing his domestic power by appealing to Sunni sectarian nationalism" (Cockburn, 2016), who is considered the force behind the war in Yemen and deteriorating relations with Iran.[1] Due to the lack of a clear, institutional line of foreign policy development, Saudi Arabia has over the years become "famous for its lack of follow-ups" despite engagement on multiple fronts (Partrick, 2010: 26).

Religion: A Mixed Blessing

Since the creation of the modern Saudi state, rulers have used Islamic credentials for both domestic and regional legitimation purposes (Gause, 2002). Ibn Saud drew on the Al Saud's long association with Wahhabi clerics to gain tribal support across the regions he tried to control.[2]

[1] Further changes under King Salman include a generational shift in succession and the appointment of career diplomat Adel al-Jubeir, the first foreign minister from outside the royal family, to replace Prince Saud al Faysal after four decades (Butt, 2015).

[2] This dates back to the first Saudi emirate in the 18th century, when the pact of mutual support between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Saudi chieftains turned "skirmishes between minor Arabian powers into an expansionist jihad in the path of God against the forces of idolatry" (Commins, 2014: 63).

Spreading the call for proselytisation of Wahhabism "provided the ideological justification for the expansion of Saudi rule" (ibid, 200). The symbiotic relationship was strengthened further through petrodollar-funded patronage and institutionalised clergy control over religious, judicial and educational affairs (Mouline, 2014). In foreign policy, too, the Saudi leadership "looks to the religious leaders to validate and approve important decisions" (Gause, 2002: 205). While the *ulama* do not appear to have a true veto, they have to be balanced carefully and royal reliance on them has increased in the context of the recent succession and growing social and financial pressures (Miller & Brodsky, 2016).

Religion as a source of Saudi legitimacy has served "to further state interests against those of rival claimants for Islamic and regional influence" (Halliday, 2005: 218), whether secular Arab nationalists, post-1979 Iran or domestic Islamist critics. Faysal "turned to religion as an instrument of foreign policy" (Commins, 2014: 183) to appease domestic religious resistance to social transformations that came with the oil age. Indeed, the Saudi combination of "economic wealth and Islam ensured a great supply of material and symbolic religious capital to pursue an aggressive expansionist policy abroad" (Al Rasheed, 2008: 2). As part of this policy, Saudi funding has supported various religious and political networks to spread its influence and weaken adversaries (ibid).

The transnational ideologies[3] that regimes can exploit to strengthen their legitimacy and destabilise others can also be turned against them. The Saudi regime's Islam-based leadership claim is also its Achilles' heel – both a constraint on possible courses of action and a target for rivals (Gause, 2002). Thus, religious legitimacy claims always came at the cost of a high degree of "sensitivity to foreign Muslim opinion" (Commins, 2014: 136).
Furthermore, external actors supported by Saudi Arabia against rivals may evolve to become threats to domestic stability: from the Muslim Brotherhood to fighters supported against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, this problem has repeatedly presented itself over the years and Islamist groups have emerged as the most serious domestic threat to the Saudi regime (Gause, 2002).
In sum, "religion provides the Saudi leadership with a sharp legitimacy tool that, like any sharp tools, has the potential to cut its handler" (Ennis & Momani, 2013: 1132). Additionally, transnational expansion through political, religious and media spheres was not only driven by official foreign policy, but also by individual princes and donors, highlighting the limits of central regime control (Al Rasheed, 2008).

III. Threat Perception and Balancing

Traditional balance of power concepts appear insufficient to explain Saudi foreign policy behaviour, as threats to regime legitimacy and stability overshadow purely material power capability concerns. In what Stephen Walt termed a "balance of threat" (1987: 5), decision-makers have to take into account potential adversaries' perceived intentions. As such, "leaders do not see military capabilities by themselves as threatening", but are more concerned by "direct

[3] The political use of traditional pan-Arab causes, especially Palestine, may appear to have subsided over the years, but should not be underestimated – in some cases, these also became intertwined with an Islamic dimension (Munro, 2002).

assaults" on their legitimacy and regime stability (Gause, 2003: 303). The threats that the Saudi regime considers most troubling are dual foreign *and* domestic challenges. Steven David (1991) has argued that Third Word leaders are most concerned with preserving regime security and therefore engage in "omnibalancing" of multiple threats, resulting in policy dilemmas. In the case of the Saudi regime, threat perceptions have repeatedly dominated regional policies.

Threats in the Gulf and Beyond

Barry Buzan (2007) describes the Gulf as a regional security complex, in which states' security is embedded in an interdependent system with a high level of mutual threat and fear. Transnational forces, including religion and sectarianism, can weaken local states' identity and create a high degree of security interpenetration (ibid).

Over time, alignments have shifted significantly in what was essentially a "triangular system (Fürtig, 2007: 627) between the main players Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. Until 1979, the pro-Western Saudi and Iranian regimes – supported by Washington's "twin pillar" approach – tried to balance the republican threat emanating from Ba'athist Iraq (ibid).

Iran's Islamic revolution overturned this system, directly threatening the Saudi monarchy (Ahrari, 1989). Riyadh responded by bolstering its own Islamic credentials, including King Fahd's adoption of the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" (Commins, 2014). The overarching goal of containing Iran created significant foreign policy dilemmas: Riyadh ended up financially supporting Iraq during its war against Iran in the 1980s (Gause, 2003).[4]

Saudi Arabia, as a "regional coordinator"(Kostiner, 2009, in: Kamrava, 2011: 98), also pushed for more formal alignment: the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was founded in 1981 to unite Sunni Gulf monarchies against revolutionary Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Riyadh repeatedly tried to rely on the organisation's "instrumentalist utility" (ibid: 99), but cohesion remains elusive. Even "natural allies" (Barnett, 1996: 427) with largely shared internal and external threat definitions, "do not want to lose their sovereignty and identity to a dominant Saudi Arabia" (Roberts, 2012).

Another, lasting, consequence is the politicisation of the Sunni-Shia divide. Saudi Arabia's regional policy since the Iranian revolution has been "governed by the fear that Iran might mobilise the Shiites in the Arab world and ultimately even within Saudi Arabia" (Steinberg, 2014: 6). Saudi-sponsored Wahhabisation of mainstream Sunni Islam and antagonism vis-à-vis the Shia as an Iranian fifth column have become difficult to reverse (Cockburn, 2015).

Such preoccupations with Iranian influence were visible following the US-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein: "the Saudi ruling family saw the deposing of Saddam as a historical mistake and an attack on the predominance of the Sunnis in the Middle East" (Matthiesen, 2013: 2) and did its best to support Sunni militant groups in Iraq, thereby increasing instability (Dearlove, in: Cockburn, 2015).

[4] This temporary alignment did not last: Saddam Hussein invaded Saudi Arabia's neighbour Kuwait in 1990, also threatening the regime in Riyadh (Gause, 2002). Moreover, the Saudi decision to invite American forces into the country incited Islamists, with domestic and international security repercussions for the next decades (Gause, 2003).

Recent Tensions

The 2015 accord on Iran's nuclear programme has done little to reduce Saudi concerns regarding Tehran's regional ambitions: "the cold war that has already begun between Saudi Arabia and Iran" is now the overarching challenge, with considerable escalation potential (Steinberg, 2014: 26). Saudi Arabia is moreover concerned about a relative rapprochement between the United States and Iran at the kingdom's expense (ibid).

Bilateral tensions reached a new high following the death of hundreds of Iranian pilgrims in a Mecca stampede in September 2015 and a diplomatic break occurred after Saudi Arabia's decision to execute Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2015 (Miller & Brodsky, 2016). Friction also increased in Lebanon, where Saudi Arabia has long tried to contain Iranian influence through local allies and on whom it increased pressure in an attempt to "force a change in Lebanon's ambivalent regional alignment" (Berti, 2016). The wider goal may be "to signal to other countries in the region that it is time to 'pick a side'" (ibid).

IV. Saudi Responses to the 2011 Uprisings

Saudi Arabia closely monitors developments in the wider Middle East that have the potential to affect its internal and external security. While the spectre of Arab nationalism, especially Gamal Abdel Nasser's variant, has been replaced by fears of Iranian ambitions, popular uprisings and Islamist challengers, the ultimate concern, Saudi regime security, has remained the same. In this context, uprisings across the Arab world were an immediate concern, as "allowing events to unfold unchecked runs the risk of courting trouble at home" (Kamrava, 2011: 99). Similar to Riyadh's perception of the Iranian threat, the "Arab Spring", too, posed a dual domestic and foreign policy challenge with omnibalancing dilemmas (Steinberg, 2014).

Counter-Revolutionaries

The uprisings provided new opportunities for Riyadh to expand its regional influence and "engage in unprecedented types of interventions" (Lynch, 2016), "positioning itself as the 'chief architect of a counterrevolution'" (Kamrava, 2011: 96). This was also due to the Saudi elite's perception that the United States could no longer be counted on to support long-standing allies such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak (ibid).

Saudi Arabia propped up the Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies, while supporting anti-Islamist groups in both Egypt and Tunisia, where the uprisings had begun (ibid). The Muslim Brotherhood's subsequent rise to power in Egypt created significant headaches among Saudi leaders, who "cannot tolerate an Islamically inspired democracy in one of the largest Sunni Arab countries without fearing ideological contamination" (Al Rasheed, 2014: 373), along with concerns that the new Egyptian rulers might seek rapprochement with Iran (Sailer, 2016). Riyadh supported the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013 and supplied the new military regime with billions in aid (ibid). The case of Egypt demonstrates how the Saudi regime has switched allegiances over the years depending on changing perceptions of utility and threat. A weakened Brotherhood has not eased Saudi concerns about Egyptian stability (Sailer, 2016): it needs Egypt on its side, "especially with the prospect of a confrontation with Iran" (Al Rasheed, 2014: 373).

Closer to Home

When protesters took to Manama's Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain in February 2011, Saudi paranoia about Iran's use of Shia populations again came to the fore. Long-standing discontent with socio-economic inequalities in the Shia majority neighbour was reignited by the popular uprisings across the region (Ulrichsen, 2014).

The Saudi regime was aware that it had "the most to lose from prolonged or major instability in its eastern neighbour"(Ulrichsen, 2014: 349). Close connections between the disenfranchised Shia youth in Bahrain and in its own Eastern Province meant that Saudi Arabia, too, witnessed "the largest protest campaign in its modern history" (Matthiesen, 2012: 658). Riyadh intervened in March to support Bahrain's military crackdown and contained further spread of domestic protests "through a mix of co-optation, repression, and a tightly knit network of patronage that worked through state institutions and tribal networks" (ibid). The regime also continues to benefit from its historical "divide and rule" approach: social and religious polarisation has so far hindered the emergence of broader opposition (Al Rasheed, 2014: 369).

Riyadh's handling of the uprising framed internal challenges as Iranian meddling, de-legitimised the underlying causes for protest and demonstrated its readiness to use force against direct threats to the regime (Ulrichsen, 2014). It also highlighted the regime's reliance on Wahhabi clerics to uphold cohesion against the Shia (Al-Rasheed, 2011).

While actual Iranian influence on the protests remains questionable, Saudi paranoia has not receded and Bahrain continues to be treated as a quasi-protectorate (Steinberg, 2014). In the wider GCC, although "the stress of the Arab Spring has reignited the need for unity" (Kamrava, 2011: 100), this proved short-lived. Distrust of Saudi Arabia's hegemonic ambitions persists among many smaller Gulf states and proactive Saudi calls for closer union only exacerbated "fears of being subsumed in a Saudi-dominated context" (ibid). Qatar has tried to pursue independent regional aims, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and various jihadi groups in Syria, resulting in significant disputes in 2014, when Riyadh considered these clients to be out of control (Cockburn, 2015). However, under King Salman, ties with Qatar appear to be improving again (Sailer, 2016). Oman, another "diplomatic maverick" (Gaub, 2016: 2), has less confrontational relations with Iran and repeatedly declined to support Saudi policy. Differences also exist within the United Arab Emirates, as Abu Dhabi's view of Iran as a threat contrasts with Dubai's historic trade links (Sailer, 2016).

Backtracking on Syria

Despite Saudi preference for the status quo and stability, the Syrian uprising presented a chance to dispose of Bashar al-Assad's regime as a key Iranian ally (Al Rasheed, 2014). By 2012, when Western support for the rebels was not forthcoming and domestic pressure to act increased as Wahhabi preachers called for Assad's overthrow, the Saudi government stepped up its support of radical Sunni groupings (ibid; Cockburn, 2015). The role of individuals also mattered: Prince Bandar bin Sultan, head of intelligence at the time, is credited with pushing for the support of these militias (ibid).

However, the Saudi leadership became increasingly concerned about the threats it had helped to create, given returning jihadis, attacks on Saudi soil and the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS)

as a transnational Islamist challenger (Bunzel, 2016). As Florence Gaub argues, both ISIS and Iran "challenge Saudi Arabia on the ideological front in similar ways", with Islamic-revolutionary rhetoric calling for regime change (2016: 2). In fact, ISIS is an even more direct ideological threat within the Sunni realm: "its Salafism resembles the kingdom's ideology to an embarrassing extent" (ibid: 3). In light of these risks, Riyadh attempted to reverse its policy in spring 2014: Prince Bandar was removed from his position, while a new approach to curb ISIS and the domestic jihadi threat was driven primarily by Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, head of the National Guard (Cockburn, 2015).

As Syria became the central site of a full proxy war of competing international actors, including Arab powers, Iran, Turkey, the United States and Russia, Saudi Arabia continued to push for regime change (Lynch, 2016). A reduction in Riyadh's air strikes against ISIS was based not only on increasing dissatisfaction with the international coalition's approach, but also due to parallel engagement in Yemen (Gaub, 2016).

Trouble in the Backyard

Saudi Arabia has repeatedly intervened against what it considers security threats in its Yemeni backyard, not least in a proxy confrontation during the "Arab Cold War" against the Egyptian-led Arab nationalist camp (Commins, 2014). Today, Riyadh considers Yemen "the red line that must not be crossed by Iran" (Sailer, 2016: 5). An insecure border and Al Qaeda's presence add to the Saudi regime's concerns (Al Rasheed, 2014). In recent years, it supported Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime, sponsored Salafist institutions and countered Iranian-sponsored Shi'a Houthis, whom it "perceived to be a Hezbollah in the making" (Gaub, 2016: 3).

When crowds in Sana'a rose up against the Saleh regime in January 2011, an alarmed Saudi Arabia tried to "promote a counter-revolution disguised as negotiation"(Al Rasheed, 2014: 374). This did not hold: Houthi rebels stormed the capital in September 2014 to overthrow Saleh's successor and Riyadh has led a military campaign against the Houthis since spring 2015 (Sailer, 2016). Domestic considerations also played a critical role in Saudi decision-making, dominated by Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman: "it seems that the new Saudi leadership needed this war in order to boost its legitimacy in the eyes of its many domestic critics" (Al Rasheed, 2015: 19). The stakes are high: Saudi failure would embolden Iran in the "zero-sum game" between the two regional competitors (Abdulla, in: McDowall, 2015). Meanwhile, Al Qaeda is already "exploiting the chaos in Yemen to strengthen its base there for attacks on the kingdom" (Butt, 2015).

Looking for Allies

Activism across the region and an increasing militarisation of foreign policy appear to have put Riyadh at risk of overstretching its resources. Saudi Arabia continues to push for institutionalising military cooperation and coordination among possible allies. The Islamic Alliance, announced in December 2015, is the latest Saudi attempt to counter-balance Iranian influence, strengthen its Islamic reputation in the face of new threats such as ISIS, and ease the burden on its military (Gaub, 2016).[5] How this broad, de facto Sunni Muslim alliance will work in practice remains

[5] Riyadh pushed for an integrated GCC command structure in 2013 and for a common police force in 2014 – both projects have not made significant progress (Gaub, 2016). According to the initial Saudi announcement, the Islamic Alliance is to include predominantly Sunni countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia (ibid).

unclear, but it demonstrates a continuing Saudi concern to strengthen its position in the face of myriad threats.

Saudi Arabia is also adjusting its international balancing: despite Russian backing for the Syrian regime, there appear to be "warming ties with Russia" in the context of declining US influence in the Middle East and Washington's improved relations with Tehran (Gardner, 2016). When assessing external alignments, it should be kept in mind that Riyadh has pursued notoriously "polygamous relations" over the years (Nonneman, 2005: 315). Similarly, the support extended by the Saudi regime to other actors also underlines that "the will to power of entrenched regimes often coexists with pragmatism, making strange bedfellows of sworn enemies" (Gardner, 2016).

V. Conclusion

This essay has examined the close connections between the domestic and regional sphere in Saudi foreign policy-making. The Saudi leadership's perception of threats to regime security has created intricate policy dilemmas in which conflicting pressures have to be balanced.

At home and abroad, concerns for regime security mean that "the Saudi leadership easily mistakes subjugation for stability" (Steinberg, 2014: 26), while walking a thin line between regional activism and overstretch in an era of rising demographic and economic pressures. The perception of being on the defensive against rising threats from all directions is what has "ultimately led to a substantial change in its usually rather quietist foreign policy" (Gaub, 2016: 2).

Viewing regional developments through the prisms of regime security and Iranian influence has resulted in increasing entanglement in complex, long-term conflict situations. And while the Arab uprisings may have provided Saudi Arabia with a chance to reassert its leadership aspirations in the region, "there is no reason to believe that this window of opportunity is any more lasting than previous ones" (Kamrava, 2011: 104).

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