

Saudi Foreign Policy Prospects under King Salman bin Abdulaziz

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2. Abstract

Part One: Attitude Appraisal

Chapter One: KSA and Arab Spring Files under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

Since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, there have been external threats to the KSA, such as the rise of ISIS, growing Houthi and Iranian influence in Yemen, increasing impact of non-Arab regional powers in the region and collapse of conventional Arab powers. Thus, there has been no Arab ally to help revive pan-Arab action.

In response, KSA has to look for a regional ally. It needs to be more realistic in dealing with the complicated issues of the region, aimed at achieving stability and halting the bloodshed and chaos. A package of strategic dialogues shall be promoted at the internal Arabian Gulf, Arabian Gulf-Arab and Arabian Gulf-Turkish levels. That would lead to the KSA's return to focus on its direct security, taking a balanced stand on political Islam movements and adopting a more open policy towards Turkey.

The Saudi foreign policy is more likely to play a major role in solving disputes between Arab or Muslim countries away from axes. It had been doing so before the September 11, 2001 attacks (under late King Fahd bin Abdul-Aziz) by means of building balanced relations with Arab and Islamic states, based on stability, solidarity and cooperation.

Chapter Two: Saudi-US Ties under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

KSA's new leadership maintains a strategic relation with Washington through political, military, security and intelligence coordination on the issues of Iraq, Syria and Yemen, even with some obvious differences about a number of cases. For instance, in spite of the KSA's political support to Washington's policies in the region, the latter has tried to weaken the former's stand on Iran since 2003. The ideological difference between the US and Iran was not an obstacle before the US realism by agreeing with Iran, rehabilitating Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, overlooking Houthi militias and raising its own allies' concerns.

Therefore, the KSA shall respond to the US-Iranian rapprochement by initializing regional understandings including Turkey, Pakistan and other political players. That would form a parallel regional alliance to counter the Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian axis with Hezbollah and the Houthis. It would also face other projects which have significantly developed at the expense of the Saudi role in the last four years, mainly that of Israel. The KSA should also, along with the Gulf states, rely on various sources of power, rather than exclusively depend on the strong relations with the US, especially in terms of arms, oil markets, energy and provision of technology. That would give

alternatives for the KSA in its foreign policy, bearing in mind that Washington tries to have several allies.

Chapter Three: The Impact of the Iranian Expansion in the Arab Mashreq on Saudi Foreign Policy under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

Iran's influential expansion in the Arab political scene is attributed to its employment of conditions made by various factors and variables and other players. Among these are the international approval of the sectarian status of Lebanon with its association with the regional milieu, the constitutional endorsement of sectarianism in Iraq and somewhat similar matters in Yemen and Bahrain.

The status quo of the Saudi-Iranian ties since 1979 is best described as Cold War. KSA cannot go alone into a destructive conflict with Iran on influence in the region, since the latter does not seem ready to make any concessions about what it sees "victories" in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon. The Iranian influence is expected to expand to intervene in the affairs of the KSA and the other Gulf states if it keeps going without finding any resistance by the countries of the region. Riyadh shall make a serious review of its regional and international alliances. One of the main ties to reconsider are those with Ankara, which would necessarily mean re-building the relations with the Islamists. Internationally, it shall take a different approach to China and Russia, employing the context of the GCC to impose certain realities to improve their policies. In general, such reviews need quick steps to make the impact of such alliances immediate and significant. Due to the slow Arab action and lack of a vision with options, the Iranian influence is unlikely to stay at the current limits. Thus, KSA is expected to take the initiative and propose such a vision, as seen in its military intervention in Yemen.

Chapter Four: Saudi Foreign Policy on Regional Alliances under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

The Saudi-Qatari ties have improved since King Salman took over. The same can be said about the ties with the UAE but with a lesser degree. Those with Ankara have notably developed. Therefore, the above four parties may agree on several issues, such as setting new rules to integrate political Islam movements in the political process, build stability and fight extremism and terror.

Tehran has utilized the "axis conflict" in maximizing its influence. For instance, the fall of Sana'a in the hands of the Houthis represents the peak of the Iranian expansion in the Arabian Peninsula, directly and obviously affecting the KSA on the crossroads of oil and natural gas transportation. As a result, Riyadh has started efforts to reconcile the GCC members and return the ambassadors to Doha. However, the ties with Turkey are still cautions with reference to regional coordination.

King Salman played a role in reconsidering some regional issues, such as improving the relations with Turkey, indicating both parties' realization of the significance of regional cooperation in this stage. As the KSA sets putting an end to the Iranian expansion a regional priority, this approach becomes a necessity. On the other hand, as Ankara realizes that Tehran resists the Turkish aspirations in the Arab World as well as threatens the Turkish interests with its sectarian approach, it is keen on playing a role with Riyadh to counter the Iranian influence.

Chapter Five: Prospects of Saudi Foreign Policy on the Arab-Saudi Conflict under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

There are a number of determinants to the KSA's presumed foreign policy. Among these are the Iranian stand on the Middle East, terror of the ISIS and failures of the peace process as in the two-state solution.

Accordingly, the KSA shall initiate re-building its alliances in the region, as it actually has formed and leads the Arab Coalition to launch airstrikes on Houthi locations in Yemen. It could exert pressure on Egypt to amend the rule condemning Hamas with terror. The ties with Hamas could be rectified to present direct help in putting an end to the siege on Gaza and reconstructing the area. The KSA has financial capabilities and political relations which can provide sufficient support to this end. It can restore its central role in the issue by pressuring Israel, promoting Palestinian reconciliation, urging parties to achieve genuine national unity as well as set a common programme capable of accomplishing liberation, and exerting pressure on relevant parties to neutralize Palestinian refugees in internal conflicts - especially in Syria.

Part Two: Saudi Foreign Policy's Prospects and Challenges under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

Chapter One: Iranian Expansion in the Arab World (Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon)

The Iranian expansion in question is not a new development nor a result of regional changes, but a deeply-rooted phenomenon. While in the past Iranians talked about "exporting the revolution", it is currently their project of hegemony over the Middle East. This is attributed to three main reasons. The first is that Article 154 on foreign policy in the Iranian Constitution entrusts Iran with "the mission of helping the weak in the face of the arrogant in the way of establishing the international state." The second is the Mother of All Towns strategy set by Mohammad Jawad Larijani. It stipulates that "Iran is not limited by geographical borders. Iran shall be without frontiers or exception. Iran shall control the Islamic World." The third is the power vacuum in the region filled by Iran, resulting from the absence of a strong Arab, Islamic project led by major Arab countries - especially the KSA - to counter the Iranian shifts and aspirations. The September 11 attacks had great impacts on the Arab and Islamic

worlds. The KSA and other Gulf states were restricted in Africa, Yemen and West Asia, in which Tehran also managed somehow to fill in the vacuum. King Salman was not away from the political scene, mainly under King Fahd bin Abdul-Aziz, as he assumed foreign policy. Now, he is expected to go back to the pre-September 11 approach of keeping stability and not making hasty reactions or foreign intervention.

Chapter Two: Towards a New Saudi-led Gulf Stand on the Arab Spring

Four reasons are believed to account for the cautious dealing of most Gulf states with the Arab Spring. The first is the initial impacts of the shift on these states, seeing the rise of “reformist” demands by educated and social elites. The second is the success of the uprisings in toppling two of their allies - the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes. The third is the growing power of political Islam. The fourth is the direct repercussion of the Gulf states’ security from Yemen, contained by their internationally supported initiative, and Bahrain, controlled by direct military intervention from their Al-Jazeera Shield forces.

The sources of threat changed following the setback of the Arab Spring in the Gulf states in light of the growing extremist militant groups, which began to move through the chaos in some Arab countries. Another reason was the Iranian political extremism, expanding the circle of Arab blood in 4 Arab countries. Thus, if the KSA adopts a number of policies, it can take the region out of the current dilemma. Among these is the revival of the spirit of Arab, Islamic accord and solidarity, mainly in major Arab, Islamic issues in the Gulf politics so that they are less targeted, exploited or consumed in security and financial terms. Another policy is the serious openness to moderate political Islam movements in different Arab countries. Another is the signing of understandings over the crises of the region. There is also the redefinition of the sources of external and internal threats - of which the Arab Spring and its major political powers are accused - so that much of the effort made on “illusionary dangers” would be saved upon getting rid of them.

It is believed that relative balance and solidarity on Arab-nationalist foundations was the minimum main part played by the Gulf states for decades. It used to entrust them with a special regional and international role, in spite of the significant influence of the economic aspect in this regard for these and similar countries. However, there are more important factors which helped and could help today in taking a quantum leap in these states’ policies to overcome the current rising dilemma due to the lack of strategy and growth of threats. Among these basics are the moral and Arab-nationalist dimensions, especially in defending the injustice suffered by the Palestinian people. Others are related to openness to political Islam movements - even the salafis - internal Gulf agreement and good connections between Gulf political elites, on the one hand, and social and political forces, on the other.

If this happens, these states would find a way out of the dilemma surrounding their foreign policy with continuous financial, security and political attrition. Furthermore, the Iranian regional influence will not grow at their expense.

Last Chapter: Race of Regional Influence and Axes under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

There are a number of factors deciding the foreign policy approaches under King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz. The first is the personality of the King himself. Foreign policy in the Third World is often based on persons, rather than institutions and states, in terms of form and content. He was more engaged in internal affairs but assumed some external files like the Palestinian issue. The second is the new action team assisting the King in making internal and external security decisions. This is the political and security council, concerned with Arab as well as Saudi affairs, whose decisions have to be studied to understand the Saudi foreign policy. Main decisions about the Arab World are made by this and not any other Saudi institution.

The Saudi strategic thinking shall care for two major challenges. First and foremost, the sectarian and nuclear dimensions of Iran have always represented an essential menace to the kingdom. Second, the US tends to witness internal shifts and confidence in it needs to be revised. Various Arab issues come third.