

## **Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical Interests in the Levant and the Threat Perception 2011-2017**

*Hasan Mohammad Almomani \**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims at analysing and investigating Saudi Arabia's geopolitical interests in the Levant. The primary argument of this paper is that Riyadh's national interests – particularly security, political and ideological – have been seriously challenged due to geopolitical developments, namely the Arab Spring and Iranian's disruptive behaviour in the region. The major bulk of this study is a discussion to Saudi foreign policy as well as its geostrategic interests mainly in the Levant region. To achieve such end, this study has employed three levels of analysis approach to support the examination of primary and secondary literature on this subject in order to understand the different variables and dynamics of Saudi geopolitical interests in the Levant between 2011 and 2017. This paper concludes that Saudi Arabia has developed different vested interests in the region, however, the rise and expansion of ISIS (Daesh) and Tehran growing expansionism in the Middle East (mainly in Syria, Lebanon and in Gaza) has posed direct threats against Saudi national interests.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, Geopolitical Interests, Security Dilemma, Threat Perceptions, Arab Spring, Expansionism.

### **Introduction**

Saudi Arabia is a Middle Eastern power that has been a major role in the international politics of the Middle East and beyond. It is one of the largest economies in the region and part of the 20 group which comprises the 20 largest economies in the world. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is the largest oil producer as well as exporter and sits atop one-quarter of the known oil reserves of the whole world. Furthermore, it is a home to the two holist places in Islam, Mecca and Medina that provided Saudi Arabia with religious importance and special role in the Islamic World. Yet, Saudi Arabia is relatively weak in terms of military capabilities in comparison to Israel, Turkey, Iran and to a certain extent to Egypt. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is situated within a rough regional environment characterised with rivalry between major regional powers like Iraq, Egypt, Iran, Israel and Turkey.

This harsh regional context has always generated security challenges and threats to Saudi Arabia national interest particularly its existence and survivability. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has perused a foreign policy based on moderate policies, employed its economic and religious importance to forge close relationship and strategic partnership with some regional powers and with the West particularly with the U.S. This fine-tuned policies made the Saudis to survive major turbulences and crises that took place in the region particularly in the 1980's and 1990s of the last century like Islamic revolution in Iran 1979, Iran-Iraq war in 1980, Iraqi invasion to Kuwait in 1991, ramifications of 11 of September atrocities in 2001 and the subsequent U.S led invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, since 2011 Saudi Arabia has faced with unprecedented challenges to its geostrategic interests due to the eruption of what is known to be as Arab Spring

#### **1.1 Problem and Questions of the Study.**

The eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the subsequent geopolitical developments have changed the regional context in which Saudi Arabia operates, creating unprecedented and serious challenges to the Kingdom's geopolitical interests in the Middle East. One of the regions most affected by the Arab Spring is the Levant, which has witnessed

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\* Prince Al Hussein Bin Abdullah II School of International Studies, The University of Jordan. Received on 22/11/2018 and Accepted for Publication on 17/6/2019.

chaos and instability, particularly in Syria. The developments in the Levant posed a real challenge to Riyadh's national interests, ultimately threatening the security of the state. The key principle of Saudi Arabian foreign policy is to maintain the survival of the regime as well as the state (Bülent and Falk, 2015:322–336). This security dilemma has generated many questions related to Saudi Arabia's geopolitical interests in the Levant. Chief among these questions are: what are these interests?; what are the main sources of threats to these interests?; and how is Saudi Arabia defending its interests in the region?

### **1.2 Objectives of the Study.**

The primary aim of this paper is to discuss and examine Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards the Levant with emphasis on its geopolitical interests in the region and how geopolitical developments in the Levant generated by the 2011 Arab Spring affected Riyadh's political, ideological and security interests. Moreover, this paper aims at highlighting the formulation process of Saudi foreign policy.

### **1.3 Hypothesis of the Study.**

This study argues that the geopolitical developments that followed the eruption of Arab revolutions, particularly the increased Iranian expansionism in the Levant (mainly Syria, Lebanon and Gaza), and the rise of terrorists groups like ISIS (*Daesh*) created serious challenges to Saudi security, political and religious interests in the region. Moreover, these challenges have posed a direct threat to the continuation of the Saudi regime and generated a security dilemma. It is argued that threat perception is the main driving force behind Riyadh's foreign policy towards the Levant.

### **1.4 The Importance of the Study.**

The significance of this study stems from the fact it is an attempt to investigate Saudi Arabia geostrategic interests in one of the important sub-regions (the Levant) within the Middle East and North Africa region. Moreover, it is an attempt to cover and fill a possible gap on the existing literature related to this subject matter. Furthermore, this study covers a significant period of time where great changes and challenges have taken place in the Middle East and in the Levant in particular which is of great importance to Saudi's national interests. In addition to that this study would be an additional contribution to Levant field of study which is an integral part of Middle Eastern studies.

### **1.5 Methodology and Theoretical Framework.**

To develop an understanding of Saudi foreign policy in terms of actors, issues and interests, a convenient analytical framework has been designed and employed. It is widely acknowledged that studying the international politics of the Middle East is complex as many scholars consider the regional state system to be fragile, highly penetrated and unconsolidated (Halliday, 2005: 21-22). Moreover, there is a high degree of overlapping between state and political regime in the region where in many countries the continuation of the regime is the primary concern to the ruling elites. This places limitations on the ability of the international relations theories to explain decision making processes, particularly in the relevant Arab countries. Therefore, choosing a theoretical perspective that could explain foreign policy-making in the region, particularly in a country like Saudi Arabia, is problematic. However, some scholars of Middle Eastern studies tend to assume a realist paradigm could offer an analytical framework so to comprehend such a process.

It is assumed that in the Middle East, the state is the main actor and that elites have interest in maximizing the autonomy and security of the state. Moreover, he accepted the realist argument that the state system is anarchic and generates insecurity, meaning that a struggle for power will erupt between rival actors (Hinnebusch, and Ehteshami 2002: 1-5). Indeed, the Middle East is one of the regions where anarchy is most evident. It is home to many intra and interstate conflicts. To overcome such a theoretical dilemma, and regardless of the abovementioned limitations, this study will use an analytical framework derived from realist thinking focusing on the relations between state interests, security and power struggles, as well as the regional and international system. Therefore, to answer the aforementioned questions and deal with the key assumptions of this paper, three levels of analysis will be employed to analyse primary and secondary literature on this subject matter. This approach discloses three different ways of understanding a state's foreign policy, and employs a "top-down" approach to study world politics (Rourke, 2001:91). It stipulates that international actors and states operate in a global social-political-economic-geographic context and the explicit characteristics and the structure

of the international system outlines the mode of interaction between the actors.

The State-Level analysis focuses on the national states and their domestic practices such as national interests, interest groups, government, and domestic economy as the key determinants of the state of world affairs (Jervis, 2017). The Individual-Level of analysis focuses on human actors on the global stage. It examines human nature, which defines the primary human characteristics that influence decisions, organisational behaviour that describes human interaction within organised settings, and personal behaviour that investigates the effect of the uniqueness of individual decision makers on foreign policy (Jervis, 2017).

As for Saudi Arabia and speaking of the individual level, the King enjoys a centrality in the political system of the state and the decision making process particularly in terms of foreign policy formations and executions. Moreover, at the nation-state level, although the King role is significant in the Saudi decision making process, the socio-economic factors plays an important role in influencing the foreign policy making and execution. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that, the international system level including regional context in which Saudi Arabia operates is also influence Saudi foreign policy. Therefore, this analysis method enables the researcher to provide an in-depth investigation and understanding for the correlation between different variables and dynamics that have influenced the nature of Saudi foreign policy with particular attention to its geopolitical interests in the Levant.

### **1.6 Literature Review.**

Within the Field of international politics particularly the international politics of the Middle East and North Africa, the study of Saudi foreign policy has received the attention of scholars and researchers since Saudi Arabia is one of the major players at the regional level and has an important role in the global politics. Therefore, a wealth of literature on Saudi foreign policy towards the Middle East in particular has been produced and published. Examining this literature would reveal that few of these studies have focused on Saudi Arabia foreign policy towards the Levant "per se" as a sub-region particularly over this period of time. However, reviewing some literature on Saudi Arabia foreign policy in general and towards the Levant would enrich this study.

In terms of Saudi Arabia making and goals some argued that the King along with a group of senior members of the Al-Saud family plays the central role in the decision making process and the formation of Saudi foreign policy. Moreover, the main goals of Saudi Arabia foreign policy are: to safeguard the country from external threats and the survivability of the country as well as the regime (GauseIII, Gregory 2002 :193-194). Another study emphasised the challenges that Saudi Arabia is facing particularly the growing Iranian influence and expansion in the region particularly in the Levant. This study claims that (Saudi Arabia is affected by many conflicts in the Middle East. At the forefront now is resurgent Iran that competes with Saudi Arabia for regional influence (Okruhlik, Gwenn.2010: 409). Speaking of the Saudi-Jordanian relations a study argued that (Saudi-Jordanian relations are a mismatch between broadly identical interests and differing means and capacities to realize them. However, the two countries are trying to work more closely together. In a more threatening regional environment, this is important (Patrick, 2013).

In regards to Saudi-Syrian relations it is been argued that since Bashar Assad's assumption of power in Syria in June 2000, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria has fluctuated and been unstable (Blanga, 2017:45-62). However, after the eruption of conflict in Syria, Saudi foreign policy towards Damascus witnessed a profound shift. It has provided assistance and support to certain opposition groups against the Syrian regime. Moreover, Riyadh regards the U.S. failure of a military and diplomatic response to the crackdown of the Syrian regime and its allies on the protests and Syrian rebels, as providing momentum for Iran and Hezbollah to extend their engagement in Syria (Keynoush,2016:216). This includes, in particular, Obama's lack of reaction to the chemical weapon attack in 2013, which he called a red line (Ball, 2012).

Regarding Palestinian question, it is been argued that, since the eruption of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948, Saudi Arabia has provided significant political and economic support to the Palestinians and recognised the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. In the intra-Palestinian dispute between Fatah and Hamas, Saudi Arabia acted as a mediator in order to solve this rift (Keynoush, 2016 : 207). However, Saudi Arabia's relationship with Hamas has long been in fluctuation and finally deteriorated when the Muslim

Brotherhood in Egypt seized power who become a rival power to Iran in the struggle for influence in the Palestinian issue (Keynoush, 2016: 221).

The preceding literature review suggest that much of the literature on Saudi Arabia foreign policy towards the Levant has been discussed in the wider contest of the discussion of Saudi Arabia role in the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, what distinguish this study from previous study maybe the fact that it is going to be one of those few studies that have focused on Saudi geostrategic interests in the Levant per se. That could be considered as an addition to the existing literature on this subject matter.

This paper is structured under four main sections; introduction, understanding Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, Saudi-Syrian relations, Saudi-Lebanes relations, Saudi Arabia and Plestinian question, Saudia-Jordanian relations as well as conclusion

### **1. Understanding Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy.**

Traditionally, the Saudi foreign policy decision-making process rests primarily in a number of politically independent decision makers within the inner circle of the royal family which are advised by several official and informal bodies (Alsultan, 2013 :457-460). In the aftermath of the death of the late King Abdullah Ibn Abd al-Aziz al-Saud in January 2015, and the accession to the throne by his half-brother and current king, Salman Ibn Abd al-Aziz al-Saud, the composition of internal decision-making personnel, as well as the strategic orientation of foreign policy changed. King Salman not only changed the line of succession in the Kingdom and assembled close relatives and allied family members in key positions of the Saudi regime, but he also removed King Abdullah's important and powerful advisors from power., .A move that would demonstrate Salman's determination to pursue a highly aggressive foreign policy as a reaction to the ongoing conflicts in the Arab world and the perceived threats towards Saudi Arabia's stability (Patrick, 2015). Henceforth, a political and economic power centre emerged around his son, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, often referred to as MBS. Prince Mohammad claimed several central positions inside the Saudi apparatus of power. First, MBS became the new Minister of Defence and the Secretary General of the Royal Court. After the break with the Saudi tradition of throne succession, MBS became Crown Prince, and will likely be the first grandson of Abd al-Aziz bin Saud, the founder of Modern Saudi Arabia, to ascend the throne. MBS uses his new competencies for a strategic realignment of Saudi foreign policy and to consolidate his power against internal rivals (Huggler, 2015). Alongside his new foreign policy doctrine with which he is trying to position Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Arab world, pursues a social, cultural and political relaxing of the kingdom's ultra-conservative tendencies as necessary concessions to Western allies. Despite the changes in the ruling elite and the strategic realignment towards a more uncompromising proactive stance, the fundamental objectives of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy remained unaffected.

The major frameworks of the geopolitical Saudi interests are the security and stability of the state and its immediate neighbourhood particularly Gulf countries, as well as Islamic solidarity among Sunni dominated or governed states, and Arab nationalism in the Arab World. All of this aims to form an environment maintaining the status quo internally and externally (Viden, 2011). Therefore, at the beginning of December 2010, Riyadh pursued a counter-revolutionary approach towards the Arab Spring, when it was simultaneously faced with the significant changes in the international and regional order. The structure of the international order was changed by the Obama policy of realignment and non-intervention towards the Muslim world following the Bush administration's interventions. Traditional Saudi foreign policy was characterised by going along with US hegemony, leading to a dependence on the on Washington DC. As put forth by Banafsheh Keynoush and Edurado Aboultaif, the Saudis are convinced that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 helped Iran to expand its influence over Iraq towards the Levant, especially in Syria, the Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine (Keynoush, 2016,: 191), and that Iran uses its military support for Assad as an instrument to further expand its influence(Aboultaif, 2016:1-11).

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, which the Saudis relied upon to counterbalance the military and economic weight of Iran, Riyadh began to consider the rivalry with Iran as a zero-sum-game, which could endanger the viability of its own reign. In order to conclude this confrontation in their favour the Saudis adjusted their foreign policy towards

the containment of Iran's bid for influence.

However, apart from the aforementioned factors, the main reason for the change in the Saudi foreign policy was, and still is, the reaction of the U.S. towards the Arab Spring, particularly the events in Syria. Since the beginning of the US-Saudi alliance, Saudi foreign policy has been influenced by the mutual interests of providing regional stability and energy security, and the fight against terrorism (Nazife, 2016: 93-41). But the occurrence of the Arab Spring caused disagreement among the close allies, and the US-Saudi alliance has suffered several major setbacks since then. The different opinions became evident in the ousting of Mubarak in Egypt 2011, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Army in 2013, and the rapprochement of the Obama administration towards Iran. However, the situation changed slightly with election and inauguration of Donald Trump. Although Trump criticized Saudi Arabia during his election campaign, he changed his rhetoric shortly after, and the meeting between Trump and MBS in March 2017 was described as a turning point in US-Saudi relations, as both regard Iran as the region's main issue (Davis, 2017).

The major reasons for the implementation of foreign policy in Saudi Arabia is its religious importance as the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina, and its economic strength as the third biggest oil production country with the second largest oil reserves (Gallarotti and Al-Filali, 2012: 233-261, p. 234). However, until today, the Iranian Revolution, the questioning of Islam's leading model, and the rejection of the Saudi regime's legitimacy, pose an unprecedented threat to the stability of Saudi Arabia. To contain the Iranian and Shiite sphere of influence, Saudi Arabia applies an extensive use of its soft and hard power capabilities. Saudi Arabia is funding religious and political movements throughout the Middle East and beyond. By supporting these movements Riyadh tries to create an atmosphere in favour of its religious interpretation of Islam, guiding the course of foreign relations among its allied nations (Gallarotti and Al-Filali, 2012: 243), which has in fact resulted in such statements as: "After the United States, Saudi Arabia is probably the country that has been most successful at exporting its culture" (Ghattas, 2015).

## **2. Saudi-Syrian Relations.**

Since Bashar Assad's assumption of power in Syria in June 2000, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria has fluctuated and been unstable (Blanga, 2017:45-62). Until the eruption of the civil war in Syria, the Saudi geopolitical interests were characterised by a bipartite approach. On the one hand the Riyadh aimed at securing the survival of the Syrian regime, as they dreaded a spill over effect from the downfall of Assad to the Arabian Gulf. On the other hand, the Saudis directed their policy towards Damascus on the assumption that only a united Arab front can curb the influence of Iran. From these two approaches the Saudis developed a policy which pressured Syria to be part of the Arab bloc against Iran, but at the same time not endanger the rule of Assad. This led to instability in the relationship between the two states. In phases of good relations between the two countries, the Saudi policy aimed at integrating Syria into Riyadh's sphere of influence to thereby strengthen its own claim of leadership in the Arab world. In times of strained relations, the Saudis tried to exert pressure on Assad Syria without irreparably damaging the relationship (Blanga, 2017:45-62). In the case of Syria, Riyadh regards the US's failure of a military and diplomatic response to the crackdown of the Syrian regime and its allies on the protests and Syrian rebels, as providing momentum for Iran and Hezbollah to extend their engagement in Syria (Keynoush, 2016: 216). This includes, in particular, Obama's lack of reaction to the chemical weapon attack in 2013, which he called a red line (Ball, 2012).

The aforementioned counter revolutionary approach of the Saudis towards the events of the Arab Spring applied, in a limited extent, to the Syrian regime during the emergence of the protests against Assad, as both regimes pursued similar interests - the regime's survival, security and stabilisation. Following the emergence of the protests against Assad, Riyadh remained silent, not condemning the violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators, in order "to prevent contagion from the Arab Spring reaching the Gulf Arab states" (Quilliam, 2017). During the course of the first months of the Syrian protest the Saudis tried via personal channels to pressure the Syrian regime to react to the demands and implement reforms. In the following months the Saudis further increased the pressure using diplomatic channels, such as the GCC and the Arab League in order to promote different solutions that would prevent a deterioration of the security situation (Blanga, 2017:45-62). The Saudi stance towards Damascus became more active due to the intensification of violence,

the emergence of the sectarian divide in the civil war, and the inactivity of the American administration in the summer of 2011 (Gause, 2011:19). Riyadh change of position was based on several factors, which the Saudi leadership perceived as a threat to the country security and stability. The first reason being the increased importance of Iran for the survival of the Syrian regime, and the second was engagement of fighters of the Shiite Islamist militant group *Hezbollah*. The third was the realisation that the U.S. was not willing to assure the survival of allied regimes (Patrick 2013: 13), as shown by the overthrow of the Egyptian former president Hussen Mubarak 2011. However, the main point of dispute between the US and Saudi Arabia has been the different perceptions of how to end the Syrian civil war. The main focal point for the Obama administration was, and still is for the new Trump administration, the defeat of ISIS and the stabilisation of Iraq, while Saudi Arabia follows the understanding that the “Islamic State militants will only be defeated if Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is removed from power” (Barkin, 2016). Moreover, SIS represents “the principal Sunni enemy”(Jenkins, 2016: 202).

who poses a new unprecedented threat inside the radical *Salafi* spectrum to the stability and legitimacy of the state, meaning “paradoxically that, the campaign against Da’esh for KSA is subordinate to the campaign against Iran and its satellites”(Jenkins, 2016: 204). These different opinions manifested in the approach towards the opposition groups in Syria, where Obama refused for a long time to supply any kind of support for rebels in Syria, Riyadh began demands early in on the armament of Syrian rebels. Obamas hesitation made it apparent that Saudi Arabia should take action on its own to capitalise on the Syrian uprising against Assad and curb the Iranian influence (McKelvey, 2015). The Saudis supported, in their opinion, the most promising fractions, the Free Syrian Army (FAS), and other groups that kept their distance from the Muslim Brotherhood. This was because with the seizure of power in Egypt in 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood became a serious opponent, threatening the stability of allied regimes in Egypt and Jordan and the intra-Sunni claim to leadership by the Saudis.

The developments in Syria in the last few years, particularly the Russian military intervention in September 2015, and the associated reinvigoration of the Syrian Army, replaced Syria as the main concern of Saudi policy, and “Saudi support for rebel groups ... continued”(Quilliam,2017). However, the insurgency of the *Houthi* militia in Yemen and the prevention of a spill-over from Syria into Lebanon came to the fore of Saudi foreign policy (Patrick, 2016). Therefore, Riyadh switched its geopolitical focus in the Levant towards Lebanon in order to secure its influence and to contain Iran and Hezbollah.

#### **4. Saudi-Lebanon Relations.**

In the case of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia supports the March 14 Alliance, which unites a wide range of religious and political parties mainly the Future party, Lebanese Forces and Kataeb Party, that share the common interest to end the influence of Iran and Syria over Lebanon and balance the political power of the Hezbollah, the leading actor in the March 8 Alliance (Legrenzi and Lawson, 2016). The March 14 Alliance is an amalgamation of different anti-Syria political parties, which was founded after the assassination Rafiq Hariri and the Cedar Revolution in 2005 to counter the Syrian influence in Lebanon, and is led by Hariri’s son Saad Hariri. Riyadh accused Syria and Hezbollah to be involved in the killing of its close ally, Hariri(Patrick, 2016).

Since 2009, the Lebanese politic has been characterised by a deadlock between the two competing alliances that reached its peak between 2014 and 2016, when both alliances failed to agree on a candidate for the office for president. To counter the strengthening of the March 8 Alliance, Saudi Arabia began to apply a more robust approach towards Lebanon. In its first move in February 2016 to increase the pressure, Riyadh cancelled a grant worth \$4 billion, to the Lebanese Army, which was designed to counter the military strength of Hezbollah (Kullab,2016). In a further step, Saudi Arabia and the GCC declared Hezbollah a terrorist entity, which is “committing ‘hostile acts’ against GCC states” and “engaging in campaigns of terror and incitement in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.”(Aboudi, 2016) This move aimed at weakening Iranian influence in Lebanon and isolating Hezbollah, which became heavily involved in the Syrian Civil War and developed into one of the main supporters of Assad (Barnard, 2016). Despite these measures, the Saudis

witnessed a further setback in Lebanon when the competing coalition, the March 8 and March 14 Alliance, reached a compromise solving the political crisis in October 2016. Michael Aoun, an ally of the Hezbollah, became president and in return, Saad Hariri, who could secure Hezbollah's influence amid the progressive weakening of its party and the power shift in Syria, was elected as Prime Minister (Alami, 2016).

Another major political crisis was caused by the Saudis forcing the resignation of Hariri in November 2017. The political and economic network of Hariri constitutes Riyadh-Sunni allies and Hariri is the most important guarantor for Saudi influence over Lebanese politics (Quilliam, 2017:21.). Shortly after a meeting with Iranian officials, Hariri declared his resignation as prime minister of Lebanon during a visit to Riyadh. Hariri claimed that he feared assassination and accused Iran along with Hezbollah of sowing strife in the Arab world (Francis, Perry 2017). Later, Hariri reversed his resignation and returned to Lebanon, easing the relations between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon once again.

In Lebanon, the major focal points of the Saudi geopolitical interests are to maintain the status quo, respectively the Taif Agreement of 1989, which ended the Lebanese Civil War and includes the distribution of power between different confessional groups. Therefore, Riyadh predominantly uses financial leverage against the Lebanese state in order to secure its interests and stabilize the state, at the same time strengthening the Lebanese Army in order to contain Hezbollah. Furthermore, the Lebanese Sunni pro-Saudi elite consist of rich business men with close business relations with Gulf countries (Baumann, 2017). Adding to this, Lebanon has a high economic dependency on Gulf countries. The Lebanese economy is one of the weakest and has one of the highest debt-to-GDP ratios worldwide and a large portion of foreign direct investments come from Gulf countries. This great financial dependency allows Saudi Arabia to exert pressure on allies inside Lebanon to increase the pressure on Hezbollah as well as exert pressure on the Lebanese state and the Lebanese Armed Forces to counter the military strength of Hezbollah. Despite this financial leverage the Saudi influence on Lebanon and the influence of pro-Saudi political actors inside Lebanon is waning.

### **3. Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Question.**

Since the eruption of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948, Saudi Arabia has been playing an active role in the conflict, particularly in supporting Palestinians. Moreover, Riyadh has participated in the international community efforts to solve the conflict as well as proposing The Arab Peace Initiative which was endorsed by Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002. This offer was renewed during the Munich Security Conference 2017 by the Saudi Foreign minister, who stated that, "we know what a settlement looks like, we just need the political will to do so" (Al-Jubeir, 2017), because any normalisation in the relations with Israel and rapprochement, without a settlement and the establishment of a Palestinian state would not be justifiable towards the Arab people, and, in particular, its own citizens.

In the intra-Palestinian dispute between Fatah and Hamas, Saudi Arabia acts as a mediator dedicated towards the Palestinian issue (Keynoush, 2016 :207). Riyadh has recognised the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the sole representative of the Palestinian people and also recognised the Palestinian National Authority that was established after the Oslo Agreements with Israel in 1993. However, Saudi Arabia's relationship with Hamas has long been in fluctuation and finally deteriorated when the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt seized power who became a rival power to Iran in the struggle for influence in the Palestinian issue (Keynoush, 2016 :221). In the aftermath of the 2006 legislative elections, Saudi Arabia tried to mediate between the two factions to end the rising tension and form a unified government, but deal, brokered in Riyadh, only lasted only several months and ended in an escalation of violence in June 2007. As a result, Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip and approached Iran and Hezbollah, the latter whom they had had good relations with since the beginning of the 1990s (Keynoush, 2016 :221). The relationship between Hamas and Saudi Arabia changed radically with the ousting of President Mubarak during the Arab Spring and the election of the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohamed Mursi. Historically, Hamas has origins in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and rose from its Palestinian branch. The seizure of power in Egypt by the Muslim Brotherhood led to the loss of one of the most important regional Saudi allies and a direct neighbour. For a long time Saudi Arabia had regarded the Muslim Brotherhood "as threat to stability in the region and "treats Hamas as part of a wider MB conspiracy to extend [Saudi Arabia's] influence" (Aras and Falk, 2015:326). However, the relationship between Hamas and Iran suffered a setback

when Hamas' political leadership sided with the Syrian rebels. This meant Hamas was forced to leave Damascus and resettle in Doha, the strongest supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and a competitor of Saudi influence"( Aras and Falk, 2015:326). The Iran-Hamas rapprochement at the beginning of 2015 forced the Saudis to react, starting a new round of competition over influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia(Abu Amer, 2015). The rapprochement between Hamas and Saudi Arabia reached its peak with the meeting of Hamas leader of the political wing, Khaleed Mashaal, and King Salman in Saudi Arabia 2015, but suffered a major setback with the election of Yahya Sinwar as the new Prime Minister of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip(Beaumont, 2017).

In the subsequent rounds of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, Riyadh only played a minor role, but supported their rapprochement, and continues to support Fatah in the process. With regard to Fatah and the president of the PLO and the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, Saudi Arabia plays an ambiguous role. In the inner-Palestinian dispute, Riyadh favours Abbas over Hamas, but at the same time tries to push Abbas towards good relations with the US and negotiations with Israel particularly after the declaration of President Trump to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in December 2017. This decision has been rejected by the Palestinians and Abbas began a campaign to discredit US as a credible in the Middle East peace process (Khoury, 2017).

Towards Israel, Saudi Arabia appears to be a representative for the Arab and Palestinian cause, willing to engage in peaceful relations on the basis of establishing a Palestinian state according to the pre-1967 borders. The disappointment over US reluctance and advancing disengagement under the Obama administration led to the emergence of common interests between Saudi Arabia and Israel, although it does not mean both have worked directly together on their interests (Ayoob, 2018). This is mainly due to Iran as both states regard Tehran as the biggest threat to stabilisation in the Middle East, and their shared disappointment over the rapprochement by the Obama administration towards Iran, which culminated in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by Iran, the P5+1, and the EU in 2015(Gardner, 2016). The disappointment over the US disengagement derives from the fact that the Saudis consider the US as a stabiliser to the Iranian ideological expansion and that any further US disengagement "creates tremendous danger in the world, because it creates vacuums and into the vacuums evil forces flow"( Al-Jubeir, 2017), which is what happened in Iraq after the US withdrawal and is currently happening in Syria. Furthermore, this creates a transit passage for Iranian support of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis in Yemen, all threatening the Saudi interests and regime's stability(Aboultouf, 2016).

Despite overlapping interests and a degree of convergence, there are no official political, economic and diplomatic ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, there are speculations and allegations that there is an informal cooperation between both states, including the sharing of intelligence and other military information. However, Riyadh has constantly denied such claims. Despite the risks of a stronger convergence between both states, official representatives of Saudi Arabia chose a moderate and measured tone towards Israel, which can be seen in the speeches of Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir during the Munich Security Conference of 2017(Rieger, 2016).

Saudi leadership who wish to renew the Saudi claim for leadership in the Arab world, are faced with the dilemma of cooperating with Israel on the one hand with regard to their common interests and the support for President Trump's hard-line policy towards Iran, and on the other hand, defending Arab core interests and principals in the region, which are threatened by Israel and US policy (Trofimov, 2018). Furthermore, US-Israel relations are back to normal under the Trump administration after years Obama and Netanyahu's strained relationship. During the election campaign as well as during his first years in office, Trump distinguishes himself as a great supporter of Israel..

#### **4. Saudi-Jordanian Relations.**

Jordan enjoys an important geographical location in the Arab World particularly its linkage between Saudi Arabia and the Levant, and therefore serves different Saudi interests. Although the relationship between Amman and Riyadh is dominated by the dispute over the control of the Hejaz, which was seized from Hashemite rule by the founder of the modern Saudi state, Ibn Saud, both have managed to forge a strategic relationship that goes beyond their occasional differences. The relationship between the two kingdoms is dominated by their geopolitical rational as Jordan plays an

important role in Saudi Arabian geopolitical interests. Amman serves, due to its geographical linkage of the Arab Gulf and Levant as a bulwark against various threats to Riyadh's survival and security. Moreover, Jordan functioned as a geographical separation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, but later evolved to provide protection against the Shiite Teheran-Damascus-Hezbollah-Gaza axis. However, Saudi Arabia has been a key ally to Jordan that provides Amman with economic aid and political support along with other Gulf countries (Neil Patrick, Saudi Arabia and Jordan: 2013).

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil war and the rise of ISIS, Jordan became a major player against a spill-over of violence, influx of refugees and infiltration from radical Islamists from Syrian territory (Patrick, 2016). In the regional structure of the Middle East, Jordan constitutes an anchor of stability, especially during the turmoil of the Arab Spring (Comolet, 2014).

Despite the geographical factor, the two kingdoms "see a mutual interest in working together" (Patrick, 2016: 4) to ensure the survival of their monarchic systems. During the Arab Spring, which witnessed a series of toppled autocrats, Saudi Arabia, as well as Jordan, felt imminent threat by the ongoing transformations in the Middle East. Even though faced with similar threats to the regimes' survival, the reactions of the monarchies differed substantially. Due to the 2011 protest in Jordan, which was caused by the economic situation and rising prices, and which was not directed against the Hashemite rule, King Abdullah II implemented substantial reforms. However, the Saudi royal family regarded the protest inside its country as a direct threat to the regime's survival. These different approaches towards the protests illustrate the different capabilities of both parties to achieve similar interests (Patrick, 2016: 4).

Due to its geographical location and its limited natural resources, Jordan is highly dependent on other countries particularly its need to oil, and is vulnerable to economic hardship. Considering that, the most important factors to Saudi Arabia regarding its neighbouring kingdom are stability and security. Riyadh pays particular attention to Jordan's economic situation, although there are no deeper interests in Jordan's domestic policy by Saudi Arabia (Comolet, 2014). In May 2011 late King Abdulla of Saudi Arabia had offered Jordan along with Morocco to join Gulf Cooperation Council in reaction to the Arab Spring (Steinberg, 2014). Although Jordan is not a member of the GCC, the move stemmed from the same desire to preserve monarchy as a regime type in the Arab world (III Gause, 2014), and aimed at the regional integration of the GCC's sphere of influence. Even though Jordan has still not joined the GCC, it is concomitant that with the rapprochement of Jordan and the GCC, there were fiscal support measures for Jordan (Steinberg, Leading the Counter-Revolution, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring 2014), which led Jordan to joining the GCC Power Grid in May 2016 (Nakayama, et al 2017). However, although Amman and Riyadh have developed a commonality of interests and shared opinions over many regional and international issues, they have, to a certain extent, disagreements over the struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood, which is outlawed in Saudi Arabia, and Qatar and Trump's alleged deal of the century. The Muslim Brotherhood is a legitimate group that takes part in Jordanian domestic politics, including participation in elections. As for Qatar issue, Riyadh demanded that Amman join the boycott against Doha imposed by several Gulf countries, but Jordan only reduced its ties with Qatar. Another possible point of contention is Jerusalem, mainly the issue of Hashemite custody over Muslim and Christian shrines in the city. Although the Saudis claimed that their position has not changed and that they consider East Jerusalem as Palestine's capital, they did not mention Amman's custodianship over those holy sites. This was interrupted by many Jordanians as a negative Saudi position to undermine their historical, religious and legitimate rights in the city.

## 5. Conclusion.

This study has attempted to analyse different aspects and dynamics of the Saudi foreign policy and its geostrategic interests in the Levant and argued that the geopolitical developments that followed the eruption of Arab spring, particularly the increased Iranian hegemony in the Levant (mainly Syria, Lebanon and Gaza), and the rise of terrorists groups like ISIS (*Daesh*) created serious challenges to Saudi security, political and religious interests in the region. Moreover, these developments formed a direct threat to Saudi national interests and generated a security dilemma. It is also argued that the threat perception is the main driving force behind Riyadh's foreign policy towards the Levant.

The aforementioned analyses of different variables and dynamics of Saudi geopolitical interests in the Levant suggest

that Riyadh has developed vested geostrategic interests in the region that include political, security and religious interests. Chief among these goals is the security and the survivability of both the state and the regime, sustaining Saudi Arabia's regional role, helping and aiding its allies in the region and preventing hegemony of other rival regional powers in the Middle East. These interests have been dictated by the Saudi's geopolitical proximity to the region. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has adapted a foreign policy based on a sophisticated balancing strategy in the politics of the region, characterised by cautiousness, and employed different methods and tools to protect and preserve such interests. However, since 2011, the regional and international context in which Saudi Arabia operates, particularly in the Levant, has witnessed unprecedented geopolitical developments that created serious challenges and threats to Saudi national interests. Chief among these developments is the eruption of Arab Spring in 2011 that impacted the Levant region and manifested itself in the Syrian civil war. The Syrian conflict has destabilised the region and threatened the stability of the neighbouring countries, particularly Jordan and Lebanon. Moreover, Iran continuing its expansion mainly in Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian territories, has created a security and religious dilemma for Saudi Arabia. This has exacerbated Saudi Arabia's concerns over their geostrategic interests in the region and created a threat perception in their minds that heavily influenced Riyadh's reaction to Tehran's growing influence and expansion in the region. These developments have actually altered Saudi foreign policy making it more assertive and aggressive in order to contain the Iranian struggle for hegemony in the Middle East and in particular, the Levant.

In addition to that, this study concludes that despite tremendous efforts that have been invested to contain and counter these challenges and their impact on Saudi interests in the Levant, Saudi Arabia has failed to counter effectively these threats. These challenges actually proved to be far beyond Saudi ability to deal with them alone. Therefore, a form of collective work and strategic partnership with other friendly regional powers like U.S, and Egypt is needed

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## المصالح الجيوسياسية للعربية السعودية في بلاد الشام وتصور التهديد: 2011-2017

حسن محمد المومني \*

### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تفصي وتحليل المصالح الجيوسياسية للعربية السعودية في بلاد الشام. حيث قامت هذه الدراسة على فرضية رئيسية تتمثل بأن مصالح الرياض وخاصة الأمنية والسياسية والايديولوجية في كل من سوريا ولبنان والأردن والأراضي الفلسطينية واجهت تحدي حقيقي بسبب التطورات الجيوسياسية في المنطقة وبخاصة الربيع العربي إضافة إلى التمدد الإيراني في المنطقة. ان الجزء الأكبر من هذه الدراسة هو عبارة عن مناقشة وتحليل للسياسة الخارجية السعودية ومصالح الجيوستراتيجية في منطقة بلاد الشام. لقد استخدمت هذه الدراسة منهج مستويات التحليل الثلاثي وذلك من أجل تحليل الدراسات الرئيسية والثانوية المتعلقة بهذا الموضوع من أجل فهم مختلف المتغيرات والديناميكيات الخاصة بالمصالح الجيوسياسية السعودية في هذه البلدان خلال الفترة من 2011-2017. ولقد توصلت الدراسة إلى مجموعة نتائج أهمها أن الرياض طورت مصالح مختلفة وهامة في بلاد الشام إلا أن ظهور وتوسع داعش واستمرارية التمدد الإيراني في الشرق الأوسط وبخاصة في كل من سوريا ولبنان وغزة قد شكلت تهديداً مباشراً لتلك المصالح في الدول المعنية.

**الكلمات الدالة:** السياسة الخارجية، المصالح الجيوسياسية، المعطلة الأمنية، تصورات التهديد، الربيع العربي، التوسعية.

\* كلية الأمير الحسين بن عبدالله الثاني للدراسات الدولية، الجامعة الاردنية. تاريخ استلام البحث 2018/11/22، وتاريخ قبوله 2019/6/17.