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Report

Saudi Defiance at UNSC Sends Multiple Messages

*Mansour Almarzoqi ALbogami**

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Abstract

Only a few hours after the announcement that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had won a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, the country refused the position, despite lengthy efforts to garner electoral support. This was the first time in the history of the UN that a founding member declined a UNSC seat, making it a surprising decision by Saudi Arabia on a multitude of levels.

This report analyses the context of this rejection, including the crisis in Saudi-US relations as a result of key issues in the region such as Egypt and Syria. The discussion also takes into account the recent warmer ties between the US and Iran, a key impetus for Saudi Arabia's decision. Finally, the US has adopted a new strategy which is labelled here as "sharing spoils and stakes," prompting Saudi Arabia to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy tone to protect its interests.

Introduction

On Thursday, October 17, 2013, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was elected to join the United Nations Security Council as a non-permanent member for a two-year term. However, hours after the announcement, the kingdom declined the position. The decision was taken even after a team of Saudi experts had already been trained in the Security Council's processes, including behind-the-scenes political manoeuvrings. Riyadh

had spent significant time and effort to garner support for its bid. Given that this was the first time a founding member of the UN rejected a Security Council seat meant the refusal was surprising on multiple levels. This paper will analyse the context of this decision, taking into consideration the following:

1. The crisis plaguing Saudi-US relations: This is related to a host of the region's key issues and is a key reason for Saudi's rejection of the UNSC seat.
2. US adoption of a new foreign policy strategy: Labelled here as "sharing the spoils and the stakes," the strategy is causing Saudi to follow a more aggressive tactic to safeguard its interests as well as increasing the potential for political manoeuvring and public confrontations.
3. The two goals of Saudi's rejection of the seat: First to test the potential room for disagreement with the US and gain significant public exposure, and second to signal major international players that Saudi Arabia is seriously attempting to forge strategic alliances unrelated to its historic alliance with Washington.

A Saudi Foreign Ministry statement announced and detailed the kingdom's rejection and its reservations about the UNSC, pointing to the UN's inability to make firm decisions to end conflicts that threaten international peace and security, particularly in the Arab world. (1) The statement particularly referenced the use of the veto by permanent members, hampering the council's role in maintaining global peace. Saudi Arabia is especially angered with the international body for providing Russia and China with the opportunity to consistently veto international intervention in Syria.

At first glance and in light of the UN Charter, the decision to reject a seat based on the justifications listed by the Kingdom seems to be rather baffling. Article 27 requires the "concurring votes of permanent members," thus granting these powers a veto. It becomes even more puzzling when one considers Saudi Arabia's previous work with and acceptance of the Security Council's veto by permanent members (US, UK, France, Russia and China). Therefore, a more in-depth analysis is required to reach conclusions not mentioned in the statement.

Saudi Arabia is fully aware of the UN's mode of operation, particularly given its founding member status and its role as a key player on regional and international levels. Further, Saudi experts have a full understanding of the balance of power in the international community, prompting observers to question why the kingdom is protesting at this time, after decades of notable engagement at the international level and its initial acceptance of the system in 1945. It also causes observers to wonder why the country campaigned so hard for the seat if it was only planning to reject it.

While there is speculation swirling around the rejection and many analysts expressing surprise at the decision, Saudi has signalled displeasure in recent history which should have made its recent move less surprising. For example, Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal refused to address the UN General Assembly's opening session in September 2013. Other indicators include the remarks of Saudi chief of intelligence and secretary general of its National Council, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, on the country's increasing frustration with the impotence of western countries, specifically the United States.

Crisis in Saudi-US relations

There are two key reasons for the current crisis in Saudi-US relations, each of them attached to their respective country's ambitions. In both cases, a shift in foreign policy and diplomacy strategies has meant a redefinition of their respective roles in the region.

A traditional diplomacy list includes neutralising threats, consolidating legitimacy and pursuing interests. Many argue the first item on the list is actually an interest, but the reality is that it is a question of cooperation-rich areas versus areas lacking the same level of cooperation between internal power centres.

Because power is shared on a large scale, cooperation and coherence tend to be most obvious on security issues, thereby creating an environment where security-oriented policies enjoy the delicate attention of almost all actors, with a visibly high degree of importance and effectiveness. And since one effective tool for ensuring or compromising security is legitimacy, legitimacy-oriented policies come second. This could partially explain why Saudi foreign policy in the past has tended to be more reactive than proactive. Due to Saudi Arabia's internal structural changes, this traditional list is very likely to be different in the near future, leading to a new tone in Saudi diplomacy.

From the US' standpoint, it has become very costly to maintain a presence around the world. In order to cut back costs, the US is pursuing what is labelled in this report as "sharing spoils and stakes" strategy, a new method of cooperation which involves finding competent regional and international players to partially replace its presence in exchange for sharing the spoils. This strategy comes at the expense of America's allies – for Saudi Arabia in relation to Iran, and for Europe in relation to Russia.

Both countries view the Arab Spring simultaneously as a threat and an opportunity, but they differ on the definitions of threat and opportunity, translating into divergent foreign

policies regarding Arab Spring countries such as Egypt and Syria. The same can be inferred about policies dealing with other key players in the Arab world such as Iran.

Egypt

Egypt is one such case in which foreign policy and diplomacy tactics used by the US and Saudi Arabia have differed. The kingdom views the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as problematic, while for the US the problem is simply avoiding a repeat of the 1979 Iranian political Islam. Saudi disapproves of the rise of Islamist parties such as the Brotherhood, a group they say "brought Islam from the prison to the throne." As a country dedicated to ruling by Islamic law (Shari'ah), democracy and personal freedoms are out of line with religion. The Brotherhood, then, is seen as a competitor that seeks to rule in the name of Shari'ah but still install a democratic political system. For Saudi, this is a symbolic crisis to which the US doesn't seem to be paying attention.

Saudi Arabia has worked extensively for the past three decades to build an anti-Iran front in the region with Egypt as its cornerstone. In that context, Riyadh views the Muslim Brotherhood's foreign policy as a threat because it believes Egypt has been pulled away from Saudi Arabia and closer to Iran. In a starkly different approach than the US, Saudi Arabia strongly supports military intervention which removed Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's democratically elected president.

Syria

Riyadh's anti-Iran front makes Syria a divergent issue between it and the US. The Kingdom views Syria as Iran's gateway to the Arab world, a key reason it is attempting to move Syria from Iran. Even western countries were unable to achieve that goal. Therefore, when the Syrian people began uprising, Saudi Arabia's hopes to cut Syria off from Iran were revived.

The US' unwillingness to provide the necessary intelligence and military support to the rebels against Bashar Assad stands in stark contrast to Saudi Arabia's support for and enthusiasm towards the Syrian revolution. In Riyadh's view, this lack of support extends the war in Syria, keeps the Assad regime in power for a longer period and makes the rebels more susceptible to extremism. Saudis had high hopes that a US strike on Syria would help terminate the regime after Assad's chemical weapons attacks against civilians, so Washington's change of heart was particularly frustrating for Riyadh.

Crisis of trust

Saudi Arabia's traditional diplomacy list is undergoing a change, reflecting a deeper change in the nature and structure of power. Coupled with the emergence of a new American strategy and in addition to Saudi Arabia's dismay with US policy on various regional issues, there seems to be a crisis of confidence between the two countries. This crisis has prompted the Kingdom to re-examine its ability to trust and depend on the United States.

While the US offers alternative assurances to its allies in Europe by deploying Patriot missiles to make up for accommodating Russian fears regarding the expansion of NATO to the east, it does not offer such alternative assurances to Saudi Arabia. From Riyadh's point of view, assurances should start and end with an anti-Iran front, negatively affected by the lack of US cooperation on the Syrian and Egyptian cases.

The new US strategy of "sharing spoils and stakes"

Since the cost of maintaining American presence around the world is extremely high, particularly under arduous economic conditions, the US has adopted a strategy of "sharing spoils and stakes," evident in its withdrawal from Iraq and its redeployment in Asia and Europe. Such a strategy means Washington will pursue an agreement with the strongest states in the region and those most capable of understanding and supporting US interests, with both parties sharing costs and benefits. Because this strategy is aimed at safeguarding its own interests, other players (such as Saudi Arabia) will be subjugated to those who will be most helpful to the US (such as Iran). Riyadh realizes this and has no choice but to adopt a more aggressive policy to defend its interests, particularly given internal power structure changes in the kingdom. The new strategy by Washington means warmer ties with Iran and insistence on seeking understanding with Iran, Russia and Europe in order to protect its interests.

The US' decision to abandon close allies such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak is a signal to states like Saudi Arabia that they can no longer rely on Washington's support. With the fragile state of the Arab world from the repercussions of the Arab Spring to the weakness of joint action, Saudi will now search for alternatives, including holding fast to its decision, leading to a higher probability of confrontation with the US.

Saudi Arabia began an alliance with the US in 1945 in order to offset Europe's colonial influence but now finds itself searching for alternatives to offset American influence (2) which has existed since the adoption of the oil-for-security deal. (3) Diplomatically

speaking, the kingdom now finds itself needing to take initiative and be proactive. Further, internal changes pave the way for this new dynamic. Riyadh's rejection of the seat should not be considered an attack on the Security Council, but rather a response to its perception of a vacuum in strategic security alliances, particularly given the US' adoption of the sharing spoils and stakes strategy.

The problem is that even if Saudi Arabia has plans to pursue a new strategy, the reality is it does not truly or readily have security alternatives in hand, particularly in the short and medium term. It is in the best interests of both parties – the US and Saudi Arabia – to attempt to find a mutually acceptable agreement. The US has expected its ally to understand its new positions without making efforts to protect Saudi interests, increasing tension between them.

Objectives of Saudi rejection of the UNSC seat

Saudi Arabia's unprecedented move in rejecting the Security Council seat has two main objectives which will be discussed in this section of the report.

1. To test the possible limitations of the range for disagreement with the United States

Inevitably, the US and Saudi Arabia will continue some form of cooperation; however, this move by the Kingdom sends a stern message to the US that its confidence has been shaken in its strategic ally. The point of this message is to identify the length to which they may disagree, the means which will be applied to manage it and the new direction which the alliance will take.

As things stand, a number of scenarios could unfold. Saudi Arabia may re-evaluate its rejection and accept the seat, but the impetus for public disagreement would have already been put in motion, emboldening Riyadh to continue to oppose its greatest ally on controversial issues. Public disagreements may continue between the two countries on Syria, US-Iran alliances and Egyptian military rule, causing embarrassment to both sides and affecting their strategic relationship.

Countries such as France have expressed their understanding of Saudi frustration. France's permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador Gerard Araud, commented that his country believed Saudi Arabia would be a positive addition to the UNSC but that Paris understood the circumstances which had pushed Riyadh to take that stand. Russia, however, commented that the rejection was strange. These differing opinions and the

reality that the UNSC has repeatedly been unable to perform its duty of maintaining world peace and security means the crisis may increase the controversy over the need to reform the Security Council – a controversy which has been ongoing since 1965. (4)

2. To attract attention of major international players, including the US, to Saudi Arabia's serious attempt at creating strategic alliances outside of its historic one with Washington

There is a strong possibility that Riyadh will expand its alliances to other countries, which may in turn pressure the US to find a simpler process to smooth over issues of contention. Riyadh will fill any security vacuums left by US policies with serious attempts to expand alliances. (5)

Conclusion

This report has explained how changes in Saudi's power structure are currently reflected in the evolution of its foreign policy from a reactive to a proactive approach. A strategic and more aggressive form of diplomatic action has been the Kingdom's response to the US' "sharing of spoils and stakes" strategy. Riyadh's rejection of the UNSC seat serves two purposes – first to test the room for public disagreement with the US and second to signal the Kingdom's seriousness in pursuing new alliances aside from their historic one with Washington.

* *Mansour Almarzoqi ALBogami is a researcher specialising in the Gulf.*

Endnotes

(1) Statement by Saudi Foreign Ministry, 18 October 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-ministry-foreign-affairss-statement-security-council-membership-october-2013/p31667> .

(2) M.A. Albogami, "Al alaqat al saudiyah al faransiyah fi sharq awsat mutaghayer (Saudi-French Relations in a Changing Middle East)," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 1 August 2013, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2013/07/2013731832371777.htm> .

(3) R. Vitalis (2007) *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi oil frontier*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

(4) E.R.H. Wirkola (2008) "Reform of the UN Security Council and Veto Player Theory," MA dissertation: University of Oslo.

(5) Albogami (2013), <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2013/07/2013731832371777.htm> .

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