

*Nazmul Arifeen*

## LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION AND FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

### Abstract

Saudi Arabia's regional posture signals some conspicuous foreign policy alterations in recent years. There seems to be a potential thaw in its relationship with Israel ostensibly overshadowing the Palestinian cause. An increased likelihood of confrontation with Iran appears more realistic than any time in the past. Finally, a more assertive regional leadership role is heralded by, inter alia, a protracted military campaign in Yemen and an embargo on Qatar. These changes in foreign policy behaviour are often believed to be precipitated by the gradual ascendancy of relatively young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Extant literature shows that under certain circumstances, leadership change may trigger foreign policy reorientation. Such drastic foreign policy changes are more likely to occur in non-democratic regimes because there is no 'audience cost' or accountability mechanisms to restraint sudden deviation of policy. The paper analyzes whether these changes in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is linked to gradual leadership succession. It rejects the claims that the changes are correlated with the ongoing transfer of power. It argues how regional dynamics such as power vacuum triggered by the US military invasion and Shiite revival compel Saudi Arabia to take on a more dominant role and recalibrate its external policy.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy Analysis, Leadership Succession, Middle Eastern Politics, Saudi Arabia, Leadership Change

### 1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia is a major stakeholder in Middle Eastern politics. It is one of the richest Arab nations, thanks to the enormous oil reserve ranked the third largest in the world. It wields significant cultural influence over the Muslims because of its housing of the *Haramain* or the two most revered sites in Mecca and Medina. It is also one of the closest allies of the West in the region. The kingdom also has the will to use its influence evident through its pioneering role in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) aided by its generous support to mostly Muslim-majority countries.<sup>1</sup> Besides, there are other reasons as to

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Humanitarian Aid & Relief Centre, "General Statistics about KSrelief Projects", available at <https://www.ksrelief.org/Statistics/CountryDetails/22>, accessed on 25 January 2020.

why Saudi Arabia features prominently in the discussions on international politics: the al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden was a Saudi national; so were 15 of 19 hijackers of 9/11 who attacked the World Trade Centre on the United States (US) soil.<sup>2</sup> Saudi foreign policy bears significance not only to the region, but it has ramifications for a greater geographical expanse.

A profound change in inter-state relational dynamics is unfolding in the Middle East which coincided with the emergence of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (often shortened as MbS in the media) as the heir apparent to the current King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. His rapid rise to prominence has been termed by some Middle East experts as ‘revolution from above’.<sup>3</sup> The far-reaching domestic policy changes he announced has earned him accolades as a visionary leader who would catapult Saudi Arabia to the world stage. Under his de facto leadership, the country also appears to be adjusting its foreign policy. The most conspicuous of these adjustments or foreign policy changes is the brewing tension with Iran first. Although Iran-Saudi rivalry is nothing new, it has intensified exponentially in recent times. The second is the thaw in Saudi-Israeli tension where the latter is no longer perceived as an arch enemy. These changes have been coupled with the Saudis taking on a more assertive regional leadership role. Two months after assuming the position of the Defence Minister in January 2015, Mohammed bin Salman oversaw a military operation in the country’s southern neighbour Yemen, embroiling in a staggering campaign that has dragged on longer than initially anticipated.<sup>4</sup> The country also took harsh diplomatic actions against the Gulf state of Qatar—which used to be a member of Saud-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—for its alleged ‘support for extremism’. These changes are, to varying degrees, a departure from previous policy. This paper seeks to understand the leadership succession and foreign policy change in Saudi Arabia.

Some argue that leaders bring about drastic changes in policies or even go to war to consolidate their power. There are numerous examples to support this claim. Former US President Bill Clinton ordered an airstrike in Iraq to sway public opinion from the Monica Lewinsky scandal.<sup>5</sup> Driven by similar intent, President Putin went to the Second Chechen War to consolidate power.<sup>6</sup> After all, it is during

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<sup>2</sup> John R. Bradley, “Al Qaeda and the House of Saud: Eternal Enemies or Secret Bedfellows?”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2005, pp. 139-152.

<sup>3</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, “Fresh Prince: The Scheme and Dreams of Saudi Arabia’s Next King”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 3, May/June 2018, pp. 75-86.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Broder, “Made for Each Other: Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Has Found His Strongman Soul Mate in President Donald Trump”, *Newsweek*, 07 September 2018, pp. 16-21.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Busby, *Defending the American Presidency: Clinton and the Lewinsky Scandal*, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 152-153.

<sup>6</sup> John Russell, *Chechnya – Russia’s ‘War on Terror’*, Oxon: Routledge, 2007, pp. 69-73.

the national emergencies when popular support tends to rally behind the executive power. This line of argument follows that if the Saudi leadership succession was not timed around this, any other leader would have acted differently, or at the least, would not change long-standing Saudi foreign policy in the region. But this line of thinking is erroneous as far as theories of International Relations are concerned. This is why the domestic explanations (i.e., those hinges on succession) of foreign policy changes in Saudi Arabia have been questioned in this paper. Contrary to the prevailing perceptions, this paper argues that the foreign policy readjustments and assertiveness in the case of Saudi Arabia were still likely without the current succession. A more theoretically-informed and convincing argument would be to look at systemic determinants of foreign policy changes in this case.

That being said, research on the Middle Eastern politics remained a relatively uncharted territory until three decades ago, due to the reclusive nature of the societies which contributes to the lack of academic literature. John Esposito noted that the Western leaders and the masses were almost ignorant of the Middle East until the Iranian revolution in 1979 shook the international community.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, there has been a burgeoning volume of research on the Middle Eastern governments that includes, inter alia, the impacts of Arab Spring and why some monarchies in the region remained largely unaffected by the Arab popular revolution. But there is a lesser amount of work on foreign policy changes in the Arab monarchies. One of the conceivable reasons is that states seldom alter their foreign policy orientation.<sup>8</sup> Several authors have also argued that notwithstanding the Arab-Israeli conflict and recent Arab Spring, internal politics of the monarchies is traditionally peaceful and ‘characterized by too much stability’.<sup>9</sup> Minor turmoil aside, politics in those monarchies is rather static. This notion, however, contradicts the foreign policy reshuffle currently being observed in Saudi Arabia—a country which has not experienced any disagreements between the Ibn Saud brothers over the succession issue since the deposition of King Saud bin Abdulaziz. By the virtue of hereditary succession and since the power stays within the same family, there is no compelling reason for previous monarchs to flex muscle outside of the national territory. But the recent transformation in regional dynamics and ensuing changes will require revisiting the question. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to understand the Saudi foreign policy change in light of the succession.

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<sup>7</sup> John L. Esposito, “The Future of Islam”, lecture delivered at University of Kentucky, 22 September 2014, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6cKvPo4Dv8>, accessed on 22 March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Kalevi J. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1970, pp. 233-309.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, pp. 7-8.

With these changes in the background, this paper explores how Saudi Arabia is recalibrating its neighbourhood policy and analyzes why the country suddenly desires to be more visible in regional politics. It explores whether the changes emanate from leadership succession in the monarchy. In so doing, the paper broadly explores the following questions: Is there any reason for the country to be more open to some former adversaries compared to the time of any previous kings? Is it because the new heir apparent the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia is signalling to do business differently or does he have domestic compulsions to engage more forcefully in the regional politics? Or, are there more justifiable explanations that pertain to regional power politics and explain foreign policy changes in Saudi Arabia? The paper explores these questions using theories of foreign policy analysis. It analyzes whether leadership succession or regional dynamics affects Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and concludes that the changes do not result from the new Crown Prince's need to tighten his grip on power.

The arguments proceed in five sections. Following the introduction, the second section explores how foreign policy is theoretically analyzed, taking into consideration the process and different levels of analysis, often with varying predictions at each level. Extant literature is also discussed in this section to properly ground the arguments of the paper to understand the causality behind leadership succession and foreign policy change. The third section discusses why leadership succession is significant in this particular instance in the history of modern Saudi Arabia. This is followed by a detailed exposition of why the assertiveness in Saudi foreign policy is not owing to leadership change in the fourth section. The paper, then, explores major changes in relations with neighbouring countries in section five to argue how regional power politics shapes foreign policy outcomes. It provides evidence to contend that changes are unrelated to the ascendancy of Mohammed bin Salman and any strong leader would have followed the same path. Finally, the paper draws conclusions in section six.

## **2. Factors Influencing Foreign Policy**

The corollary of leadership succession on foreign policy has been widely discussed in the discourse of International Relations. There have been some major shifts in the foreign policy analysis (FPA) scholarship over the last six decades since the late-1960s. The first generation of scholars focussed on the personality traits of leadership and their influence on foreign policy decision making.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, foreign

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<sup>10</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2005, pp. 1-30; Laura Neack, Jeanne A. K. Hey and Patrick J. Haney, "General Change in Foreign Policy Analysis", in Laura Neack, Jeanne A. K. Hey and Patrick J. Haney (eds.), *Foreign Policy Analysis: Continuity and Change in Its Second Generation*, Eaglewood Cliffs,

policy is the sum of decisions made by individuals or groups who aim to maximize national interests. Whether the decisions are made by an individual or a group of actors depend on the types of the regime, domestic political settings and national culture. From the point of view of decision makers, three models can be useful to explain how decisions are made.<sup>11</sup> The first is the rational actor model which assumes that the decisionmakers are rational actors who seek to augment the interest of their own states.<sup>12</sup> The rational actors are faced with what Robert Putnam calls a ‘two-level’ game in foreign policy making: the leaders must uphold their national interest vis-à-vis other states while at the same time carefully navigating through domestic public opinion from which they derive their legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> The second model is known as the bureaucratic politics in which different government agencies push for their own departmental priorities and interests.<sup>14</sup> In some non-democratic regimes where bureaucracy is not strong enough, organizational process—the third model—may influence foreign policy decisions.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes, leaders may also fall to ‘groupthink’ by conforming to the ideas already floating around rather than thinking out of the box.<sup>16</sup>

Since any change in foreign policy lies at the end of a process through which decisions are made, this process is again conditioned upon the structure that constrains those decisions. As such, foreign policy is further predicated upon different ‘levels of analysis’: the systemic level of analysis concerns itself with the international system and how international order limits state behaviour. The level of analysis is also important to understand and predict foreign policy behaviour. If the Saudi case is taken to explain its foreign policy, it would involve how its position at the international level dictates its behaviour. The second way is to understand the state-level considerations that emerge out of the interactions of one state with another. This implies that Saudi actions are conditioned upon its neighbours, such as Iran’s nuclear programmes and the imperative to build alliance to counter potential threats born out of ‘Shia revival’. The third option is to look at the individual level: foreign policy behaviour is also explained by an individual’s perceptions and orientation. This is where most theoretical disagreements occur among scholars. It boils down to what

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New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995, pp. 1-7.

<sup>11</sup> Graham T. Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1971, cited in Valerie M. Hudson, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Eugene R. Wittkopf, Christopher M. Jones and Charles W. Kegley Jr., *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process*, Belmont, California: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008, pp. 458-462.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 471-473; Robert Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games”, *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1988, pp. 427-460.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, “Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics, and the Crafting of Foreign Policy”, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2000, pp. 733-749.

<sup>15</sup> Eugene R. Wittkopf et al., op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*, Second Edition, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Pub, 2014, pp. 73-115.

Hermann and Peacock noted: “fuller explanations of foreign policy phenomenon require multi-level and multi-variable explanatory frameworks”.<sup>17</sup>

Whether foreign policy behaviour is an outcome of choices taken by the leaders or to what extent it is influenced by structural considerations are debated in FPA scholarship. There is a growing body of academic work on the impact of leadership changes in foreign policy behaviour, including those in the monarchies. Some theoretical tradition’s preoccupation with the structural factors affecting foreign policy is explained by their insistence that states are unitary actors and whatever decisions are taken by the actors (be it individual leaders or bureaucrats as a whole) within states, they constitute a unified resolve. Because leaders’ decisions and actions are restrained by the ‘audience cost’ of policies. There is hardly any scope that foreign policy decisions would yield to the caprice or whim of the leaders.

On the contrary, Richard Snyder and his colleagues argue that structural factors have no independent impact on foreign policy decision making.<sup>18</sup> Their classic work *Foreign Policy Decision Making* published in 1962 was grounded on political psychology. This hypothesis was later challenged by Kenneth Waltz’s seminal work on the role of structures in international relations and how it influences the state’s behaviour. There has also been a resurgence of psychoanalysis of leadership roles through the works of Margaret Hermann who proposes eight hypotheses with causal linkages between foreign policy and leadership.<sup>19</sup> However, her propositions regarding the dramatic means through which leaders come to power directly relate to succession and its potential impact. Other causal factors pertain to the degree of personal interests of leaders in foreign policy, concentration of power, charismatic personality, lack of defined foreign policy making apparatus, internal crisis situations and previous experience of the individual.

Even in countries with a relatively stable history of external relations may experience some degree of deviation in foreign relations with leadership change. Sometimes these changes are conspicuous: new leaders adjust their foreign policy which may best reflect personal preferences and style. For example, the current foreign policy conduct of the US is surely mirroring the personal style of President

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<sup>17</sup> Charles F. Hermann and Gregory Peacock, “The Evolution and Future of Theoretical Research in the Comparative Study of Foreign Policy”, in Charles F. Hermann, Charles W. Kegley and James N. Rosenau (eds.), *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, Winchester: Allen & Unwin, 1987, cited in Laura Neack et al., op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck and Burton Sapin, “Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics”, in Richard C. Snyder et al., (eds.), *Foreign Policy Decision-Making (Revisited)*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 21-152.

<sup>19</sup> John Thomas Preston, “Leadership and Foreign Policy Analysis,” in Renée Marlin-Bennett (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, Online Publication, Oxford University Press, 2010, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.255.

Donald Trump who has sought to establish diplomatic communication with North Korea. Some of his foreign policy decisions were rather drastic: such as the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change, moving away from the Obama-era Iran deal and so forth.

The nuance of foreign policy change specific to regime type adds to complexities. David Huxsoll contends that leadership change in non-democratic regimes is likely to result in more dramatic fluctuations in foreign policy than in a democratic regime.<sup>20</sup> He rests his arguments on the instance of Iran after the Islamic revolution in 1979. Since non-democratic regimes are not constrained by accountability and compromise, they have relatively free hand in major decisions. However, hereditary succession, as is the case in Saudi Arabia, ensues lesser political changes because the dynastic nature of the regime remains unaffected. Jason Brownlee's notable work distinguishes three distinct characteristics of hereditary succession, including the transfer of state power from father to son in which the power transfer is initiated before the death of the father and an absence of electoral mechanism or legal procedure that could have otherwise facilitated such transition.<sup>21</sup> If this hypothesis were valid, there should have been lesser changes of foreign policy behaviour. The following sections discuss why this has not been the case.

### **3. From Brothers to Sons: Shift from Horizontal to Vertical Succession**

The monarchy of Saudi Arabia is ruled by the House of Saud or Al Saud family. The modern Saudi state was founded in 1932 by Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud—the most illustrious ruler of the Al Saud dynasty which was originally founded some 275 years ago. The dynastic name 'Saud' is derived from Muhammad bin Saud of eighteenth century who established the 'first Saudi state' in 1744 in a small settlement called Diriyah near modern-day Riyadh. Muhammad bin Saud combined forces with a religious reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab who gave him legitimacy. This also has implications for leadership succession which will be discussed later. Since the Al Saud family goes back to Muhammad bin Saud in the eighteenth century, there have been eight generations of leaders since then and there are thousands of princes who trace their lineage to the founder of the dynasty. Moreover, there exist so-called 'cadet branches' of the House of Saud, in addition to the main ruling line, who descended from Muhammad bin Saud's brother

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<sup>20</sup> David Baker Huxsoll, *Regimes, Institutions and Foreign Policy Change*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation No. 2377, Louisiana State University, 2003, available at [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations/2377/](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2377/), accessed on 27 April 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies", *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2007, pp. 595-628.



Thunayyan Ibn Saud who briefly ruled from 1841–1843.<sup>22</sup> The cadet branches also hold high positions within Saudi Arabia and play important roles in the decision making process. Because of the Arab cultural practice of polygamy, most kings and princes have multiple wives and thus the number of offspring multiplies. Putting the main branches and cadet branches together, there are many claimants to the throne. To make matters more complicated, there are tens of thousands of members of the royal family. Anthony Cordesman notes that there are more than 80 princes with considerable power and influence.<sup>23</sup>

Still, power transfer from one ruler to another has been more common in the Saudi monarchy than any other monarchies around the world, owing to the fact it has moved from one ageing son of Ibn Saud to another, unlike other monarchies where leadership succession occurs vertically—from one generation of rulers to the next generation, e.g., father to son. Saudi Arabia is an outlier where powers have been transferred horizontally—within the same generation of rulers, e.g., one brother to another. As a result, since the passing of Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud in 1953, the power has shifted hands of his sons. When abdicated power in favour of his sons, he declared his oldest surviving son Prince Saud the Crown Prince and another son Faisal the next in line. This made it clear that the throne would be passed on from one brother to another which has been the case for the last eighty years until now. Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud left behind 35 surviving sons born of his 22 wives.<sup>24</sup> Many of his sons are still alive which implies that the princes may still lay claim to the throne as per customary horizontal succession. Six kings have ruled the country since Ibn Saud: Saud, Faisal, Khalid, Fahd, Abdullah and the current King Salman—all sons of Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud. Interestingly, there have been more kings and crown princes from one group of full brothers who share the same mother: Husa bint Ahmed al Sudairi. This powerful clan seven brothers is known as ‘Sudairi Seven’, named after their mother.<sup>25</sup> They are: King Fahd, Prince Sultan, Prince Abdur Rahman, Prince Nayef, Prince Turki, King Salman and Prince Ahmed. Some kings also rely more on their full brothers. Influential half-brothers also wield considerable clout.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Bligh, *From Prince to King: Royal Succession in the House of Saud in the Twentieth Century*, New York and London: New York University Press, 1984, p. 105, cited in Joseph A. Kechichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom*, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 26-27.

<sup>24</sup> Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, however, never broke the Islamic religious tradition of not marrying more than four wives at a time. See, for details, Simon Henderson, *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*, Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1994, pp. 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph A. Kechichian, op. cit., 2001, pp. 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Second Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 143.



The monarchy in Saudi Arabia is not like a constitutional monarchy such as the United Kingdom (UK) where the Queen has only a ceremonial role. Rather, it is absolute monarchy, where the king takes all important decisions. It will be useful to keep in mind that the Saudi king is also the Prime Minister of the country, while the Crown Prince oftentimes performs the functions of the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. The Crown Prince is the heir apparent and the next in line to become the King in the Saudi monarchy. When the former King Abdullah was still on the throne, his brother and the present King Salman was the Crown Prince. King Salman became the King of Saudi Arabia in 2015 after the death of half-brother King Abdullah who had previously ascended to the throne after the death of his half-brother King Fahd. Upon assuming power, King Salman made his half-brother Muqrin bin Abdulaziz the Crown Prince. As the power shifted from one brother to another, when the latter kings ascended to the throne, they were mostly in their late-1960s or 1980s. But in a sudden move and much to the pleasure of the West, he made his nephew Muhammad bin Nayef the Crown Prince on 28 April 2015. His own son was given the post of Deputy Crown Prince at the same time. For the first time, a potential transfer of power to the grandchildren of Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud. This event marked a historical change in Saudi monarchy where, unlike other monarchies, leadership succession has moved horizontally—from one brother to another. This was an aberration because there are many full and half-brothers of King Salman, who would have been, as the tradition goes, more likely to become the next in line.

In a sudden move in July 2017, King Salman removed Muhammad bin Nayef and replaced him with his own favourite son Salman who was hitherto unknown to the Westerners. This time around, however, a ruling king has made his son an heir apparent. When the announcement of Mohammed bin Salman's new role became public, there were sons of Ibn Saud who were potential candidates to become Crown Prince. Even, members of the powerful 'Sudairi Clan', viz. the king's full brothers were also bypassed.<sup>27</sup> It was surprising because Muhammad bin Nayef was educated in the USA where he obtained a Master's degree in 1981. He was also trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) between 1985-88 at Langley academy, and Scotland Yard between 1992-94 on counterterrorism. Not only did he possess useful networks in the West, but as noted by Bruce Riedel, he was "pro-American, almost certainly more so than any other member of the

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<sup>27</sup> When MbS was declared Deputy Crown Prince—a post created only a year earlier in 2014—on 29 April 2015, three full brothers of King Salman were alive. They were: Abdur Rahman (died in 2017), Turki (2016), Ahmad (still alive). See, for details, Angus McDowall, "Saudi Succession in Spotlight after New Heir Named", *Reuters*, 19 June 2012, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-crownprince-succession/saudi-succession-in-spotlight-after-new-heir-named-idUSBRE85I16N20120619>, accessed on 20 February 2019.

Saudi leadership.”<sup>28</sup> His selection as the Crown Prince has also surprised some Western experts on the Middle East.<sup>29</sup> The background surrounding his removal is subject to much speculation. In a video shot afterwards, Mohammed bin Salman was seen kissing hands of Muhammad bin Nayef and touching his feet out of respect. One report published by *The New York Times* alleged that Muhammad bin Nayef was deposed and since then was placed under house arrest—an allegations that Saudi officials deny.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the validity of such assertions, the fact remains that the rise of MbS was quick and a watershed event in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Salman’s own elder half-brother Prince Faisal bin Salman, who once thought to be a viable contender to crown principedom now teaches at Riyadh University. Former King Fahd’s son was another prince who was once believed to be the potential candidate for the job. When the current king Salman was made Crown Prince, he was 80 years old. For the first time in many decades, the power is being transferred to a young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who is likely to rule for a long time.

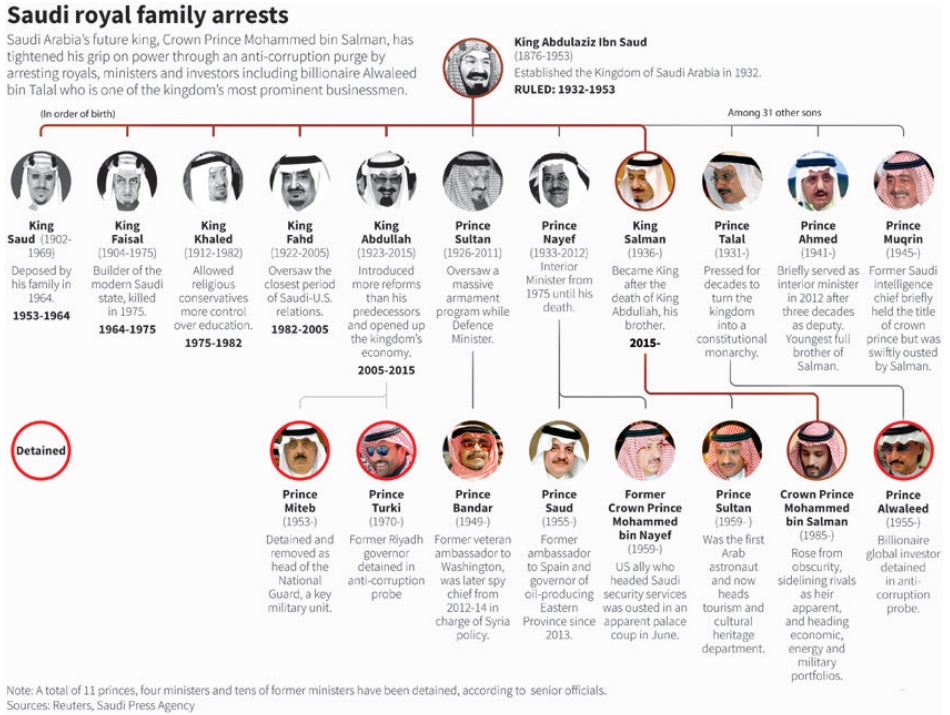
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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Riedel, “The Prince of Counterterrorism”, *Brookings Institution*, 29 September 2015, available at <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2015/the-prince-of-counterterrorism.html>, accessed on 15 January 2019; see also: Stig Stenslie, *Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia: The Challenge of Succession*, Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Riedel, “Kingdom Come or Kingdom Gone? Saudi Arabia and the Future of the Middle East”, 30 March 2016, lecture given at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), University of Waterloo, also available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fS6xpmg-3u4>, accessed on 10 January 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Hubbard, Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, “Saudi King’s Son Plotted Effort to Oust His Rival”, *New York Times*, 18 July 2018.

**Chart 1: Saudi Succession and Recent Arrests**



Source: Sunday Guardian Live, “How Saudi Crown Prince purged royal family rivals”, 11 November 2017, available at <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/world/11609-how-saudi-crown-prince-purged-royal-family-rivals>, accessed on 22 January 2020.

This is why the changes in Saudi Arabia’s external realignment and reassessment of its role in the region are both remarkable and bears significance for its future. Before the paper delves into analyzing what actually caused them, the next section looks the theoretical arguments related to the impact of leadership succession on foreign policy change.

**4. Domestic Factors: Leadership Succession and Its Impact**

Sudden changes in foreign policy are not rare in contemporary international relations. In fact, some drastic policy change may be desirable in some circumstances. Dramatic events, such as those during international crises may temporarily boost the approval ratings of an incumbent leader. A poll by Gallup showed that the popularity of former US President George W. Bush spiked during the attack on 11 September, invasion of Iraq and the day deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein

was apprehended.<sup>31</sup> Military campaign and international crises may function as a diversionary device because they often result in a phenomenon known as ‘rally round the flag effect’. National crises cement internal divisions and work as a unifying factor. There is all the more reason for a leader who is seeking reelection to employ this tactic. Major diplomatic actions act as effectively in this regard.<sup>32</sup> This trend is not only found in democracies; autocratic governments also benefit from such major foreign policy overhaul.<sup>33</sup> That is to say, the types of regimes are correlated with a leader’s choice to embark on risky foreign policy ventures. However, it remains to be explained if this hypothesis can explain the behaviour of monarchies, especially in the case of Saudi Arabia. The following discussion analyzes some plausible domestic determinants of foreign policy and explores if they had affected in the case of Saudi Arabia.

The foreign policy making in Saudi Arabia rests in the hands of reigning monarchs. Unlike succession issue where consensus among the members of House of Saud must be reached, foreign policy decisions are taken in consultations with the senior princes and technocrats who may be knowledgeable about the issue. While the final decisions are likely to be taken by the king but the crown prince may take major decisions. For example, when former king Fahd was incapacitated after a massive stroke in 1995, the then Crown Prince Abdullah took important decisions for another decade King Fahd’s reign lasted.<sup>34</sup>

The claim that the new Crown Prince might engage into regional military actions to boost approval ratings does not hold in light of theoretical scrutiny. A leader’s erratic and radical foreign policy changes are often attributed to the need for assuaging discontent and quell dissent at home. But Saudi Arabia is not facing anything of the sort. Therefore, ‘scapegoat hypothesis’ does not hold. The hypothesis offered by Jack Levy is otherwise known as the ‘diversionary theory of war’.<sup>35</sup> It argues that facing increasing

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<sup>31</sup> Marc J. Hetherington and Michael Nelson, “Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism”, *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2003, pp. 37-42; Also see: “Presidential Approval Ratings — George W. Bush” *Gallup*, available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Marc J. Hetherington and Michael Nelson, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, “Why Autocrats Love Emergencies Crises”, *New York Times*, 12 January 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/12/opinion/sunday/trump-national-emergency-wall.html>, accessed on 17 February 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Hermann Frederick Eilts, “Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy”, in L. Carl Brown (ed.), *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2001, pp. 241-242; Harvey Sicherman, “King Fahd’s Saudi Arabia”, *Orbis*, Vol. 55, No. 3, 2011, pp. 487-488.

<sup>35</sup> Jack S. Levy, “The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1, 1998, pp. 139-165; Jack S. Levy, “The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence,” in Philip E. Tetlock, Jo L. Husbands, Robert Jervis, Paul S. Stern and Charles Tilly (eds.), *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War*, Vol. 1, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, cited in Andrea K. Grove, *Political Leadership in Foreign Policy: Manipulating Support across Borders*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 3.

uncertainties in domestic politics, some leaders opt for scapegoating external and internal actors. It is known that wars have a unifying power, i.e., it brings a nation together during the time of national emergencies. In other words, it is unjustifiable to claim that the country's leadership is trying to divert public attention to regional politics. There is barely any domestic crisis that may warrant external military adventurism. Regardless, the causal relationship is internal to the country. Internal instability may motivate leaders to be embroiled in war and foreign policy changes. The argument stems from the fact that there is no apparent threat to Saudi Arabia's current regime that would necessitate distracting military campaign to sway public opinion.

The power in Saudi Arabia seems to be consolidated than any other country in the region, thanks to the extended family networks of the House of Saud that dates back to past seven generations. The House of Saud family members fill up the upper echelons of state power hierarchy, senior positions in the armed forces and the business sector. The Al Saud reins in a relatively peaceful time as the country has not encountered any major turmoil since the Seize of Mecca in 1979. The revisionary changes that Arab Spring brought about had only affected the republics of the Arab states. Sean Yom and F. Gregory Gause showed that despite tremor of Arab Spring, the monarchies of the Middle East were left considerably unscathed. It was the republics in the region—Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen—that fell to the wave of popular demands for democratization.<sup>36</sup> The monarchies were largely unhindered by mass uprisings that swept across the region. The only Middle Eastern monarchy that experienced forms of uprisings in the Arab Spring wave was Bahrain, although it escaped unhurt at the end. Hence, there is not enough ground to claim that Saudi Arabia's monarchy has an existential threat to the regime from Arab Spring.

Another phenomenon that explains foreign policy behaviour is when a new leader derives political support from different societal groups from his predecessors. This also helps explain why, mostly in democratic states, a new government pursues policies entirely different from the previous regime. But in absolute monarchies, there is usually no need to buy loyalty. The political force is not strong.<sup>37</sup> This, nonetheless, does not indicate that there is no dissent in Saudi Arabia's internal politics. The main threat comes from the Muslim Brotherhood and *sahwa*, then again it needs a regional response.<sup>38</sup> But none of these is strong enough to take a different course in foreign policy.

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<sup>36</sup> Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause III, "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 4, October 2012, pp. 74-88.

<sup>37</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, "Is Saudi Arabia Immune", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2011, pp. 48-59.

<sup>38</sup> Frederic Wehrey, "Saudi Arabia's Anxious Autocrats", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2015, pp. 71-85.

Most importantly, like many of the Middle Eastern monarchies, Saudi Arabia is a ‘rentier state’—it derives most of the revenue from external sources in the form of rent, viz., by selling oil for which there is no significant production cost. However, “only few are engaged in the generation of this rent (wealth), the majority being only involved in the distribution or utilisation of it”.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the economy is dependent on rent-like income from oil revenues. This nature of the economy dramatically reduces the necessity of imposing taxation on the citizens. There is also an economically important aspect—for most citizens, basic services are provided free of cost by the state. The only real problem encountered in recent years seems to be a growing rate of unemployment. That also is being taken care of by the introduction of ‘Saudization policy’ whereby the government has set a quota for companies to hire Saudi citizens. The new Crown Prince has also taken up a wide range of policies to lift Saudi Arabia out of its oil dependence. The Saudization is an extension of that policy.

One potential external factor that had internal implications for Saudi Arabia is the Pan-Arabism promoted by Egypt during the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. The idea espoused a common Arab identity and culture. It has caused uneasiness in the past because Pan-Arabism transcends ‘artificial’ state boundaries and advocates more unity among Arabs.<sup>40</sup> This brings to imagination the risk of potential redrawing of maps in the region. However, Arabism of the past no longer poses threats to the monarchies. Nor are there any viable domestic compulsions that dictate a major foreign policy change in Saudi Arabia.

By exploring the domestic sources of foreign policy determinants, the foregoing discussion explains that foreign policy change in Saudi Arabia is not positively correlated with the leadership succession. Because conventional domestic factors remain unchanged. This analysis is grounded on the realist ontology, which posits that foreign policy of a state is driven by its pursuit of power and position as well as individual predilections and personality traits. Although there are no viable domestic compulsions that dictate a major foreign policy change in the country, there are structural factors that explain these changes which will be dealt with in the next section.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World”, in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State*, New York: Croom Helm, 1987, p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Doran, *Pan-Arabism before Nasser: Egyptian Power Politics and the Palestine Question*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; Hussein Sirriyeh, “A New Version of Pan-Arabism?”, *International Relations*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> This should be noted here that the word ‘structure’ used in the paper denotes as it is theoretically understood in international relations. See, for details, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.



## 5. Structural Factors Affecting Foreign Policy Decisions

The discussion in the preceding section shows that there is little evidence to claim that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy reflects its internal compulsions. On the contrary, in the case of the Middle East regional dynamics play a greater role in forging new alliance and stoking rivalry and hence offers a rigorous analytical lens to understand Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the contemporary times. Barry Buzan et al., discuss the concept of 'regional security complex' (RSC) regarding South Asia politics.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, the RSC also criticizes the clash of civilization hypothesis proposed by Samuel P. Huntington who argued that after the erosion of bipolarity, there will be an increased likelihood of conflicts between civilizations, such as the West versus Islamic, or the West versus Chinese civilization. Buzan contends that the Huntington's assertion fails to explain why there are conflicts within each of these civilizations, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia both of which are Muslim countries. In the discussion that follows, this paper extrapolates Buzan and Rizvi's argument to Saudi foreign policy changes amid leadership succession and show that the changes are not linked to domestic sources. To present the arguments, here the paper puts forward how power vacuum created after the fall of the Iraqi state, a looming 'Shia revival' is dictating Saudi foreign policy. It explores three distinct cases, namely reassessing regional leadership role, dialling down hostility with Israel and rivalry with Iran to explain the logic of RSC and how it shapes foreign policy in case of Saudi Arabia.

### 5.1 *Regional Security Complexes and Security Interactions*

The changes in Saudi foreign policy hinges upon, and is concurrently indicative of, the shifting nature of regional order. Traditionally, the US has been the sole security guarantor for several Middle Eastern countries including its most important allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. One of the foreign policy successes of King Salman and his son, the Crown Prince Mohammed, has been maintaining a warm Saudi-US relationship during the administration of President Donald Trump that generally been unwelcoming towards several Middle Eastern countries and has imposed travel ban on some Muslim-majority, mostly Middle Eastern nations. In general, the Trump administration has been reluctant to extend security guarantee to traditional allies. During his election campaign he hinted to discontinue support to longtime allies like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), unless the latter commit to shouldering more burden of the security arrangements.<sup>43</sup> In light of the

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<sup>42</sup> Barry Buzan, Gowher Rizvi, Rosemary Foot, Nancy Jetly, B. A. Roberson and Anita Inder Singh, *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986.

<sup>43</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, "King Salman and His Son: Winning the USA, Losing The Rest", in Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed.), *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Oxford University



prevailing US foreign policy, Saudi-US relations is a success by any measure. On top of it, US ‘rebalancing’ policy, aimed at China’s rise, implies that its Indo-Pacific strategy would take a centre-stage. It will eventually reduce the pre-eminence of the Middle East in the US foreign policy and result in a gradual erosion of security guarantee.<sup>44</sup> The US also hesitated to provide security to its former ally Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak after the Tahrir square uprisings dislodged him from power.<sup>45</sup> There is a substantiated fear amongst the House of Saud that Saudi Arabia will need its security arrangements, should any crisis loom in the foreseeable future.<sup>46</sup>

Much of this insecurity arises from neighbouring countries, because security implications tend to increase when states are in closer proximity. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver hold that sheer proximity implies that there would be more security interactions.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the most conspicuous examples of Saudi foreign policy reorientation was with regard to neighbouring countries, although instances of otherwise exist such as the temporary deterioration of relations with Canada over the issue of Jamal Khashoggi. First, the new Minister of Defense Mohammed bin Salman oversaw military offensive against Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen in the south of its border. Since then, the humanitarian situation in Yemen—the poorest nation in the Gulf region—has worsened. Sudden bitter relation with Yemen has historical roots when the founder of the Saudi Kingdom Ibn Saud led a successful military campaign against Yemen in 1934, two years after the formal founding of the Kingdom. The war erupted over the question of control of the Asir region that abuts the two regions—modern day Saudi Arabia and Yemen.<sup>48</sup> Yemen was one of the few Middle Eastern republics that experienced a regime change owing to the Arab Spring and fall of Yemeni President the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi who now lives in exile in Saudi Arabia. But one corollary was the empowerment of a Houthi militia who belongs to Zaidi sect of Shi’ism. Some allege that the Houthis are supported by the Iranians. However, Thomas Juneau argues despite increased support from Iran for Houthis, it is inadequate to alter “the balance of internal forces in Yemen or to buy Iran more than marginal influence there.”<sup>49</sup>

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Press, 2018, pp. 235-236.

<sup>44</sup> US Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, Washington, D.C.: The Department of Defense, 2019; Yun Sun, “Westward Ho!”, *Foreign Policy*, 07 February 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas Hamilton, “Israel shocked by Obama’s ‘betrayal’ of Mubarak”, *Reuters*, 31 January 2011, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-israel-usa/israel-shocked-by-obamas-betrayal-of-mubarak-idUSTRE70U53720110131>, accessed on 23 June 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Byman, “Regime Change in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 127, No. 1, 2012, pp. 43-44.

<sup>47</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, op. cit., pp. 6-20.

<sup>48</sup> Mohammed A. Zabarrah, “Yemeni-Saudi Relations Gone Awry”, in Joseph A. Kechichian (ed.), *Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf States*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 263-280.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Juneau, “Iran’s policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3, 2016, pp. 647-663.

Second, Saudi Arabia has also been involved in a prolonged diplomatic rift with another Gulf county of Qatar. Other regional members of GCC has bandwagon in extending the diplomatic embargo on the country. Saudi Arabia prevented Qatar from using its airspace resulting in severe loss of the latter flagship carrier business. The Saudi apprehension was also caused by Qatar cozying up with Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood, which the former designates as amounting to sponsoring terrorism and destabilizing the region through al-Jazeera news channel.<sup>50</sup> This rift between Sunni Arab states also allows non-Arab states like Turkey to extend its ‘sphere of influence’ outside of its immediate neighbours. After the harsh diplomatic actions, Qatar has enhanced its ties with Iran, Turkey and India to ensure trade supplies. The Arabs, in general, have a bitter memory of the Ottoman Empire who ruled the then Constantinople. The predecessors of modern House of Saud were murdered by the Ottomans in the nineteenth century. One of such Emir was of the Second Saudi state, Abdullah bin Saud who was decapitated in 1818.

## 5.2 ‘The Shia Revival’

Some authors have pointed out that the most significant development for the Muslim world in the twenty first century is the changing nature of Middle Eastern politics. It has to do with the sectarian tension within the heart of Islamic theology. In addition to the rise of terrorism, the most far-reaching transformation has occurred in the relational dynamics between the Shia and Sunni population, particularly in the context of the Middle East. The contemporary sectarian tension dates back to the Islamic revolution of Iran that overthrew Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979, inspired by a theological model of the state which Ayatollah Khomeini conceived and popularized during his exile in France. The revolution took the whole world by surprise because no one, even the pundits, had foreseen it. Iran which had been a traditional ally of the US turned anti-Western overnight. Some blame the Islamic revolution in Iran as a driving factor for the rise of conservatism in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region. The success of theological Shi’ism in neighbouring Iran compelled many regional leaders to give more concession to religious voices at home in its wake. In an interview with *the Atlantic* magazine, Mohammed bin Salman commented that Saudi monarchy was compelled to take up stricter religious policies as a result of the revolution<sup>51</sup>. For example, the custodianship law was introduced as a result of the internal pressure following the development in Iran. However, more relevant for the scope of this paper is to understand why a Shia regime in Persian-speaking Iran is perceived as a threat to the rest of its Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslim states.

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<sup>50</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Introduction: The Dilemmas of a New Era”, in Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed.), op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’”, *The Atlantic*, 02 April 2018, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>, accessed on 15 April 2019.

At the heart of this transformation lies the Shia awakening. Today's Middle East is best summarized, to borrow a phrase from Vali Nasr, the 'Shia Revival'.<sup>52</sup> Iran was not the only Shia country in the vicinity of Arab states, other countries in the region have a considerable Shia population who have been empowered in the wake of the US invasion. Today, Iraqi politics, the Assad regime, Houthi rebels, Hezbollah in Lebanon—all are examples of how Shias have emerged to pose formidable challenges to once-Sunni-dominated regional politics.

First, the origin of Shi'ism dates back to the time of the fourth of 'rightly guided caliph' Ali ibn Abi Talib. The word Shia is a short form of 'Shiatul Ali', or literally Ali's party/adherents of Ali. Because of veneration of Ali and placing him before the three other caliphs who had preceded him, some Sunnis use a derogatory term to denote Shia Muslims *rafida* or 'the rejectionists', i.e., those who reject Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman—the three caliphs who preceded Ali. This disagreement between Shia and Sunni Muslims is more profound than many ordinary Westerners and even ordinary Muslims realize. Hence, some Sunnis consider Shias as apostates or *kafir*. Now that there is a Shia theocratic state, which also has regional leadership ambition, next to Sunni Arab countries, it is easier to explain why Sunni-majority countries feel uncomfortable.

Second, the Iranian revolution shook the entire world. The immediate reaction of many Muslims who are less conversant with nuances of Sunni versus Shia rift was favourable towards Shia Islam. Some claim that the current conservatism in the Saudi society, for instance, is a direction to the changing political and social landscape in the wake of Iranian revolution which gave Sunni conservatives a stronger case that the House of Saud was not doing enough for Islam.<sup>53</sup> As a result, Saudi Arabia introduced the 'guardianship law' for pilgrimage and long-distance travel for women which bars them from travelling alone.

Third, the austere interpretation of Islam that the House of Saud follows as a result of its pact with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century with Mohammad ibn Saud—the founder of the House of the Saud—is essentially contradictory with Shi'ism. Of many religious austerities Ibn Abdul Wahhab introduced was the demolition to the ground of the holy shrines in Saudi Arabia that belonged to the twelve most important persons of Shia Islam including the daughter of the Prophet, Fatima.

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<sup>52</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, op. cit.

Fourth, the demographic composition of many countries in the Middle East gives stronger prospects for a Shia revival in the region. Saudi Arabia's close neighbours surrounded Syria and Iran. The Syrian regime is Alawite Shia sect with close ties to Iran. Iran, on the other hand, is an antithesis to what the Kingdom stands for. There are other regional militia, such as Hezbollah that is sponsored by Iran's paramilitary force Islamic Revolutionary Guard.

Saudi policy, however, must not be mistaken as purely arising out of anti-Shia policies. Although some Shia activists have been allegedly handed down heavy punishment yet again 'conspiracy' against the government. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has taken policies to reopen its embassy in Iraq after three decades. The Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with the Shia Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi who was on an official tour of the Kingdom.<sup>54</sup> These developments owe more to regional security aspects and resultant threats to the House of Saud.

Now, against the backdrop of a Shia resurgence from Yemen in the South, Iraq in the North, Lebanese Hezbollah in West and Iran in the East, there is potential security threats to Saudi state. More importantly, the Saudis are apprehensive of burgeoning role of Shi'ism in the region, especially in context of changing geopolitical landscape.<sup>55</sup>

### **5.3     *Apparent Thaw in Saudi-Israel Relations***

Perhaps, the most profound shift in the Saudi foreign policy is observed in Saudi-Israeli relations. Like most Arab states, Saudi Arabia has been a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause, one of the very few issues on which Arab countries of all political stripes agree. After the establishment of the State of Israel, King Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud ordered Saudi ARAMCO to employ one thousand Palestinian refugees in that company.<sup>56</sup> As per the King's desire, the state-owned oil company opened a recruiting agency in Lebanon where most of the Palestinian refugees took shelter. This sense of camaraderie toward Palestinian cause is not only cemented by religious affinity but also by the idea of Arab nationalism. The Saudis do not see eye to eye with many of their neighbours when it comes to Pan-Arabism popularized by Egypt Anwar Saadat in the 1970s. The idea runs contradictory to the founding principle of modern Saudi Arabia. Yet, former kings have rarely wavered in upholding their support for Palestine. The ensuing discussion

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<sup>54</sup> "Iraqi PM Abdul Mahdi met Saudi crown prince in Riyadh", *Reuters*, 18 April 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, "A Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East: Myth or Reality?", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2011, pp. 27-40.

<sup>56</sup> Ian J. Seccombe and Richard I. Lawless, "Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910-50", *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1986, pp. 548-574.

on the Iran question sheds some lights as to the Kingdom's entente with Israel. This new axis of Sunni Arab states and Israel has led to some people calling Israel 'the new Sunni state'.<sup>57</sup> This encapsulates the Kautilyan dictum 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. The mutual animosity towards Iran and condemnation of Hamas has also brought the two countries closer.

But time has come to see if Mohammed bin Salman would depart from long-standing policies with regard to Israel. In an oft-referred interview with the *New York Times*, the Crown Prince has been straightforward about this and supported Israel's right to land ownership.<sup>58</sup> This gesture has been extended to other areas of hitherto barely-existing contact between the two countries. For example, in March 2018, an Air India flight to Tel Aviv was permitted to use Saudi air space to fly to Israel. This was regarded as a significant sign of thawing relations from a country that does not officially recognize the State of Israel. The expression of jubilation is more pronounced on the Israeli side rather than Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that it was not officially declared by Saudi Arabia, senior Israeli political leaders celebrated the development.<sup>59</sup> It may be too early to conclude that there has been a 180-degree turn in Saudi Arabia's relations with Israel. That being said, there is increasingly convergence of regional policy positions vis-à-vis Israel.

Bahgat Korany and Ali Dessouki contend that historically the Saudi stance on the question of Palestinian statehood was often regarded as a legitimizing factor for the former's political elites.<sup>60</sup> The time has become so volatile that even the historic relations is being reconsidered in the light of regional power politics.

## 6. Conclusion

Leadership succession often leads to foreign policy reorientation of states. As new leaders assume office, they bring in changes to imitate their perceptions of international politics, to consolidate power and, sometimes, to divert public attention from more pressing needs at home. What is a better way to do this other than embarking on military campaigns and forging alliances? However, these arguments do not hold true for Saudi Arabia's apparent foreign policy changes in recent years

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<sup>57</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Introduction: The Dilemmas of a New Era", op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Prince Says Israelis Have Right to 'Their Own Land'", *The New York Times*, 03 April 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Although neither Saudi Arabia nor Air India declared it officially, the news was lauded by Israeli political leadership including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. See, for details, Raphael Ahren, "As Israel fetes Air India flight over Saudi airspace, El Al cries foul", *Times of Israel*, 26 March 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, "Introduction", in Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*, Cairo: American University of Cairo, 2008, p. 5.

amidst ongoing leadership succession where, for the first time, political power is transitioning from siblings to offspring. The paper refutes the claim that the recent behavioural changes are caused by internal factors, rather they emanate from external sources. The paper argues that because of the oil revenue of the Arab monarchy and its 'rentier effect', the kingdom is not facing an existential threat originating from within. Instead, there is a power vacuum at regional level after the collapse of the Iraqi state and the phenomenal rise of Shi'ism throughout the region.

Middle Eastern politics has always been significant owing to both external and internal factors. The most important determinant of the Middle East's place for external powers has been either the question of Israel or oil reserve. However, as argued in the paper, there is likely to be a change in the political calculus. While oil will continue to be relevant to all actors interested in the region, the sectarian question is going to play a drastically more influential role in the future of the Middle East. Hence, the central premise of the paper is that domestic politics or psychological factors do not dictate the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. It offers some evidence to repudiate the logic that the foreign policy variations are rooted in the ascension of a new leader in the monarchy who seeks to consolidate his grip on power.