

## Position Paper

### King Salman's Priorities: Revamping Alliances to Stop Iranian expansion

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**Curbing Iranian expansion is one of King Salman's priorities [AFP]**

### Abstract

Immediately after Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz passed, his successor, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, made successive major decisions affecting key positions in the structure of the political system. It appeared that Salman was restructuring the government entirely. Naturally, numerous questions have been raised about whether the major changes in the structure of rule and government will be associated with parallel changes in Saudi foreign policy. If there has been a serious incident that set off warning bells in Saudi Arabia over the past few months, it has undoubtedly been the events in Yemen, where the Houthis have seized control of most of the north and thus opened the country's doors to Iranian influence. The Saudis' response, Operation Decisive Storm, are further evidence of Saudi's changing priorities, but it is too early to make extreme predictions on the impact of these changes on specific regional issues and policies.

### Introduction

The death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz was announced on 22 January 2015. Immediately, then Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz was declared the new king of Saudi Arabia. Within hours and during the morning of Friday, 23 January, typically the Kingdom's official weekend, the state-run television station announced thirty-four royal decrees and ministerial edicts. They included what was described as a complete transformation in the structure of Saudi Arabia's government. Under the decisions, which seem to have been prepared in the few days when the late king's health had deteriorated, Muhammad bin Nayef, the minister of interior, was appointed deputy crown prince, and Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud was appointed minister of defence and head of the royal court. Large-scale changes in the membership of the cabinet and the list of governors across the country were also made.

However, the most significant changes announced were the dissolution of the specialised councils, which were established in the previous era and had become a parallel cabinet, and the setting up of two major councils with a mandate to put forward strategic policies and oversee their implementation. The first is the Political and Security Affairs Council, which is headed by Muhammad bin Nayef and comprises the ministers of security and military affairs and foreign affairs, in addition to the intelligence chief. The second is the Economic and Development Council, which is chaired by Mohammad bin Salman and includes all other ministers. The announcement indicated that the two councils will play a major role in government affairs in the next phase, under the supervision and guidance of the king.

Over the following weeks, Salman made a series of major decisions that affected the second row of positions and officials, as if restructuring the government entirely. Naturally, numerous questions have been raised about whether the major changes in the structure of the rule and government will be associated with parallel changes in Saudi foreign policy. As Salman has changed most officials of the previous administration, will he also change the foreign policies of the previous administration? These questions are being raised as a result of the unprecedented steps taken by the current administration, which were unusual compared to traditional Saudi foreign policy and the steps taken by the late king's administration, especially with regard to Arab and regional policies. This paper provides a preliminary analysis of the shifts in Saudi foreign policy during King Salman's reign in an effort to explore its main features.

### **The double weight of the Kingdom's regional status and role**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was officially established in September 1932, although most of the country was already under the control of the capital Riyadh and the rule of the first king, Abdulaziz Al Saud (Ibn Saud). The new Kingdom played a major role in the Arab region from the beginning, even before the discovery of oil and the provision of a fiscal surplus for its rulers. Since the independence of the Arab states, the Kingdom has been considered – along with Egypt, Iraq and Syria in the Levant, and Algeria and Morocco in the Maghreb – a country with major influence in Arab decision-making processes, whether during periods of understanding and solidarity among Arab states or during periods characterised by division and conflict. Over the past four years, the Kingdom's influence and role have doubled as a result of the Arab Spring, which caused massive domestic turmoil in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, and a continuous decline in the role of Egypt and its ability to act.

Abdullah's administration used the Kingdom's growing influence in an entirely different way than in the past. Throughout most of its history, except for a short period during the reign of King Faisal, Saudi Arabia's policies in the Arab world had been characterised by

a great deal of pragmatism, keenness not to interfere in Arab affairs, efforts to maintain the stability of Arab countries and foster their solidarity, and support for Palestinian rights. However, the late king's administration moved away from this pragmatism, especially in dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly after the Arab revolutions paved the way for the rise of political Islam. Although it dealt with the revolutions in Libya, Yemen and Syria with pragmatism, the Kingdom displayed an obvious fear of democratic transformation in the Arab region generally, and adopted an anti-revolution and anti-Muslim Brotherhood policy in Egypt.

The late king's administration adopted a supportive stance towards the counter-revolutionary forces in the Arab region and against the rise of Islamists to power in Egypt, though it was based on votes. This was strange, not only because the Muslim Brotherhood's rise was the result of the popular vote in the elections, but also because Riyadh took an unusual stance in favour of the July 2013 coup regime, despite the clear division it caused in Egypt and the bloody measures taken by the regime to end the protests in Rabaa and Ennahda squares in August 2013. The anti-Islamist attitude reached its peak with the publication of the Saudi terror list on 6 March 2014, which declared the Muslim Brotherhood, who had always enjoyed warm relations with the Kingdom, along with other forces and groups, as terrorist organisations. Meanwhile, Riyadh did not object to the Fatah-led Ramallah government's attitudes against the Hamas movement in Palestine or to the blockade imposed by the Egyptian regime on the Gaza Strip. In this way, the Kingdom shifted away from its usual tradition of defending the rights of the Palestinians.

The fact that the Kingdom has given top priority to addressing revolutionary movements and change in the Arab world, and to countering the forces of political Islam, has created a climate of tension and division within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and led to a loss of allies for the Kingdom inside the Sunni political Islamic movement. Consequently, Iran has taken advantage of this confusion in Saudi policy and expanded its influence in an unprecedented way, not only in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, but also in Yemen. As a result, the Kingdom has been forced to bear a significant financial burden to support allied Arab regimes, especially in Egypt. This also sparked internal criticism as many Saudis realised that their country had moved away from its traditions and legacy. However, since the accession of King Salman, the new administration's regional and Arab policies indicate that they may differ significantly from those of the late king.

### **Indicators of change in the Kingdom's foreign policy**

The first indicator of change in the Salman administration's policies was the visit of Muhammad bin Nayef – the deputy crown prince, chairperson of the political and security affairs council, and interior minister – to Doha on 11 February 2015, which was



his first visit abroad since taking office. During the past few years, Doha–Riyadh relations have been characterised by a degree of tension, especially regarding attitudes towards Sisi’s government in Egypt, with Riyadh exerting increasing pressure on Doha in order to shift its stance on the Egyptian regime.

Therefore, Muhammad’s visit was considered an indication of the keenness of the Salman administration to prioritise strengthening GCC solidarity, regardless of differences on other Arab issues. It also meant that supporting the Egyptian regime is no longer a top priority in Riyadh. In the following days, Riyadh received GCC leaders or their representatives, starting with the Emir of Kuwait on 15 February. Remarkably, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, was given a special reception, and spent an eventful day of formal and informal meetings, upon his arrival in Riyadh on 17 February.

Two days after the official visit of Sheikh Tamim to Riyadh, on 19 February, from the headquarters of GCC Secretariat-General in Riyadh, Secretary-General Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani issued a strongly worded statement in response to statements made by an Egyptian diplomat in which he accused Qatar of supporting terrorism. Given the role of Saudi Arabia in the GCC Secretariat-General, many assumed that Al Zayani could not have issued such a statement without the approval of Saudi Arabia. Later the same day, Al Zayani issued another statement in which he stressed the close ties between the GCC and Egypt, without referring to his previous statement. It is believed that the second statement was issued to contain the angry reaction of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the first one.

Since the beginning of March, Salman has received Arab and Muslim officials, whose motive clearly has not only been to meet the new King and congratulate him, but also to identify future political trends in the Kingdom under his leadership. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi made a brief visit to Riyadh on 2 March, after which Egypt issued a unilateral statement. Egypt stated that the two parties had discussed bilateral relations and that Sisi called for the formation of a joint Arab military intervention force. However, Saudi did not issue a statement on the visit, and the Egyptian statement did not clarify whether the Saudis had approved the proposed force.

On the next day, 3 March, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Riyadh on an official visit to the Kingdom, after spending two days performing Umrah and visiting the city of Madinah. The Saudi and Turkish sides held two lengthy sessions of talks, with the second confined to a limited number of officials. In addition to King Salman, both Muhammad bin Nayef and Mohammad bin Salman participated in the talks. Media reports hinted that the two countries had agreed completely on Syria and Yemen, and about the dangers that Iran's unremitting expansion posed to the security and stability

of the region. They also agreed to explore the possibility of setting up a strategic council to bolster bilateral relations, similar to the joint strategic council between Turkey and Russia. However, the two sides differed on their assessment of the Egyptian situation.

In parallel with this series of meetings, there have been reports of contact between the leadership of the Kingdom and Khaled Meshaal, the head of the political bureau of Hamas, for probably the first time in years. These reports even indicated Saudi invited Meshaal to Riyadh. Moreover, the Kingdom took a firm stance on the development of the situation in Yemen, emphasising the legitimacy of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and calling for Yemeni dialogue in Riyadh, a position endorsed during a meeting of GCC foreign affairs ministers. This was followed by the transfer of GCC ambassadors to Yemen from Sana'a to Aden, which President Hadi announced as an interim capital of the country. Also, reports hinted that Saudi provided tangible support to Yemeni tribes in the strategic governorate of Ma'rib that opposed the Houthis expansion. On 23 March, the Kingdom then warned, in a statement made by Saud Al Faisal, the foreign minister, of the use of force if the Houthis continued their coup against Yemeni President Hadi and sought to impose their authority on the rest of Yemen by force. Operation Decisive Force started mere days later, with Saudi leading a coalition of ten countries in air attacks on the Houthis.

On 10 March, Salman delivered a comprehensive speech in which he outlined the main features of his administration's policy. Observers noted that most of the speech focused on domestic affairs. The king keenly emphasised his commitment to the fundamentals upon which the Kingdom had been established, especially regarding adherence to Islamic sharia. On external affairs, Salman echoed the traditional Saudi rhetoric. He emphasised Palestinian rights and the Kingdom's commitment to supporting the Palestinian people, and stressed the need for Arab and Islamic solidarity.

On 13 March, despite the fact that observers of the Egyptian situation noted Salman's absence at the Egypt Economic Development Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh (the conference had been called for by late king Abdullah), Deputy Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz represented his country. In his speech at the conference, Prince Muqrin said that Saudi Arabia would support the Egyptian economy with five billion US dollars, of which one billion would be deposited at the Central Bank of Egypt (i.e. as an interest-free loan). However, Muqrin did not mention the duration of the interest-free deposit, nor did he give any specific details about the other four billion US dollars, including whether they would be in the form of oil, grants or investments. He also did not specify the time period in which the support would be provided. Indeed, the absence of King Salman from the conference and questions surrounding the nature of the promised support clearly indicate that the enthusiasm of the Salman administration for the 3 July regime in Egypt does not match that of the previous one.

## Where is Saudi foreign policy really heading?

General determinants of the foreign policy of the King Salman's administration

If there has been a serious incident that set off warning bells in Saudi Arabia over the past months, it has undoubtedly been the events in Yemen, where the Houthis now control most of the north and have thus opened the country's doors to Iranian influence.

Despite its move to reopen the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad, the Salman administration cannot ignore the fact that Iran has dominated Iraqi decision-making and increased its influence in the Iraqi state. Iran also has the upper hand in Syria and Lebanon, either directly or through allies. A number of those who have met with King Salman have reported that he continuously referred to the threat posed by Iran's continuous expansion in the Arab region, and here lies the crucial shift in Saudi policy. In other words, confronting the risks of Iran's expansion has become a top priority of Saudi policy.

This priority requires strengthening intra-GCC relations, especially in light of the absence of key Arab states in the current power balance. It also requires improving relations with Turkey and Pakistan, as well as a wider mobilisation of regional allies, both at the level of the state and of political forces. Nonetheless, it is necessary to avoid exaggerating the scope of change that will result from shifting Saudi priorities on specific Arab and regional files.

GCC countries do not only provide the necessary cover for Saudi Arabian policy but are also a source of additional force and influence, especially in countries with multiple crises, such as Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Pakistan plays a crucial role in preventing Iran's expansion eastward and may play a role in the development of Saudi Arabia's nuclear capabilities, when the need arises. Meanwhile, Turkey can play a very important role in containing Iranian influence in Iraq, and in pushing the Syrian crisis in the direction desired by Riyadh. Certainly, Saudi Arabia needs strong Arab popular support for its policies in the coming period; an Arab movement cannot provide this support in the way that the Islamic movement can offer. In some areas, such as in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya, the Kingdom can help the general Islamic movement to make a significant change in the power balance, weaken extremist Islamic groups and prevent them from expanding. This likely means that the new Saudi administration will ignore select Islamic groups featured on its 2014 terror list and open the doors for closer cooperation with forces such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and al-Islah in Yemen.

On the other hand, Riyadh's keenness to strengthen GCC unity and enhance Saudi-Qatar rapprochement does not necessarily mean that Saudi relations with the UAE will turn upside down. Most likely, the specificity which has characterised Saudi-UAE relations over the past three or four years has come to an end but will not eventually

turn to hostility or tension. Similarly, the restoration of warmth in Saudi relations with the Sunni political Islamic movement, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, does not mean that Riyadh will adopt an approach to overthrow the Egyptian regime. There is no ideological rationale for continuing an anti-Sunni political Islamic movement policy. Further, the Salman administration does not consider the Sisi regime in Cairo to be an Arab priority, and any shift towards improved relations with the Sunni political Islamic movement would not translate into a hostile attitude towards the Egyptian regime.

The Salman administration must be aware that the army has always been the main force in Egypt's governing system and that Sisi is merely its representative. This means that nothing significant has changed in Egypt, and what is important for the time being is to preserve what is left of Egypt's security and stability. In light of the deteriorating conditions of a number of Arab countries, with some heading into civil war, the collapse of Egypt will make it difficult, if not impossible, to restore stability in the Arab region. In other words, Riyadh–Cairo relations are determined by the future of Egypt and not the future of Sisi. Moreover, the democratisation process is not a favourite target of the Saudi monarchy.

Although Saudi-US relations have always been closely related to Saudi's Arab and regional policies, they are surrounded by a degree of vagueness today. On one hand, there are expectations that negotiations over the Iranian nuclear programme are moving towards an agreement and that such a deal will certainly reflect the US' attitude on Iran's regional expansion. Truthfully, the impact of negotiations with Iran on US policy in the Arab world has already begun, notably in the unwritten alliance between Washington and Tehran in Iraq, and in the keenness of the Obama administration not to anger the Iranians in Syria or Yemen. Clearly, Riyadh must have noticed the significant decline of the US' role in the Middle East since the beginning of the Obama era. Consequently, the decline of the US' role and the potential risks of an agreement about the Iranian nuclear programme have obliged Saudi Arabia to become less dependent on the US as an ally, and to move towards building a greater, more effective and more active regional alliance.

On the other hand, it is not easy for Riyadh, after decades of a very special alliance, to turn its back on Washington. In addition, the military and security structure of the Saudi state was not established to undertake a role independent from its US ally. This, perhaps, is one of the biggest dilemmas faced by the Salman administration, and its resolution will play a major role in determining the future of Saudi Arabia's other regional relations.



In other words, undoubtedly, the list of Saudi priorities is changing, but it is necessary to avoid making extreme predictions on the impact of this shift on specific Arab and regional policies. Even Saudi Arabia's growing concern over Iranian expansion does not necessarily mean that Riyadh has finally given up on the option of negotiating with Tehran. There are indications of a change in Saudi's internal political map and its system of governance. With regard to foreign policy, the changes will be less noticeable and more cautious, and their features will take some time to fully develop.

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