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## SOME ASPECTS OF SAUDI ARABIAN FOREIGN POLICY: RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT AS AN ACCEPTABLE PRECEDENT

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### ABSTRACT

The article examines the issues of noticeable diversification of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's approach to a number of issues of a domestic political, regional and international nature. It tells about the individual methods used by the specified country to achieve strategic objectives. Modern Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is characterized by a strategic shift towards greater assertiveness and diversification. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom has pursued initiatives such as Vision 2030, aiming to reduce oil dependency and enhance economic resilience. KSA plays a crucial role in regional conflicts, notably in Yemen and Syria, while strengthening alliances with Western powers and emerging nations like China. The kingdom also seeks to enhance its global image through cultural diplomacy and investments in technology and tourism. However, its human rights record and involvement in regional tensions pose challenges to its international standing.

### KEYWORDS

Geopolitical processes, diversification, confrontation, reforms, consolidation, security, traditional foreign policy, international system, external interventions, regional security, economic cooperation and cultural exchange.

### INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical processes unfolding in the world, particularly the events related to the Ukraine-Russia conflict, are compelling the leadership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to significantly alter its traditional foreign policy directions.

This trend is also associated with the ongoing processes in the Middle East, as well as the escalating security threats at regional and international levels.

According to numerous media reports, the complex internal political situation in Yemen, linked to the



support provided by the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Shia rebel Houthi movement, is of particular concern to the KSA.

In this context, the situation remains critical, as the existing shared borders (extending over 1,450 kilometers) are vulnerable to the smuggling of explosives and other prohibited substances, as well as the infiltration of subversive forces.

Historically, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has employed diplomatic methods to address emerging issues. However, in recent times, given the practical ineffectiveness of international legal norms, official Riyadh has intensified measures aimed at strengthening regional security. To this end, comprehensive assistance is being provided to the Yemeni government.

Moreover, in recent times, against the backdrop of the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, tensions between key players in the international community have intensified, creating adverse situations that threaten the security of other countries. Consequently, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is taking active measures aimed at strengthening its state sovereignty.

The formation of such actions is significantly influenced by calls from the United States and European countries to comply with sanctions against Russia, as well as political pressure to cease cooperation and coordination through OPEC+. The full realization of their political objectives is complicated by the unique relationship between Saudi Arabia and Russia.[1]

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is demonstrating increased activity in the international arena, including among Muslim countries, in response to the ongoing

conflict between Israel and Palestine and the escalation of the regional situation due to the intervention of Western and other powers.

Despite efforts to implement large-scale reforms in various sectors and increase budget allocations to enhance defense capabilities, the officially declared goal of this national project remains to diversify the economy in light of growing environmental concerns, ensuring resilience in the face of potential crises that may arise due to the depletion of natural energy resources.

## ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE

Saudi Arabia, officially known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), plays a pivotal role in both regional and global politics. Its foreign policy is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, religious, economic, and geopolitical factors. As one of the leading powers in the Middle East, understanding KSA's foreign policy is essential for several reasons, ranging from regional stability to global economic implications.

To date, numerous scholars have studied the foreign policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Notably, Professors Yoel Guzansky and Ilan Zelayat from Tel Aviv University in Israel have been conducting long-term research on the foreign policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in modern times and its new directions. Additionally, renowned Brazilian scholars Paloma González del Miño and David Hernández Martínez, in their article "The Salman doctrine in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy: objectives and the use of military forces" have conducted an in-depth analysis of the political processes in Saudi Arabia, the pragmatic foreign policy of the House of As-Saud, and regional security issues. Lastly, in the book "Security Problems and Conflicts in Eastern Countries" by Uzbek orientalists Suhrob Buronov and Habibullo Azimov, the

main directions of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and the mechanisms for their implementation are theoretically analyzed. Dr. Tobias Borck's article "Kingdom of Change: Saudi Arabia's Evolving Foreign Policy" highlights SAP's regional security initiatives, including a number of practical measures aimed at ending the Russo-Ukrainian War, emphasizing that regional security is more important than ever. In this article, we will delve deeper into the current foreign policy directions of Saudi Arabia and their characteristics.

## MAIN PART

On January 23, 2015, Salman bin Abdulaziz, son of the founder of the Abdulaziz bin Saud kingdom, was inaugurated as the seventh monarch of Saudi Arabia. One of his first decisions was to appoint his son, Mohammed bin Salman, Minister of Defense and Secretary-General of the Royal Court. Within a few months, the young prince would tally enormous political responsibilities.[2] Since then, the foreign policy of the Saudi monarchy is marked by a series of changes promoted directly by the head of state and his heir to the throne, with the purpose of revitalizing the country's international role and preserving its main interests in the Middle East.

In the particular regime of Saudi Arabia, there is a special convergence of the desire to strengthen a political process of greater institutional reinforcement, a diversified economy and timid socio-cultural changes, promoting a significant makeover.[3] If we analyze the external sphere, it is also mutating its foreign policy, traditionally considered a conservative power, by virtue of the generational succession in the al Saud monarchy and the remodeling of the complex scenario in the Middle East, through more active, autonomous and belligerent policies, despite the traditional external dependence on security. Today, the Saudis believe that there is a need to adopt a comprehensive

vision of regional security that is not limited to mere balances of power, the expansion of influence, and increased military capability, but aims to create an enabling environment for development and prosperity and aims to create a decent life for all peoples of the region, writes Saleh Muhammad Al-Khathlan, Professor of Political Science and Senior Advisor at the Gulf Research Center, Saudi Arabia, for the 13th Middle East conference of the Valdai Discussion Club.

The design of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is built upon three spheres: on the one hand, the essential conceptions that the monarchy has about its role in the country, in the Middle East and the Muslim sphere; on the other, the analysis elaborated on the events that have occurred in recent times that have eroded the security margins and, finally, the conclusions raised on possible threats, risks and opportunities in the face of the complex scenarios opened after the various regional crises.

Many factors push a country's foreign policy to adapt and move beyond the features of its usual diplomatic activity, redefining its approach. The most prominent of these factors are (1) changes in its immediate regional environment regarding the opportunities and challenges it provides, and (2) the shift in decision-makers' perceptions towards the external environment and towards the position of their country in the international system.[4]

These two factors explain the changes in Saudi foreign policy in the past decade. Since the Arab Spring and its repercussions, the regional environment of the Kingdom has witnessed transformations that have created serious challenges for many countries in the region and pushed them to move beyond former policies and adopt positions and actions to confront these challenges and mitigate their effects.

Perhaps the most prominent of these challenges faced by the Kingdom has been the 2011 regime change attempt in Bahrain, which would have posed — had it happened — a real threat to Saudi national security, given Bahrain's location and strong ties to the Kingdom. [5] Therefore, Riyadh, in coordination with the rest of the GCC countries, rushed to provide military assistance to the government of Bahrain, which at the time was facing riots and sabotage, supported by external interventions, and this assistance aimed to protect vital facilities in the state of Bahrain.

Years later, Saudi Arabia faced another threat to its national security: the Houthi's seizure of power in Yemen in September 2011. The two countries share a border that is more than 1,450 km long, and the Kingdom has suffered from infiltration and smuggling operations for long periods. Because the ability of the Houthis to take power in Yemen signalled the expansion of Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula, the Kingdom responded to the request of the legitimate Yemeni government to provide military assistance by forming a coalition in which Arab countries participated.

In the historical context of Saudi foreign policy, we will find that this military action was an exceptional case, as the Kingdom has always adopted turning to diplomacy. [6] The dangers faced by the Kingdom necessitated adapting its foreign policy by adopting a firm approach to protect its security and interests at a time when the region was in turmoil, which threatened political systems with collapse and states were at risk of disintegration.

**At present,** Saudi Arabia prefers diplomacy over armed conflict so that it can focus on socioeconomic modernization and attract vital investment, and for that purpose it needs stability. Bin Salman has not

abandoned his inclination to embark with determination and even some impulsiveness on would-be regional exploits, dragging other countries with him, only now it is not toward wars and boycotts, but to regional reconciliation arrangements that until recently appeared unimaginable. The kingdom, together with the United Arab Emirates, has ended a decade of direct and indirect fighting on various fronts following the regional upheaval of the so-called Arab Spring, out of the belief that the immediate threats to the Royal House arising from that upheaval have subsided and at this stage can be contained. [7] The regional moves led by the Crown Prince do not signify reconciliation but detente, i.e., an easing of more superficial tensions with no resolution of the deeper problems, which may well erupt in the future. At present, there is a desire to sweep them under the rug for several reasons:

**At the domestic level:** The kingdom is interested in curbing conflicts, some of which it itself fomented, and achieving a situation of zero problems in its foreign relations so that it can turn its attention to internal matters. Since it is currently enjoying relatively high oil prices, it is focusing on national projects, some of a megalomaniac nature, aiming for the economic diversity required by Vision 2030. The political level and the individual level are one and the same in this case, as bin Salman is a type of centralizing ruler the kingdom has not experienced since the days of its founder, ibn Saud.

**At the regional level:** Saudi Arabia seeks closer relations with Iran, perhaps heeding the advice to “keep your enemies close,” understanding Tehran's superior power, and recognizing that the attempt to block its nuclear ambitions by diplomatic means has run its course. It is noteworthy that shortly after the Israeli-Gaza War erupted in October 2023, bin Salman



held a first-ever phone call with Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi (who also participated in a joint Arab League and OIC summit in Saudi Arabia on the war), presumably seeks to distance the kingdom as much as possible from the regional crisis.

**At the global level:** The dwindling American attention to the security problems of Saudi Arabia, its traditional ally, has led Riyadh to understand that it cannot allow itself to continue pursuing the political and military escapades of the previous decade and improvement of its strategic situation also depends on this.

Saudi Arabia claims to be the natural leader of the Arab world, especially in the Gulf region, and its biggest rival is Iran, a Shiite country. The two states, which frequently come face to face on regional issues, approach the problems from different sides. Saudi Arabia is uncomfortable with Iran's expansionist policies. [8] However, Saudi Arabia, the protector and host of the holy cities, has close relations with other Islamic countries. The fact that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is in Riyadh shows this situation. However, it cannot be said that the Kingdom's relationship with other Islamic countries is stable, and there are occasional tensions and disagreements. The concept of "regional powers" is an expression used to describe how states assume and maintain the region's leadership. In fact, there is no generally accepted definition of this concept. Still, it is mostly used for giants with more military, economic, and scientific power in a certain geographical area than others. [9] These are states that also have severe effects on neighboring countries around them.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is built on maintaining stability in the region, aimed at a consistent approach to avoiding conflict. However, the 2011 Arab Spring movement led to remarkable changes in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. To maintain its dominance and stability

in the region, the kingdom has begun to increase its military power, as well as to fuel sectarian politics, impose sanctions and implement other restrictive policies, increasingly resorting to military force, sectarian politics, and sanctions or other restrictive measures.

Saudi Arabia has played a leading role in promoting Arab unity and cooperation, particularly through its active involvement in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC is a political and economic union of six Gulf Arab states, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). [10] The organization is aimed at enhancing regional security, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange.

In terms of its regional posture, Saudi Arabia has been a leading player in the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The kingdom has been a strong supporter of the Syrian opposition and has provided significant financial and military assistance to rebel groups. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has led a coalition of Arab states in support of the internationally recognized government against Houthi rebels. [11]

It can be said that Saudi Arabia acts as a leading country in foreign policy, but it is also clear that there are situations where the opposite is true. During the embargo process against Qatar, Qatar took steps against Saudi Arabia, and today the UAE is taking steps against Saudi Arabia despite Saudi Arabia's opposition. It should be added that the strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has turned into a proxy war that has become even more intense after the Arab Spring movement in 2011. This rivalry rests on two pillars, power policy over the region and religious-ideological separation.

In fact, issues of sectarianism and nationalism can be thought of as political forces used to gain an edge in the competition between the two countries or to limit the influence of the rival. There are three primary reasons for the current tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The first stems from their regional power struggle. Iran sees itself as the natural leader of the region due to its size, population, and historical heritage.

It is impossible to understand Saudi Arabia's new regional posture, particularly the renewal of relations with Iran, without taking into account the regional adjustment to the gradual shift toward a multi-polar global system, with a number of powers competing for global hegemony. The Western barrier isolating bin Salman was breached even before the war in Ukraine in early 2022 and was finally shattered when the war demonstrated Saudi Arabia's weight in the global energy economy, thus intensifying the courtship of bin Salman. [12] Bin Salman's decision to reject the United States request to increase oil production due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in July 2022 (even after a visit by President Joe Biden that marked the end of the rift over Jamal Khashoggi's murder in 2018) reflected a change of strategic policy in the kingdom. In a search for a different balance of relations, Riyadh now examines its position on each and every issue, giving priority to its own interests.

Even if Riyadh hopes for the return of Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential elections, the new Saudi policy toward the United States does not depend on the president or the administration but, rather, on the assumption that the strength of the United States has declined and that it is no longer committed to the defense of the kingdom. The watershed was the serious Iranian attack in September 2019 on Aramco facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia with drones and cruise

missiles. [13] This attack, which temporarily disrupted about half the kingdom's oil production capacity, was a wake-up call for Riyadh over its vulnerability in the face of Iran, particularly regarding what Riyadh sees as its "abandonment" by the United States, which did not provide military assistance. All this sharpened Saudi understanding of the need to diversify its sources of support at the global level and hedge its risks at the regional level with respect to Iran, its main rival.

Where the United States exits, China steps in: as a superpower without significant sources of energy of its own, China depends on oil imported from Saudi Arabia and has already overtaken the US as Riyadh's biggest trading partner. Bin Salman knows that during the long years of monarchy that awaits him, the US is likely to lose the lead in other ways in favor of Beijing, and he wants to get the most out of the Chinese presence in the Middle East and position Saudi Arabia as China's preferred regional partner. [14] Beijing's sponsorship of the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation agreement in March 2023 (even if its real role in the process was relatively marginal) gave China its first significant diplomatic foothold in the region. Therefore, it was likely one of the factors that pushed the United States to engage in the normalization talks with Riyadh later that year, negotiating for the first time returns as a defense pact and nuclear program.

Diversification of its sources of support is vital for Riyadh, in spite of the risks and the costs, to avoid finding itself on the losing side in a multipolar system. Sitting on the fence during the war in Ukraine was a prominent but not sole example of its long term policy as an independent actor maneuvering between the powers. In the same way, in 2022, Riyadh played the role of broker in the prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine and also helped to release the American basketball player Brittney Griner from

Russian imprisonment. [15] By its determined refusal to stand fully with the West on the war in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia is winking to the Arab world and the whole Global South, which are alienated from the West and not enthusiastic about supporting its coalition against Moscow; at the same time, however, the kingdom is careful to clarify at every opportunity that it is not in Putin's pocket. This can be seen, inter alia, in the invitation to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to the Arab League Summit hosted by Saudi Arabia in May 2023 and to the summit conference on the subject of the war in Ukraine that it hosted in August 2023.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of existing materials and ongoing global processes, the following conclusions are deemed necessary:

- Saudi Arabia's increased foreign policy activity is primarily linked to a decline in confidence regarding prospects for cooperation with the United States and the European Union, due to their recent excessive involvement in addressing Eastern European issues.
- The relative decline in economic and other capabilities of many Arab countries, resulting from internal political changes in recent years, has created favorable conditions for Saudi Arabia to take measures to expand its geopolitical position.

Noting Saudi Arabia's stated practices, it is necessary to reiterate certain theoretical considerations emphasizing that security threats often extend beyond national borders. Taking this logic into account, it appears essential for Central Asian states to pursue their foreign policy and strengthen collective regional security matters based on region-specific interests. From this perspective, it is particularly worth highlighting the practical foreign policy of Uzbekistan,

which has maintained leadership in the region in almost all positive directions over the past few years.

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