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Report

Saudi Arabia and its neighbours: A troubled relationship

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Saudi Arabia will not avoid the consequences of its foreign policy unless it becomes more dependent on diplomacy and dialogue and recognises the right of independent states to make decisions that will not always reflect Saudi policy [EPA]

Introduction

The crisis between Saudi Arabia and its allies on the one hand, and Qatar on the other, is one factor, though perhaps not the final, in a series of critical Saudi interactions with its smaller Gulf neighbour.⁽¹⁾ The current intractable crisis emerged abruptly on 23 May 2017, but accelerated gradually, as was evident in the days immediately following the hacking of the Qatar News Agency website. This may not be the end of these difficult interactions, but rather an extension of an existing Saudi foreign policy. This has recently been revived in a more negative way, in large part due to the promotion of the young and inexperienced Mohammad bin Salman to Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia.⁽²⁾ This report discusses the fundamentals and rules of Saudi foreign policy that allow the kingdom to adopt attitudes that may be seen as arrogant towards its neighbours. The current dispute is just one in a persistent pattern, and a chronic problem, relating to Saudi-Gulf relations more generally. The crisis with Qatar is another episode from a series of disputes arising from political rivalry in the region.

The fundamentals of Saudi-Gulf policy

Regional policy is based on key pillars and assumptions that form understandings of a country's foreign relations. Hence, we must define the foundations of the Saudi relationship with its Gulf neighbours, as dictated by Saudi Arabia, as a comprehensive framework that characterises relations between these countries.

We must go beyond the official discourse that portrays Saudi Arabia as a country keen on Gulf cooperation through a shift to a true union – a failed initiative launched by the late King Abdullah.⁽³⁾ We must look further than Saudi Arabia's insistence on integration

among the six countries that have founded and participated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),(4) established in 1981.

Looking at the historical realities, we observe moments of cooperation and others of confrontation. We can also establish the foundations and concepts underlying Saudi Arabia's relations with the Gulf states beyond the official image of constant cooperation. We can identify six pillars the kingdom's policy towards the Gulf depends on:

- **The importance of religious symbolism**

The Saudi regime believes that their role as a Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina is an important card in dealing with other countries in the Gulf region and beyond. Due to this holy geography, the Saudi regime considers itself empowered to lead, first, the region around the Arabian Peninsula, second, the Arab world, and third, the rest of the Islamic world. They consider themselves as a force that the West and others should regard as the foremost leader of the Islamic world.

Thus, the Saudi regime uses the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques to promote itself as preeminent in terms of religious significance. This also makes them preeminent in terms of political importance. Here, we find a shift from religious symbolism to a kind of politics that includes variations, competing interests, and deals. It may not be a successful bet to involve sacred matters in political conflicts, but Saudi foreign policy expects others to deal with them by imposing on others politically what is imposed on them religiously. This leads to the intertwining of the sacred with the profane. Policies may have negative consequences on Saudi Arabia's external relations because they are based on the premise of the Islamic states' surrender to its political will as well as its religious leadership.

- **Inherited symbolism**

Saudi Arabia is the cultural heart of the Arab world. Arab tribes, especially those in the Gulf, have roots that extend into the depths of the Saudi kingdom. From a tribal perspective, it considers itself the basis of societies whose origins are from the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. This understanding of alleged and actual Arab origins leads to a feeling of superiority stemming from the Saudi belief that it is the origin and others are the branches. This may tarnish Saudi Arabia's regional relations with its neighbours at certain moments, as recently when the al-Shaykh family (referring to Shaykh Mohammed bin Abdulwahab), the family associated with Saudi Wahhabism, issued a statement denying the tribal link between them and the rulers of Qatar.(5) This statement reflected a Saudi position that is prepared to sow political conflict in tribal relations, thus fuelling a conflict based on historical differences rather than one rationally based on contemporary politics.

Exploitation of the discourse of tribal origins, and its use as a weapon against those with whom the Saudi regime disagrees, reflects the underlying concept behind Saudi Arabia's vision of relations with its Gulf neighbours.

- **Central geography**

The kingdom is not only the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula, but also in the Arab world, as its borders extend towards Jordan and Iraq to the north and Yemen to the south. Based on this geographical scale, Saudi Arabia considers itself a pivotal centre on which other countries must respect it. This relates particularly to the smaller Gulf states which are small in size and far less populous than Saudi Arabia. This has been particularly evident in the manner in which former Saudi officials speak about Qatar. Former Saudi intelligence chief, Turki bin Faisal, described it not as a country, but as a family of 300,000 people. Hence, the Saudi view of the citizens of other Gulf countries and their geographies, which are similar to that of Qatar, indicates why Saudi Arabia deals with Gulf countries this way.

- **Economic wealth**

The Saudi economy is considered the largest in the Arab and Gulf region due to its oil resources, market size and purchasing power. However, the Saudi regime does not consider Gulf economic integration important unless it is under Saudi control and in line with its interests. Thus, integration is unacceptable, and other countries should accept the economic dependence as Saudi Arabia decides. This has been the expectation since 2014 when Saudi Arabia refused to decrease its oil production after prices collapsed in order to maintain its market share. This refusal was made without concern for the repercussions on the economies of its Gulf neighbours, especially those more affected by falling oil prices. This single economy's interests have dominated those of small countries in the Gulf system. The Saudi regime proposed a Gulf single currency system, like the European euro, and insisted that the Saudi capital be the headquarters of the proposed Gulf bank. However, the United Arab Emirates objected, which led to the proposal's final collapse.

- **Military ambition**

Saudi Arabia is the Gulf's military centre. All military and security cooperation initiatives must be based on Riyadh's patronage, position and leadership. This belief is based on Saudi Arabia's conviction that its military is the largest in the Gulf, as well as its spending on military modernisation imports,⁽⁶⁾ which are among the largest not only in the Gulf, but globally.

The Saudi approach to military cooperation in the Peninsula Shield Force's system, security agreements, and regional military alliances has become clear after the GCC's establishment. Riyadh will not accept a joint military system unless it is under its own

leadership. This was the situation that emerged in Yemen when it brought together a Gulf, Arab and Islamic military alliance to launch the War in 2015.

- **Regional leadership**

The Saudi regime is the main axis of dialogue with global power structures on behalf of smaller Gulf states. This has been clearly demonstrated by the Saudi-US relationship regarding the Gulf and Arab regions. Riyadh will not accept independent foreign relations outside the framework it has outlined for Gulf communications with other states. This has led to a clash with Gulf states who have initiated direct lines of contact with the United States without Saudi permission. For example, the Omani decision to initiate the US-Iranian negotiations that led to the nuclear agreement under the Obama administration angered Riyadh. This was because Oman adopted a policy of dialogue rather than confrontation with Iran, paving the way for independent relations with the United States. Saudi Arabia considered this to be against its policy of dealing firstly with the United States and secondly with its enemy Iran.

Tentative gains

These pillars have enabled Saudi Arabia to achieve some success in extending its hegemony by imposing decisions on the Gulf states. They have also contributed to its success in exploiting the Gulf states during various stages of internal or regional weakness.

This is illustrated by situations in two Gulf states: Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion and the Gulf crisis in 1990, and Bahrain after the outbreak of the revolution during the Arab uprisings of 2011.

- **The peaceful model**

In the case of Kuwait, Riyadh was able to restrict its foreign policy decisions because of the political debt that the small emirate owed to the Saudi regime during periods of Iraqi aggression. In addition, Kuwait's dependence on Saudi Arabia formed a strong bond that enabled it to regain its presence on the map as an independent state. Kuwait has been constrained by this debt, especially in regional affairs, although it has a long history of political activity due to its vibrant civil society, elected parliament and established constitutional institutions. However, Kuwait was able to resist Saudi Arabia on the issue of the Khafji oil field, for example. It has also adopted a unique foreign policy in important areas, such as its relationship with Iran, where it maintained its diplomatic representation despite Saudi Arabia cutting ties with Tehran in 2016. Kuwait has also pursued a largely independent policy towards Iraq characterised by a rapprochement with Iraq.

However, the small emirate was unable to regain its full strength for more than two decades after its conflict with Iraq. It has always attempted to use peaceful diplomacy to avoid provoking Riyadh with conflicting decisions. If it wants to avoid Riyadh, it plays the role of mediator in the crises of Saudi Arabia with its other Gulf neighbours, which is what is happening in the current Qatari–Saudi–Emirati crisis.

- **Dependency model**

Bahrain is absolutely dependent on Saudi Arabia because of the Bahraini government's internal fragility after the events of 2011, when a political schism and a social and sectarian divide occurred between the leadership and its people. Saudi Arabia exploited this divide and brought Bahrain under its influence without much effort. This caused Bahrain to lose its independence in political decision-making, and increased its dependence on financial aid from Saudi Arabia.

In these two examples, we find that Saudi Arabia succeeded in one way or another in establishing potentially problematic relationships. This is because it depends not on equality, but rather on dependency to ensure its hegemony over smaller countries who are in need of security and economic support.

Failures of dependency

These firm foundations, which we have defined as a framework for the nature of Saudi–Gulf relations, cannot establish true Gulf unity, but only ever a limited unity based on the concept of subordination to an 'older sibling' under the slogans of Gulf cooperation and consensus. Thus, the foundations of this relationship result in continuous tensions that surface, and are then contained. However, recent factors may make Saudi–Gulf crises a continuously recurring situation, as demonstrated in the last few years. This links strongly with internal Saudi politics, especially following the ascension of a person who has no experience or political sense. Such a person may recklessly defeat Gulf unity, leading to the collapse or marginalisation of the GCC at the expense of bilateral alliances such as the current Saudi–Emirati alliance.

Historically, there have been failures. Most important were the border disputes that formed the centre of the Saudi–Gulf conflicts, beginning with the demarcation of borders in the 1920s between Kuwait and then Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman – all of which centred around oil, its location and how to use it. To resolve disputes, Saudi Arabia resorted to the concept of land ownership based on the identity of tribes living in the area, and their historic loyalty.

In addition to the conflict over economic resources, there have been other, more dangerous conflicts, such as tribal disputes and the spread of populations across Gulf

borders. The latter was recently portrayed as part of a foreign agenda, formerly British and later followed by US oil interests.

Among the failures of Saudi-Gulf policy is the intensification of continuing crises with some countries such as Qatar, which took a contrary approach to that of Saudi Arabia when dealing with the Arab revolutions in 2011.

Qatari media policy opposed that of the Saudis, which favoured counter-revolutionary approaches in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere. The clash between Qatar and Saudi Arabia was inevitable, especially in light of the aforementioned Saudi-Gulf policies.

The second case was Oman, which pursued a policy remote from Saudi Arabia's. This led to cold bilateral relations that have not yet reached the same point of rupture as the Saudi-Qatari situation, although relations between the two neighbours have never been strong. Historically, Saudi Arabia did not consider Oman an Islamic state; their mufti did not recognise the Ibadi doctrine practiced in Oman as an Islamic doctrine.⁽⁷⁾ This led to a religious clash behind the scenes, fuelled by the Saudi religious establishment. After overcoming this religious crisis, the conflict shifted to the situation in Iran, where Oman distanced itself from the pro-conflict Saudi position. The Sultanate preferred covert dialogue, which it sponsored and facilitated between the United States and Iran.

From dependency to equality

Under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia appears to be more aggressive in its positions than its Gulf neighbours. Instead of the Gulf consensus it used to advocate as a sponsor of unity and cooperation, it favours a zero-sum game in its relations with the Gulf countries based on the principle of being either with it or against it.

This zero-sum game leads to an imbalanced relationship based on the principle of hegemony rather than equality. Hence, the prospects and scenarios of the next stage will be dangerous not only for the smaller Gulf states, but also for the entire Arab region for various reasons.

The decline of diplomatic discourse and the adoption of confrontation, militarisation and siege on countries considered by the Saudis to be troublemakers will be detrimental to the peace and social fabric of the Gulf. Riyadh has forced Gulf citizens into political conflict through orders such as the deportation of citizens to their native countries during crises. This is an arbitrary act against human rights and migrants. However, it is not surprising as Saudi Arabia previously deported hundreds of thousands of Yemenis to their country after Ali Abdullah Saleh, then president of Yemen, sided with Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War in 1990.

In the new Saudi era, money may be considered a more important card than diplomacy, and may be used to buy loyalty. However, even if it benefits Gulf countries like Bahrain that need Saudi financial support, its efficiency is limited with a rich country such as Qatar. Saudi Arabia will not avoid these tactics in its foreign policy unless the policies and rules of foreign relations change. They will only find alternatives if they become more dependent on diplomacy and dialogue, and recognise the right of independent states to make decisions that will not always reflect Saudi policy.

Therefore, the principles of Saudi foreign policy are a danger to the region. Simply because, they ignore an important consideration: the sovereignty of other countries .and the principle of equality. These principles are key to establishing a Gulf region safe from recurrent conflicts that can result from ambition without political wisdom.

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References

- (1) To understand Saudi foreign policy from an official perspective, see <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/KingdomForeignPolicy/Pages/ForeignPolicy24605.aspx>.
- (2) Al-Rasheed discusses the changes in leadership in Saudi Arabia in an article entitled, 'Four ways Mohammed bin Salman's rise will change Saudi Arabia', <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/salman-s-kingdom-royal-reshuffle-brings-young-mohammed-so-close-throne-1057438643>.
- (3) King Abdullah (2005–2015) raised the issue of the transition from Gulf cooperation to a strong alliance, but the proposal did not achieve a Gulf consensus. Oman stood against it and was received coldly in Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar; however, Bahrain received it positively for internal reasons, when demonstrations broke out there in 2011. See El Gamal, Rania (2013). 'Saudi call for Gulf Arab union faces hurdles at summit', Reuters, 9 December. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-suit-strains-idUSBRE9B811E20131209>.
- (4) Al-Rasheed, Madawi (2010). A History of Saudi Arabia. Cambridge University Press.
- (5) Including inherited relationships in political conflict is a phenomenon that emerged clearly during the Saudi–Qatari crisis. See (2017). 'The family of the Sheikh: the relation of a Gulf prince to our family is a lie and a fabrication', Al Arabiya, 28 May. <https://goo.gl/cb4Dqo>.
- (6) Saudi military spending is the highest in the world and is always rising. See <http://www.janes.com/article/66555/saudi-arabia-reveals-6-6-defence-spending-rise-for-2017>.
- (7) On Saudi Arabia's relationship with Oman, see the book by Madawi al-Rasheed (2010). A history of Saudi Arabia. To view the full file, click here.