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The Modern State of Saudi Arabia's Policy to Ensure Regional Security in The Middle East

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Abstract: This article explores the contemporary strategies adopted by Saudi Arabia to ensure regional security in the Middle East. It highlights the Kingdom's efforts to strengthen alliances, combat terrorism, stabilize conflict zones like Yemen, and improve relations with Iran. Economic diversification under Vision 2030 and mediation in regional conflicts are also emphasized as key pillars of its policy framework. The inclusion of a summary table provides a clear overview of Saudi Arabia's initiatives and their impacts, making this analysis a valuable resource for understanding its regional role.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Middle East, regional security, GCC, Vision 2030, counterterrorism, Yemen conflict, Iran relations, economic diversification, conflict mediation, diplomacy.

Introduction: As a term, Middle East, albeit still contested in its meaning, did not gain much currency until after the Second World War. Especially during the Cold War, the terminology was popularised in US contexts (Adelson 2012, 47–50). Here, we use the neologism Middle East as referring to the geographical area situated at the junction of Europe, Asia, and Africa and of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, reflecting contemporary politological conventions without denying the term's contestations. As such, the region occupies a unique strategic position. Hence, we can easily understand why the region has attracted the strategic attention and involvement of great powers and empires throughout history. The Middle East is also the birthplace and spiritual centre of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Specifically, the Middle East contains the holiest places of Islam as well as the highest institutions of Islamic learning, while the Holy Land of

Palestine is associated with the aspirations of Jews and Christians. It is also the birthplace of civilisation in the Northern hemisphere (Jamieson 2016). Moreover, with the beginning of the twentieth century and the discovery of oil and natural gas "the fate of the region" changed dramatically (Grigoriadis 2014, 124) because in the Middle East we can find the greatest single reserve of oil that stipulated other powers' desires.

The region's significant stocks of crude oil added to its geographical, strategic and economic importance. Particularly 'Saudi Arabia was no longer the regional backwater that it had been until the 1940s', but became one of the leading regional powers in the region. With the ongoing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly after 1979, 'the Persian Gulf became an epicenter of global instability' (Steinberg 2014, 116; Qadir and Rehman 2016). Mass production of oil began around 1945, with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) possessing large quantities of oil. Thus, with ongoing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in mind, it is worth noting that the oil reserves of Saudi Arabia and Iran are some of the highest in the world and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is dominated by Middle Eastern countries. It is not, therefore, surprising that the importance of the Middle East transcends its geographical limits and that the region has been a major theatre of global politics.

Defining Security

The answer to what makes something a security problem has been a subject of a long academic debate which grew out of dissatisfaction with the narrowing of the field of security studies imposed by the military logic of the Cold War. Thus, it has been argued that concerns about military security traditionally masked underlying issues of political, economic, societal, and environmental threats (Buzan 1991 and 1991a; Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998). Although military threats remain important for security thinking and frontier disputes maintain or are still perceived as an ongoing (military) security threat (Joffé 1996), other types of threats have risen in importance. Increasingly, Middle East scholars have argued for a shift in the perception of security away from military aspects to other issues in the region (Chalk 2004). Unsurprisingly, the continuous emphasis on the military aspect of security comes primarily from scholars related to the military sector itself (see Feldman and Toukan 1997; Cordesman 2004; Terrill 2015) and, at least partly, reflects the traditional interests of hegemonic powers in the region (Zulfqar 2018). Thus, reflecting the recent trend in scholarship, this volume does not treat military security as a singular issue, but as a problem that should be discussed in as wider context. For instance, as Blanton (1999) has argued, an increase in military imports often goes hand in hand with an increase in human rights violations and, thus, a decrease in personal security. Thus, for the purposes of this volume, Middle East security is defined in the broader sense as the presence of threats that pose an existential threat to states, governments, communities, individual groups, and the region as a whole.

In other words, security operates both at the domestic and regional levels. Because the dynamics of national security are highly relational and interdependent between states (Buzan 1991a, 34), individual national securities can only be fully understood when considered in relation to each other. Yet, power dynamics within individual states are also of relevance here, whether they concern authoritarianism, rentier economics, and protectionism (Dauderstädt 2006) favouring some groups, while causing security concerns to others. Moreover, although migration is mostly discussed in the European context (Held 2016), it is essentially an even greater challenge, security issues included, for the Middle East. Consequently, even though the traditional understanding of security suggests a focus on the military sector, the concept cannot be properly understood without bringing in actors and dynamics from the political, societal, economic, and environmental sectors (Buzan 1991, 363). According to Buzan, the concept of security binds together these levels and sectors so closely that it demands to be treated in an integrative perspective (Buzan 1991, 364).

What is important to note is that the operation of the forces of interdependence causes threats operating in one sector to spill over and affect other sectors. For example, a threat operating in the economic sector may generate threats operating in the military and societal sectors. In this sense, economic decline or the unequal distribution of economic benefits may affect internal stability, state (government)-society relations, as well as reduce a state's capacity to acquire weapons systems for its defence. Similarly, threats stemming from the domestic environment of the state may affect regional security. The Syrian Civil War is a case in point of a crisis that has a long history leading up to the events that sparked the civil war: After 'Hafez al-Assad had abandoned socialism for a limited crony capitalist liberalisation in the 1990s […] his son accelerated the process', limiting economic opportunities to the elites, while stripping off farm subsidies for diesel and fertilisers. Together with the 2006–2010 drought which caused the internal migration of over 300,000 (Sunni) peasants to the urban centres, and the destabilisation of the social strata in these centres (Philipps 2015, 366–7).

In the military sector, the referent object of security

(what it is to be secured) is mainly the state and threats usually come from the state's external environment. Military action usually threatens all the components of the state. It can, for instance, repress the idea of the state, damage its physical base, destroy its various institutions, and leave a defeated society at the mercy of the conqueror's power. One example may be seen in Lebanon's dependence on Syria during and after Lebanon's civil war (1975–1990). During the war, Syria's Hafez al-Assad established 'a web of client relationships with multiple political actors and militia' (Philipps 2016, 13) that essentially turned into a de facto hegemony in Lebanon (Scheller 2013, 51). This is one reason for which military threats have traditionally been accorded the highest priority in national security concerns. Due to the existence of several conflicts in the Middle East, military security features prominently among governmental priorities.

In the political sector, a state may be threatened both internally and externally. Internally, threats may result from a political struggle over the state's ideology (e.g. secularism, Islamism, pan-Arabism, democracy, and authoritarianism), which may lead to governmental actions that would threaten individual citizens or groups. All of these elements may be identified in the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt that first ousted Mubarak, brought the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood under Morsi to power through democratic election, and eventual military coup under el-Sisi (Arafa 2014). Resistance to the government, efforts to overthrow it, or movements aimed at autonomy or independence all threaten state stability and enhance state insecurity. The Arab Spring has demonstrated the centrality of political security since social uprising was, among other things, a response to years of state oppression. Externally, political threats are aimed at the organisational stability of the state but may jeopardise the stability of the entire region (Mason 2016, 77). Their purpose may be to pressure the government on a particular issue, or to overthrow the government, or to encourage secessionism, as it is visible in the Kurds' call for an independent state, or to disrupt the political functions of the state in order to weaken it prior to military attack. The idea of the state – particularly its national identity, organising ideology, and institutions – are the usual targets of political threats. Since the state is essentially a political entity, political threats may be as much feared as military ones.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has taken significant steps to shape its policy framework for ensuring regional security in the Middle East. As one of the region's most influential nations, its strategies are informed by both its geopolitical ambitions and the necessity of addressing emerging challenges.

Strengthening Alliances

Saudi Arabia has prioritized fostering alliances with key regional and international partners to enhance collective security. Central to this is the Kingdom's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an organization designed to promote political, economic, and military cooperation among its member states. By bolstering military coordination and intelligence sharing within the GCC, Saudi Arabia aims to present a united front against common threats such as terrorism, cyber warfare, and external aggression.

The Kingdom has also deepened its strategic ties with global powers such as the United States, the European Union, and China. These partnerships encompass arms agreements, joint military exercises, and intelligence-sharing initiatives, further solidifying Saudi Arabia's role as a key player in regional security.

Counterterrorism and Extremism

Saudi Arabia has been at the forefront of efforts to combat terrorism and extremist ideologies in the region. Initiatives such as the establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), a coalition of 41 Muslim-majority countries, highlight the Kingdom's commitment to addressing these challenges through a multilateral approach.

Domestically, Saudi Arabia has launched comprehensive de-radicalization programs aimed at rehabilitating individuals exposed to extremist ideologies. Coupled with stringent counterterrorism laws and increased surveillance capabilities, these measures have significantly curbed terrorist activities within its borders.

Promoting Stability in Yemen

The conflict in Yemen has been a critical test of Saudi Arabia's regional security policy. The Kingdom's intervention, under the umbrella of the Saudi-led coalition, was initially aimed at restoring the internationally recognized Yemeni government and curbing the influence of the Iran-backed Houthi rebels. While the protracted conflict has drawn criticism, Saudi Arabia has shifted its focus towards diplomacy, initiating peace talks and supporting humanitarian efforts to stabilize Yemen.

Navigating Relations with Iran

Saudi Arabia's relationship with Iran has historically been marked by rivalry and tension, primarily due to ideological differences and competing interests in the region. However, recent developments, including the China-brokered agreement to restore diplomatic ties in 2023, indicate a shift towards de-escalation and dialogue. By pursuing diplomatic channels, Saudi Arabia seeks to mitigate the risks of direct conflict while addressing shared concerns such as maritime security

and the stability of energy markets.

Emphasis on Economic Security

Recognizing the intrinsic link between economic stability and security, Saudi Arabia has incorporated Vision 2030—its ambitious plan for economic diversification—into its security strategy. By reducing dependence on oil and investing in technology, renewable energy, and infrastructure, the Kingdom aims to fortify its economy against external shocks. Additionally, initiatives such as the Red Sea Economic Zone and NEOM project are designed to position Saudi Arabia as a hub for trade and innovation, thereby enhancing its geopolitical influence.

Role in Conflict Mediation

Saudi Arabia has increasingly positioned itself as a mediator in regional conflicts. Its involvement in facilitating peace agreements, such as efforts to reconcile warring factions in Sudan and broker negotiations between Israel and Palestine, reflects a broader commitment to regional stability. By leveraging its diplomatic clout, the Kingdom aims to build trust and foster cooperation among diverse stakeholders.

Summary Table of Key Policies and Initiatives

Policy Area	Key Initiative or Action	Impact
Strengthening Alliances	GCC coordination, US and EU partnerships	Enhanced military and intelligence ties
Counterterrorism	Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)	Regional cooperation against terrorism
Yemen Stability	Saudi-led coalition intervention and peace talks	Diplomatic focus on stabilization
Iran Relations	China-brokered agreement, maritime security cooperation	Reduced regional tensions
Economic Security	Vision 2030, Red Sea Economic Zone, NEOM project	Diversified and resilient economy
Conflict Mediation	Facilitating Sudan peace talks, Israel-Palestine dialogue	Increased diplomatic influence

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia's modern security policies underscore a multifaceted approach that blends military strength, diplomatic engagement, economic resilience, and counterterrorism efforts. As the Middle East continues to face complex challenges, the Kingdom's evolving strategies highlight its pivotal role in shaping a more secure and stable region. Through sustained partnerships, pragmatic diplomacy, and a commitment to modernization, Saudi Arabia seeks not only to safeguard its own interests but also to contribute to the broader goal of regional peace and prosperity.

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