

From Stillness to Aggression: The Policy of Saudi Arabia towards Syria after the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The new dynamics that emerged after the Arab Spring have shaped the policies of countries in the region. Their traditional foreign policies changed to better respond to national interests in the region. In particular, Saudi Arabia, as an effective actor, modified its traditional positions as a result of fear of an epidemic effect on the region. In this context, this study examines the reaction of Saudi Arabia, focusing on Syria. It will also try to respond to two questions: Why did Saudi Arabia give up its traditional foreign policy, and why did it change its position from the status quo to a revisionist policy regarding the Assad regime? To seek the answers in the first step of this work, Saudi Arabia's traditional foreign policy and regional alliances will be analyzed. The second step will include the "double bind" dilemma of Saudi Arabia in its reaction towards the Arab uprising, in particular its change in posture towards Syria from remaining silent or procrastinating to supporting intervention against the Assad regime.

Key Words: Arab Spring, security, Syrian civil war, foreign policy

Traditional Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia

The characteristic features that affected the domestic dynamics of Saudi Arabia were its monarchical style and conservative social structure. These features resulted in Saudi Arabia focusing on support of Arab issues and providing domestic stability and dignified foreign policy. Considering the historical background of Saudi Arabia, Arab nationalism became an effective tool in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy to support Arab concerns.

Arab nationalism was supported by a minority until the end of World War I. However, the invasion of the West in the region led to the growth of Pan-Arabism. Initially, the aim of Arab nationalism was independence from foreign rule and a request for truly sovereign and independent Arab nation-states (Toffolo, 2008). In the region, given the Palestine question and the Arab- Israeli conflict, the notion of Arab unity became an effective part of Arab nationalism.

The context of this unity was the close economic, cultural and security ties that deepened the Arab political community, in addition to reaction against the territorial and juridical disintegration of the Arab world. Saudi Arabia made an effort to broaden the impact within the inter-Arab consensus via this unity (Arab Nationalism). The main principles of unity should "coordinate their political plans so as to insure their cooperation and project 'their independence and sovereignty' against every aggression by suitable means; and to supervise in a general way the affairs and interest of the Arab countries (The Alexandria Protocol, 1944)." Saudi Arabia supported this approach of unity via the Palestine issues, but its attitude provided not only the strategic balance for relations between the Israeli and Arab worlds, but also consolidation of dignity in the region. Another factor that affected the traditional policy was Saudi Arabia's alliance with the United States (US). The US government and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have had strong relations for a long time. This relationship affected the traditional foreign policy of Saudi Arabia through the mutual interests of providing regional stability and energy security, and the fight against terrorism (Report).

The US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq caused economic fluctuations in Saudi Arabia that resulted from oil prices, some reforms and counterterrorism activities, interrupting and obstructing the public relationship (Blanchard, 2010). On the other hand, the growth of Iran as a regional power, created a stronger alliance between Saudi Arabia and the US, both militarily and politically. Indeed, the characterization of US-Saudi relations was assessed as an "odd disconnect" by Chas Freeman. He focused on: "recognition on the part of the governments in both countries that this is a very important relationship. But in both cases, the public is extremely negative. Saudi Arabia has been successfully vilified in American politics, and the United States is now extraordinarily unpopular in Saudi Arabia (Freeman, 2008)."

Despite the economic, military and political interests that strengthened the Saudi and U.S connection, the democratic values and human rights emphasis that the US used as a tool in regional policies brought relations to a delicate stop. Hence, the disconnected alliance was reshaped during the Arab Spring, particularly in the reformist shift of Saudi Arabia in the case of Syria and Libya.

Reaction of Saudi Arabia after the Arab Uprising

The Arab uprising manifested itself as fear in the reaction of Saudi Arabia, because the fall of Tunisian President Bin Ali and protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square, demonstrating that the same fate awaited the Mubarak regime, increased anxiety of the protests spreading. The fear, indeed, resulted from Saudi's fragile regime, according to Howard La Franchi, "an unstable country in unstable region (III, 2011)."

These characteristics of Saudi Arabia caused, first in domestic policy, the government to respond to the unrest with hesitance, alerting security forces and warning the population (Steinberg, 2014). While some precautions were taken, King Abdullah decreed an increase in spending, including \$67 billion on housing and funds for the military and religious groups to counter the domestic protests (Fattah, 2011); the government also offered new job opportunities and increased salaries (Majidyar, 2013). On the other hand, the leaders who opposed the Riyadh regime were arrested (Majidyar, 2013).

Another initiative was preventing the spreading of protests in the Eastern Province, the location of the largest and most frequent protests, most of the Kingdom's oil sources and the majority of its discriminated-against Shiite minority (Rieger, 2014). In this context, Saudi Arabia's regime got involved in the protests of Shia in Bahrain and closed the King Fahd Causeway, which provides a connection between Bahrain and the Saudi Eastern Province (Causeway to Bahrain Reopens, 2011).

Although Saudi Arabia afforded the protection of monarchies in the Gulf by maintaining stability in the region, this situation would not continue during the Arab Spring. The reaction of Saudi Arabia towards the Arab Uprising has been assessed as being between counterrevolutionary (Kamrava, 2012) and pro-revolutionary. Initially, the Riyadh regime favored the stabilization of the Jordanian and Moroccan monarchies. The Saudis were certainly counterrevolutionary in Egypt, because the Riyadh regime relied on its traditional foreign policy which supported President Hosni Mubarak politically, diplomatically and financially until his resignation on February 11 (Rieger, 2014). However, the counter-revolutionary posture of Saudi Arabia then encountered Obama's reaction to the Mubarak regime.

At the beginning of the protests, the Obama administration was divided about whether or not to abandon Hosni Mubarak; in the end, the government ignored "Mubarak's initiatives namely 25 January revolution (al-Ibrahim, 2015)." According to Obama, "America's interests will be better served by the forces of democratic reform being unleashed in Cairo than by sticking with the man who has been Washington's most important regional ally for the past three decades (Coughlin, 2011)." This approach of the Obama administration to a loyal alliance was a turning point in Saudi and Egyptian cooperation. The fall of the Mubarak regime created risk to the balance of power in the region. In particular, loss of the Saudi-Egyptian axis resulted in loss of power to the Tehran regime and its regional influence.

The Case of Syria

The case of Syria is important to analyses the changes in Saudi traditional policy, not only the domino effect that resulted from the Arab Spring, but also the importance of the regional power balance and the rivalry with Tehran. Therefore, this transition will be addressed via three concepts: the power struggle in Syria with Iran, opposition to Arab nationalism and protection of dignity, and relations with the US. Historically, Saudi-Syria relations have always fluctuated, the countries ordinarily finding themselves on opposing sides; the proxies in Lebanon and Palestine also led to clashing ideologies (Coughlin, 2011). In the 1950s and 1960s, the increasing pan-Arabism under the leadership of Gamal Abdul-Nasser and the divisive effects of the Cold War caused Syria and Saudi Arabia to situate in rival camps (Al-Saadi, 2012).

After the death of Nasser, relations were brought to a new peak, with Saudi Arabia offering more than US\$1 billion in financial aid annually (Al-Saadi, 2012). This stationary relationship was interrupted during the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, because Saudi Arabia kept silent about Sadat's peace with Israel. In addition to this, the alliance of Syria and Iran, esp. in the Iran-Iraq War, caused deepening of the divide in Damascus and Riyadh relations. Based on recent history, relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria have become increasingly conflicting. In particular, in 2005 Saudi Arabia blamed Syria for the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister and Saudi protégé Rafic Hariri, increasing the conflict.

Nevertheless, Syria supported the Gulf intervention to suppress the Bahraini protests, due to seeking the favor of Gulf regimes to help it face domestic uprising (Milne, 2012). Similarly, Saudi Arabia was interested in regional stability and preserving authoritarian rule after the protests in Syria, but improvements in Syria were followed by silence, (Macfarquhar, 2011) described as "keeping your eye on Syria (Al-Saadi, 2012)" to protect Saudi interests. This silence ended in the summer of 2011, when King Abdullah critiqued the violence of the Assad regime, demanded "stop the killing machine" and called for reforms (Blomfield, 2011). "Large numbers of martyrs have fallen, their blood has been shed, and many others have been wounded... this is not in accord with religion, values and morals." The Saudi King further urged the Assad regime to "stop the killing machine and the bloodshed... before it is too late (Saudi Arabia recalls Syria envoy as Assad defends crackdown, 2011)."

Syria did not give a positive response to King Abdullah's warnings, so the Riyadh regime recalled Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Damascus. There are several reasons for the change in the Saudi reaction. Another reason is claimed by Gregory Gause for the Saudi decision to turn against Assad. "during Ramadan religious feelings are heightened. The Sectarian element of the Syrian confrontation, with an ostensibly secular and Alawite Shiite dominated regime brutally suppressing the Sunni Muslim majority, became a more prominent element in how the overwhelmingly Sunni Saudis, population and leadership, view events (F. Gregory Gause III, 2011)." In addition, the League of Arab States (LAS) would steer away from the notion of Arab nationalism and the Arab States system in the case of Syria. In this context, the Arab League launched numerous initiatives against Syria, such as imposing economic sanctions, preparing a peace plan, launching a peacekeeping mission, and—most importantly—attempting to suspend Syrian membership in the League (Küçükkeleş, 2012).

At the beginning of the revolts in Syria, the Arab World chose to be silent on the Assad regime. This situation also illustrated the ineffective policies of LAS in the region. The Assad regime has benefited from lack of regional authorities; it increased the violence in order to give no quarter to protests. Nabil Al-Araby felt frustrated due to the failure of Syria and reluctant to open dialogue.

This caused the LAS to consider diplomatic and economic sanctions on Syria. The ineffectiveness of this initiative of the Arab League and an increased death toll in Syria led to suspension of Syria's membership in the Arab League on November 2011.

Second, the Syrian civil war indeed proved to be a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudi regime believed that "Iran might exploit instability in the Arab states to expand its influence in the region (Rieger, 2014)." Additionally, the fall of Assad might weaken Iran's regional power status. Thus, while the Riyadh regime was supporting opposition and launching initiatives against the Assad regime, Iran supported the Syrian leadership with weapons and fighting units.

Finally, the relationship between US and Saudi Arabia broke down during the Arab Spring period. As mentioned earlier, although Saudi Arabia claimed the necessity of supporting the Mubarak regime, the Obama administration withdrew its favor from the old alliance. The second step of the US came in the "red line." Although Obama declared that any use of chemical weapons by Syria would be assessed as a "red line," he continued airstrikes against the Assad regime. Thus, the Saudi government chose a new approach to the region beyond its traditional foreign policy rather than a reckless policy.

In this sense, two points illustrate why the disconnection emerged in spite of a 40-year alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia. First of all, the Riyadh regime's Syrian policy was shaped by Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al-Saud, head of the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate. According to many observers, he had long ago started to play a vital role in Riyadh politics; Bandar served as ambassador to Washington from 1983 to 2005, and he directed crucial relations with US administrations (Steinberg, 2014).

He declared that "Saudi Arabia has been focused exclusively on garnering international support, including arms and training, for Syrian rebel factions in pursuit of the eventual toppling of President Bashar al-Assad (Usborne, 2013)." In addition to this, despite the reaction of the Obama administration, Prince Bandar tried to strengthen less radical and non-jihadist elements among the Syrian opposition (Rieger, 2014). Hillary Clinton recognized this about US national interests: "Our choices also reflect other interests in the region with a real impact on Americans' lives—including our fight against al-Qaida, defense of our allies, and a secure supply of energy (Keiswetter, 2012)."

In this context, Saudi Arabia disengaged with the US on security issues in the region, because the US focused, this time, on the more democratic Middle East instead of the protection of monarchies or old alliances.

Conclusion

During the Arab Revolution period, Saudi Arabia, on the counter-revolutionary side, continued its status-quo position supporting Bahrain and Egypt. However, in the case of Syria, the regime manifested itself as pro-revolutionary. In particular, the traditional policy of Saudi Arabia focused on the military and political opposition to President Bashar al-Assad and his regime. In addition to this, Saudi Arabia, together with Qatar, sought suspension of Syria's membership in the Arab League. Contrary to the aim of the League of Arab States, they began some initiatives that strengthened the arguments for foreign intervention. This reaction of Saudi Arabia illustrates that it gives up Arab nationalism and overrode its own national interests in the Middle East.

Another important point was that the US and Saudi Arabia initially followed their traditional policies. However, this relationship brought change due to posture of the US towards monarchies and Obama's initiatives with the Arab World. In this context, Saudi Arabia, particularly in the case of Syria, demonstrated change in its traditional foreign policy. Saudi Arabia tried to respond strategically to improvements after the Arab Spring, focusing on a more proactive foreign policy by promoting regional stability through new Gulf State alliances to contain Iranian regional influence and giving up Arab nationalism for national interests.

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