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SAUDI ARABIA RETURNS

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Introduction

At the dawn of the Biden era of American foreign policy, a more mature, realistic Saudi foreign policy is emerging to match the shifting signals from Washington. In some measure, the Saudis are readopting elements that traditionally characterized their policy preferences before the meteoric rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), the kingdom's de facto ruler. Historically, Saudi Arabia avoided direct conflict with its enemies, made use of its deep pockets to steer regional developments, and placed an emphasis on diplomacy as the main tool in its national toolkit. By contrast, since 2015 Saudi foreign policy, matching Donald Trump's hubristic "America First" policy, was characterized by aggressiveness and a willingness to resort to force to achieve its goals. But that newfound assertiveness largely failed to advance Saudi regional objectives. Among other setbacks over recent years, the Saudis embraced Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, went along with a blockade of Qatar, and intervened in the civil war in Yemen, only to see each of these initiatives fall into disarray or collapse. The perception of Saudi Arabia as a "bull in the china shop" internationally, coupled with concerns over MbS's domestic policies, led many international observers to cool their initial enthusiasm regarding the future king. Thus, the recent return to the earlier era with its welcome change in Saudi strategy, the more cautious pursuit of its interests, and the revival of Saudi diplomacy, has repaired much of the reputational damage that the kingdom has suffered in the past few years.

In this context, recent Saudi policy shifts have been notable. With his al-Ula initiative, MbS brought about the signing of a

reconciliation agreement with Qatar, offered the Houthis in Yemen an especially generous cease-fire agreement, sought to strengthen the kingdom's relations with Iraq, brought about a honeymoon in relations with Oman, considered measures to reintegrate Syria, and even engaged in direct talks with his main rival, Iran. With these initiatives, the crown prince aims to reduce regional tensions, minimize damage to Saudi interests, consolidate Saudi influence where possible, and, along the way, win favor with the White House. As usual, MbS is firing in all directions, but this time it's not bullets. He's making use of the capabilities of the biggest economy in the Middle East and the standing of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in order to restore the kingdom to its natural place in the regional order and also to prepare for the sensitive process of transferring the crown from his father. In this context, he is carrying out significant changes in Saudi foreign policy regarding competitors and partners.

Iran

The most prominent development is related to Iran. In an April 2021 interview with the al-Arabiya news channel, the crown prince was surprisingly conciliatory in his comments about the Iranian regime, emphasizing that Saudi Arabia was seeking good relations with its rival. Indeed, MbS suggested that Saudi Arabia and Iran together could promote regional prosperity. These words contrast sharply with earlier statements about Iran, including comparing Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to Hitler and hinting at his interest in increasing Saudi subversion in Iran. But by 2019, the Saudis had lost confidence in the U.S. maximum pressure campaign. The Trump administration's ambivalent response to a series of

Iranian aggressive moves, especially the drone and missile attack on Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq, convinced Riyadh that U.S. commitments to protect Saudi security were unreliable. Seeking to lower regional tensions appeared to be the natural response as the UAE had already concluded.

Thus, the crown prince's April interview came in response to reports that Riyadh and Tehran were engaged in Iraqi-sponsored talks, the first reported meetings between the two countries since diplomatic relations were cut off in 2016. The Saudis remain cautious about the prospects for successful engagement with Iran. They note that the Iranians would like to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries in order to project an aura of normalcy, but remain unwilling to address Saudi concerns. The Saudis also note that the Iranians are seeking to exclude regional parties from participating in the nuclear talks while also preventing international partners from joining talks on regional issues. For their part, the Saudis have been clear that they support the nuclear talks, provided that other troubling issues will be discussed in subsequent negotiations, including Iran's arsenal of surface-to-surface missiles, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as the activity of its proxies in the region.

Regardless of the fate of this round of talks, there is substantial negative baggage on both sides and the basic reasons for their mutual hostility have not disappeared, even if changing circumstances in the region are spurring both sides to reposition themselves and to ease, at least partially, the tension between them. The source of the antagonism, which is a prominent element of the regional architecture, is geopolitical disputes, and it involves ideological aspects. The competition over regional influence is expressed mainly in a struggle in various arenas, by means of allies and proxies.

Yemen

The kingdom's top priority since at least 2016 is to end the conflict in Yemen, which is inflicting a significant human and financial toll as well as constituting a direct threat to Saudi security and stability. Although the Saudis pushed back against the characterization of their intervention that was commonly held in the U.S. and the West, including by the incoming Biden administration, they nevertheless quickly followed President Joe Biden's strategic shift on Yemen with their own matching offer to the Houthis for a cease-fire. But the Saudis believe

that the Houthis misinterpreted Biden's intentions and were encouraged by his decision to reverse their designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Thus, they responded to the new diplomatic push with increased aggression within Yemen as well as across the border into Saudi Arabia. Despite the Saudi cease-fire offer, which paralleled the U.N. special envoy's efforts, the Houthis have refused to engage. The Saudis believe that the Houthis' willingness to negotiate an end to the civil conflict is linked to the fate of the P5+1 talks in Vienna. They therefore see no option except to continue support for the Yemeni forces fighting in Yemen — some 90% of their air operations are close air support to the Yemeni military in Marib — fearing that the fall of Marib would open the door for Houthi successes in Shabwa and farther east in Hadramawt, making a negotiated end to the conflict increasingly problematic, if not impossible. Re-establishing the balance of forces on the ground is a necessary prelude, in the Saudi view, to a return to the negotiating table.

Israel, Palestine, and the Abraham Accords

In the social and political realms, attitudes toward Israel and Palestine have shifted markedly in recent years. Saudis, particularly the younger generation, often express greater openness toward Israel and an acceptance of Israel's presence in the region. This change in attitude was exemplified by the great interest shown in Saudi Arabia in an Olympics judo match that went ahead between a Saudi athlete and her Israeli competitor, in contrast to an Algerian athlete who forfeited her match rather than enter the ring with the Israeli.

Conversely, while popular support and sympathy for the Palestinian people remains high among Saudis, there is frustration with the failures of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to provide responsive leadership. In particular, Saudi officials complain about endemic corruption within the PA and the weakness of Mahmoud Abbas.

Despite this shift in popular sentiment, however, it remains probable that the Saudis will not follow the Emirati and Bahraini lead in normalizing their official relations with Israel. For the Saudis, leadership of the larger Islamic world and sensitivity to their role as the keeper of the Islamic holy places, which could be jeopardized if recognition of Israel is rejected by Muslims around the world, remains their highest



Photo above: Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman gives an interview to the official TV channel in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on April 28, 2021. Photo by Saudi Royal Council/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

foreign policy priority. The official Saudi position remains the Arab Peace Initiative first proposed by the late King Abdullah in 2002, which predicates full diplomatic relations on the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Nevertheless, quiet contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia, especially in the defense and security realm, continue and there is potential for additional, under-the-radar, improvements in relations.

Syria

The Saudis are similarly rethinking their policy toward the Assad regime in Syria. So far the kingdom has hesitated to normalize its relations with the Assad regime, with improvement conditional on advancing the political solution in the country based on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. Specifically, in return for normalization, the Saudis are insistent that Assad must remove the Iranians from key strategic points, including airports and ports, and declare a general amnesty, allowing people to return to their homes in safety. Should it come to pass, the renewal of relations with the Assad regime should help Arab states acquire influence over the Syrian regime and the direction of its policy and thus to balance the

power of Iran in Syria and to at least somewhat reduce its influence in the country.

Beyond this, Bashar al-Assad is working vigorously to return Syria to the Arab League and to strengthen its standing in the Arab world and is thus in need of Arab legitimacy for his rule. The Saudis may be more amenable to supporting Assad in accomplishing that limited objective.

Relations with the GCC Partners

The Arab boycott of Qatar began shortly after a visit by former President Trump to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, in which he expressed sympathy for the claims raised by the leaders of the “Arab Quartet” (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) against Qatar. In response to the boycott action, the rift strengthened Doha’s relations with Ankara, which even established a military base in the emirate. Closure of the Turkish base was one of the 13 demands presented to Qatar as conditions for removing the boycott. Additional demands included ending the incitement against them on the Al-Jazeera network and cutting off ties with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. The different agenda of President Biden and the understanding, especially in Riyadh, that continuing the



Photo above: Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud (R) and Secretary-General of the GCC Nayef bin Falah Al-Hajraf, hold a press conference at the end of the GCC's 41st summit, in the city of al-Ula in northwestern Saudi Arabia on January 5, 2021. [Photo by FAYEZ NURELDINE/ AFP via Getty Images.](#)

boycott of Qatar involved more disadvantages than advantages, led Saudi Arabia to bring about reconciliation between the central players in the Arab world and end the blockade of Qatar in January 2021, despite the lack of clarity regarding fulfilling the demands presented to it. In fact, the Saudis are pleased not only that they took the lead in forging the al-Ula agreement that brought a formal end to the boycott but also that they have been in the lead on implementing the agreement and normalizing their relations with Doha.

In opposition to its reconciliation with Qatar, Saudi Arabia appears to be embarked on a friendly, primarily economic competition with the UAE. In that regard, disagreements between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two countries regarded as allies cooperating in a number of theaters on various matters over the past decade, have escalated recently. Most notably, the two partners fenced over a disagreement within OPEC+ on planned oil production increases. But the Saudis are also applying their economic muscle to challenge broader Emirati financial interests. A demand that international

corporations doing business in Saudi Arabia establish their regional headquarters in the kingdom is squarely aimed at overtaking Dubai's dominance as the region's financial capital. Development of the NEOM megaproject in northwest Saudi Arabia, dubbed "Dubai on the Red Sea," will mirror Dubai's mix of a sophisticated business and legal infrastructure coupled with more relaxed social standards to advance Saudi competitiveness in the strategic Red Sea arena.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have tried to project that nothing is amiss in their bilateral relations. Indeed, it is natural for allies to have different emphases and constraints, such as Saudi Arabia's greater sensitivity to normalization with Israel. The current multiplicity of disputes, however, indicates an effort by the two countries to reshape the relations between them. In many spheres, the UAE has regarded itself as an equal, even superior, to its larger neighbor — an attitude that Saudi Arabia finds extremely irritating. It is important to Saudi Arabia to re-establish what it regards as its superior status over the UAE, which has raised its regional and international standing

in recent years, punching above its weight, in part by walking through a door opened by unpopular decisions taken by Riyadh, which have lessened its status.

Great Power Competition

Although frustrated by what they perceive as Washington's uncertain policy direction and unhappy about the unrelenting negativity of U.S. media commentary about Saudi Arabia, the Saudis nevertheless consider preservation of their nearly 80-year-old strategic partnership with the U.S. as the centerpiece of their foreign policy. That relationship has served both countries well for many decades. But they are also clear that they do not want to be drawn into Washington's vision of great power competition with Moscow and Beijing. The Chinese, they point out, are now Saudi Arabia's number one trading partner, while the Russians are a key partner in OPEC+. Saudi Arabia is intent on maintaining good relations with all three of its main international partners.

In that regard, the Saudis have thus far managed to pursue a foreign policy of delicate balance, hedging, and risk management, similar to Beijing's policy of "both this and that," namely, a policy of developing their "economic plus" relations with China while maintaining strategic relations with the United States. The Saudis wish to diversify their sources of support in order to avoid a situation of absolute dependence on the United States, and supplement their strategic ties with the U.S. by developing relations with competing powers. As the U.S. reinforces the impression that it intends to reduce its involvement in the region, it must take into account that its rivals, including China, will exploit this in order to intensify their own involvement at its expense. The extent of cooperation with China, however, is a function of American pressure. The stronger such pressure, the harder it will be for the Gulf states to ignore Washington's interests in order to develop ties with China.

Conclusion

In this new era, the Saudi leadership is clear that they are committed to pursuing a foreign policy agenda that serves their domestic interests. Like the rest of the world, the Saudis today are focused on issues related to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, they are facing a future where

the economy they built around the export of fossil fuels will no longer suffice to support the needs of their people. The Vision 2030 initiative put in place in the last decade was intended to provide a roadmap for the country to address the challenge of sustaining economic prosperity in a changing and more competitive world, to confront the effects of climate change, and to provide for a burgeoning population. These interests will form the core pillars of their foreign policy, as well.

Not all of the regional measures being advanced by MbS are expected to bear fruit, and this is especially true of the dialogue with Iran. However, they are essential for coping with the scenario he expects: the U.S. distancing itself from the region's concerns, and Iran, following its possible return to the nuclear deal, strengthening its position. The U.S. can and should encourage Riyadh's return to a foreign policy based on diplomacy, mediation, and smart foreign aid, especially against the backdrop of its desire to somewhat reduce its military and diplomatic presence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is a central regional player that cannot be ignored without U.S. interests being harmed. Its economic, religious, and political weight is an asset for any American administration seeking to promote a more stable, more secure region in the future.

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