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Dominance of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East after the Arab Spring

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to utilize double track diplomacy to examine Saudi Arabia's foreign policy following the Arab uprisings, with a focus on Saudi dominance in the Middle East. The research aims to illustrate a transition in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy from a strategy of balancing to one of leadership and coalition-building, as framed by the balance of threat theory. The central inquiry is: what effect did the altered security environment of the Middle East post-2011 Arab uprisings have on Saudi foreign policy? Addressing this question, and considering the assertion that the nature of threats in the Middle East has shifted post-uprisings in a way that directly threatens the stability of the Saudi regime, necessitating a different response, our hypothesis posits that Saudi foreign policy moved from traditional balancing (aligning with international powers against threats) to a more independent and self-reliant stance.

However, Saudi Arabia's assertive stance towards Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria in reaction to regional events has led to heightened fear and instability in the region. These actions have the potential to shift the balance of power, posing significant challenges to the legitimacy of these nations within their respective spheres of influence.

Keywords: arab spring, saudi arabia, midlle east

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memanfaatkan fungsi dari double track diplomacy untuk menganalisis kebijakan luar negeri Arab Saudi setelah Arab spring, dengan fokus pada dominasi Saudi di Timur Tengah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan transisi kebijakan luar negeri Arab Saudi dari strategi keseimbangan ke strategi kepemimpinan dan pembangunan koalisi, sebagaimana dijelaskan oleh teori keseimbangan ancaman. Pertanyaan utama yang diajukan adalah: apa dampak perubahan geopolitik keamanan di

Timur Tengah pasca Arab spring tahun 2011 terhadap kebijakan luar negeri Saudi? Menjawab pertanyaan ini, dan mengingat pernyataan bahwa sifat ancaman di Timur Tengah telah bergeser pasca-pemberontakan dengan cara yang langsung mengancam stabilitas rezim Saudi, yang memerlukan respons berbeda, hipotesis kami menyatakan bahwa kebijakan luar negeri Saudi beralih dari keseimbangan tradisional (berkoalisi dengan kekuatan internasional melawan ancaman) ke sikap yang lebih mandiri dan mengandalkan diri sendiri.

Namun, sikap tegas Arab Saudi terhadap Yaman, Bahrain, dan Suriah sebagai reaksi terhadap perkembangan regional telah menyebabkan ketakutan dan ketidakstabilan yang meningkat di kawasan tersebut. Tindakan-tindakan ini berpotensi menggeser keseimbangan kekuatan, menimbulkan tantangan signifikan terhadap legitimasi negara-negara ini dalam lingkup pengaruh masing-masing.

Keywords: respon politik, partai keadilan sejahtera, millenial

INTRODUCTION

Based on the drive and desire to create a freer and more democratic life, as well as to achieve fair rights and justice, there have been significant changes in society's views on the authoritarian power that has dominated their history. The manifestations of these changes include widespread protests and uprisings in several countries leading to the collapse of these authoritarian regimes. Responses to this phenomenon have varied, with some countries providing full support while others showing resistance. In this context, changes in power dynamics and shifts in foreign policy play a crucial role.

Saudi Arabia's policies are widely recognized as having considerable and crucial impact on the region and its major players. Saudi Arabia, in opposition to this trajectory, seeks to propagate Wahhabi doctrines, bolster its relative power, and counterbalance Iran's influence. This stance positions Saudi Arabia as a key figure in the Western and Arab coalition within the region. Takfiri terrorism emerges as a primary reaction to these conflicting interests on both the global and local stages, significantly fueling the persisting conflicts in various Middle Eastern nations, particularly Iraq and Syria.

Saudi Arabia holds significant regional power, particularly in the realms of economy and politics. The country possesses vast oil resources and stands as one of the largest oil producers globally. This economic prowess enables Saudi Arabia to influence political policies in the Middle East, primarily through financial and military aid to countries within the region.

Saudi Arabia has close relations with several other countries in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. These relationships enable Saudi Arabia to influence the political policies in the region and enhance its influence in the area. Saudi Arabia's influence in the Middle East is influenced by various factors, including conflicts with Iran, regional power dynamics, roles in regional conflicts, and relations with other countries. Saudi Arabia holds significant regional power and has been involved in several regional conflicts in the Middle East, thus its influence in the region cannot be overlooked.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several previous studies have examined the politics and dominance of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the researcher will describe studies related to the aforementioned issues but with differences in theories and approaches. The first study, conducted by Mohammed Nuruzzaman, discusses Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Nuruzzaman observes that Saudi Arabia plays a strategic role in the Middle East. With support from the United States, Saudi Arabia has become one of the key political and economic powers in the world, particularly concerning natural resources and military defense, which are highly regarded on the international stage.

The second study, conducted by Gregory Gause, examines the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, which has been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in the Middle East for decades. Despite substantial differences in history, culture, and governance, the two countries generally agree on important political and economic issues and have often relied on each other to secure mutual aims. The 1990-91 Gulf War is a notable example, but their ongoing cooperation in maintaining regional stability, moderating the global oil market, and pursuing terrorists should not be downplayed.

However, the relationship's importance is increasingly imperiled by mistrust and misunderstanding. One major question is Saudi Arabia's stability. In this Council Special Report, sponsored by the Center for Preventive Action, F. Gregory Gause III explores the foundations of Riyadh's present stability and potential sources of future unrest. It is notable that Saudi Arabia avoided significant upheaval during the political uprisings that swept the Middle East in 2011, despite sharing many of the social and economic problems of Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. Unlike their counterparts in Cairo, Sanaa, and Tripoli, Riyadh's leadership maintained order by increasing public spending on housing and salaries, relying on loyal and well-equipped security forces, and utilizing extensive patronage networks. Divisions within the political opposition also aided the government's cause.

METHOD

Qualitative data analysis techniques are research approaches that present data in its appropriate context. This method involves a systematic process of organizing data from interviews, field notes, and documentation. The process includes categorizing data, describing units, synthesizing, forming patterns, selecting key elements to be studied, and drawing conclusions for easier understanding. This technique employs inductive reasoning to test hypotheses formulated as temporary answers to research problems. The inductive approach is based on identifying various emerging facts. Thus, qualitative data analysis techniques allow researchers to understand data in depth and contextually.

In this study, the applied data analysis technique is qualitative data analysis. Considering the collected data is qualitative and described in sentences or words, the analysis is conducted by examining and interpreting the relevant data in detail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Saudi Arabia holds significant influence in the Middle East, a region situated between Asia, Africa, and Europe. The abundant oil reserves in this area grant Saudi Arabia a strategic position in the global economy. In maintaining its stability and influence in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia faces Iran, another regional power with a different political system. Saudi Arabia has conducted military interventions in Yemen to curb Iran's influence in the region. This intervention aims to preserve Saudi Arabia's status quo in the Middle East and suppress groups in conflict with the Yemeni government.

To explain the driving factors behind Saudi Arabia's military intervention, researchers use the concept of deterrence, which suggests that Saudi Arabia intervenes to prevent Iran from further expanding its influence in the region. Saudi Arabia also plays a strategic role in regional cooperation with other Middle Eastern countries. It acts as an initiator in forming the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which aims to ensure security for oil-producing countries and enhance communication and solidarity among Arab states.

With its national stability, Saudi Arabia can actively engage in politics both internationally and regionally. Saudi Arabia's primary foreign policy objective is to minimize and resolve the numerous conflicts in the Middle East. To this end, Saudi Arabia sought a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2014-2015 term but withdrew, citing the UN's ineffectiveness in addressing Middle Eastern conflicts.

In several instances, Saudi Arabia has been involved in conflicts with other Middle Eastern countries. For example, it severed diplomatic ties with Qatar due to Qatar's alliance with Iran and its acceptance of a former Iraqi president. In this conflict, Saudi Arabia not only cut diplomatic relations but also imposed a blockade on Qatar, closing flights between the two countries.

In synthesis, Saudi Arabia plays a significant role in Middle Eastern conflicts, particularly in countering Iran and maintaining its status quo in the region. Saudi Arabia has conducted military interventions in Yemen, holds a primary foreign policy goal of minimizing conflicts, and plays a strategic role in regional cooperation with other Middle Eastern countries.

The logic of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is based on maintaining friendly relations with Western capitalist countries. The Saudis aim to align and cooperate with the West in order to preserve the status quo and balance revolutionary radicalism, preventing its spread within the country. Since the rise to power of King Abdulaziz Al Saud and the establishment of Saudi Arabia as a nation, the country has consistently followed a conservative policy in regional affairs (Ashti, 1366: 80-76). Additionally, like most Arab countries, Saudi Arabia has a Shia minority that enjoys minimal political, religious, and civil rights. Thus, there is a possibility that the limited opposition and public protests within the country could be influenced by the expanding and successful Arab transformations and Saudi Arabia's aggressive and interventionist policies.

As a key regional player, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy aims to adopt an "aggressive conservatism" to prevent the spread of regional revolutionary waves to its own borders. An analysis of Saudi foreign policy following regional revolutions shows that Saudi Arabia, in an effort to preserve regional order, has not been a mere observer of developments. Instead, the country has actively sought to influence these revolutions

by engaging fully with the impactful elements of these transformations. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is conservative in the sense that it seeks to maintain the status quo, yet it is also aggressive as it attempts to manage the regional revolutionary climate to its advantage through political, economic, and security tools.

Saudi Arabia, which has long had deep-seated issues with Syria, saw an opportunity to weaken and undermine the Syrian regime and sought to put pressure on Damascus. Initially, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council supported the Syrian government during the onset of the unrest. However, with the increase in civilian casualties and the evident inability of Syria to handle the opposition, they changed their stance. From that point on, Saudi Arabia became a major player in the Syrian crisis and officially announced its support for the armed struggle against Bashar al-Assad's government. King Abdullah recalled his ambassador from Damascus to Riyadh following severe criticisms of Assad and subsequently adopted an aggressive and active approach towards the Syrian crisis.

Saudi officials perceive Syria as the sole and most crucial Arab ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has consequently enhanced Iran's influence and presence in Syria, Lebanon, and the occupied Palestinian territories. According to Saudi authorities, Syria is regarded as the main conduit for Iran's material and moral support to Hezbollah and Hamas. Additionally, Syria's collaboration and alliance with Iran have significantly undermined the united stance of Arab countries against Iran. Riyadh's approach to Syrian issues clearly reflects its adversarial stance towards Iran in the region, as Syria remains Iran's only strategic ally and a key component of the resistance axis against Israel. Hence, destabilizing and toppling the Syrian regime could deprive Iran of a major advantage and shift the regional power balance in favor of the conservative Arab regimes. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's various strategies and policies aim to weaken the resistance axis, diminish Syria's regional influence, and alter the regional power dynamics to its advantage. The Saudi Kingdom believes Syria provides a pathway for Iran's engagement in the Arab world, enabling Iran to influence Palestinian matters and impede the Middle East peace process. Ultimately, achieving peace in the Middle East without Syria's consent and cooperation is considered unattainable, similar to how a ground war against Israel by Arab nations is unfeasible without Egypt's participation.

Therefore, one of Saudi Arabia's fundamental strategies in response to the increasing power and influence of Iran in the region is to form alliances and coalitions with regional and extra-regional powers. In the regional context, concerning the coalition with Israel, it should be noted that although Tel Aviv and Riyadh share a common view that the Islamic Republic of Iran is the primary threat to themselves and the region, Israel cannot be openly and operationally allied with Saudi Arabia due to the sensitivity that Islamic groups within Saudi Arabia have towards the Zionist regime, as well as the low legitimacy that this regime holds in the public opinion of West Asia. However, these two countries have taken steps to align their views on Iran within the framework of "Track Two Diplomacy." In this regard, Bloomberg, in a report by Eli Lake, mentioned five secret meetings between officials from Saudi Arabia and Israel in recent years, aimed at preventing Iran and the P5+1 from reaching a nuclear agreement and curbing Iran's influence (Lake, 2015). One of the most important of these meetings was between Dore Gold, Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs—who at the time of the

meetings was a researcher at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs—and Anwar Eshki, a retired Saudi general and former advisor to Bandar bin Sultan in Washington.

Thus, Saudi Arabia has been attempting to pull Syria out of its alliance with Iran and bring it into the Arab world, viewing Syria as Iran's most crucial ally in the eastern Mediterranean, which is key to Tehran's power projection and influence in the region (Jancis and colleagues, 2014: 79-80). Saudi Arabia lacks the military capacity for direct intervention. Hence, it has used its oil wealth to militarily equip Syrian rebels to ensure that, in the event of Assad's fall, his replacement would be a Sunni government with friendly relations (Giokaris, 2013: 2). Therefore, by supporting Assad's opponents and in conjunction with its regional and extra-regional allies, Saudi Arabia has been striving to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Through this, Saudi Arabia aims to reduce the power of the resistance axis (Jancis and colleagues, 2014: 88), minimize the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region, limit its role in shaping regional dynamics and order, and expand its sphere of influence along Iran's borders and within the heart of the resistance axis.

The situation in Syria has not progressed as Saudi Arabia had anticipated, and the recent victory of the resistance axis, with Russia's support in Aleppo, has given Iran the upper hand in the region and in Syria. In fact, the victory in Aleppo will play a significant role in further strengthening the resistance axis led by Iran (Nuruzzaman, 2016), and will pose a serious challenge to the plans and actions of the reconciliation axis in the region.

The nature of Saudi Arabia's approach to the internal conflicts in Syria has primarily been to exacerbate the Sunni-Shia divide and reduce Iran's power and influence in the region. It is not surprising that in 2015, the King of Saudi Arabia mentioned that Iran's attempts to increase its influence and power in the region result in instability and threaten regional security, which, in turn, increases sectarian conflicts and creates an environment conducive to extremism and terrorism. Therefore, understanding Saudi Arabia's policies regarding Syria and the Arab Spring leads to the conclusion that Saudi Arabia is primarily concerned with the stability and survival of the Al Saud regime (Costa, 2015: 31).

As a traditional conservative actor in the region, Saudi Arabia seeks to "contain" threats and preserve its "security." The country tries to remain less influenced by the internal potentials of the Arab world, such as political reforms, women's rights, the role of youth, etc., and effectively prevent the spread of Arab uprisings within its own borders. Based on this, Saudi Arabia pursues a policy of containing Iran in the region and actively participating in the crises in Syria and Bahrain to enhance its own security.

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia's implementation of dual-track diplomacy has facilitated increased engagement and the strengthening of strategic ties between Riyadh and Washington. However, faced with unfavorable conditions in the region, Saudi officials are working to rebalance by seeking support from Trump. They anticipate that Trump will apply pressure on Iran regarding regional issues like the Syrian crisis and Yemen, aiming to weaken the Islamic Republic of Iran's influence or restore balance in the region. Following Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, Qatar's emir, who has had strained relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Arab nations since 2013, has taken a clearer

stance against Riyadh. Tensions in Doha-Riyadh relations are also influenced by Zionist interests, historical territorial disputes, and American agendas, in addition to the leaders' personal characteristics and the countries' interests. Saudi officials and policymakers believe that the fall of the Assad regime could reduce Syria's regional position and its support for resistance groups, thereby diminishing Syria's influence in Lebanon and Palestine, which are crucial areas for Saudi Arabia. This scenario could help reconcile conflicting interests among Arab states post-Arab Spring. Despite bolstering a US-backed regional military force, Saudi Arabia and its allies have struggled to achieve their objectives in regional conflicts like the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, posing significant challenges to Al Saud's broader regional aspirations.

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