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Report

Saudi Arabia alters its foreign policy on various fronts: Why now?

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The change of Saudi foreign policy will either save itself from itself or create more political chaos in the

Abstract

The recent developments in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have created more confusion than clarification. A closer look at these new developments reveals a shift in its foreign relations. A "bastion of Sunni Islam", Saudi Arabia has adopted controversial political decisions that have resulted in a number of criticisms from Muslims across the world.

It is also losing legitimacy as a leader within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The continuing war in Yemen is one case that has drawn enormous criticism towards Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the haphazard handling of the blockade against Qatar has added to the criticism of the country. The blockade has split the GCC and rendered it dysfunctional. It is also difficult to see how the remaining members of the GCC, particularly Kuwait and Oman, will continue to trust Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) moving forward. The blockading countries' rashness in how they dealt with Qatar, one of "their brethren", has certainly raised serious questions. Moreover, the neutral positions assumed by Oman and Kuwait in this debacle suggest it was clearly a half-sided decision imposed on the GCC collective without exhausting all possible options.

It is also no secret that the change of leadership in Saudi Arabia has not made things easier in terms of the smooth running of the council. There have been some serious notated impulses under the leadership of the defence minister and new crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. Secondly, his closeness to the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, has further complicated the situation. The leaked emails detailing private conversations between the Emirati ambassador the United States, Yousef al

Otaiba, and various stakeholders suggest that “the UAE is in charge of Saudi Arabia’s thoughts and actions”. (1)

Saudi Arabia making political in roads in Iraq

Reports emerged recently suggesting that Bin Salman has asked Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to lead mediation with Iran. Saudi Arabia, however, has denied this. (2) Additionally, the influential Iraqi Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, recently visited Saudi Arabia for the first time in over a decade. This is yet another sign of growing relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Iraq has enjoyed a close relationship with Iran since the downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. On his second visit to the Gulf, al-Sadr met and held discussions with bin Zayed. The former flew to the UAE on a charter flight sent from Abu Dhabi, just two weeks after visiting Saudi Arabia. (3)

The formation of friendly relations with the Iraqi scholar by Saudi Arabia and the UAE will most likely polarise the internal political relations in Iraq. Just over two months ago, Al-Abadi came to the defence of Qatar when it was accused of having paid a huge ransom for the release of Qatari hostages held in Iraq. The prime minister’s statement indicated a close relationship between the two governments.

In addition, Saudi Arabia’s courting of al-Sadr can be interpreted as a means of increasing Saudi influence in Iraq against Iran. To that end, the kingdom and its Gulf ally have been using the ethnic-sectarian card in Iraq. Al-Sadr himself is an Arab Shiite who has a difficult relationship with Iran. By empowering him, the Saudi-Emirati coalition may be able to infiltrate Iraq and further polarise the country politically. However, it may also try to set the Iraqi government against al-Sadr and his support base.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is currently experiencing a Shia insurgency. Perhaps it hopes that al-Sadr, a Shia Arab, might assist in dealing with that and be used as a propaganda tool. Senior fellow at the Middle East Institute at the University of Singapore, Fanar Haddad, maintains that al-Sadr is assertive about his Arab identity, which corresponds to “the Saudi policy toward the non-Iranian Shiite entities in the region.” (4) Propaganda against the internal Shia insurgency has already spread in the kingdom. The government has insisted that its involvement in the Shia-dominated al-Qatif region has nothing to do with sectarianism but with maintaining law and order, and that it is Shia Iran is meddling in Saudi affairs and creating instability.

This type of propaganda will not achieve much within the Shia community in Saudi Arabia. The killing of popular Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016 has rallied most Shiites in the country against the government; and that will be very difficult to undo. Before his death, al-Nimr was presented as an Iranian-backed agent of destabilisation in the country.

Al-Sadr is, for all intents and purposes, meant to “replace” al-Nimr in light of the absence of a strong political and spiritual authority. In the pre-revolution era of Iran, Arabs rather than Persian Iranians dominated the Shia sect. Arab-dominated Iraq remains a bastion of Shiism, and the most important Shia shrines are in Iraq including the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf and Imam Hussein Shrine in Karbala.

Change of tone towards Syria

Saudi Arabia’s initial position on Syria has been that the departure of Bashar-al Assad is necessary for any meaningful political process to take place. However, recent reports suggest that the kingdom is changing its tune regarding the Syrian president. Several media outlets, including state-owned Russia Today, reported that Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir informed the Syrian opposition's High Negotiations Committee (HNC) about the decision (5) to tone down on the demand for al-Assad’s departure. However, Saudi Arabia has refuted statements about its change in position. It has issued conflicting statements in the past regarding its foreign policy, and to and froing has become commonplace in its foreign policy. An example that illustrates this is the aforementioned refutation of reports that bin Salman had asked the Iraqi premier to facilitate a dialogue with Iran notwithstanding reliable sources from Iraq.

Why the shift at this stage? Does it have anything to do with the United States?

Firstly, the advent of the United States in the ongoing Syrian negotiations has forced Saudi Arabia to streamline its position to match that of the former. It seems almost certain that the only process that will bring a political settlement in Syria will be the current negotiation process. The Saudi-backed opposition is not part of the talks. The Russians, Iranians, Americans and the United Nations are backing the talks. If Saudi Arabia wants to be part of the post-war political process, it must take the opportunity to do so now.

Secondly, its apparent acceptance of al-Assad in post-War Syria indicates that it seeks to isolate Qatar even further. If Saudi Arabia joins the talks, it might leave only Qatar-backed rebels out, thus confirming that Qatar “is a destructive player in the region”. Having said that, it is important to note that Qatar has already delinked itself with warring entities in Syria by signing a memorandum of understanding on fighting terrorism with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Doha, Qatar in July 2017.

Finally, the war in Syria is very costly. Estimates have put the total cost of the arming and training at several billion US dollars (6). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has another war going on in Yemen that has also costed an exorbitant amount of money. It simply cannot afford to sustain its involvement.

The war in Yemen

The recently leaked emails between al-Otaiba and former US ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk revealed that "Saudi Arabia wants to pull out of the war in Yemen". (7) The war in Yemen has been very devastating and costly for Saudi Arabia, and there are numerous reports detailing the destruction it has created. According to a leaked UN report, the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthi rebels has targeted civilians with air strikes in a "widespread and systematic" fashion. (8) The withdrawal of Qatar from the coalition in Yemen will add to Saudi Arabia's financial burden. The Saudi Shia insurgency has not made things easy for Saudi Arabia either. The country is gradually ring-fencing itself with three hostile fronts within its vicinity: Qatar, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shiites al-Qatif.

Additionally, the social impact in Yemen has invited international criticism. The recent outbreak of Cholera has added a strain to national health facilities. The slow flow of medical supplies due to Saudi-created impediments on the ground has resulted in thousands of deaths. According to Oxfam, Yemen's cholera epidemic is the "worst on record," with over 360,000 suspected cases within the first three months of its outbreak. (9)

Despite its military power, the Saudi-led coalition has failed to defeat the Houthis. The complicity of Iran in Yemen has also complicated things for Saudi Arabia, and the war continues to entrench Iran in the Gulf's political affairs. Saudi Arabia had gone to Yemen to prove its stature as the regional superpower and try to push back the frontiers of Shia penetration in the country. The initial estimation was that the war would take a short period of time; however, two years later, it is still raging.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's regional leadership is untenable. It has put itself in a political fix. It has overestimated its power and has subsequently overstretched itself in its involvement in the wars of the Middle East. The GCC was the last regional political bloc in the Middle East that had the potential to leading. The conflicts in the Middle East and the collapse of the Arab League strengthened the GCC and indirectly Saudi Arabia. However, its miscalculations on various fronts including the political move against Qatar has destroyed that potential. It will have to scramble for solutions to take itself outside the current quagmire. It will also have to quickly come up with solutions to remove itself from the wars in Syria and Yemen. If reports that Riyadh is engaging Baghdad to initiate discussions with Tehran, then Riyadh is eating a humble pie. However, if engagement with Iraq is to re-establish itself as the regional powerhouse and polarise Shia Islam in the region, then more resources will have to be redirected to Iraq. This is will not be welcomed much domestically. Saudis are growing more and more impatient with poverty and the lack of service delivery. The wars in Yemen and Syria is costing the country daily and do not seem

to be coming to an end soon. Additionally, the rebels it has betted on in Syria are missing an opportunity to be part of their future government.

Finally, Saudi Arabia recently announced its plans to open luxury Red Sea resorts on a stretch of coastline in the country's northwest as part of Bin Salman's drive to modernise the Saudi economy. The resorts will have special laws that will allow women to sunbathe in bikinis instead of covering up their skin as the rest of the women residing in the country do. (10) On 26 July 2017, al-Otaiba told American television talk show host Charlie Rose that

the UAE and Jordan amongst others were trying to circularise the Middle East. The question is how will they circularise a region that is regarded by Muslims around the world as a centre of Islam?...Notwithstanding the ongoing conflicts in many parts of the Middle East, what we are currently experiencing is a calm before a very huge storm. (11)

The change of Saudi foreign policy will either save itself from itself or create more political chaos in the Middle East.

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