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COMMENTARY

Calling out Saudi misadventure: the Trump presidency and a plea for European diplomatic nous in an ever-turbulent Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia has once again gained the unconditional backing of the United States to pursue its regional agenda. Its historical use of its vast oil wealth to promote Wahhabism abroad as a means of maintaining stability at home facilitated the rise of a sectarianized, harsh interpretation of Islam that gained global reach with devastating consequences across the Muslim world and beyond. This commentary provides a sketch of Saudi-led soft and hard power initiatives. It highlights the destructive path that Western nations have been complicit in turning a blind eye to, and outlines the shifting US stance towards its key ally. Now is not the time for record-breaking arm deals with the house of al-Saud. Rather, it is an opportunity for European diplomatic nous to help take the heat out of the building tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran and provide a semblance of balance to Middle Eastern affairs.

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In a Middle East that continues to be wracked by geopolitical conflict and extra-regional intrigue, the coming to power of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States added a new and some might say unpredictable element in to the mix. Trump “the deal-maker” has prioritized securing a workable Israel–Palestine agreement, noting it as the “toughest deal”,¹ while at the same time lambasting his predecessor’s nuclear deal with Iran and seeking to reinvigorate ties with the US’ traditional allies in the region, namely Saudi Arabia. The challenge for European states in this new environment is how to maintain the progress made on relations with Iran and

continue its more even-handed approach in the light the Trump administration’s return to further bolstering the US’ traditional allies in the Middle East.

More than ever, there is a need for European states to balance against the moves to strengthen Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council allies by providing a clear-headed and rational response to US attempts at containing Iran. The EU played a prominent role in the negotiations over Iran’s nuclear programme, and has been key in attempting to re-integrate the Islamic Republic into the global economy. This constructive diplomacy is in marked contrast to the at times reckless partisanship demonstrated by the new US

administration towards the region. This commentary provides a brief tour of Saudi-led soft and hard power initiatives across the Muslim world, highlighting the destructive path that Western nations have been complicit in turning a blind eye to, and outlines the shifting US stance towards its key ally. In doing so it argues that now is not the time for record-breaking arm deals with the house of al-Saud, but instead it is the moment for facilitating real dialogue and taking the heat out of the building tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran – an area that European diplomatic nous can help engender.

The Saudi play for leadership in the region and wider Muslim world

Saudi Arabia is a key power in the Middle East and wider Muslim world with leadership ambitions. It is a state that has a power base in the sense of its importance for world oil and subsequent wealth, its position as custodian of Islam's holiest shrines, and in recent years has added a more activist foreign policy into the mix. Saudi Arabia's self-perception as the protector of Muslim interests has long typified its foreign policy-making and desire for influence. This was particularly prevalent in its efforts to counter Nasserism in the 1960s, with the establishment of the World Muslim League propaganda body – efforts Halliday (2005, p. 218) noted as being as much about appeasing domestic criticism as countering Arab nationalism. A defining feature of Saudi foreign policy has therefore been its appeal to the *ummah* – borne of a sense of leadership from its position as the religious centre of the Muslim world. Its fundamental foreign policy goals are shaped by a desire to protect the regime from transnational threats to its legitimacy (Cause,

2014, p. 193, 197), be it through the varying hues of Arab nationalism, the perception of a hostile Iran, and the spectre of Islamist terrorism, which it was partly complicit in engendering.

On the level of state diplomacy, this has historically and until recently, manifested itself in a pragmatic alliance with the US, generally cautious diplomacy, and a focus on multi-lateral initiatives, some of which utilize Islam as unifying feature, such as the Organisation of Islamic Conference. Its play for *ummah*-wide leadership sees it placing emphasis on cultivating ties based on shared Muslim heritage and religious identity, but there is a less benign side that makes use of the same reference points in a far less cooperative endeavour. It is strategy that has led the al-Saud dynasty to pursue links with Islamist groups across the region and beyond, drawing on the levers of its soft power to extend its religious and cultural influence. It has been argued that there is no such thing as an Islamist foreign policy as far as Saudi Arabia is concerned (Hinnebusch, 2005, p. 169) or that it does not generate a specifically “Islamic power” (Ehteshami, 2014, p. 344), however, this ignores the fact that successive Saudi governments have funded, or at least facilitated, Islamist groups across the Muslim world through its patronage of the World Muslim League. Although the prominence of Wahhabism as given the al-Saud dynasty a robust political legitimacy at home (Gallarotti & Al Filali, 2012, p. 246), it is a policy that has wreaked havoc abroad emboldening various militant groups. The renowned Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi describes Saudi Arabia's international role as a promoter of a kind of “aggressive petro-fundamentalism”, one that, incidentally, would have been impossible without the support of liberal democracies (Mernissi, 2003,

p. 51). Indeed, Saudi aid was free from scrutiny pre-9/11 but has since been under much greater international (primarily US) pressure to ensure funding does not fall into the hands of undesirable groups (Mason, 2015, p. 63). This has arguably shifted again following president Trump's May 2017 visit to the Kingdom.

Saudi funding for conservative religious groups again stems from a desire to protect the regime at home, and can be traced in part to its response to Iran's revolution and the revolutionary state's own *ummah*-wide aspirations, with a deal being made that saw the ruling family gave the Wahhabi clerics more influence at home and a mandate to expand their ideology abroad (Burke, 2004, p. 22). Because of its immense wealth, Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism dominates many Islamic organizations worldwide (Qureshi & Sells, 2003, p. 16), and the Saudi government has used this as a key tool in trying to shape regional issues to its liking, acting as an important channel for Saudi influence. However, as with other "pan" ideologies, the attempts at promoting a Saudi pan-Islamism which aims to overcome national territorial differences and unify different entities in the region, has paradoxically been a source of fragmentation and division (Darwich, 2016, p. 470). In her 2016 study, May Darwich has compared the Saudi foreign policy discourse towards Iran post-revolution with that towards the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012, arguing that "in both cases the self-identity of the kingdom was threatened as its source of distinctiveness was eroded" (Darwich, 2016, p. 471), and that the Saudi state responded through reinforcing its distinctiveness vis-à-vis regional "others" it perceived as threat. While the Saudi regime facilitated a "Salifisation" of the Muslim Brotherhood

prior to the downfall of Mubarak, its subsequent rise to power (albeit short-lived) arguably challenged the Saudi leadership position in the Sunni world (Darwich, 2016, p. 481).

The increased competition from rival claims of leadership, be they from the Muslim Brotherhood or other non-state entities such as Daesh and al Qaeda, has come about as a result of the changes in Saudi Arabia's neighbourhood following the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia had traditionally pursued a foreign policy that added a veneer or myth of being in favour of cautious diplomacy on the international level, while simultaneously expanding its influence through its well-funded soft power activities in the form of its religious networks. However, the flux in which the region finds itself has coincided with a new, more assertive leadership in the country under King Salman and his newly appointed Crown Prince son Mohammad bin-Salman, which has resulted in Saudi Arabia taking a more overtly activist stance in foreign policy. It has pursued largely sectarian responses as a counterrevolutionary strategy vis-à-vis the Arab Spring (Al-Rasheed, 2011), and other regional crises. In adopting a sectarian stance in relation to the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia largely viewed the transformations taking place in the region through the lens of its regional competition with Iran (Ennis & Momani, 2013, p. 1128), which has steadily increased its influence in Iraq and continues to support the Assad government in Syria as well as maintaining a strong position in Lebanon through its patronage of Hezbollah.

This has found an articulation in the increased military involvement of Saudi forces across the region. Thus one can observe its intervention in support of the Sunni minority ruling regime in Bahrain

in March 2011, the increase in funding for Sunni factions engaged in Iraq's ongoing conflict (Mabon, 2013, p. 83), and its patronage of Sunni Islamist opposition groups fighting in Syria. At the time of writing, Saudi Arabia has also been engaged in combat operations in Yemen against the Zaidi Shi'i Houthi rebels (and their allies made up of forces loyal to former president Saleh) for over two years, drawing in other Sunni majority states in the region into the conflict. In December 2015, the Saudis also announced the formation of the "Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition", which includes most Sunni majority states, and in which Shi'i majority states are notable by their absence. Despite its pretention as an anti-terror coalition, the sectarian bent of the impetus behind its formation points to the continued paranoia in Riyadh about the Shi'i communities acting as a potential fifth column for Iranian influence. Tensions between the two have been slowly rising for several years, and have peaked around contentious issues such as the stampede in the 2015 Hajj, in which over 400 Iranian pilgrims were killed, and the execution of Saudi Shi'i leader Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, which led to the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Geopolitical competition, rather than some deep-seated, historical sectarian hatred is what ultimately is driving the rivalry. However, the Saudis have seemingly played into the sectarian narrative by harnessing their material and wider cultural resources to position themselves as the "dominant religio-regional figurehead" (Ennis & Momani, 2013, p. 1134), and challenge an Iran that is tentatively coming back into the international fold following the deal struck over its disputed nuclear programme.

Rejuvenating US–Saudi relations post-Obama

In choosing Saudi Arabia as his first foreign trip as president, Trump signalled to the world that the US was set on reinvigorating a relationship with its erstwhile regional ally. This was a relationship that had cooled under the Obama administration due to the combination of a number of thorny issues coming to the fore towards the end of his presidency. Firstly, falling oil sales and a crashing oil price in wake of the shale revolution in the US reduced the dependency between the two states, with oil sales falling over 40% from a peak of over 2200 barrels a day in 2003 to just over 1300 in 2017.² The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached between Iran and world powers also created potential discord in US–Saudi relations, with the latter concerned that an Iran freed from punitive economic sanctions would be emboldened in pursuing goals in the region that were contrary to its vision for a regional order. In addition, the spectre of alleged Saudi complicity in terrorist activities also began to gather more column inches in the US press. The green light given by Congress in 2016 for relatives of the victims of the 9/11 attacks to sue to Saudi government for their alleged complicity strained ties, despite Obama's attempts to veto the move. This was compounded by WikiLeaks' publishing of leaked emails from presidential candidate and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referring to clandestine Saudi funding of Islamic State and al-Qaeda.³

Saudi Arabia's pursuing of a sectarian-tinged conflict against Zaidi Shi'i rebels in Yemen also complicated relations under the Obama administration. Despite the US offering some rhetorical and some

logistical backing to the Saudi-led coalition's campaign there, arms sales were cut at the end of 2016 on account of mounting civilian casualties and the continued humanitarian crisis in Yemen as a result of the conflict. At the time, then-National Security Council spokesman Ned Price warned Saudi Arabia that US security co-operation was "not a blank cheque",⁴ a stark contrast to the record-breaking, \$110 billion arms deal signed by the Trump administration with Saudi Arabia in May 2017. Indeed, the Trump presidency has seen a considerable reinvigoration of the US–Saudi alliance. Starting with his visit to the kingdom in May 2017 and the announcement of a renewed commitment to providing arms, the US and Saudi Arabia subsequently issued a joint communique sketching out further cooperation in counter-terrorism, trade, and countering Iranian influence in the Middle East.⁵ We are, at the time of writing, only 6 months into the new US administration, but it looks likely that the US is falling into line with the Saudi vision for the region, throwing its full backing behind its long-time ally. The recent imbroglio between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt on the other, over alleged Qatari funding for terrorist groups has, despite some attempts at mediation from the State Department, seen Trump firmly back the Saudi position on the crisis.

Europe's role in providing balance

A key challenge for policy-makers in Europe has been how to deal with the Trump administration's foreign policy direction. Though post-Brexit vote UK has firmly hitched itself to the Trump administration's foreign policy aims and

also sought to deepen its links with its allies in the Persian Gulf, the EU has been more circumspect, and is in a position to offer a more nuanced response to current developments in the Middle East. Having played a prominent role in securing the JCPOA, the EU has shown it can act as a significant diplomatic actor. The personal relationships built up through the years of painstaking negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme have helped win the trust of key diplomatic figures in the Islamic Republic. EU states led the way in securing numerous trade deals with Iran following the signing of the JCPOA, and are forging ahead despite continued US ambivalence over the deal. Most notably, French energy giant Total signed an almost \$5 billion deal with Iran to develop the South Pars gas field in the Persian Gulf, at the time of writing the largest foreign deal signed by Iran since the lifting of sanctions.⁶

Regarding Saudi Arabia, while an expansion of defence contracts has been a significant feature of bilateral trade with European states, namely Britain and France over the past 15 years (Kinninmont, 2016), the EU as a bloc has an important role in Saudi Arabia's trade relations. The (currently) 28 EU members constitute Saudi Arabia's largest overall trade partner, with the EU coming in first and accounting for over 25% of Saudi Arabia's imports, and second (behind China) as a destination for Saudi exports.⁷ It is therefore of key importance that the EU acts in concert to check the blank cheque given to Saudi Arabia by the Trump administration. When it matters, the EU can exert a positive influence on global affairs, as seen by its participation in the JCPOA. Europe has shown the benefits of constructive engagement with Iran, and should

harness this spirit in promoting an even-handed, balanced approach to the region, in contrast to the partisan politics of the US.

This is not to propose a bold EU-Iran counter axis to US-Saudi relations, an unrealistic prospect, but Europe, collectively, through its continually improving relations with Iran and candidness with Arab states can check moves to impose a dangerous Saudi hegemony on the region. It is important to continue to promote civil society and moderate forces across the region. While the Islamic Republic's democracy may not always meet Western-defined standards, the level of popular participation far exceeds that of the US Saudi and Persian Gulf allies. Scholars are in the fortunate position to be able to call out the hypocrisy that characterizes many Western states' policies towards dealing with autocratic regimes in the Middle East. It is incumbent on the policy-makers of these states to rise above regional factionalism and help restore balance – not through huge arms deals, but through facilitating real dialogue and recognising the past mistakes of extra-regional powers in the region. This can be done by making real moves to facilitate a détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its allies. Europe is fortunate in this regard as it is not “tainted” by association in the same way as the US, and to a certain extent Russia, are in the region. Europe, or more specifically the EU as a whole, does not have the baggage of close defence and military ties to opposing sides in the region's geopolitical puzzle in the same way that the US and Russia do – a fact evidenced all too clearly by their backing of opposing sides in the Syrian conflict.

For too long the West has turned a blind eye to Saudi misadventure. Therefore this commentary ends with a call on

the EU to assume the moral high ground vacated by the current US administration's turn towards conservative, authoritarian forces in the region. Saudi Arabia is a prime example of a country that needs to be held to account, not fawned over – only then can the ground be laid for a fairer, more balanced regional order, and European states should be well-placed to help this prevail.

Notes

1. “Donald Trump on Israeli-Palestinian peace deal: ‘We will get it done’”, *The Independent*, 3 May, 2017. Available online at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-mahmoud-abbas-israel-palestine-peace-deal-a7716306.html>
2. US imports of crude oil from Saudi Arabia, historical data, taken from United States Energy Information Administration website. Available online at: <https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=MCRIMUSSA2&f=M>
3. *WikiLeaks* email exchange between Hillary Clinton and her 2016 presidential campaign chair John Podesta from September 2014. Available online at: <https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/emailid/3774>
4. See *BBC News* “Yemen conflict: US cuts arms sales to Saudi Arabia”, 14 December 2016. Available online at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38310870>
5. See “Joint Statement Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America” *White House Press Release*, issued 23 May 2017. Available online at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/23/joint-statement-between-kingdom-saudi-arabia-and-united-states-america>
6. See “Iran to sign \$4.8bn gas deal with Total”, *Financial Times*, 2 July, 2017. Available online at: <https://www.ft.com/content/3b530f02-5f1d-11e7-8814-0ac7eb84e5f1?mhq5j=e1>

7. See “European Union, Trade in goods with Saudi Arabia – 2016”, *European Commission Directorate-General European Union, Trade in goods with Saudi Arabia for Trade*. Available online at: http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113442.pdf

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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