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SAUDI LEADERSHIP IN A CHAOTIC MIDDLE EASTERN CONTEXT

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This paper aims to depict how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has the capacity to assert itself as the most influential Arab player in the region. However it will also be stressed that the lack of a clear strategy in the medium-term and the failure in creating a unite front with other gulf countries is deeply undermining the capability of the kingdom in promoting a new regional order. KSA seems, in fact, to have the sole aim of preserving the status-quo wherever possible, engaging in a confrontation with Iran in the Iraqi, Syrian and Yemeni context. It will be argued that the US could therefore play a significant role in promoting new shared responsibilities for the Gulf States and the KSA.

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There is a transformative process underway regarding geopolitical dynamics among the states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The MENA area is witnessing a mixture of the West's lessened ability to shape events and its lack of will to do so¹. The United States (US) has focused on negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), failing to define a clear strategy on Syria, and then allowing its relations to fade with its main Arab partners: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states as a whole, and Egypt. These states (except Qatar) see change in the region as a risk in itself, while stability, security and the status quo have become their principal goals. The GCC (regardless of its own internal divisions and rivalries) has emerged as a growing regional player since the beginning of the Arab uprisings (2011), challenging the ongoing socio-political developments that are reshaping the traditional regional order but with no clear agenda for building a new one.

This paper aims to depict how the KSA has the capacity to assert itself as the most influential Arab player in the region with the firm goal of maintaining the status quo and preventing any change, rather than promoting a new order.

Is Saudi Arabia capable of assuming a leading role as a major Arab state in a changing Middle East?

Today the KSA is the only Arab country that can engage in regional affairs. At the same time, threatened by a nexus of external and internal forces, the KSA is obliged to implement an active foreign policy to curb the growth of Iranian influence in the region.

The KSA has vast reserves of oil, a respectable demographic base, and a huge inventory of sophisticated armaments bought from the West, principally the US. In addition it is located at the centre of the Gulf system and is the predominant power of the GCC, which combines the six dynastical monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula created in May 1981². Furthermore, its enormous oil wealth gives it different means of intervention. On top of this, Saudi geostrategic competition with the IRI and self-proclaimed role as the protector of Sunni interests against Teheran and its Shi'a co-religionists in Iraq and the Levant have increased its prominence in the Arab world.

With Syria and Iraq clearly unable to play any regional role and Egypt still on the way to reviving its traditional

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¹ Harling Peter: "IS back in business", *Le monde diplomatique* and www.nzh.rmailjet.com, September 1 2014.

² GCC comprises: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman.

regional role, the KSA and IRI are the two key players in this conflicting area. Accordingly, the KSA appears today to be the strongest Arab player able to stem Iranian progression from Lebanon to Iraq. Additionally, Turkish diplomacy failed to fulfill this role in spite of its initial ambitions to do so and today it gives priority to its domestic stability and has decided to focus on the Kurdish regional issue in Iraq and Syria to preserve its sovereignty. As for Israel, it is condemned to a defensive, security-oriented regional policy to protect its interests with the support of its Western allies, according to a reasserted hard power approach.

Indeed, the major challenge the KSA faces in the short run is linked to its troubled regional environment where an unprecedented number of crises and tensions proliferate (Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, followed by political tumult mainly in Egypt and to a lesser extent in Bahrain and also heavy tensions with Qatar). But most importantly, this context made up of sectarian divisions all over the Middle East echoes the major geopolitical rivalry between the KSA and IRI in their quest for predominance in the region.

As a traditionally conservative regional player, the KSA seeks to “contain” threats and maintain its own security. On the one hand, the country tried to avoid the impact of the Arab uprisings’ socio-political dynamics and to prevent them from crossing its borders. On the other, Riyadh’s active role in the Syrian and Bahrain crises is focused on constraining the IRI’s regional role as well as strengthening Saudi security.

After Mubarak’s fall in Egypt (February 11, 2011) and the popular Shiite revolt in Bahrain (March 2011) the KSA’s regional policy was dominated by its refusal to admit changes, condemning Obama’s abandonment of Mubarak and taking a harsh stance against Obama’s new Middle East policy of “leading from behind”. Furthermore, the Saudi approach to defining regional threats and its renunciation of a UN Security Council seat on October 2013³ gave the West the impression of a confused Saudi foreign policy directed by an aged and emotional leadership.

Nevertheless, the numerous conflicts and deep crises neighboring the Kingdom’s territory forced Saudi leaders to exert a more assertive regional policy. However, the chaotic environment inherited from the West’s failure to act in Iraq and Syria did not lead the KSA to fill the vacuum. In fact, the successful progression of the Islamic State (IS) (which controls 40% of

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³ Most Saudi scholars I’ve interviewed on the decision to renounce the UN Security Council seat contest this approach “made of oddness and panic”. In their view, this unprecedented decision and the harsh declarations from major Al Saud princes on Obama’s new Middle East policy approach “leading from behind” were intended to prompt a break in their foreign policy style usually known to be active behind the scenes and not such as a straightforward and aggressive one. ,

Iraqi territory from Baghdad's suburbs to Eastern Syria), proclaimed on June 29, 2014 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the new self-declared caliph, gives evidence of the West's failure to act or ineffectiveness. Indeed, the KSA needs to reorder its priorities regarding regional threats.

In addition, contrary to the general perception, the Saudi monarchy's stability does not seem threatened by quarrels related to the intra-dynastical succession issue. The regime will not collapse, due to the very robust idea that guides the dynastic monarchy principle in maintaining a consensus for its survival, as stated by Michael Herb.⁴ Therefore, the Al Saud appears to be able to resolve their succession disputes and this will not limit the KSA's projection into the region.

Saudi Arabia versus Iran

The removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad on April 2003, following the US invasion, fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Gulf. From then on, there has been a "new" confrontation going on, increasingly depicted as a "cold war", between the KSA and IRI, which is based on ideological and geopolitical rivalry. In that sense the latter has much to do with a political struggle to gain influence and defend self-interests for regional leadership⁵. It is, indeed, through the deployment of money, weapons, ideology and sectarian influence in the domestic politics of their neighbours that the two states battle for regional supremacy.

The ongoing "new" confrontation between the KSA and IRI has been fueled by two main and different factors. On the one hand, the IRI's hegemonic influence in the Middle East, thanks to its nuclear program, appeared to Saudi leadership as the worst enemy to counter since it is also, along with Lebanese Hezbollah and Russia, the main ally of Assad's regime in Syria. On the other hand, by weakening the stability of a number of Arab states, the so-called "Arab Spring" opened up new fields of confrontation between the KSA and IRI. More than three years after the Arab uprisings began, the Syrian conflict, the Bahrain sectarian tensions and the Yemeni crisis (the Shi'a-Houthi rebellion threatening the central state by extending their territorial influence and demanding a bigger share of power and a new political order) have widened the traditional sectarian divide, elevating it to a regional and transnational affair. Since

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⁴ H. MICHAEL, "The Saudi succession and challenges facing Saudi Arabia", *Noref*, August 2014.

⁵ F. DAZI-HENI, "Saudi Arabia versus Iran: Regional balance of Power", *Sunni and Shia: Political readings of a religious dichotomy*, <http://www.awraq.es> and <http://issuu.com/casaarabel>, Second quarter 2013.

solutions to these crises still seem difficult to find and predict, this arc of crisis will define the regional background for KSA and IRI confrontation.

Regarding the case of Iraq, the situation is slightly different, although highly critical as well. In fact, the deterioration of the security context in Iraq since the proclamation of the Islamic State not only threatens the integrity of Iraqi territory, but constitutes an existential menace for Iran as a Shiite state and Saudi Arabia as patron of Sunni Islam. Given the presence of this common threat, both countries could find it less cost effective to manipulate the sectarian divide. Accordingly, the end of the Maliki government in Iraq (late August 2014) with the consent of Teheran could contribute to appeasing the aggressive Saudi and Iranian sectarian narrative.

Saudi approach towards MBs and Political Islam

When Field Marshal al-Sisi dismissed elected president Morsi on July 3, 2013 and began eradicating the Muslim Brotherhood, the KSA, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and to a lesser extent Kuwait turned out to be al-Sisi's main supporters. Then, the Muslim Brotherhoods (MBs), which were seen as the politically empowering force in MENA after the Arab Spring, became the target of the KSA and UAE, together with their Egyptian ally. At the same time, relations were strained with Qatar and Turkey, as the MBs' main sponsors.

Furthermore, the KSA's extensive support for the Egyptian regime after Morsi's removal led the monarchy to adopt more drastic measures against MBs in order to stop their militancy in the Kingdom and in all neighboring GCC states.

First, on February 4, 2014, a royal decree announced punishment of a prison sentence for any person belonging to intellectual or religious movements or groups of extremists, categorized as terrorists on the local, regional and international levels. Furthermore, following the Egyptian government's decision to declare both al-Qa'ida and MBs "terrorist organizations" (December 23 2013) the Saudi government also decided to explicitly name MBs and all affiliated movements as terrorist organizations (March 7, 2014) along with al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Hezbollah and the Houthis militias fighting in Yemen.

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The *de facto* threat to the regime comes from the field of political Islam, according to the Al Saud royal family. In the late 1990s MBs proved their ability to mobilize and to be a potential political alternative to the regime with religious legitimacy among a number of followers. After the Saudi's repression of Sahwa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Awakening) during the mid-1990s and early 2000s, recently the movement has regained influence on the socio-political field⁶. Sahwa sheikhs and intellectuals regained considerable authority over religious issues and became a dangerous alternative to the religious establishment (Higher Council of Ulamas), originally allied to the Al Saud family,

Sahwa's assessment of the Arab uprisings was from the beginning very different from that of the official Saudi religious establishment. The Grand Mufti and other famous scholars described demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt as "*fitna*" (chaos) organized in order to destroy the *Umma*. But this did not keep emblematic Sahwa figures, such as Salman al-'Awda, from enthusiastically backing the revolutions in the two countries.

Nonetheless, the Sahwa stance converged with the position of the Saudi regime on the Syrian conflict, in which both sustained the uprisings against the Syrian regime. As described by Stephane Lacroix, the Saudi regime's and Sahwa support for the Syrian revolution was mainly expressed in sectarian terms⁷. The Kingdom's mufti, after he had harshly expressed his rejection of all Arab revolts, finally backed the Syrian uprising, described as a legitimate jihad. The sectarian Sahwa stance was also manifested when Sahwa sheikhs actively denounced the Bahraini uprising of February 14, 2011. Consequently, Bahrain's popular demonstrations were seen as a sectarian chaos aimed at eradicating the Sunni presence and government. This explains why Sahwa approved the GCC's Peninsula Shield intervention on March 18, 2011 in Manama to help the Sunni Bahraini regime crush the uprising led by the Shi'a majority of the population⁸.

Prioritizing IS as the first regional threat

The Islamic State was defined as the number one enemy of Islam by the KSA's Grand Mufti, Abdul Aziz al Sheikh, on August 19, 2014. He described IS and al-Qa'ida as "Kharijites", a sect that caused one of the

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⁶ S. LACROIX, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁷ S. LACROIX, "Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring", Kuwait Program on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States, London, LES, no. 36, May 2014.

⁸ L. LOUËR, *Les monarchies du Golfe face au printemps arabe*, Septembre 2011, <http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org>.

most traumatic schisms in Islam⁹. The unanimity of hatred and fear toward IS crosscuts regional rivalries and tensions making IS the common enemy.

In creating priorities for its regional agenda and making the struggle against IS its first concern, the KSA gives a clearer reading of its foreign policy. Nevertheless, the reinforcement of sectarian influence supported by the IRI even in Yemen, helping Houthi rebels, could curb Saudi efforts in using its influence to convince Sunni Iraqi tribes engaged along with IS to abandon their support for IS.

The fight against terrorism and the objective of defeating the IS in Iraq and Syria turned out to be the main priority in the KSA's regional agenda. Rival regional powers (the KSA, IRI, Turkey) and international actors (P5) have a common interest in cooperating in fighting the IS. If IS' identification as the top existential threat by regional and international nations is obvious, the political solution to combating radicalism and strategies to deal with the issue among different regional players remain unclear. Combating the IS- and Al-Qaida-affiliated groups (Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar as-Sham and Khurasan) right now seems to reinforce the Assad regime in Syria. This is not a shared objective among the anti-IS US-led coalition, especially among Saudi, Qatari, Turkish and French coalition members.

Furthermore, the US decision to fight IS by launching air strikes in Syria still fails to address a precise agenda for Syria's political future. The KSA is heavily committed to broadening the targets of this coalition not only to IS affiliates but also to other Islamists who are fighting in other parts of the MENA region (Libya, Sinai, Yemen and other hotspots)¹⁰. For that purpose, the KSA and other GCC states (UAE and Kuwait) are pushing alongside Egypt to create a military pact (Egyptian-Gulf Alliance) aiming to combat Islamist "extremism" in the region, particularly in Libya and Yemen. But these states are still waiting for US approval¹¹.

Furthermore, beyond identifying the common enemy, much needs to be done to make the international cooperation of the current coalition under

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⁹ www.gulfnews.com/Gulf/SaudiArabia/September102014.

¹⁰ T. KARASIK, "Analyzing the emergence of the GCC+4 against ISIS", www.alarabiya.net/english, 15 September 2014.

¹¹ "Gulf States and Egypt may set up an anti-islamist force", www.gulfnews.com, 4 November 2014; "The emergent Egyptian-Gulf alliance: Libya and Yemen in the crosshairs", www.al-akhbar.com, 8 November 2014.

US leadership efficient, due to the lack of trust between regional powers (the KSA, Iran, which is an inexorable player even if not a full member of the coalition)¹².

GCC: a rising bloc trying to remain immune from change

The ascendancy of the Gulf states as regional powers, especially after the so-called “Arab Spring”, shows growing assertiveness in policy-making by acting unilaterally or as a loose regional bloc to secure vital interests. The increasing dynamism of GCC states in using their military, financial and other assets in the MENA region is evidence of Gulf monarchies’ attempt to remain immune from changes. Their main goal is to prevent at all cost democratic transitions that may overturn the conservative security-based political order, the establishment of Islamist governments close to MBs or Iranian-supported Shiite movements.

According to this line, GCC troops moved under KSA and UAE control into Bahrain, engaged in air strikes (Qatar and UAE) under the NATO umbrella against Gaddafi’s regime in Libya, and then UAE made unilateral strikes (late August 2014) against Islamist militias in Libya with Egyptian help. GCC States gave also different forms of assistance (financial and military) to rebels fighting the Syrian regime and backed their allies with political and huge financial support (Egypt, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen and to a lesser extent Jordan and Morocco) and proxies in several Arab countries (Libya included).

The KSA-UAE entente¹³ demonstrated its ability to influence developments in ways that no other contender for regional power has. Even if some issues, such as border tensions and GCC currency, still create sensitive divergences, most of their regional interests coincide. These are Gulf security, stabilizing oil prices, containing Iran’s regional power and fighting by all means the Muslim Brotherhoods’ political Islam. By taking matters into their own hands and pooling their financial resources and the use of coercion and force, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have been until now quite successful in shaping regional events, like in Bahrain and Egypt, or in isolating Qatar and supporting and orienting Yemen’s transition¹⁴. But this does not suggest that this common approach to maintaining the status quo in the region will be successful in the long run. The present deteriorating situation in Yemen with the increasingly empowering

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¹² M. JANSEN, “US backs Iraq, committed to overthrow the Syrian regime”, www.jordantimes.com, 10 September 2014.

¹³ S.A. COOK – J. STOKES – A.J. BROCK, *The contest for regional leadership in the new Middle East*, June 2014, Center for New American Security.

¹⁴ S. STIG, «Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia’s policy towards Yemen», *Noref*, Policy Brief, March 2013.

influence of Houthis today demonstrates the KSA's unsuccessful approach to Yemeni transition. In fact, Riyadh was unable to keep Yemen's central power from becoming too weak¹⁵. The increasingly troubled and insecure situation in Egypt with a deteriorating economy despite huge financial support from the KSA, UAE and Kuwait will not be sustainable in the medium or long term.

However, the GCC diplomatic crisis that saw the KSA, UAE and Bahrain withdraw their ambassadors from Doha on March 5 2014, revealed deep divisions arising from backing the new military oriented Egyptian regime versus Qatar's support for MBs in Egypt as well as throughout the MENA region. Nevertheless, recently this situation seems to be reversing. In fact, Emir Sheikh Tamim's new low-profile regional approach considers the Saudi-Qatari rivalry¹⁶ unproductive, because it did not make it possible to form a cohesive front in the Syrian conflict. He has also been critical of Hamad Bin Jassim's provocative diplomacy¹⁷ towards the KSA and other Arab neighbors. GCC players involved in the March 2014 crisis reached a detente after a Riyadh meeting on April 17, with the Kuwaiti mediation that convinced them to give the new Emir time to change Qatar's regional diplomacy.

This mediation ought to resolve the dispute between close neighbors before the 35th GCC summit scheduled to be held in Doha, next 23 and 24 December 2014 and to give Qatar the next rotational presidency of the GCC for 2015. Finally, facing a growing threat coming from various conflicting situations, GCC states held an emergency meeting in Riyadh late Sunday (November 16), in order to resolve their rift with Qatar. Under the KSA patronage and thanks to the constant Kuwaiti mediation, they agreed to return their ambassadors to Doha in order to attend the next GCC Summit on December 23 and 24 and to give more coherence to their efforts to struggle against regional instability.

Conclusion

The struggle against IS in the region helps to promote the hardline GCC security approach put forward by the KSA and UAE and followed by Bahrain. This line endorses GCC defense and security reinforcement to create a strong military alliance. This project was strongly supported by

¹⁵ Armed Houthis rebels backed by Iran and trained by their main proxy (Lebanese Hezbollah) extended their territorial gains across Yemen after seizing Sana'a, the capital, end of September 2014 in a move that forced Yemen's GCC backed President Hadi to appoint a new government. On Saturday October 18, they captured the country's second largest port Hodeidah and Saudi.

¹⁶ F. DAZI-HENI, "Qatar's regional ambitions and the new Emir", www.mei.edu, 9 May 2014.

¹⁷ He was the very influent previous Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs under Emir Hamad who abdicated in favor of his son Tamim on 25 June 2013.

More than ever the US is back to promoting a new Gulf security approach featuring a multilateral integrated defense concept with reinforcement of GCC multilateral structures devised with sophisticated US armament equipment and inter-army doctrine. This approach will greatly depend on KSA and UAE defense capacities but also combine a stronger GCC with the irreversible return of Iran as a major regional player too

US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel¹⁸ during the 9th Manama Dialogue session in December 2013 but was buried with the Saudi Gulf Union initiative launched in May 2011 and unanimously rejected by other GCC members.

Then, more than ever the US is back to promoting a new Gulf security approach featuring a multilateral integrated defense concept with reinforcement of GCC multilateral structures devised with sophisticated US armament equipment and inter-army doctrine. This approach will greatly depend on KSA and UAE defense capacities but also combine a stronger GCC with the irreversible return of Iran as a major regional player too.

This situation is fostering a new security approach where the GCC must be promoted to being a more responsible regional actor under the supervision of a US ally that will focus its relations more and more on military equipment and training than on oil deals, no longer needed with America's expanding hydrocarbons production¹⁹.

First, this will make GCC States more reliant on US willingness to guarantee Gulf security, but according to the spirit of the "twin pillar strategy" of the Nixon Doctrine elaborated by his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger. The GCC under US control and Iran as a significant regional actor will be the two new pillars rather than the KSA alone with Iran, as was the case during the seventies²⁰.

Second, the approach consisting of making GCC states more responsible in regard to regional conflicts and security issues is leading this regional inter-governmental pact into a more structured multilateral regional integration. This situation also drives GCC states to establish a new military alliance with Egypt, which is considered, primarily by the KSA, UAE and Kuwait, to be a major regional security partner. This new regional security approach, combined with the increasingly assertive regional role of Iran, may reshape geopolitical stakes in the Middle East.

¹⁸ A. CORDESMAN, *Improving the US-GCC security partnership, planning for the future*, www.CSIS.org, 7 April 2014.

¹⁹ R. PRINGBORG, "The Energy Revolution's Impacts on the Arab World", *Middle East Institute*, 10 June 2014.

²⁰ Z. KARABELL, "Twin Pillars Policy", *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, 2004, Encyclopedia.com, 20 October 2014, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3424602762.html>; Z.