



Report

One year for King Salman in Al-Yamamah Palace: Estrangement or Extension?

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King Salman assumed the throne in January 2015 after King Abdullah's death, marking one year in power (Raed Outena/European Pressphoto)

Abstract

This paper discusses the main features characterising Saudi policies a year after King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's ascension to the throne in KSA. It adopts two conceptual approaches: the first is analytical and descriptive, and the second is taxonomic. Structurally, the paper addresses three levels: internal, regional and international. The article argues for three main elements as follows.

First, despite much expectation of King Salman moving away from the era of his predecessor, the new era remains an extension of the previous one. This extension comes in its own context. The latter is composed of the emergence of the fourth Saudi State, as well as the rise of non-polarity in World Order. The consequences of this context – which have resulted in a shift in the manner of State administration- may be mistaken for an estrangement.

Second, KSA has taken a decision regarding its strategic options. It gave absolute priority to confronting Iranian expansionism after a period of uncertainty. This strategic option seems to have helped speed up the return to the dual-structure of the Regional Order.

Third, there has been a significant shift in the structure as well as in the nature of Saudi Arabia's international alliances. The most prominent evidence of this is the shift in US–Saudi relations.

Introduction

The ascension to the throne of King Salman bin Abdulaziz marked a turning point in the development of events in the Middle East. Experts in the Arab World are divided about whether to criticise Riyadh's role or support what it does. It seems useful, as a general background for this paper, to examine these two positions.

For two centuries, the Arab world has been experiencing an identity crisis: defining the relationships between the individual and the group, on the one hand, and defining the relationship between the group and the State, on the other. The official institution has, and still does, considered the people as a neutral element, neither a strategic asset nor a burden during crises, but a factor that could be either, depending on circumstances.

In this context, the Arab Spring (1) (defined in the end of this article) emerged as an expression of the crisis in these relationships and showed that the Arab people are yearning to be active, not passive, participants, not spectators. However, the Arab Spring's repercussions have led to a situation of chaos upon which actors from outside the Arab World are capitalizing. Therefore, a high degree of mistrust has emerged towards external actors. In this situation, Arabs need to build their own capabilities as well as ensure a high degree of independence from foreign powers. Cooperation among themselves has become more needed than any other moment in their ancient history.

It is in this moment that Saudi Arabia seems to have taken the lead in the Arab world.

Thus, some of the criticism towards Riyadh can be attributed to the identity crisis experienced by the entire Arab world. This is because Riyadh's role is not based on a precise definition of the relationship between the individual and the group, nor that between the State and the people. For those who criticise Riyadh, any role that is not based on a precise definition of the abovementioned relationships must be regarded with suspicion.

Moreover, it is in light of the Arabs' mistrust of external actors that we can understand the unconditional support for Saudi Arabia's leadership. This is implicit in the assumption that the Arabs consider Riyadh as a strategic asset to the whole Arab nation.

This view is in accord with Riyadh, which views itself as a natural leader for the Arab and Islamic worlds. The Arab nation was born in the Souk Okaz (a literary, political, social and commercial annual event, dating back to several centuries before Islam, and that is still taking place next to the Saudi city of Taif), grew up in Dar al-Nadwa (a general

assembly of wise and experienced members of the Mecca community, which debated and decided on political, military, commercial and social matters) and went out to the nations with the Mu'allaqat (seven long Arabic poems that are considered the best work of the pre-Islamic era, and which used to be suspended on the walls of the Ka'ba). The Islamic nation was born in Mecca, grew up in Yathrib (Medina) and went out into the world from Saqifaht Bani Sa'idah (the name of the place where Abu Baker was sworn as head of the islamic nation after the death of the prophet).

Internal level

A general perception prevails inside and outside of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that King Salman's era represents a clean break with the old era. It cannot be known whether this perception is accurate or not without identifying areas of change, noting the Kingdom's position on women's rights as well as its alliance with political Islam, on the one hand, and how the State manages the country's economy, on the other hand.

Estrangement or extension?

Estrangement can be defined by three principles. First, the new era should have symbolic and material assumptions entirely different from the previous eras. Second, it must undo the previous era's work where it is non-compliant with its new assumptions. Third, new works, in accord with the new assumptions, must take place.

In the final analysis, any estrangement is a process of questioning, based on symbolic and material starting points, either directly or indirectly. In light of this definition, the meaning of extension can be described as not questioning the old assumptions.

Therefore, it is possible to review for test purposes two of the many points upon which the estrangement theory is based: the question of woman's rights and the alliance with political Islam in foreign policy.

The position on women issues is one of the most important features of the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz era, represented in the municipal elections law, which gave equal rights to women and men in voting and running for office. The municipal elections were organised in December 2015, representing political gains for women. Twenty women from various regions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia won in this election. In addition, the laws of the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Commerce related to women's employment and the circumstances and conditions of employment have not been modified under the new reign. Also there is no change in the allocation of twenty per cent of seats in the Shura Council (The Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia) for Saudi

women. In this regard, we can say that the reign of King Salman represents an extension of King Abdullah's reign.

The role of political Islam in Saudi Arabia's external alliances has shifted. After a period of fluctuation between confronting the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and standing up to Iranian expansionism, Riyadh gave absolute priority to confronting Iran. The Brotherhood became a potential ally. However, this is due to a context, rather than to an estrangement of some sort between King Salman's era and the previous one. With the emergence of the fourth Saudi State, Riyadh moved from a strategic posture of reaction into one of initiative and action. The arrival of the third generation of royal elites to the ranks of leadership, as well as the creation of the Allegiance Council, both symbolise the change in the nature and structure of power. (2) In addition, the transition of the global system from a unipolar system to a non-polar system has led to the absence of hierarchy between States. Traditional classification of allies or enemies no longer applies in the same way it used to do. The logic of existential threat has become dominant, which results in unprecedented aggressiveness and ferocity. (3) The reason for the shift in Riyadh's relationship with the Brotherhood (after giving priority to countering Iranian expansionism) is the beginning of the fourth Saudi State and the shift in the global system. Hence, there is no estrangement between the former and current eras.

Economy and State administration

State management, as represented by internal and external policy, has changed as a consequence of the emergence of the fourth Saudi State. These transformations and projects need a strategically supportive environment, such as a strong and productive economy and massive financial support. However, low oil prices have complicated the task of the State's apparatus in providing the needed support for both internal and external projects. From here, the State administration has taken a strategic importance. Efficiency of performance with fewer available resources has become a national security issue for Riyadh. Any failure in internal performance will reflect directly on the Kingdom's capabilities in ensuring its security as well as supporting its regional and international role.

Considering the transformations taking place regionally and globally, it is impossible for KSA to rely on the support of allies. This caused strategic planners in Riyadh to adopt the vision of 'last chance'. Any project initiated by Riyadh is managed as if there is no second chance, and no choice but to succeed because the country cannot rely on allies in the event of failure. This sense of existential threat is effective in concentrating the mind

and the capacities at hand, as Dr. Samuel Johnson observed. (4) Indeed, and as Lewis Gaddis argued, danger is a school for strategy. (5)

For the first time since the assassination of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz in 1975, the State administration has overcome 'theateritis', as George C. Marshall called it. (6) The term refers to the practice of a general who considers the needs of his own theatre of operations separately from the other generals and their operational needs, which hinders a holistic view of the war. Overcoming 'theateritis' can help us understand the abolition of the majority of the State's Supreme Councils and the resultant focus of all energy in just two chambers, the Council of Economic Affairs and Development and the Council of Security and Political Affairs. Although some analysts consider this to be a step with authoritarian dimensions, the shift in the strategic thinking that led to the concept of 'last chance' has led the State administration to consider the 'fragmentation of the theatre' as a barrier that must be done away with. From this standpoint we can understand the reason behind the establishment of these two chambers.

In light of the abovementioned, the new administration in Riyadh has adopted bold steps, both internally and externally: the 'decisive Storm' operation in its symbolic significance is the epitome of Saudi Arabia's strategic thinking, internally first and foremost, then externally.

Thus, one can understand the privatisation projects affecting sectors and companies, which have great importance not only for the Saudi economy, but also for the regional and global economy, such as the international energy giant Aramco.

The private sector has a major role in this. For the first time since the emergence of a national economy at the State level in 1953 (the moment of the State administration's unification under the authority of one Council of Ministers, after the abolition of the Council of Wakils and the transfer of the Legislative and Executive powers of the Shura Council to the new Council of Ministers), the private sector has become a foreign policy tool. This is particularly true, whether in terms of delivering the appropriate infrastructure to support Saudi Arabia's role regionally and internationally, or through its influence in Riyadh's foreign relations.

If we understand that these changes are primarily intended to provide a strong strategic environment for the State, to ensure its security and support its regional and global role, we could understand the directions of these economic changes. Riyadh has adopted an ambitious economic plan aiming to provide six million jobs in the next fifteen years and

to raise household income by seventy-five per cent, in order to keep up with population growth and the challenges of unemployment. This plan is based on targeting the rapidly generated revenues. That is because the intent is to build a strategic environment supporting Saudi Arabia's capabilities to ensure its security and support its role, hence the need for generous returns at the earliest possible opportunity.

In light of the above mentioned, we can understand the economic measures in the medium term, which aim firstly to strengthen the State's capacity. Riyadh's economic planners seem to be watching the results of this plan in order to devise long-term trends, which can focus on enhancing the quality of life for the individual in order to avoid having poor citizens under a wealthy State.

Regional level

Riyadh faces two challenges at the regional level: Iran and 'axes of alliances'. To deal with these two challenges, Riyadh adopted a two-tiered regional policy after King Salman took the reins of power in January 2015.

Relationship with Iran

There exists a fierce competition for regional hegemony between Riyadh and Tehran. This competition is a threat to Saudi Arabia. Iran seeks to dominate the traditional Saudi zones of influence, which poses a direct threat to its security. In addition to being a threat in itself, this Iranian quest for dominance represents a threat at another level, which is that of the tools Tehran uses to achieve its goals. These tools are those of 'non-State actors'.

By virtue of international sanctions and its regional and international isolation during the past three decades, Iran has been unable to fully exploit the instruments of the nation-State. To compensate for that, it resorted to creating and supporting non-State actors such as Hizbullah of Hijaz, Hizbullah of Kuwait, Hizbullah of Lebanon, the Badr Brigade and the Mukhtar Army in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen and many others. Iran builds its alliances with these actors based on sectarianism, which explains why all of them are of one specific branch of Islam. And thus sectarian identities must be emphasised in order for these non-State actors to be effective in recruitment and polarisation. At the same time, central governments must be weakened so that the 'non-State actor' can act and be operational. In the final analysis, Tehran's alliances with 'non-State actor' lead to: 1- a general atmosphere of sectarian conflict and instability, and 2- weak central

governments. This environment forms an ideal incubator for the expansion of extremist organisations, such as Daesh and al-Qa'ida. This poses a double challenge for Riyadh.

The policy of axes

The regional system before the outbreak of the Arab Spring was based on a dual-structure of axes: on the one hand, Riyadh and its allies, and Tehran, on the other. After the Arab revolutions began, political Islam emerged at the head of several States. That coincided with a growing Turkish influence and interest in the Arab and Islamic regions. Together with Qatar, Turkey formed an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, including some groups that took power through the ballot box in several Arab countries, such as Tunisia (Ennahda) and Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood). This alliance led to the emergence of a third axis, which posed numerous challenges to the Saudi axis, thus leaving Iranian expansionism unchecked. The latter was especially enhanced after its progress in nuclear negotiations with the West.

Riyadh's position after King Salman's arrival

The new ruling team in Riyadh has adopted a systematic approach that is focused on depriving Tehran of its major tool, which is essentially the 'non-State actor'. This includes intensifying the fight against the organisations described as extremist and terrorist, such as Badr Brigade, Daesh, the Houthis and al-Qa'ida. Riyadh originally supported centralised government structures across the region, and later it placed disputes with the Muslim Brotherhood aside. This has paved the way for the return of a regional order based on two axes. That has led to the manifestation of the Saudi-Qatari-Turkish rapprochement.

This is taking place in a broader international context where non-polarity is on the rise, leaving a vacuum in many parts of the world, including the Middle East. Hence, we can understand the Arab military coalition "Operation Decisive" Storm, the "Islamic Anti-Terrorism Coalition" and the "Saudi--Turkish Strategic Cooperation Council".

Operation Decisive Storm is a Saudi-led intervention, spearheading a coalition of nine Arab States, aimed at preventing Yemen from falling under Tehran's control by returning the Yemeni government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to power. Operation Decisive Storm aims, therefore, to prevent Yemen from becoming a new Iraq, where Tehran is the decision maker. Another significant aim of the operation is to restructure Yemeni State institutions, which includes restructuring the security institutions and integrating tribes into the State institutions as an integral part, rather than a parallel entity. Unlike the already-achieved first aim of not allowing Sana'a to be the 'fourth Arab

capital' to fall under Tehran's influence (after Beirut, Damascus and Bagdad, as highly placed Iranian officials have declared on numerous occasions), the second aim requires much time and effort.

Operation Decisive Storm can be compared with the start of the Marshall Plan in Europe, after which Stalin never regained the initiative in Europe, as George Kennan observed. Likewise, Operation Decisive Storm has paralysed Tehran's ability to take the initiative, thus weakening its strategic position.

On the other hand, Riyadh announced the formation of a Riyadh-based Islamic Anti-Terrorism Coalition on 15 December 2015. The idea of the coalition is not new, as the late Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, when he was Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, called on the United Nations (UN) to establish an international centre to combat terrorism. This call was made at the Counter-Terrorism International Conference held in Riyadh from 5 to 8 February 2005, with the participation of fifty-five countries and seven international organisations. (7) The centre came into effect in 2011, under the chairmanship of Riyadh's permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador Abdullah Al-Moalimi, after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia donated USD 100 million to it. (8)

The Islamic Coalition aims to set up a framework to counter terrorism, based on the protocol of exchanging intelligence information and direct communication between the relevant agencies in the member States. Riyadh plays a vital role in fighting terrorism through its intelligence capabilities and database. Hence, it is of interest to the coalition's member States to cooperate with Riyadh in order to take advantage of its capabilities and strengthen the chances of success. The coalition also aims to unify political, economic, media and cultural efforts. Although military action is not a priority of the coalition, it opens the way for military interventions under the umbrella of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

The coalition also has strategic objectives, as important as the practical ones, especially as Muslim and Arab countries still view terrorism as firstly, a threat to their security and interests and, secondly, an excuse for foreign interventions and invasions. Based on this, Riyadh believed the Islamic world had to take the initiative. The coalition, therefore, is a symbol for detaching Islam from terrorism. It also makes Muslim and Arab countries the sole legitimate power to intervene in the Arab and Islamic countries, as it is hard for foreign powers to intervene without prior cooperation with the coalition. The lack of cooperation would then be seen as a war on Islam rather than on terrorism.

There are many challenges facing the Islamic Coalition. Defining terrorism itself is a major challenge, since each country tends to define it in the way that best fits its interests and the nature of its regime. Thus, it would be very difficult for a member State to adopt an internal definition of terrorism that is different from the definition adopted in the joint framework of the coalition. In this regard, the coalition has to legitimise, at least theoretically, some sort of political opposition in the member States. For example, some member States do not consider the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group. Consequently, the coalition's member States have the right to recognise the Brotherhood as an opposition group. This limits the options for each member State's internal and foreign stances, as the coalition requires internal and foreign policies based on common platforms, such as a common definition of terrorism.

The Saudi–Turkish Strategic Cooperation Council, announced in Riyadh on 29 December 2015, can be viewed from a similar angle. Due to fundamental differences in the Saudi and Turkish political systems and disagreement on some regional issues, Saudi–Turkish cooperation is mainly based on neutralising the differences between the two sides and focusing on mutual benefits. (9) Therefore, the council represents an organised attempt to develop mechanisms to enable the two countries to neutralise disagreements and intensify work on possible areas of cooperation.

International level

As non-polarity rises, the international system is well prepared for chaos, as Zbigniew Brzezinski observed, with no dominant force or hierarchy. In addition, it will be quite hard to identify individual players as allies or rivals. Rather, relations will be selective, localised and circumstantial. (10) The Crimea crisis was the official start for this new system, as the Budapest Memorandum -- with guarantees from the major powers under which Ukraine's security was ensured in exchange for surrendering nuclear weapons -- proved practically worthless. Riyadh assimilated the Ukrainian lesson, which demonstrated that there is no substitute for self-reliance.

With the beginning of the fourth Saudi State and US disengagement, a shift in relations between Riyadh and Washington took place. This shift is characterised by two things: first, Saudi Arabia stepped up to be the first line of defence for its own security (not the US) and, second, cooperation between Riyadh and Washington moved from long-term cooperation to a short-term arrangement, limited to immediate operations based on an exchange of benefits. The deal between them has shifted from the former (oil for security) to a new strategic level (one deal at a time). On the one hand, any deal between the two countries will have a short-term expiration date. On the other hand,

once the deal has expired, negotiations are renewed for another deal with a new short-term validity date.

Conclusion

Understanding the realities of the internal situation represents an indispensable starting point for any analysis of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In this regard, there has been a shift in the nature and structure of power, occurring in light of regional and global transformations and numerous challenges. It is in this context that King Salman bin Abdulaziz came to power. His reign marks the starting point for bold steps related to the State's management, economically and politically, as well as several major strategic projects at the regional and global levels.

However, adequate media and cultural efforts have not accompanied the abovementioned shifts.

There exists a systematic and methodological hatred of Saudi Arabia in the West, and Tehran lobbies are working on its promotion, benefitting from two factors. The first is the rise of extreme right-wing parties and their racism against Muslims and Arabs. The second is the emergence of opportunities for major Western companies to enter the Iranian market after the nuclear agreement's signing in July 2015. Motivated by eagerness to benefit from this, these companies support certain groups that advocate shifting Western alliances from Riyadh to Tehran. The discourse of hatred of Saudi Arabia is part of this process.

To deal with this, there is a dire need for the Saudi media to be on the ground and reproduce the London experience as headquarter for Saudi newspapers. However, this time it has to include Paris and Madrid. The French thinking is very different from the British thinking. While there are Saudi journalists working in London, there is not an equal presence in Paris. Such initiatives in Paris mean a direct contact with the French culture and the Arab elites located there. And the same applies to Madrid, with all Spanish-speaking countries behind it.

With regard to cultural outreach, Saudi Arabia is profoundly under-represented. At a time when artists, musicians and philosophers from Iran are touring the capitals and cities of Europe as ambassadors of culture and civilisation, Saudi activities in London and Paris only target Gulf tourists there. The Saudi position on the cinema also hinders its role and prestige as the spiritual cradle of the Arab and Islamic Worlds and their leader. Importance must be accorded to individual performances, in music and theatre, art

exhibitions and cultural events, and screening of documentaries and films, all targeting the Western audience.

In addition, some issues have significant repercussions, such as preventing women from their right to drive. In any cultural or political debate, it is enough to recall that Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that prohibits women from driving. This reminder is equivalent in its negative impact to many years and billions of dollars in Iranian media campaigns against Riyadh. In addition, there are issues with regard to civil liberties. A media and cultural decisive storm is much needed.

It should be noted that facing Iranian expansionism is not only taking place in Yemen and Syria, but also in Berlin, Paris, Madrid, Rome, Washington, New York and Los Angeles. Building a cultural and media-friendly environment in the West is no less important than weapons contracts and joint military exercises, as well as sovereign investment funds.

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References

1- This paper adopts a specific definition of the Arab Spring. The latter is an expression of the crisis of a lack of definition of the relationship between the individual and the group, on the one hand, and between the people and the State, on the other hand. The existence of this crisis predates the start of the Arab Spring. Therefore, the Arab Spring's existence cannot be explained by this crisis only. There has to be another reason explaining the start of the Arab Spring at a specific moment in time. The other reason can be seen as a breakthrough based on the fall of one of the most important tools of governance for official Arabic institutions: the elite. The official institution justifies its presence on the concept of 'risk' (in two parts: the return of colonialism and the emergence of sedition, fitna). Any challenge to the role, which the institution attributes to itself regarding being the only actor to combat this risk, is dealt with mainly through the division of the fields in the public space (religious, cultural, sports, media, etc.). The political crisis happens, as argued by Michel Dobry, only when all fields rise simultaneously against the existing political order. Therefore, the official institution has two main objectives: preventing the challenge to its role in each field separately and preventing the simultaneousness of challenges. These two objectives become necessary for maintaining power. The official institution achieves that by first polarizing the 'elite', and second through creating windmills battles (fake battles) between fields and elites. In addition, the official institution presents itself as transcending all interests, setting up the elites as those responsible for any failure or crisis, so they are the focus of blame. The majority of the people is silent and subservient. The phenomenon of devotees and followers represents one sign of this silence. Moreover, the differences in the language of the religious elite versus that of the cultural elite provide an important evidence of the division between these two fields. For example, a member of the religious elites presents himself or his argument in a specific manner, which is different from that of a member of the cultural field. However, technical developments in the means of communication have first ended the State's monopoly on the media and the means of mobilisation. And second, they have worked to unify the language across fields. And third, the elites lost temporarily their capacity to influence. That is partially why the Arab Spring has no "leaders". Issues have become more and more presented as well as argued for in a general language used across fields. Mechanisms of mobilisation could now be presented in a meta-field language, thus allowing for a higher chance of cooperation and coordination across fields. Every person can express his/her views, or call for the overthrow of a regime, and everyone else, despite their fields, can hear and react to that call. Soon, however, the official institution found a way to cope. If

cooperation and mobilisation depend on political energy, then dispersing and depleting this energy becomes relevant. And therefore this becomes the institution's primary goal.

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