

Saudi Arabia: Towards a More Interventionist Diplomacy?

Agnès Levallois

Research Associate

Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), Paris

Lecturer, Sciences Po, Paris

Saudi Arabia has encountered numerous challenges since the start of the protest movements in the Arab World in 2011 and Iran's return to the regional stage. At first the government was concerned about the consequences the uprisings could have for the Kingdom – Bahrain is a case in point. Then the evolution of the Syrian case spoiled its policy of support for the opposition. And finally, the intervention of the Saudi Armed Forces in Yemen to counter the advance of the Houthi forces has proven a nightmare, for they are at a deadlock, with no currently foreseeable end to the crisis. Riyadh finds itself propelled to centre stage, having to assume the role of regional power to counter Iranian ambitions, reassure the Sunni populations in the face of an absence of leadership, and counter the rise of radical Islamist groups and the Islamic State.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's Return

Riyadh considers that Iran's return to the regional stage thanks to the Iranian nuclear programme agreement between Tehran and the P5+1¹ signed on 14 July 2015 represents a major threat due to the Iranians' hegemonic goals. Since then, it sees Teh-

ran behind the ensemble of conflicts in the region; it is concerned about Iran's policy of influence and considers it responsible for destabilizing the Middle East. It is true that certain official Iranian statements are not reassuring for the Saudis. Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri, former Speaker of the Parliament of Iran, the Majlis, declared in January 2015: "We find that our revolution has now been exported to Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq." On the previous 16 December, Ali Velayati, councillor to the Supreme Leader, purportedly stated that Iran's influence currently extended "from Yemen to Lebanon."² This declaration, widely broadcast in the Gulf, heightened the oil monarchies' sensation of being surrounded, in particular Saudi Arabia.

The rivalry between the two regional powers is old: in the early 1980s, the project to export the Islamic revolution had led the Gulf monarchies to fear action against them through their Shiite communities, and it was this spectre that reappeared in February 2011 when thousands of people, primarily Shiites,³ gathered at Manama's Pearl Square. The movement was violently repressed through the intervention of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces led by Saudi Arabia.

The Failure of Riyadh's Syrian Policy

At the onset of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, the Kingdom observed the situation, little inclined to support a popular movement. It took the side of the

¹ The P5+1 refers to the UN Security Council's five permanent members – the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia and China – plus Germany.

² Michel MAKINSKY. "Les relations entre l'Iran et l'Arabie saoudite à l'heure des choix," *Les clés du Moyen-Orient*, 19/03/2015, www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Les-relations-entre-l-Iran-et-l.html

³ The dynasty in power is Sunni, whereas the Shiites make up 70% of the Bahraini population and are suspected by the Sunni Saudis of being manipulated by the Iranians. The protest was, however, primarily a movement demanding civil rights and not a destabilization movement initiated by the Iranians.

opposition as of August,⁴ considering the Saudi population's sensitivity towards the protest movement and with the aim of overthrowing the Bashar al-Assad Regime. It hoped to thus weaken the Tehran-Damascus axis and Hezbollah's position in Syria, because for Riyadh, the Iraqi precedent should not be repeated.⁵ Indeed, it would be appropriate to prevent Tehran from gaining a stranglehold over Syria like it has over Iraq.⁶ Qatar likewise gave its support to the rebel forces, but the Syrian stage had become an opportunity for competition between the two oil monarchies, to the detriment of the effectiveness of the aid provided to the Syrian opposition, which was to heavily suffer the consequences. Both countries sponsored brigades without accepting the development of a common strategy, which would obviously have been more effective vis-à-vis Iran, which had a clear objective: unconditional support to the Assad regime.

The fundamental difference between Iran and Saudi Arabia in handling the conflicts is that Riyadh has not managed to establish serious proxies upon which to rely and build a strategy in order to safeguard its interests as Tehran does through Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. The Saudis have spent significant sums to fund groups but have not managed to create loyalties. The fall of the city of Aleppo demonstrates the oil monarchies' inability to provide support to the rebels significant enough to allow them to reverse the balance of power, which the Russians and Iranians have, thus cementing their role in the Syrian conflict.

The Challenge of the War in Yemen

The Houthi rebellion in Yemen is an existential challenge for the Kingdom due to its geographical proximity to that country, because Riyadh has always considered Yemen as its backyard and as a matter of domestic policy. The deployment of the Saudi Armed Forces in "Operation Decisive Storm" as part

of an Arab coalition launched in March 2015 was designed to fight against the Houthi rebels⁷ because the latter had been militarily occupying the Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since September 2014 and they had just taken Aden. The Saudi intervention aimed to make the Houthis leave the cities and force them to retreat to their home area, Saada, a city in the north of the country not far from the Saudi border.

Riyadh sees Tehran behind the ensemble of conflicts in the region and considers it responsible for destabilizing the Middle East

With this intervention in Yemen, the new Saudi king, Salman,⁸ intended to assert his regional power and send a clear message to the Iranians that "he would not tolerate the presence of a power under Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula."⁹ But was Iran really aiming to threaten Riyadh through the Houthis when it was already deeply engaged in Syria? Nothing is less certain, but this military operation also had a domestic political goal, which was the confirmation of Prince Mohamed ben Salman, the king's young son, as deputy crown prince and Defence Minister, positions to which he had just been appointed. He thus needed to take his first steps and establish himself as a credible minister, though clearly, the results are very mixed.

Towards Greater Saudi Interventionism?

The Saudi engagement in Yemen marks a deep change in the country's position, as it now finds itself on the frontline of an armed conflict, whereas until now it had entrusted its security to the United States. But the crisis of confidence between the two countries is deep, for the Saudis took the "dis-

⁴ On 7 August 2011, Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador from his post in Syria.

⁵ The Saudis reproach the Americans for having allowed Iran to control Iraq thanks to Washington's 2003 intervention in Iraq.

⁶ DAZI-HENI, Fatiha. "Les diplomaties des monarchies du Conseil de coopération du Golfe dans la crise syrienne," *Confluences Méditerranée*, No. 89: 81-93, 2014.

⁷ The Houthis emerged from the Zaydi minority, which believes in the Shiite doctrine.

⁸ He rose to power in January 2015 after the death of his brother, King Abdullah, and three months later, he appointed his nephew, Mohamed ben Nayef, crown prince and his favourite son deputy crown prince.

⁹ BLIN, Louis. "L'émancipation contrainte de la politique étrangère saoudienne," *Politique étrangère*: 49-61, 2016.

charge” of Zine al-Abidin Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak as a result of the Arab revolutions very badly, fearing that they could no longer rely on the protection of their ally should difficulties arise. This fear was accentuated by the signature of the Iranian nuclear agreement, which was a priority for US diplomacy – to the chagrin of the Saudis –, not to mention Washington’s announced disengagement from the Middle East.

The Saudis have spent significant sums to fund groups but have not managed to create loyalties

Riyadh has drawn its conclusions from this new situation, realizing the need to be more autonomous insofar as security. And why not establish closer ties with Moscow in order to diversify its foreign policy? This is what it has done by intensifying economic dialogue on oil issues. Beyond economic matters, the Russians hope to take advantage of the new order in the region and their strategic role in the Syrian conflict to regain diplomatic positions. Nonetheless, Moscow’s strong support to the Assad Regime is an obstacle to the strengthening of bilateral relations. Russia’s new foreign relations concept clearly states that “Russia will continue making a meaningful contribution to stabilizing the situation in the Middle East and North Africa.”¹⁰ The Russians are aware of their capacity to serve as intermediary for

certain matters and could attempt to lower the tension between Tehran and Riyadh. Indeed, stabilization of the Middle East will require rapprochement between these two countries, for they are fighting one another by proxy on several battlefields.

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Will the latest developments in Syria, with the 4 April 2017 chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun attributed to the Assad regime, change the order of things? The rapprochement that seemed to be developing between Moscow and Washington is no longer on the agenda and Riyadh, which welcomed Donald Trump’s election, was also glad of the US airstrikes against a Syrian military base as it represented a break with Barack Obama’s non-intervention in August 2013, which had angered the Saudis. The latter seem reassured by Trump’s actions; they share the same analysis of radical terrorism and the new US President has made sure not to include the Saudis on the list of nationalities banned from entering America.¹¹ In contrast, on the matter of Syria, Riyadh and Moscow’s points of view diverge, the rapprochement between the two countries being primarily economic and relatively fragile.

¹⁰ Document approved on 30 November 2016 by the Russian president, Point 92: www.mid.ru/fr/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6B6Z29/content/id/2542248?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_CptlCk6B6Z29&_101_INSTANCE_CptlCk6B6Z29_languageId=en_GB

¹¹ On 27 January 2017, the US President signed an executive order prohibiting entry to the United States for all refugees and foreign nationals from seven countries: Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen in order to fight against terrorism. The San Francisco Court of Appeals blocked the executive order.