

The Saudi predicament

Saudi Arabia /

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The Saudi ruling elite has relied on US backing, and military support, for its regional policies. But since the Trump administration, none of their regional policies has met with success.

What makes the Middle East distinctive is oil, not Islam. The hydrocarbon wealth of the Arab-Iranian Gulf led the British empire to create or consolidate, on the Arab side, states that were artificial to various degrees, and to establish or shore up the contemporary world's most archaic monarchies; it exploited and revived the remnants of tribalism, made clan groups 'royal families' and set up patrimonial absolutist powers which the British hoped they would dominate until the oil ran out. The oil wealth made the US act the same way as the British towards the Saudi kingdom, its de facto oldest protectorate in the region. The 'leader of the free world' has supported the least democratic, most misogynist, most fundamentalist country on the planet, the only one to have the Quran and the Sunna (deeds and sayings of the Prophet) instead of a constitution.

What distinguishes the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council – Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar – is that their workforces are mostly foreign. In most of them, foreigners are even a majority of the population: in the UAE and Qatar, they are almost 90%. The exceptional autonomy of the state thanks to the oil and gas rent has ensured these archaic systems endure, grafted onto modern state institutions and capitalist economies. The more concentrated power is, the more the state has been able to ignore a socioeconomic rationale in which the interests of a capitalist class or a layer of bureaucracy act as a constraint. The smaller the ruling elite is, while oil allows it to treat the state as its private property, the less it heeds structural constraints, and the greater is its freedom to manoeuvre. It can make sudden decisions that appear erratic and capricious. Large state machines change course slowly; but states in which power is highly concentrated can veer abruptly.

Iran and Iraq are the only Gulf countries to have avoided the region's prevailing sociopolitical structure: they both have ancient urban civilisations, larger populations and more developed societies, and are the only countries to have overthrown their monarchies. In Iraq, this led to the 'republican' patrimonial regime of the Baath Party, rigidly ruled by a family (that of Saddam Hussein) with the same flaws as absolute monarchies, until its overthrow in 2003 following the US-led invasion.

In Iran, the fall of the shah led to a unique, strictly theocratic state. Unlike its Gulf neighbours, it is governed not by a family but by institutions and laws, even if the Supreme Leader enjoys exceptional power. [1] As such, it is the only state in the region that acts according to a coherent, easily recognisable strategy: the Revolutionary Guards' expansionism. Subsequent worsening regional tension helps to further legitimate their power. [2]

No winner in Iran-Iraq war

The founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979 determined the Gulf's current geopolitical framework.

The Iranian revolution greatly alarmed its Arab neighbours, especially as the US was then at its lowest ebb post-Vietnam, paralysed by challenges including a revolution in Nicaragua and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Iraq's attack on Iran in 1980 provided the US and allies with a solution: they would facilitate the mutual destruction of these troublesome states. There was no winner after eight years of war between the two countries (in which nearly a million died, according to current estimates).

Not having obtained the cancellation of his debts to the monarchies that had backed him, Saddam Hussein seized Kuwait in August 1990. This gave the US the chance to kill two birds with one stone by returning in force to the Gulf for the first time since 1962 (when the US base at Dhahran in the Saudi oil region was evacuated under pressure from Nasser's Egypt) and confirming US post-cold war supremacy to allies, rivals and enemies, just as the Soviet bloc was crumbling.

Iran's leaders had mixed feelings about the 1991 allied military intervention, even though it targeted its enemy, Baathist Iraq. But the US show of force reassured the Saudi royal family, which now felt protected against any Iranian incursion. The attitude towards the US war on Iraq became the litmus test of Riyadh's regional relations: the kingdom punished all those who had supported Saddam's invasion of Kuwait or opposed the US intervention. It expelled nearly a million Yemeni workers, cut off support for Yasser Arafat's PLO, and severed relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, even though it had been the Brotherhood's main supporter since its foundation in Egypt in 1928. With the US, the Saudis had opposed Gamal Abdel Nasser's Soviet-backed nationalist regime in Egypt (1954-70), which had severely repressed the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood would have lost many members by aligning with the Saudis during the first Gulf war in 1991. Riyadh's intention was to bring it into line (like the PLO) by depriving it of logistic and financial support.

The situation changed when Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani deposed his father and took power in Qatar in 1995. He was keen to play in the major league of regional politics, and decided to fund the Brotherhood, just as magnates buy football teams. He also invested heavily in setting up the satellite TV station Al Jazeera, in which the Brotherhood had a key role; it quickly established a huge audience by giving a platform to opposition movements in the Arab world – except those in Saudi Arabia and Qatar itself, where disrespect for the monarchy can lead to life imprisonment.

The emir, with these political weapons, now faced the anger of the Saudi monarchy, so he covered his risks by diversifying and created links with all the significant forces in the region. He paid for the secret construction of a US air base at Al Udeid near Doha, and established trade with Israel, while demonstrating harmonious relations with Iran and supporting Lebanon's Hizbullah and Palestine's Hamas.

The Arab Spring erupts

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 disrupted everything across the region. It was probably the most serious failure of US imperial policy, given the high stakes. The US and its allies had to leave Iraq in 2011 without achieving any fundamental objectives, for the country was already dominated by the US's regional archenemy, Iran.

In 2011 the Arab Spring engulfed states on which US regional hegemony rested. Rival counter-revolutionary options emerged, supported by the Saudis and the Qataris – both options rooted in the reactionary bastion of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The traditionally ultraconservative Saudis supported the defence of regimes in power by crushing the uprisings – as in their intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 – or through negotiating compromises where they had good relations with the official opposition, as in Yemen.

Qatar was the principal supporter of the Arab Spring, asserting its ability to moderate it through its influence over the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood took advantage of the uprisings to gain a prominent role, with Qatari financial and media support. In Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began, Qatar assisted the popular revolt by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood's Tunisian partner, Ennahda, while the Saudis gave asylum to the deposed dictator, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.

The Obama administration tacked between these positions. It tolerated the repression of the uprising in Bahrain but supported compromise in Yemen. Where revolt became too powerful, it sought to co-opt it, counting on the cooperation of the Muslim Brotherhood; this happened in Egypt, even before the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi won the presidential election in May-June

2012. [3]

In Libya, Washington's European allies, especially the UK and France, persuaded the US to join them in bombing Muammar Gaddafi's forces. Qatar participated; the Saudis did not. The ensuing chaos in Libya dissuaded Obama from playing any further part in the collapse of another state. He refused to give the Syrian opposition the means to neutralise the Assad government's major military advantage of air power: he declined to impose a no-fly zone, as in Libya, and, critically, blocked the supply of anti-aircraft weapons to the opposition. The Assad regime was therefore confident of its air supremacy, to the point of dropping barrel bombs from helicopters, unchallenged. And Obama delegated responsibility for sponsoring the Syrian opposition to Gulf allies and Turkey.

The Saudi response

The Saudis couldn't back Assad because of his alliance with Iran but, as with Qatar, they could not countenance a democratic, secular revolution nearby. They decided to reshape the Syrian opposition in accord with their own reactionary regime; they competed with the Qatari-Turkish axis to fund armed Syrian Sunni fundamentalist groups (Salafist and jihadist). The 2011 Syrian revolution was crushed between the Assad regime (with the help of regional Shia fundamentalist militias directed from Iran and, from 2015, Russian air power and missiles) and armed fundamentalist groups backed by Turkey, Qatar and the Saudi kingdom.

Not even the rise of ISIS (Islamic State), the capture of Mosul (Iraq) and the proclamation of the caliphate, could persuade Obama, despite much encouragement, to back credible Sunni Arab armed forces in Iraq and Syria. Those who tried to convince him argued it would cut the ground from under ISIS; for the US occupation of Iraq had only been able to end ISIS's previous incarnation, Islamic State in Iraq, by arming and funding Sunni Arab tribal militias. In this new conflict in Iraq, the US relied on predominantly Shia regular and irregular forces with varying loyalty to Iran, to the Saudis' dismay. In Syria, it relied on nationalist Kurdish forces, to Turkey's great displeasure.

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Obama's approach was consistent with his policy of placating Iran and banking on the moderate, 'reformist' faction of the Iranian regime, a policy whose cornerstone was the nuclear deal with Iran. Obama made this agreement his priority and managed to secure it in July 2015 after negotiations with input from Russia, China, Germany and France. He pursued this course despite Iran's regional expansion; having achieved a position of control in Iraq, it became involved in Syria from 2013 through regional proxies. US indifference to this involvement frustrated Iran's main regional enemies, Israel and the Saudi kingdom.

Saudi anxiety peaked in September 2014, when the Yemeni capital Sanaa was seized by the pro-Iranian Houthis, allied to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. [4] In this alarming context, Salman bin Abdelaziz al-Saud assumed the Saudi leadership, succeeding his half-brother who died in January 2015. King Salman, then aged 80, wanted to be succeeded by his favourite son, Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), then not yet 30, whom he first made defence minister, then in July 2017, crown prince. [5] The king and prince opted for a robust response to Iran, intervening directly in Yemen, and presenting a single Sunni regional front through improved relations with Qatar and a softer attitude to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Intervention in Yemen

The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, which began in March 2015 under MBS's direction, mobilised a coalition that included Qatar to help a 'legitimate' Yemeni government, representing a coalition that included the local Muslim Brothers. The Brotherhood is indeed a key component of the Al-Islah party, with which the new Saudi regime re-established contact after years of ostracism. However, this created tensions with Egypt, where President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi is a bitter enemy of the Brotherhood, which he crushed in his own country. Egypt and the UAE remain inflexible about this; Abu Dhabi's crown prince, the federation's strongman, Muhammad Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan (MBZ) is himself an anti-Brotherhood hardliner. [6]

Donald Trump's election as US president upset the situation. He surrounded himself with Islamophobic advisers who argued a hardline case against the Brotherhood, even recommending it be classified as a terrorist organisation; this was encouraged by the UAE, and by its ambassador to the US. They all advocated forcing Qatar to stop support for the Brotherhood.

Trump, received with pomp by the Saudis in May 2017 on his first overseas visit as president, pressured his hosts to force Qatar to sever ties with the Brotherhood and cut off its access to Al Jazeera. Not two weeks after Trump's visit, the Saudi kingdom, Bahrain and the UAE, followed by Egypt and a few servile governments, cut diplomatic ties with Qatar. The three GCC members even suspended trade and transport links with Qatar. This generated a lot of noise but ended in a fiasco that persists to this day. Qatar, thrown out of the Yemen coalition, drew on its huge financial resources to adapt, with commercial and military help from Turkey, its ally and fellow sponsor of the Brotherhood since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

The Trump administration could tolerate Assad remaining in power under Russian tutelage on condition that Russia helps push Iranian forces and their allies out of Syria. Riyadh has followed this policy since Trump's visit. Last October King Salman was the first Saudi ruler to visit Moscow, and to judge by the accompanying high-ranking delegation, and the contracts negotiated, this was to persuade President Putin to change his stance on Iran. A month later Trump and Putin attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam and signed a joint declaration on Syria, supporting the international Geneva conference process and implicitly approving Assad staying until a new constitution has been adopted and elections organised.

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Meanwhile, the Saudis summoned the Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri, whose family is dependent on the Saudis, and forced him to resign; oddly, his announcement was made in Riyadh on 4 November. [7] In his statement, Hariri criticised Iran and its Lebanese auxiliary, Hizbullah (he had formed a government of national unity with Hizbullah in 2016), ending cooperation with the Shia party. (This echoed Trump's statement in Washington in July, with Hariri by his side, when the US president criticised Hizbullah, calling it "a threat to the Lebanese state, the Lebanese people and the whole region" and equating it with ISIS and Al-Qaida.) But then, this ended in a new fiasco: Hariri was extricated from the Saudi kingdom by France's president Emmanuel Macron, and retracted his resignation. The Lebanese coalition government remains fragile, and vulnerable to crises.

New signs of tension between Moscow and Riyadh have appeared over Syria: the Saudis, after seeming to back Russian moves towards dialogue between the regime and opposition, have toughened their stance, and encouraged the Syrian opposition to boycott the Russian approach. Ultimately, Syria's fate will depend on US-Russian relations. For now, the US attitude to Russia has hardened, as shown by "Russiagate", new sanctions, and arms supplies to Ukraine, all against the wishes of an irritated Trump.

The Saudis, faced with unprecedented chaos in US policy, are in a difficult situation, especially as their offensive in Yemen is deadlocked and has caused a major humanitarian disaster. Their hope of turning the situation by turning Saleh ended when he was murdered by his allies in December. On top of that, an open conflict erupted between the Yemeni forces backed by the Saudi-led coalition, with some factions supported by Abu Dhabi, others by the Saudis.

Nothing that the Saudis have done at Trump's instigation, towards Qatar, Lebanon, Syria or Russia, has paid off. The US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital has embarrassed Saudi leaders, as, to fulfil US wishes, they have been pressuring Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority to accept Israel's diktat; they had to disavow this. Trump's international isolation over Iran can only increase their bitterness; his sword dance with his Saudi hosts is now a distant memory.

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[1] See Philippe Descamps and Cécile Marin, "The mullahs' asymmetric rule", *Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, April 2016*.

[2] See Bernard Hourcade, "Iran returns to the world", *Le Monde diplomatique, English edition*.

[January 2018.](#)

[3] See Gilbert Achcar, "The Muslim Brothers in Egypt's "orderly transition"", [Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, March 2011.](#)

[4] See Laurent Bonnefoy, "Yemen's dangerous war", [Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, December 2017.](#)

[5] See Nabil Mouline, "Religious concessions in Saudi Arabia", [Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, January 2018.](#)

[6] MBZ was born in 1961 and became head of the UAE's security services in the 1990s. It is rumoured he was trained by expatriate Egyptian officers, whose main domestic target was the Muslim Brotherhood. MBZ accused the Brotherhood of conspiring to seize power and cracked down on its members and sympathisers in the UAE.

[7] Saad Hariri's father, the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, assassinated in 2005, made his fortune in Saudi Arabia, under the protection of King Fahd bin Abdelaziz al-Saud.

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