

The Evolving Security Landscape Around the Arabian Peninsula: A Saudi Perspective

by Abdullah K. Al-Saud and Joseph A. Kéchichian

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ABSTRACT

For over eight-decades, decision-makers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia adapted and re-evaluated their foreign policy options to preserve and protect the nation's security, usher in regional stability, limit rivalries among partners and allies, and concentrate on the creation of wealth. The shifts that occurred within the regional and international environments during the first two decades of the twenty-first century have presented the Saudi leadership with new sets of challenges and difficult choices, some of which are discussed in this paper, amidst one of the greatest periods of change in the history of the country. A proactive policy of diversification, not only in the economic sphere but also in security and foreign relations, has been pursued in order to meet internal needs and remain relevant in an ever-evolving international environment.

Saudi Arabia | Gulf countries | GCC | USA | Russia | Iran

keywords

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Introduction

Foreign policy decisions are seldom taken in a political vacuum, as governments operate within the boundaries of an evolving international system as well as dynamic regional environments. It is within this wider regional and global context, which has been in constant flux over the past decade, that the decision makers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have had to adapt and re-evaluate their foreign policy options with two overriding objectives in mind: how to preserve the state's security and safeguard its national interests; and how to bring into fruition its vision of a stable regional order, one that will limit rivalries, encourage the creation of wealth, and ensure security and stability through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and beyond.

Currently, there are two main competing visions or models of the regional order in the Middle East, each supported and pursued by one of the region's main rivals, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudi vision of a regional order is based on the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states "in which governments have strong centralized authorities, regardless of the type of government in each country (democratic or autocratic; monarchy or republic)".¹ The Iranian vision of the region, by contrast, rests on "nation-states with weak sovereignty, in which centralized authority is fragile and non-state actors play a prominent role".² As seen from Saudi Arabia, Iran, in order to achieve its regional order vision and expand its influence, pursues a strategy that relies, at its core, on the cultivation of a network

¹ Abdulmajeed Saud Manqarah, "Competing Models in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran", in *KFCRIS Special Reports*, 22 July 2019, p. 5, <http://kfcris.com/en/view/post/220>.

² Ibid.

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of armed non-state actors and militias across the region, and the promotion of sub-identities at the expense of the national one. Many of the region's conflicts and developments in previous decades can best be understood through the prism of these two competing visions on the regional order rather than the old prisms of sectarianism or opposing types of political systems – with the Saudi perspective that upholds the nation-state system and seeks to strengthen centralized states and the capacity of their institutions, and the Iranian one that cultivates sub-state revolutionary movements and identities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere. However, in order to better apprehend the rationales and calculations behind Saudi foreign policy choices in recent years, it might be useful to shed light on the massive changes that occurred over the past decade in both the international and regional environments in which the Kingdom operated and continues to evolve.

Long before its precious petroleum resources transformed the Arabian Peninsula into one of the world's most attractive geopolitical prizes, leading global powers engaged in classic swashbuckling that, inter alia, ignored indigenous interests and regional stability. Over the centuries, Western states practiced piracy to subdue local opposition, as they secured "routes" and controlled substantial landmasses. For most of the twentieth century, the United Kingdom exercised immense power through much of the Middle East and Gulf regions, only to be succeeded by the United States, whose post-World War II defence umbrella gained momentum in 1980 when President Jimmy Carter clarified his doctrine, which was quickly followed by President Ronald Reagan's corollary. Carter's missive, uttered in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution and the 25 December 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, which placed Moscow's troops close to the strategic Straits of Hormuz, was crystal clear: Washington would use force to defend the Gulf and, towards that end, would deploy its newly created Rapid Deployment Force, which evolved into the US Central Command (CENTCOM) on 1 January 1983. Reagan went a step further, ensuring that the United States backed the Arab Gulf monarchies, led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Both of these significant engagements defined the US security vision which was transformed into a more or less permanent security architecture.³

It was a grand affair, and one that endured periodic disagreements, especially when London and Washington played divide and rule policies. Still, leading Western powers were the Gulf region's ultimate security guarantors, often with the full approval of emerging independent nation-states, too weak to defend themselves and that sought stability through international reassurance. This occurred even as several states on the Arabian Peninsula were disappointed that very limited progress was achieved on the question of Palestine, which preoccupied conservative Arab

³ Joshua M. Epstein, *Strategy and Force Planning. The Case of the Persian Gulf*, Washington, The Brookings Institution, 1987. See also Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015, especially p. 19-73.

monarchs and their subjects.⁴ Although overlooked by leading Western authorities, linkages between ongoing Arab–Israeli conflicts and security in the Gulf, and the broader Middle East, were too obvious to be ignored, even as the so-called peace process took on a life of its own.

Starting in the early 2010s, growing strategic concerns were displayed by China, Japan and South Korea, among several Asian countries, to protect long-term economic relationships with the Gulf states, largely to secure access to petroleum resources at reasonable prices.⁵ As several powers repositioned themselves on the global checkerboard, with many looking after their own long-term energy interests, a noticeable shift from West to East meant that the established Arab Gulf dependence on Western states was on the wane, while the post–Cold War era awakened indigenous security efforts.⁶ Saudi Arabia, as well as other Arab Gulf monarchies, nurtured long-lasting ties with key Western powers while simultaneously forging new relationships with Russia, China, Japan and South Korea. Remarkably, tangible economic agreements, as well as fresh regional and international political developments, encouraged the establishment of new spheres of influence, the strengthening of existing alliances and the creation of new ones.

1. Saudi relations with leading global powers

Gone are the days of post–Cold War unipolarity and, as Graham Allison has written recently, “The tectonic shift in the [international] balance of power that occurred in the first two decades of the twenty-first century was as dramatic as any shift the United States has witnessed over an equivalent period in its 244 years.”⁷ China is a rising economic giant with increasing military spending and capabilities, while Russia has demonstrated repeatedly in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine and recently in Syria that it can flex its military muscle and score wins with few objections. For US partners and allies in the Middle East, which have long benefited from a security architecture maintained by the US, these changes in the international balance of power have not gone unnoticed.

⁴ For a sample of the rich literature on the subject see Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military*, cit.; Robert E. Hunter, *Building Security in the Persian Gulf*, Santa Monica, Rand, 2010, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG944.html>; Matteo Legrenzi, *Security in the Gulf: Historical Legacies and Future Prospects*, London/New York, Routledge, 2011.

⁵ Muhamad S. Olimat, *China and the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries. Strategic Partnership in a Changing World*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2016; Tim Niblock and Yang Guang (eds), *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region*, Berlin, Gerlach Press, 2014.

⁶ Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers. The Rise of the Arab Gulf*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2016. See also Joseph A. Kéchichian, *From Alliance to Union. Challenges Facing Gulf Cooperation Council States in the Twenty-First Century*, Brighton/Chicago/Toronto, Sussex Academic Press, 2016.

⁷ Graham Allison, “The New Spheres of Influence”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (March/April 2020), p. 32.

Undeniably, the growing Russian role in the Arab World necessitates careful attention and, as stated above, Moscow was on a concerted campaign to regain its lost influence throughout the Arab World, particularly in the oil-rich Gulf region, for unabashedly strategic reasons. Although ties between Saudi Arabia and Russia began in 1926, what marked contacts for most of the twentieth century was hesitancy. A breakthrough occurred in 2007 when Russian President Vladimir Putin led a high-level delegation to Riyadh, even if this was reciprocated by King Salman only a decade later, when he became the first Saudi monarch to formally visit Russia in 2017.⁸

King Salman and President Putin opened a new chapter in relations, signing several accords on economic, military and petroleum projects. A three billion dollar military package was finalised in October 2017, as Saudi Arabia started to manufacture Russian anti-tank missiles, rocket launchers and automatic grenade launchers.⁹ An equally important investment was Riyadh's readiness to invest a billion dollars in several energy projects, while the Russian gas processing and petrochemicals company Sibur committed to building a plant in Saudi Arabia in a separate billion dollar agreement.¹⁰ The two governments engaged in full-scale coordination on oil production, which has continued since the two historic visits, although Moscow and Riyadh contended with sharp political differences over Syria after Russia sided with Iran and the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria's civil war, something that Riyadh was loathed to mimic pending full accountability for the atrocities committed against the majority of the Syrian population in that war-torn country.

Notwithstanding this drawback, the two governments agreed to cooperate in the glutted world oil markets in late 2016, as Putin and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman pledged to reduce oil output for six months starting from 1 January 2017. The Saudi rationale, revealed by the Heir Apparent in a *Washington Post* interview, was to coordinate oil policies with Moscow in order to convince Russia that Riyadh was a better bet than Tehran and to encourage Russia "not to [...] place all its cards in the region behind Iran".¹¹

When President Putin returned to Riyadh in late 2019, he and his delegation inked valuable contracts that allowed Saudi Aramco to acquire a 30 per cent share in Novomet, a Russian oil equipment supplier, along with future cooperation with Russia's Gazprom on natural gas projects. Whether this rapprochement was due to a growing Saudi mistrust of the West in general and the United States in particular

⁸ King 'Abdallah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz visited Russia in 2003, though he was then the Crown Prince.

⁹ Catherine Hardy, "Saudi Arabia and Russia Sign Arms Deal", in *Euronews*, 10 June 2017, <https://www.euronews.com/2017/10/06/saudi-arabia-and-russia-sign-arms-deal>.

¹⁰ "Saudi King Signs Lucrative Deals on Landmark Russia Visit", in *BBC News*, 5 October 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41512759>.

¹¹ David Ignatius, "A Young Prince Is Reimagining Saudi Arabia: Can He Make His Vision Come True?", in *The Washington Post*, 20 April 2017, <http://wapo.st/2oVEjn2>.

is difficult to determine. However, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia embraced Moscow to spite Washington, though the US's lukewarm commitments troubled some in the Saudi court. What it certainly meant was that Riyadh correctly evaluated global developments – which emphasised far narrower interests than advertised in the name of globalisation – and concluded that it could not afford perpetual ideological enmities.

Trouble brewed on the horizon, however, as the two governments eventually broke their 2016 agreement to cooperate in managing the price of oil and thereby create an informal alliance dubbed "OPEC+". The 8 March 2020 Saudi-Russian break-up triggered a major drop in oil prices after Russia rejected a Saudi offer to cut production. Riyadh wished to decrease global production at a time when world consumers were suffering the consequences of a massive downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the Russian refusal may have been a retaliation against US sanctions on the Russian energy giant Rosneft, imposed in February 2020, critics blamed Saudi Arabia for flooding the market and further depressing prices, while some analysts opined that the moves were meant to weaken the US shale oil industry even if the more likely intention was to fight for and regain lost markets.¹²

Nonetheless, in the second week of April 2020, Saudi Arabia coordinated and led a huge effort of global oil diplomacy, calling for two consecutive OPEC+ meetings in less than a week, as well as an emergency G20 energy ministers meeting, in order to stabilise energy markets in the aftermath of the global economic meltdown ushered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Russia felt compelled to once again cooperate in order to minimise a severe economic depression. The result was an agreement by the OPEC+ group for a record cut in output of 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd) for the first two months starting on 1 May 2020, followed by a 7.7 million bpd cut for the subsequent six months, and 5.8 million bpd for another period of 16 months until the end of April 2022. Moreover, there was a pledge by G20 nations outside the OPEC+ alliance to cut about 3.7 million bpd of oil supply.¹³

Another country with which Saudi has had close cooperation in recent years is China. Saudi-Chinese relations date back to 1939 when the Kingdom was the first Arab country to establish political ties with Beijing. However, relations faltered due

¹² See, for example, "Oil Plunges 10% after OPEC Deal Collapses", in *BBC News*, 6 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51774622>; Benoit Faucon, Georgi Kantchev and Summer Said, "Russia Takes Aim at U.S. Shale Oil Producers", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 March 2020.

¹³ In the OPEC+ meeting on 6 June 2020, Saudi Arabia and Russia were able to secure an agreement to extend the record cuts of 9.7 million bpd for another month until the end of July 2020. See, Grant Smith et al., "OPEC+ Extends Oil Cuts in Win for Saudi-Russian Alliance", in *Bloomberg*, 6 June 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-06/opec-agrees-to-extend-output-cuts-as-quota-cheats-offer-penance>. Also see, Rania El Gamal, "Saudi Energy Minister Says Effective Global Oil Cuts Above 19 Million bpd", in *Reuters*, 13 April 2020, <https://reut.rs/34xuVKP>; Grant Smith, Javier Blas and Salma El Wardany, "Oil Price War Ends With Historic OPEC+ Deal to Slash Output", in *Bloomberg*, 12 April 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-12/oil-price-war-ends-with-historic-opec-deal-to-cut-production>.

to ideological differences and being on opposite sides during the Cold War. It was only in 1990 that official diplomatic relations were re-established, which means that 2020 marked the 30th anniversary of Sino-Saudi relations. When President Xi Jinping embarked on an overseas trip in 2016, he chose the Middle East and stopped in Saudi Arabia first, where both countries signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership”, the highest kind in China’s hierarchy of partnerships.¹⁴ Cooperation between the two countries intensified following Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman’s visit to China in 2019, after which it was announced that the Chinese language would soon be taught in Saudi public schools, indicating the long-term strategic importance Riyadh placed on the relationship.¹⁵

Saudi Arabia’s close relationship with China, which is part of a broader cooperation and pivot to Asia, makes sense economically as well as politically. With the strategic aims of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and China’s Belt and Road Initiative, both countries stand to benefit from close economic cooperation and partnerships. Moreover, having close coordination with an international heavyweight like China in platforms such as the UN Security Council can be hugely beneficial, especially as differences over Syria and Iran still linger and as Saudi Arabia assumes the presidency of the G20 in 2020.¹⁶ This was eminently in evidence on 26 March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic mobilised G20 leaders under the chairmanship of King Salman in the first virtual summit held by the organisation, and where Beijing offered various initiatives, which were unanimously approved.¹⁷ What is important to underscore is that the intensification of Sino-Saudi cooperation in the past decade “is not about the United States and Saudi Arabia. It is about the ongoing structural shift in geopolitics, as the global economic center of gravity moves east and Asia and the Middle East draw closer together”.¹⁸

Aware of the Kingdom’s strategic value, US President Donald J. Trump has made it a point to work with Saudi Arabia despite the slew of criticisms that preceded the tragic Jamal Khashoggi assassination in late 2018. The US president placed the Kingdom at the centre of his foreign policy in the Middle East, sharing Riyadh’s concerns over Iran, even if his colourful declarations on vital security questions upset the proverbial apple cart.¹⁹ Whether Trump’s preferences were authentic or

¹⁴ Jonathan Fulton, “China’s Changing Role in the Middle East”, in *Atlantic Council Reports*, June 2019, p. 3, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=130732>.

¹⁵ Ruba Obaid, “Students Begin Studying Chinese in Public Schools in Saudi Arabia”, in *Arab News*, 19 January 2020, <https://arab.news/bdynm>.

¹⁶ Sinem Cengiz, “Saudi Foreign Policy Towards China in the Post-Arab Uprisings Era: A Neoclassical Realist Approach”, in *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2020), p. 51-67.

¹⁷ “Xi Jinping’s Remarks at G20 Virtual Summit”, in *CGTN*, 27 March 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-26/Full-text-Xi-Jinping-s-remarks-at-G20-virtual-summit--Pbmq2YLJnO/index.html>.

¹⁸ Jonathan Fulton, “Why Saudi Arabia Is Turning to Asia”, in *Monkey Cage*, 6 March 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/06/why-saudi-arabia-is-turning-asia>.

¹⁹ Tom Batchelor, “Trump Says Saudi Arabia’s King Salman ‘Would Not Last Two Weeks’ Without US Support”, in *The Independent*, 3 October 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/>

whether he adopted various policies to correct the course set by his predecessor will long be debated. Nevertheless, what was clear was his desire to end the diplomatic overtures towards Iran, which Saudi Arabia and its Arab partners spurned. To his credit, Trump declared that Saudis “have been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran”, at a time when it was very easy to bash the Kingdom.²⁰

Critics, including staunch Republican supporters like Senators Lindsey Graham (South Carolina), Jim Risch (Idaho) and Ted Cruz (Texas), among others, objected to what they perceived as a red-carpet treatment of Saudi Arabia. Congressional criticism and scepticism toward Saudi Arabia, while not new, has increased in recent years, partly as a result of domestic political polarisation within the United States as well as “the articulation and championing of progressive and isolationist foreign policy stances by factions within the Democratic and Republican congressional delegations”.²¹

In any event, Saudi Arabia remained a staunch ally of the United States, which Washington acknowledged as it celebrated the 75th anniversary of the famous 14 February 1945 meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman, on board the USS Quincy.²² Beyond the strategic petroleum imperative that had defined US global dominance since WWII, and despite doubts raised about the reliability of the United States by those who concluded that the demise of the superpower was imminent, Saudi Arabia professed genuine support to its ally, which Washington habitually reciprocated.

In short, Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states increased their ties with Russia, China and other Asian states, and notwithstanding fresh “strategic partnerships” with Beijing and Moscow, it was hasty to conclude that the Russian proposal for a multilateral approach was far more attractive in the long run than the current US security umbrella. What Riyadh foresaw was the need to strengthen existing security alliances, build new ones and empower a regional order that rested on resilient and sovereign nation-states that were ready to assume a larger share of the security burden. How Saudi Arabia proposed to achieve these goals deserves special attention.

americas/us-politics/trump-saudi-arabia-king-us-military-support-mbs-salman-yemen-a8566556.html. See also “Trump: We Are Losing Our A** Defending You, Saudi Arabia” (video), in *Middle East Monitor*, 29 April 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190429-trump-we-are-losing-our-a-defending-you-saudi-arabia>.

²⁰ White House, *Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia*, 20 November 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-standing-saudi-arabia>.

²¹ Andrew Leber, “Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Congress: Cooperation and Opposition since 9/11”, in *Dirasat*, No. 44 (April 2019), p. 27, <https://kfcris.com/en/view/post/214>. See also Paul Musgrave, “Between Two Poles: The Kingdom and the U.S. Foreign Policy in an Age of Political Polarization”, in *Dirasat*, No. 47 (July 2019), <https://kfcris.com/en/view/post/225>.

²² “KSA, US Celebrate 75th Anniversary of FDR Meet on Board USS Farragut in Jeddah Islamic Port”, in *Arab News*, 16 February 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1628671>.

2. Adjusting to a new regional landscape

One of the most consequential events to strike the Middle East in recent decades was the protests and uprisings that, starting in late 2010, swept across many Arab countries in a regional convulsion that was initially dubbed the "Arab Spring". Much hope for long-sought reforms had accompanied the onset of the revolutions, and some even contended that this entrepreneurial generation of young Arabs rising up together against their rulers would spell the end, or at least diminish the appeal of, radical movements and ideologies. That hope was short-lived and the reality that transpired thereafter was that the uprisings and reactions to them spread chaos and war across the region, and radical groups and movements were in fact revived and became more invigorated.²³

The most detrimental consequence of the Arab uprisings, however, was the weakening and failure of state institutions and the ensuing challenges to the very sovereignty and territorial integrity of many afflicted states. This has contributed to an ongoing structural shift in regional geopolitics and power balance. Traditional centres of power in the Arab world such as Egypt and Iraq have been weakened and, in the midst of this volatile regional environment and the ensuing vacuum, the Gulf, and in particular Saudi Arabia, emerged as the new centre of gravity.²⁴

Turkey, post 2011, presented another problematic dilemma as it too failed to put its own house in order before embarking on regional adventurisms that, more often than not, drew the ire of global as well as regional powers. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who perceived the Middle East as his own sphere of influence, Ankara adopted unhealthy Ottoman methodologies that failed once and were bound to fail again. Erdoğan behaved as a "sultan" – a reference to Ottoman days, when Turkey dominated the region – and clearly feels much more comfortable than his predecessors in operating across the Arab world. To be sure, Erdoğan's alignment with and support for the transnational Islamist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, his deployment of military troops in Qatar, his military incursion into northern Syria, as well as his deployment of Syrian proxies in order to fight Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in Libya, were not endearing steps for the vast majority of Arabs, especially Saudis.²⁵ When it comes to Syria specifically, Ankara is playing its Kurdish card well, maintaining that it can and must manage stability along its 600-

²³ Emma Graham-Harriss, "Beyond Syria: The Arab Spring's Aftermath", in *The Guardian*, 30 December 2018, <https://gu.com/p/ab4nx>. See also Jon B. Alterman, "Radicalism Four Years into the 'Arab Spring'", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 15 December 2014, <https://www.csis.org/node/24898>.

²⁴ 'Abd al-Khaliq 'Abdallah, *Lahzat al-Khalij fi al-Tarikh al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir* [The Gulf moment in contemporary Arab history], Beirut, Dar al-Farabi, 2018.

²⁵ See Soner Cagaptay, "Erdoğan's Failure on the Nile", in *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, No. 33 (Spring 2019), p. 82-95, <https://www.thecaireview.com/?p=9767>; Helen Warrell, Chloe Cornish and Laura Pitel, "Turkey's Military Incursion into Syria Threatens to Revive ISIS Cells", in *Financial Times*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/3fb0791e-e9e9-11e9-a240-3b065ef5fc55>; Bethan McKernan and Hussein Akoush, "Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian Fighters Deployed to Libya to Support Government", in *The Guardian*, 15 January 2020, <https://gu.com/p/d4zff>.

mile border with Syria. However, it is a dangerous game for Turkey, with possible negative repercussions for the region as a whole, to address what it perceives as a threat to its security by aligning itself with radical Islamist groups and rebels.

Inasmuch as the post-2011 Arab uprisings crystallised Washington's preferences – especially in Egypt and Libya – Saudi officials took note of US apprehensions after Barack Obama's Ankara and Cairo speeches that did not hide the president's loathing of traditional regimes.²⁶ It was this realisation that sank whatever goodwill existed in Riyadh. With dramatic regional transformations that engulfed the bulk of the Arab world after Spring 2011, Saudi Arabia backed President 'Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in Yemen, even PM Sa'ad Hariri in Lebanon, though the latter kowtowed to Hezbollah and lost his opportunity to save Beirut from collapse. What stood out in most of these evolving settings was the role played by Iran as it asserted its leadership and expanded its influence.

Taking advantage of the ensuing chaos and weakened central governments and state institutions in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and beyond, Iran was able, through financial, material and physical support, to expand its influence and entrench its transnational network of armed militias and non-state actors. The main reason is that it plays with its own set of rules, and pays little or no attention to good neighbourliness and the rules of the Westphalian system governing relations between sovereign nation-states. Whatever paradox existed in Gulf foreign policies could well be explained by the dangers posed by an increasingly assertive Iran, whose legitimacy gained traction in the aftermath of the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA). The JCPOA sought to solely limit Iran's nuclear program, and did not deal with its regional adventurism or its ballistic missile programme, with the hope that it will positively contribute to the moderation of Tehran's behaviour and, thus, regional and international peace and security. Effectively, however, it permitted Tehran to expand its influence and pressure its Arab neighbours after securing a partial lifting of sanctions and receiving substantial financial relief, both of which were provided within JCPOA guidelines that, truth be told, allowed Iran to maintain its regional activism and threaten its regional antagonists.²⁷ Iran stood as a regional rival, not because conservative Arabs perceived it as a mortal danger to their domestic stability and security, but because the Iranian regime has seldom shied from pursuing its expansionist agenda and advancing its destabilising model of a regional order

²⁶ The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman said in an interview with Bloomberg in October 2018, "Throughout his Administration that lasted 8 years, President Obama worked against most of our agendas, not only in Saudi but throughout the Middle East. And despite that, we were able to protect our interests". See Stephanie Flanders et al., "Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests: Transcript", in *Bloomberg*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-05/saudi-crown-prince-discusses-trump-aramco-arrests-transcript>; Turki al-Faisal al-Saud, "Mr. Obama, We Are Not 'Free Riders'", in *Arab News*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/894826>.

²⁷ The JCPOA is the so-called Iran nuclear deal that was inked on 14 July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States – plus Germany).

that stands in stark contrast to the one adopted and pursued by the Saudi-led alliance. Its actions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere, all highlighted Iranian hegemonic aspirations that exploited chaos and skirted good neighbourly relations.

For over four decades, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments cajoled their Western allies to address the Iranian threat in toto, though those efforts were either overlooked or, most recently under the Obama administration, allowed to expand as his administration both downgraded Iran's problematic regional policies below the objective of reaching an agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, as well as allegedly viewing the real threat to Western interests as Sunni extremism manifested in Salafist traditions.²⁸ In fact, the decade-long vacillation in US leadership portrayed the image of a retreating superpower, anxious to appease a hegemonic regional power instead of supporting traditional allies. Doubts were raised by some concerning the reliability of the United States, especially following Obama's shocking contention that Saudi Arabia should "share" the region with Iran, their regional foe and a US-designated state sponsor of terrorism.²⁹ Was Washington still committed to its decades-old security architecture – as upheld by every president since Jimmy Carter – at a time when Saudi Arabia perceived Iranian expansionism with grave concerns?

Notwithstanding the Obama administration's convenient regional accommodations that appeared to favour Iran, Saudi Arabia opted for a two-pronged approach to ensure regional security, first by adopting a far more assertive role in Bahrain and Yemen, and second by imposing order within the GCC family. Even if complications arose at both levels, few could dismiss Riyadh's policies to preserve its core interests, especially after its steps put to rest the festering canard that Saudi Arabia seldom assumed security burdens. In 2011, the GCC deployed military forces, the Peninsula Shield Force, into Manama to end an insurrection against the ruling family, as well as engineering the GCC initiative that aimed to put an end to the political crisis in Yemen. In 2015, when the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels hijacked the political process and took control of Sana'a, Saudi Arabia used even greater force in Yemen as it mobilised and led a strong coalition of states at the request and in support of the legitimate Yemeni government. Parallel to these measures, Riyadh organised large-scale military exercises that conveyed a keen determination – under the reigns of both King 'Abdallah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz and King Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz – to protect the Arabian Peninsula.

²⁸ Nabil Khalifé, *The Attempt to Uproot Sunni-Arab Influence. A Geo-Strategic Analysis of the Western, Israeli and Iranian Quest for Domination*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2017. See also, Suzanne Maloney, *Progress of the Obama Administration's Policy Toward Iran*, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, 15 November 2011, <http://brook.gs/2bAHDvo>.

²⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine", in *The Atlantic*, Vol. 317, No. 3 (April 2016), p. 70-90, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525>.

In addition to these grave concerns, the Kingdom confronted a genuine security hazard from Qatar, which reached the level of a diplomatic crisis in June 2017 when 12 countries joined Saudi Arabia in severing relations with Doha. Riyadh and its partners were particularly irked by Qatar's strong support and encouragement of the Muslim Brotherhood and other proxies in Syria and Libya, including some with ties to terrorist jihadist movements, representing a more or less direct threat to the governance model proposed and pursued by the Kingdom. The coalition that imposed a boycott cited Doha's support for extremist organisations, its continuous incitement against its Gulf neighbours through its media arms, along with the Qatari accommodation of Iran.

Remarkably, Doha acknowledged that it had provided assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood (though it denied aiding militant groups linked to al-Qaeda or the so-called Islamic State), and while Qatar shared vital economic ties with Iran over the North Dome Gas Field in the middle of the Gulf, close Iranian–Qatari ties remained puzzling. Significantly, Doha condemned the 2 January 2016 Iranian attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad, and even recalled its ambassador from Iran as this constituted a violation of international diplomatic norms, but it did not alter its general course of action vis-à-vis Tehran and other GCC states. Qatar did not criticise Iran over its interferences in Bahrain, and after the boycott, returned its ambassador to the Iranian capital on 23 August 2017. Further distancing itself from its GCC partners, the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its willingness to improve bilateral ties with Tehran.

To date, Kuwaiti efforts to mediate a lasting reconciliation have failed to produce a settlement of existing differences, which led a handful of commentators to bury the alliance as yet another failed Arab initiative.³⁰ However, while the situation within the GCC alliance is not perfect, the aforementioned commentators' readings are perhaps overly pessimistic. In fact, the diplomatic rupture showed the immense benefits in having a regional grouping such as the GCC, as coordination between all six members continued on many levels, including military drills. To be sure, and beyond critical security ties, effective economic relationships fostered greater intimacy as GCC officials developed and adopted mutually beneficial policies. Moreover, non-negligible geostrategic benefits of integration occurred even if few anticipated the latest Doha crisis.

³⁰ See, for example, Geoffrey Martin, "Is the GCC Dead after the Qatar Crisis?", in *Gulf States Analytics*, 5 February 2018, <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/?p=1777>. See also Imad K. Harb, "The Qatar Blockade Killed the GCC, But What Next?", in *The New Arab*, 5 June 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/6/5/the-qatar-blockade-killed-the-gcc-but-what-next->; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Can the Gulf Cooperation Council Survive the Current Crisis?", in *ACW Policy Analysis*, 7 September 2017, <http://arabcenterdc.org/?p=5671>; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Evolving Narratives of Political Contestation and Geopolitical Rivalry in the Persian Gulf", in Wolfgang Mühlberger and Toni Alaranta (eds), *Political Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa. Conceptions of Order and Perceptions of Instability*, Cham, Springer, 2020, p. 71-91.

When the six monarchies nestled on the Arabian Peninsula joined to create the GCC in early 1981, they shared economic integration aspirations, common ideologies, conservative values, identical security aims and, above all else, similar assessments regarding the need to protect their countries and preserve their rule. For the most part, none of these purposes changed, and it would be wrong for any single country to think that it can survive and achieve its strategic objectives while working against the interests of the remaining ones, especially in a region subjected to continuous ideological, political and military assaults.

Nonetheless, as Henry Kissinger wrote, "Saudi foreign policy, for most of the existence of the modern Saudi state, has been characterized by a caution that elevated indirectness into a special art form".³¹ However, as a result of the new regional as well as international strategic environment, Saudi Arabia decided to do away with caution and assume a more hawkish posture as it adopted forward-looking foreign policy instruments. This was not because Saudi officials were overconfident of their Muslim credentials or were persuaded that intrinsic manipulations of regional rivals would be easy. Rather, Saudis assumed the responsibility because they concluded that their security required a hands-on approach, though the costs remained high. Equally important was the conclusion that the United States, still a vital ally, was telegraphing changing priorities and might no longer be willing to invest in the Kingdom's wellbeing the way it used to.

To be sure, US power has not declined in recent years, and it would be inaccurate to presume that it would withdraw substantially from the region in the foreseeable future. Still, "the questions being posed today are less about American capability than about American will, leading to deep uncertainty as to whether the United States still defines its regional interests as it once did".³² These questions, exacerbated by the rise of protectionism, populism and isolationism within segments of the US public, fed a perception that in turn could dictate a new reality.

Notwithstanding growing apprehension, at least among the Saudi public, regarding the long-term commitment of the United States, Saudi Arabia welcomed the Trump administration and the latter's support for the Kingdom's regional vision, as Washington distanced itself from Iran in the area. Saudi leadership assumed the responsibility of a major regional power, paying a larger portion of the defence burden. As stated above, and while the Kingdom lacked the population of its putative rivals, including Iran and Turkey, it intended to boost its technical capabilities and, notwithstanding intrinsic challenges, to acquire effective military competencies that would allow it to protect and defend the Arabian Peninsula.

³¹ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, New York, Penguin Press, 2014, p. 136.

³² William F. Wechsler, "US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality", in Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, Milano, ISPI, 2019, p. 25, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/24090>.

3. Regional security: Increased burdens for increased threats

Resulting from these developments, Riyadh emphasised the need to be more responsible for ensuring its security and the security of the Arabian Peninsula and the region, and embarked on comprehensive re-evaluations of military needs starting in early 2015. In fact, Saudi defence industry ambitions, which were included in the comprehensive Vision 2030 plans, promised to address fundamental national security challenges even if these ambitious projects demanded minute attention to detail as authorities worked to eliminate institutional obstacles for sorely needed reforms. While the development of the Saudi defence industry accelerated, requiring updated capabilities as emphasized by Vision 2030, few expected existing strategic ties with supplier countries to change over the short term. What Saudi security plans envisaged was technological expertise from reliable partners and, when such partners were not available, to seek fresh supplies from Russia and China, both of which were ready to assist the Saudi defence industry to develop faster.

As discussed in the Vision 2030 blueprint, Riyadh intended to push for a localisation of defence industries, not only to reduce military spending, but also to stimulate other “industrial sectors such as industrial equipment, communications and information technology”, all of which were expected to create more job opportunities.³³ Although the Kingdom was the world’s fifth largest military spender in 2019 behind the United States, China, India and Russia,³⁴ barely 5 per cent of its estimated 60 billion US dollar annual spending was within the Kingdom, with only seven indigenous national defence companies and two research centres. Whether Vision 2030’s aim “to localize over 50 percent of military equipment spending” could be achieved was impossible to know, though first efforts were promising. By concentrating on “less complex industries such as those providing spare parts, armored vehicles and basic ammunition”,³⁵ the plan intended to learn how to walk in the field before starting to run. Moreover, and because Riyadh required trained personnel to produce and efficiently use what leading companies could produce, the real challenge rested on the ability to secure an effective transfer of technology, which major powers were seldom disposed to accept.

It was critical to underscore that the security burden increased because of intensified threats that could no longer be overlooked. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) military expenditure databases, GCC states spend about 100 billion US dollars a year on defence, just behind the United States and China, though Gulf Arab monarchies were progressively entrusted with the gargantuan task of

³³ Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030*, 2017, p. 48, https://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/report/Saudi_Vision2030_EN_2017.pdf.

³⁴ Nan Tian et al., “Trends in World Military Expenditure 2019”, in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, April 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/node/5103>.

³⁵ Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030*, cit., p. 48.

protecting the entire Arabian Peninsula and its immediate surrounding airspaces and sea-lanes.³⁶ GCC states led by Saudi Arabia disbursed significant resources to shield the Arabian Peninsula, where 36 million indigenous inhabitants along with an additional 22 to 24 million expatriate workers live in 2020.

Furthermore, and since most of these individuals live on the coasts as well as within isolated urbanised oases, extensive infrastructures, including vital desalination plants that provide sorely needed water for human, animal and plant lives, required costly safety measures. Of course, the Arabian Peninsula's oil resources, estimated to contain about 500 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and 1,500 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, compelled decision-makers to invest in effective defences of vital facilities also. One may add to this list the protection of large cities, critical electricity grids, airport installations, land, air and naval bases, as well as other vital facilities.³⁷

Protecting this large area, including those living within its space, was a major responsibility that GCC states took seriously even if they continued to confront sharp strategic challenges after 1981. For over four decades, sectarian, ethnic and ideological divisions grew in scope, which added to existing vulnerabilities as a major regional foe seldom shied from its quest to upset regional stability. Repeated Iranian interference in the internal affairs of GCC states – ranging from an attempt to assassinate the ruler of Kuwait in 1981,³⁸ to repeated meddling in Bahrain after the mid-1990s,³⁹ to periodic clashes at Hajj ceremonies in Saudi Arabia,⁴⁰ to its tactical marriage of convenience with al-Qaeda post 9/11⁴¹ and its well-documented financial and material support of the Houthi militia in Yemen⁴² – necessitated

³⁶ See International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2020*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020, p. 324-387; and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, London, Oxford University Press, 2019, Chapter 4.

³⁷ Economist, "Spiralling", in *The Economist*, No. 9153 (27 July 2019), p. 27-28, <https://econ.st/2Yj5WWX>.

³⁸ UPI, "Car Bomber Fails in Attempt to Kill Leader of Kuwait", in *The New York Times*, 26 May 1985, p. A1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/26/world/car-bomber-fails-in-attempt-to-kill-leader-of-kuwait.html>.

³⁹ Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 155-161 and 275-296.

⁴⁰ Gwenn Okruhlik, "Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations: External Rapprochement and Internal Consolidation", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer 2003), p. 113-125, <https://mepec.org/node/4008>. See also Joshua Teitelbaum, "Terrorist Challenges to Saudi Arabian Internal Security", in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 2005), p. 1-11.

⁴¹ Assaf Moghadam, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa'ida's Tactical Cooperation", in *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (April 2017), p. 12-18, <https://ctc.usma.edu/marriage-of-convenience-the-evolution-of-iran-and-al-qaidas-tactical-cooperation>; "CIA Docs from Osama bin Laden Raid Suggest Iran-al Qaeda Link", in *CBS News*, 2 November 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-osama-bin-laden-al-qaeda-before-september-11-terror-attacks-cia-documents>; Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, "Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself—With Iran's Help", in *The Atlantic*, 11 November 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/al-qaeda-iran-cia/545576>.

⁴² Farzin Nadimi, "The UN Exposes Houthi Reliance on Iranian Weapons", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 3261 (13 February 2020), <https://washin.st/38u1Xgc>.

heavy investments by GCC member-states, most of which were amply aware that their limited populations prevented the establishment of effective security forces that, consequently, required unity if not union. GCC states invested significant resources to upgrade their military competences, and while they had in the past relied on global allies to ensure regional security, awakened nationalism and core sovereignty questions now shifted some of the burden onto their shoulders.⁴³

Equally as important as the Gulf, on the western side of the Arabian Peninsula lies the Red Sea which is one of the world's most heavily trafficked waterways, handling around 15 per cent of global trade. Recent years have seen a flurry of regional and international interest in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa region, which unfortunately, and despite its immense strategic and economic importance, has been plagued by a plethora of economic, political and security threats and challenges ranging from piracy and terrorism to irregular migration and the smuggling of weapons and drugs. The fact that a number of states in the region suffer from fragile institutions exacerbates an already precarious situation. Extremist groups, such as the Iranian-backed Houthis, began in recent years to demonstrate sophisticated capabilities, including the use of anti-shipping missiles, sea mines and self-guiding explosive boats, threatening the freedom of navigation and international trade. In fact, these terrorist activities forced Saudi Arabia to temporarily halt shipments in the Red Sea in mid-2018.⁴⁴

These dynamic Red Sea, Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden trans-regional developments increased the fear of being caught in a great power competition. In Djibouti, for example, where US, French, Japanese and Italian military facilities co-existed for several years, China joined the club in 2017 with its first naval overseas military base, which added to US and Japanese concerns. Against these enhanced deployments, the US Congress expressed alarm in 2018, concerned over the potential national security implications of big-power politics, as best highlighted by former National Security Advisor John Bolton who devised President Trump's new Africa strategy and stressed the need to confront major rivals such as China and Russia.⁴⁵ While the Chinese presence in the region has traditionally been economic in character, Beijing has certainly expanded its military footprint in the region over the course of several years due to various threats and challenges to its economic interests.⁴⁶

⁴³ Nawaf Obaid, *A New Assertive Saudi Arabia?* (podcast), European Council on Foreign Relations, 22 November 2013, <https://www.mixcloud.com/ECFR/a-new-assertive-saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁴ Elana DeLozier, "Seeing Red: Trade and Threats Shaping Gulf-Horn Relations", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 3079 (15 February 2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/seeing-red-trade-and-threats-shaping-gulf-horn-relations>.

⁴⁵ Zach Vertin, "Toward a Red Sea Forum: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa, & Architecture for a New Regional Order", in *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers*, No. 27 (November 2019), <https://brookings/2oMGldc>.

⁴⁶ Mohammed al-Sudairi, "The People's Republic in the Red Sea: A Holistic Analysis of China's Discursive and Material Footprint in the Region", in *Dirasat*, No. 52 (January 2020), <http://kfcris.com/en/view/post/259>.

As the commercial and military footprint of external actors continues to expand, Horn of Africa and Red Sea states may find themselves subjected to global power competition, especially in an era characterised by dramatic shifts in the international balance of power. In the midst of this evolving strategic context, Saudi Arabia felt it important to increase its engagements in the region to safeguard it from nefarious external influences and protect the national as well as mutual economic and strategic interests of the states sharing this increasingly crowded neighbourhood.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia increased its diplomatic and mediation efforts in the region with notable successes, the highlight of which was the historical peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea that was signed in Jeddah in September 2018 and marked an end to a bitter war that had lasted 20 years. However, the most sustained, successful and potentially rewarding initiative that Saudi Arabia spearheaded was the establishment of a new entity comprising the littoral states of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which it first announced in December 2018, and whose founding charter was signed in January 2020 under the name "Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden".⁴⁷ Security is certainly high on the agenda but it is not the only focus or concern of the new Council. The Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs stated upon the signing of the charter with his counterparts from Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea, that it was important "to expedite the pace of our countries' cooperation and enhance our capabilities in order to confront any risks or challenges facing our region as well as to protect [its] security".⁴⁸

There are, of course, other economic as well as environmental benefits that can be reaped through such close cooperation and coordination. Through the Council, for instance, the smaller economies and developing countries in the Horn of Africa could potentially gain access to previously inaccessible opportunities, and, collectively, be able to better manage the flurry of new foreign engagements, rebalancing the asymmetrical relationship with other wealthy countries.

Though little known outside government circles, an equally important alliance the Kingdom took the lead in forming was the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), which was created in December 2015 to enhance cooperation and "form a unified pan-Islamic front against terrorism".⁴⁹ The IMCTC has since grown in membership to 41 countries, and has been active in the area of training, capacity building, and intelligence sharing between member states.

⁴⁷ Saudi Press Agency, *Foreign Ministers of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden Sign Charter of the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden*, 6 January 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=2019799>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See the IMCTC official website: *Brief History*, <https://imctc.org/English/About>.

To be sure, Saudi Arabia is placing a huge burden on itself, both in political terms and in advancing the necessary financial capital to several institutions, though leading such ambitious undertakings is a precise fit with enhancing its long-term national security interests. Indeed, taking the lead in building such regional coalitions and groupings is testament to the Kingdom's firm belief in the benefits of multilateralism, and a concrete example of its determination to be proactive in forging regional solutions to many of the region's problems.

4. Gulf security: Russian, US and Iranian proposals

In the midst of the abovementioned regional and international developments, few were surprised when Moscow proposed a new collective security concept to replace the Arabian Gulf's US defence umbrella and, in the process, position Russia as a co-equal power broker alongside Washington.⁵⁰ What President Putin foresaw was nothing short of a radical overhaul of the Western-created security architecture, which guaranteed access to defend Arab Gulf societies and the area's vast petroleum resources fuelling the global economic engine, as he envisaged an international conference on security and cooperation in the Gulf, with a view to establishing a regional security organisation that would, ostensibly, adopt "a long-term programme of action aimed at normalizing the situation, improving stability and security, resolving conflicts, [identifying] key benchmarks and parameters for a future post-crisis architecture, as well as ways to fulfill the related tasks".⁵¹ What this entailed was the eventual removal of the "permanent deployment of troops of extra-regional states in the territories of states of the Gulf",⁵² a reference to US, British and French forces and bases.⁵³

The Russian proposal was backed by China, and would presumably include other stakeholders, including Iran, though it failed to discuss why Saudi Arabia and its Arab Gulf partners would accept to join in this plan. Even if convoluted, the Russian logic was based on the alleged perception that the United States, which was no longer dependent on oil imports from the Arab Gulf region, was gradually reducing its commitments to its Arab allies and that local powers, led by Saudi Arabia, ought to distance themselves from Washington. Of course, this very reading was controversial.

In fact, the number of US troops dispatched to the region has grown in recent years because of renewed tensions with Iran, confirming that Washington is not

⁵⁰ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Theodore Karasik, "Is Russia's 'Old' Gulf Security Plan the Best It Can Do?", in *Arab News*, 30 July 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1533096>.

leaving the Arabian Peninsula despite a widespread belief that that was precisely what would occur before long. Iranian officials and pro-Iranian analysts concluded that this fundamental assumption steered Arab leaders in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to hedge against a US departure, including by making overtures to China, Russia, Turkey and even Iran, which was certainly provocative even if pedantic.⁵⁴

Interestingly, Russia perceived the security of the Gulf region as a counter-terrorism conundrum, in which stakeholders would join efforts to eliminate “the hotbed of extremism and terrorism in the Middle East” without, however, identifying what that might be. Those efforts, Moscow believed, ought to be under the aegis of the United Nations and its alleged “solid basis of international law” that was highly questionable because of the catch-22 Security Council veto power. Moreover, it insisted that the new Gulf area security system ought to be universal and comprehensive, “based on respect for the interests of all regional and other parties involved, in all spheres of security, including its military, economic and energy dimensions”. Of course, its most interesting feature was the call to create “a security and cooperation organization in the Persian Gulf (PGSCO) that would include, in addition to the Gulf countries, Russia, China, the USA, the EU, India and other stakeholders as observers or associated members”.⁵⁵

Regrettably, this call overlooked the existence of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which plays an important role in maintaining security, stability and prosperity in the region. The reason was perhaps the 2017 rupture with Qatar, which stood as an illustration of the estrangement, although this did not greatly hinder GCC’s cooperation as illustrated above.

In addition to the GCC alliance, the Kingdom joined the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC),⁵⁶ and supported the European-led naval mission in the Straits of Hormuz (EMASOH), which strengthened ties between the Arab Gulf monarchies and European powers. Indeed, EMASOH was an additional sign of European backing as member-states shared in the security burden and their presence in the Gulf was deemed to be useful by GCC states.⁵⁷ From the Saudi perspective, those two maritime security missions were certainly preferred over the Iranian HOPE proposal, which wished to see a Western military withdrawal from the area, if only because Iran has long been an active participant in the destabilisation of many countries in the region, and, especially following the US

⁵⁴ Associated Press, “Iran Asks West to Leave Persian Gulf as Tensions Heightened”, in *CNBC News*, 22 September 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/22/iran-asks-west-to-leave-persian-gulf-as-tensions-heightened.html>. See also Anthony H. Cordesman, “The American Threat to America in the Gulf”, in *CSIS Commentaries*, 6 January 2020, <https://www.csis.org/node/55068>.

⁵⁵ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia’s Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, cit.

⁵⁶ “Saudi Arabia Joins International Maritime Security Alliance”, in *Al Arabiya*, 18 September 2019, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2019/09/18/Saudi-Arabia-joins-International-Maritime-Security-Construct>.

⁵⁷ Nathan Gain, “European-led Coalition in the Strait of Hormuz Begins Operations”, in *Naval News*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/?p=8870>.

withdrawal of the JCPOA, the main culprit behind the attacks in the Straits of Hormuz as well.⁵⁸

As to the US-proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), which was first announced during President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, it is still a work in progress and the shape it will ultimately take remains unclear.⁵⁹ This alliance was to include all six GCC states, Egypt, Jordan, as well as the United States, and proposed to focus not only on security, but also on the economy and energy questions.⁶⁰ However, it seems that some members have expressed hesitation towards the initiative, which culminated in the withdrawal of Egypt in April 2019. Despite that drawback, MESA meetings continue to be held and the remaining members, including Saudi Arabia, seem to be coordinating and "moving ahead with the initiative".⁶¹

Conclusion

To sum up, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran stemmed from opposing regional order visions and significant geopolitical disputes, and served as a salient component in the security architecture of today's Middle East. Saudi Arabia remained troubled by Tehran's support of a network of armed non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Inasmuch as Iranian regional policies are perceived as posing direct threats to the security of the Gulf as well as the wider region, it was a foregone conclusion that Saudi Arabia and its partners would react with firm diplomatic positions, appropriate political responses, concrete economic steps and, when absolutely necessary, carefully tailored military responses.

As highlighted above, Saudi Arabia's threat perceptions vis-à-vis the situation in the Middle East and the Gulf, particularly concerning the role of Iran, was no longer in doubt. In Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, Tehran was unabashed in backing Shi'a militias that threatened the internal stability of all four societies, while Riyadh defended its traditional allies and sought to preserve and strengthen the state institutions. Likewise, Saudi Arabia confronted a reinvigorated Turkey, whose leader followed a dual nationalist and Islamist strategy, and contemplated the restoration of Ottoman hegemony over a vast swath of territory. From the Saudi point of view, Ankara was a leading regional power but could not possibly be allowed to re-establish its Ottoman lore. To be sure, Turkey remained an ally but

⁵⁸ Mehran Haghiriyan and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor Succeed?", in *IranSource*, 3 October 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=186210>.

⁵⁹ Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", in *Carnegie Articles*, 8 February 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/78317>.

⁶⁰ Kristen Fontenrose, "A Crisis of Commitment in the Middle East, But Whose?", in *New Atlanticist*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=199162>.

⁶¹ Stephen Kalin and Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive: Egypt Withdraws from U.S.-led anti-Iran Security Initiative – Sources", in *Reuters*, 11 April 2019, <https://reut.rs/2GgqQjO>.

its military presence in Qatar, along with its support of the transnational Muslim Brotherhood, was not perceived positively. Still, the gravest threat emerged from Iran, where religious leaders seldom shied away from issuing anti-Saudi declarations, including brazen calls to “liberate” the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah.

As analysed above, the shifts that occurred within the regional and international environments over the past decades have presented the Saudi leadership with new sets of challenges and difficult choices. A proactive policy of diversification, not only in the economic sphere but also in security and foreign relations, has been pursued in order to meet internal needs and remain relevant in an ever-evolving international environment. Throughout all of these changes, it is safe to argue that neither King Salman nor his Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman shirked their responsibilities to defend the Kingdom and promote stability in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.

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