

Saudi Foreign Policy: A New Regional Approach or More of the Same?

By Neil Partrick, November 14th 2017

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The paper has since been updated to reflect significant Saudi-related events in 2017, but has remained largely as originally written.

Introduction

Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s acquiring of seemingly unconstrained power has compounded the impression that Saudi Arabia is upturning its foreign as well as domestic policy. Given the increasingly modest influence his ailing father King Salman has over him, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) seems unassailable. He has shunted aside his cousin, Mohammed bin Naif, for the position of crown prince, and sacked and detained a large number of serving and former senior officials, including some royals, as well a small number of moderate critics, including a few popular Islamists. Alongside a supposed re-founding of the social, economic and religious compact at home, some think that MbS is waging a much more muscular contest for regional hegemony with Iran.

It is true that MbS has been more willing than King Abdullah (2005-15) to attack Iran rhetorically, and that the Saudis’ practical expression of their strategic competition looks tougher. In part this is about a commonality of outlook between MbS and the current occupant of the White House, but a hard Saudi stance toward Iran was occurring during Obama’s presidency, both under King Abdullah and King Salman.

This paper will argue that, in substance, current Saudi foreign policy is consistent with that of previous Saudi leaders, and that there is clear link between the era of Abdullah and that of King Salman/MbS. What is striking though is that the expectation that I had when this paper was written (December 2016) - that an ongoing Saudi-led war in Yemen could prove politically damaging to MbS given its expense amidst budgetary constraint and its growing cost to Saudi national security - shows little sign of happening. In part this is due to a growing Saudi nationalism that MbS has encouraged, after Abdullah’s tentative steps in this direction, something that the national war footing plays a part in. Furthermore, the domestic political upheaval that MbS’ arrests caused, and the intended association of these in the public mind with an anti-corruption campaign tied directly to economic reform (Saudi Vision 2030; SV2030), inoculated the populist prince from criticism. However, arresting businessmen on palace whims rather than due process, whether they’re genuinely involved in corruption or not, isn’t good for foreign or domestic business. It may also undermine SV2030’s ability to deepen the Kingdom’s international outreach. However the established Saudi attempt at pivoting toward Asia, in particular to state-related Chinese businesses, will

probably not be damaged by this domestic political tumult. Likewise, MbS' engagement with Russia – of limited success in managing the oil price providing Saudi leverage in Syria – won't be affected by arresting bigwigs that in any case Saudi public are not crying over. In the medium to longer term, what will matter more for the populous under 25s who are MbS' base, is whether the crown prince starts to deliver jobs. That won't affect Saudi foreign policy *per se*, but it will affect MbS' political standing, and thus indirectly his ability to up the *ante* with Iran.

That aside, the substance of Saudi foreign policy hasn't changed that much. In the unlikely event that he is dethroned, it still probably won't, other than the eventual need for any Saudi leader to find a way out of direct involvement in the Yemen conflict, to dial down Saudi posturing in Lebanon, and to accept that Qatar won't kick out every last Muslim Brotherhood member nor cut its connections with Iran. These headline-grabbing parts of Saudi foreign policy were subjects over which the Saudis were already exercising pressure, in part due to seeing them in the context of the Saudi conflict with Iran.

This paper will argue that under MbS these factors haven't changed that much, nor has the fluctuating Saudi relationship with the US that, while currently on the up, could easily be buffeted again. In the context of a Sunni Arab political vacuum, however, greater Saudi willingness under King Salman/MbS to take on Iran has been welcomed both in Saudi Arabia and among those other Sunni Arab states willing to give functional as well as rhetorical support. However, the practical expressions of this tougher Saudi anti-Iranian position were air strikes in Yemen, and an attempted countering of Hizbollah in Lebanon. The former has been devastating for Yemen, its people, infrastructure and (what remained of) its state integrity, but this, and an immature Saudi stance in Lebanon, is hardly a major shift in the Kingdom's international orientation or objectives, or even in the means toward realising them.

The national security preoccupation of Saudi foreign policy has been reinforced: underpinning the unchanged Saudi focus on Iran as the preeminent regional threat has been a reinforcement of the military, security and economic relationship with the US, while the Kingdom's ongoing dependence on oil revenue alongside attempts to open up and diversify the economy have compounded existing efforts to broaden the extent and range of international partnerships, including in Asia and with Russia. A tightening under MbS of state control over Islamic opinion and practise in the country is in the tradition of Saudi policy, especially in the wake of 9/11, but the Kingdom has and remains careful to maintain its attempted ideational legitimation, reflected in the ongoing Wahhabi identity of the state and society, and the state's ongoing international role as would-be Islamic custodian and, relatedly, facilitator of *haj* and *umra*.

The Saudi-led aerial war on Yemen has been going on since March 2015. While the Saudis have never conducted a comparable military campaign, they have previously used military force in Yemen and have long looked upon it as their political and security domain. Since the air war began they have adjusted their official war aims. Initially they sought the absolute defeat of their enemies in Yemen and the full restoration of what is curiously referred to as the legitimate government. After a year the Saudis were seeking a redeployment of their

enemies' armed forces, including those of the Iranian-backed Houthi, from the capital and two other key cities, and a coalition government in which the Houthi would have a role.

In Lebanon a more assertive Saudi political stance has sought to check a government more overtly identifiable with Iran. Annoyed at Lebanon's unwillingness to take an overt anti-Iranian public stance, Saudi Arabia announced that it was cancelling the previously announced military and security grants (worth \$4bn in total) that were mostly tied to French arms supplies, some of which had already been deliveredⁱ. As this strengthens the very thing Saudi Arabia was seeking to outbid, Iranian influence in Lebanon, it is likely that it will eventually abandon this position. Ultimately Lebanon is a country in which the Saudis have and wish to retain political and financial leverage. The Saudis have long played a pragmatic game in Lebanon – including an acceptance that Hizbollah has more of a veto on who becomes president than it does – and they know that sympathetic Lebanese Sunnis need the Saudis involved, not huffing and puffing from the side lines.

Across a range of other regional issues the Saudis' actions have not fundamentally altered. Saudi frustration with the US over some of these – most obviously and most importantly over Syria – has been semi-officially expressed. However Mohammed bin Salman has not questioned the fundamentals of the strategic Saudi-US relationship, even if, like previous Al-Saud leaders, he has talked tough as a bargaining strategy or to let off steam. It's notable though that he did this before Donald Trump took over the presidency. At present there appears to be a closer bilateral relationship as the worldviews of the top personalities involve overlap. However the personal factor alone will not ensure that there aren't differences down the line as Saudi frustrations with US regional policy still exist, and the Kingdom is unlikely to be immune from Congressional and even some US Government criticism over aspects of the Saudi state's relationship with Islam or US-Saudi business relations, even if Trump doesn't voice them. There are scenarios, albeit remote, in which Saudi exasperation over Syria could yet see the Kingdom arm Syrian rebels without subjecting itself to US oversight. However this is easier to do if, like Turkey, you neighbour Syria. Generally, arms supplies to rebel and supportive military intelligence are coordinated between Turkey, the US, Saudi and Qatar in the north; and Jordan, the US, Saudi and Qatar in the south.

Saudi-Qatari cooperation had actually begun being restored toward the end of King Abdullah's reign and continued under Salman and Mohammed until June 2017 when the Saudis resumed Abdullah's periodic attempts at ostracising Qatar but turned it up to eleven. However, like all intra-GCC affairs, what always counts is the bilateral relationship; as a collective endeavour the GCC was essentially a rhetorical project, even before the intra-Gulf crisis that essentially split the would-be bloc three ways between the anti-Qatar countries, the ameliorators, and Qatar itself. At the time of writing the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar, excepting, crucially, its energy exports, looked like it could continue for many more months. On the side of the GCC states that signed up to Qatar's isolation, this was essentially a determined effort to do what hadn't been achieved by the 2014 Riyadh agreement that ended Abdullah's last attempted isolation of Qatar: kill-off once and for all Qatar's

collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), in Qatar itself and in the wider Arab worldⁱⁱ.

The Saudis have accepted the US accommodation with Russian interests in Syria, hoping that this runs counter to Iranian ones. This doesn't exclude some Saudi bought arms reaching some Syrian Sunni Islamists that the US, formally speaking, disapproves of (as opposed to those it helps). However, it doesn't change what happens on the ground where Syrian rebel groups morph into others, groups collaborate in the mutual interest, and group members switch allegiances or have family connections with supposed rivals. A greater Saudi willingness to aid Islamist rebels specifically would not alter a strategic reality in which the Assad government has Russian jets and Iranian and Iranian-trained foot soldiers on its side, while the mostly Islamist rebels have US trainers and some Gulf arms. What had been the Saudis' strong support for Turkey in Syria has been damaged by the intra-Gulf spat that made Turkey, long an MB backer, suddenly highly suspect in Saudi eyes. When Saudi-Turkish relations were warmer, a Saudi role in the aerial policing of Turkey's emerging (undeclared) northern Syrian security buffer was being mooted and some Saudi jets had reportedly been positioned in Turkey as a sign of the Kingdom's support for Ankara. However a direct Saudi aerial role was unlikely then, and it certainly is now. It would risk direct aerial confrontation with Russia. Even more unlikely is the Saudis breaking a deep-seated reluctance to deploy nationals on the ground (despite foreign minister Adel Jubeir suggesting on a visit to Turkey in 2016 that the Kingdom might, as part of an international alliance against ISIS). In other words, Mohammed bin Salman has not and will not move the dial very far in Saudi Arabia's Syria policy.

Internal struggle

Mohammed bin Salman became de facto Saudi leader after his father, Salman, acceded as king in 2015. Given King Salman's health, his son Mohammed controls the King's court, which is nominally run by a Mohammed bin Salman-approved commoner. In short Mohammed bin Salman is akin to an executive prime minister under a king whose role is largely that of a figurehead. Mohammed bin Salman established a new set of economic and by extension, political structures designed to drive reform and diversify wealth creation, thus enhancing stability by providing private sector jobs for Saudis and a more predictable and reliable government revenue stream.ⁱⁱⁱ

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has a major diplomatic role as heir apparent and as head of the Commission for Political Affairs (CPA)^{iv}, one of two overarching policy bodies. The CPA sits alongside the Commission for Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA). Bin Salman has the lead on economic affairs, including oil, and brought in the grandiloquent set of expensively advised vagaries otherwise known as "Saudi Vision 2030".

Before bin Salman overthrew his first cousin, bin Naif, in June 2017, there was an emergent division of labour between the two men. For example, a formal logic applied in that MbS represented Saudi Arabia in China and Japan in September 2016 at an economically-focused discussion that included a G20 meeting, while Mohammed bin Naif headed the Saudi

delegation to the UN General Assembly that month and then conducted a two day official visit to Turkey. However economics is power in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Naif tried to influence the tone of important bilateral relations but he could not re-engineer them. That said, Mohammed bin Salman hasn't done that much re-engineering either, and some important bilateral relations continued to be handled as they were under King Abdullah in part because bin Salman lacks the experience or knowledge to deal with them. When he was crown prince, there was little to suggest Mohammed bin Naif could override Mohammed bin Salman's *de facto* control over foreign policy. MbS' key foreign policy stance – leadership of the war in Yemen - was undertaken against Mohammed bin Naif's preferences (and those of the then foreign minister, and seasoned diplomat, Prince Saud Al-Faisal). In October 2016, Mohammed bin Naif publicly argued that the Syrian conflict had left hundreds of thousands dead and injured and that it was time to find a political solution that ensured the unity of Syria and preserved its institutions. Arguably this is precisely the approach that Saudi Arabia under Mohammed bin Salman, mindful of Russian and Iranian weight in Syria, is resigned to.

Mohammed bin Salman has thus far been responsible for a less reflective Saudi foreign policy, and his toughness in Yemen and Lebanon reflects the Kingdom's ongoing struggle to offset Iranian power. Mohammed bin Salman's deposing of Mohammed bin Naif, and the removal in November 2017 of any residual fears that the Saudi Arabian National Guard under King Abdullah's son Miteb might intervene against MbS, seems to have ensured Bin Salman's eventual accession as king. In practise though he was already ruling the country in all but name. His ongoing political ascent hadn't been opposed by Mohammed bin Naif when he was heir apparent nor his brother Saud, the governor of Eastern Province; or by the cousins of Mohammed bin Salman, some of whom (even after the November 2017 arrests) are in power but largely powerless; let alone the cousins who are more or less out of power entirely, such as the sons of former kings Faisal, Fahd and Abdullah. The one known exception, Prince Abdulaziz bin Fahd, had already been silenced before the November 2017 purges, although there were rumours that he too had been picked up that month, or even killed, in the course of being arrested.

Over the medium term, unless the whole of Yemen somehow obediently falls into the Saudi lap, Lebanon assumes the status quo ante prior to the Iranian revolution, and SV2030 magically creates sufficient real private sector jobs to address the burgeoning youth unemployment problem, then Mohammed bin Salman's ongoing honeymoon as *de facto* leader could begin to fade. Whether he formally becomes king while Salman appears able to continue at least some of his public duties, doesn't seem to be that important any more. Given Salman's poor health and seeming indifference to the political consequences of his son's rapid rise and removal of possible dissenting voices, it is conceivable that Mohammed bin Salman will accede, although this prospect continues to be officially denied. MbS is king in all but name and so the final step may be resisted for as long as there are the slightest doubts about the acceptability of such a move.

Despite impressions, the cautious and often pragmatic approach of Saudi Arabia continues to characterise many of its regional relations under Mohammed bin Salman, underpinned

by a periodically discourteous but strategically firm relationship with the US. Iran under Mohammed bin Salman is highly likely to remain the focus of Saudi regional and to an extent extra-regional policy, for example in eastern Africa, which was already contested with Iran during the reign of King Abdullah. However, the Kingdom has never wished to threaten its national security in the process and will remain, despite the clerical war of words across the Gulf, open to oil deals with Iran when there is a perceived and likely gain.

Case by Case

Yemen

Yemen has been a 'backyard' Saudi property ever since the modern Saudi Kingdom expanded its territorial domain into a major slice of Yemeni real estate in the 1930s. Here the Saudis have exposed a small number of their troops, and some of their civilian population, to danger. The Saudi-led aerial assault on Yemen begun in March 2015 compounded a territorial threat that an earlier (2009-10) but brief Saudi ground invasion was supposed to correct. In the course of the 2009-10 action the Saudi army cleared civilians from both sides of what in 2000 had become a formally agreed, if not demarcated or uncontested border. The Saudis distrusted the loyalty of the largely Ismaeli population in the Saudi province of Najran who shared the broadly Shia identification of the Yemenis residing the other side of this contemporary border. Furthermore, they feared penetration among tribes whose historic fealty wasn't bound territorially. For Saudi Arabia, therefore, this is a very local conflict in which they have, in one way or another, long been immersed.

Under Mohammed bin Salman the Saudis' Yemen immersion has deepened. Yemen is the one Saudi bilateral relationship in which MbS has wrought significant change – in the application of force at least. However, it hardly qualifies for the florid description provided by cheerleaders that the Kingdom is now 'in the resolve era' of Saudi foreign policy.^v The Saudis assembled a mostly symbolic, largely Arab, coalition after the Saudi air force had been conducting raids with Emirati involvement. The political objective was announced as the restoration of 'legitimacy'. This meant the rule of Saudi ally, Hadi, the sole presidential candidate under a Saudi-encouraged a Yemeni political deal under GCC auspices that temporarily put an end to the latest phase of Yemen's long running civil conflict. Hadi had hightailed it to Aden first and then to Jeddah as the (loosely Shia) Zaidi militia, the Houthi, expanded their domain into the capital Sana'a by September 2014. After politics had been pursued by military means, the second announced phase ('Operation Restore Hope') allowed for a negotiated settlement. This has been formally pursued in Kuwait by Hadi's team and their Yemeni opponents, the Houthi and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and discreetly in Jeddah by Saudi and the Houthi. The air attacks, however, continued pretty much unabated.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Saudis' contemporary involvement in Yemen, the conflict has made the Saudi state more vulnerable to border penetration and has done little

to reduce the strength of the Yemeni forces that the Kingdom sees as Iranian-aligned. It has also facilitated the growth of ISIS and done little to reduce the strength of Al-Qaida. AQ is not a desirable force to have in relatively proximate territory, even if it can be a tactically useful opponent of the Houthi. This reality encouraged Mohammed bin Salman to sign-off on attempted talks with the Houthi a year after the air war began. The Saudis' unrealistic attachment to total disarmament by Houthi and Saleh forces in a country where the state has struggled to be the majority since 1990, let alone the sole repository of violence, helped scupper those efforts.

In September 2016 the Kerry-proposed tripartite Yemen government in Sana'a (in which by definition Hadi/ regime elements would have had a minority of seats had it become an official US administration plan) was judged by a well-placed Saudi pundit to be an 'insult' to Saudi Arabia.^{vi} The Saudis consider the US to be appeasing Iran in Yemen even without an overt and established Russian strategic interest applying. An acceptance that there will not be total disarmament is implicit in what Kerry tried to achieve. In any case the Saudis recognised that the regular Yemeni armed forces (to the extent that there is such a thing) never stopped being Saleh's forces.^{vii} A UN plan, agreed October 2016, and made possible by the support of the US and other permanent members of the UN Security Council, proposed that a post-Hadi federal government be formed. This was to be made up equally of northern and southern representatives. Until a deal is done - with US connivance, quiet Russian approval, and begrudging Saudi acceptance - the Saudis will probably continue to bomb. Anything else would be a loss of face *vis-a-vis* Iran. None of this will be good for Mohammed bin Salman's efforts to build his domestic and regional authority.

As the American musician Gil Scott-Heron observed in one of his final songs, 'War is very ugly'. The Saudi's chief military spokesman seconded this emotion when, in November 2016, he argued that "War has an ugly face and we need to deal with it."^{viii} War is also very expensive. This is especially the case at a time of fiscal rectitude. The whispering campaign in Saudi Arabia questioning such an exorbitantly expensive conflict, amidst utility bill rises and frozen salaries, could grow if the war goes on for much longer.^{ix} One reason it might be simply that the Saudis don't put their own skin in the game and would arguably not be very well equipped if they did. Buying in combatants like the Sudanese and Eritrean foot soldiers flown into battle in Yemen is useful when projecting yourself as leading an alliance. It plainly impressed US Senator John McCain, who said of the Yemen campaign and the large number of states apparently onside with Saudi Arabia, that there hadn't been anything like it for decades. Presumably this was a reference to the two state Arab alliance that planned the 1973 war, while Saudi Arabia sat in the rear doling out the cash. The truth is that the Saudis' Yemen coalition isn't a well planned alliance. The political appearance of concrete action was hastily manufactured after the Saudis had already begun flying sorties over Yemen. The supposed collective GCC commitment to the Saudi cause had been limited in military terms, while even the rhetorical commitments came very late in the Omani case. If the Saudi-led air war stops, this won't be the outcome of a NATO-style formal discussion in which inevitably the lead actor is more equal than the others. It will be because MbS decides he doesn't want Saudi pilots to fly anymore, and most likely because he decides to revert to the status quo ante that the Saudis were grasping for in the Jeddah talks with the Houthi.

Essentially, this means an awkward calm while money changes hands and tactical deals are made with Yemeni militias.

The Saudis dropped the ball on the death of Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, their unofficial tribal manager. More liberally-minded Saudis argue that tribal manipulation is the dog that won't hunt in the post Arab Uprisings environment and that the Saudis should properly embrace the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood (or Islah), whose fighting capacity would turn the war around. General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, Saleh's former number two and an expert in Islamist manipulation, has been working with Islah and facilitating battlefield gains as a consequence. Ali Mohsen was the Saudis' latest man in uniform.^x Islah though cannot function as an armed grouping without drawing on tribal allies that at one made them a pivotal force under leadership of close Saudi ally, Abdullah Al-Ahmar.^{xi}

Given that there has been little, if any, political stability, nor a coherent state, since a unified Yemen was declared in 1990, the war cannot properly end. However, a calming will happen when fiscal, political and battlefield pressures conjoin, and Mohammed bin Salman sees his leadership ambitions increasingly tarnished by this latest Saudi intervention in its southern hinterland. In the meantime expect more nefarious activity of a kind that drew the US into naval strikes on alleged Houthi-controlled radar sites in mid-October 2016. After ill-defined but surprisingly well-equipped Yemeni forces had twice attempted to hit a US naval ship in international waters, this defensive action deflected from the mounting, and not yet dissipated, controversy in America over US arming and advising the Saudi bombing campaign.

Syria

Saudi Arabia's essentially Islamist rebel alignment in Syria includes *jabha Fatha Al-Sham*^{xii} (JFS), who work closely with US-backed groups and cooperate with the internationally supported Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Saudi-backed *Ahrar Al-Sham*. *Ahrar Al-Sham* have collaborated with Turkey's territorial carve-up in northern Syria and, like other rebels, has been angry at the US' targeting of its tactical ally, JFS, and the damage done to its own and other allied fighters. Given the realities on the ground and in the air in Syria, the US is likely to continue to appease Russia. Not doing so would mean a reversal of its post-Iraq posture and risk a shooting war with Moscow. This only compounds the US' aversion to giving Syrian rebels ground-to-air Stinger missiles. Their use against Russia in Afghanistan in the 1980s hasn't been forgotten in either Washington or Moscow. After all, the Syrian rebels' fluid affiliations could see Stingers being used against US aircraft. The Saudis periodically talk up their arming options^{xiii} but will not stray too far from what the US would approve of.

The US, with some Saudi/Gulf, European, Turkish and possible Russian participation, will probably continue to conduct sorties against ISIS or other Sunni militants in Syria. The Saudis gave verbal support to Turkish military action in Syria, but Riyadh's September 2015 offer of military support didn't mean much. Mohammed bin Salman restored the *status quo ante* in Saudi-Turkish relations, thereby taking it back to where King Abdullah was headed before the Arab Spring created geo-strategic competition between Turkey's proto-Islamic

democracy and the Saudi preference for autocracy. Saudi-Turkish cooperation increased the arms flow to selected Syrian rebels, at least until Turkey's incursion into northern Syria and coordination with Russia. The Saudi-Turkish relationship benefits from a shared desire not to tread on each other's toes in Syria. Rhetoric and photo opportunities aside, it does not constitute a military alliance in support of mutual political goals in Syria.

The US was embarrassed at its impotence in the face of Russian and Iranian strength in Syria, which was so publicly attacked in the semi-official Saudi press. Under President Trump the US may make a de facto accommodation with Assad. There were signs of this happening before he took over from Obama, as the US largely avoided confronting the Syrian regime out of a greater fear of its opponents and a healthy fear of being effectively at war with Assad's Russian (and Iranian) backers. The 1973 Arab-Israeli War is instructive on this account. The Soviets aerially supported Egyptian troop advances and thus threatened Israel. The US, judging that its strategic credibility regionally and internationally was at stake, came very close to a direct aerial intervention against the Soviets. The fear of a nuclear conflict over only one of its regional allies, against the interests of others (including Saudi Arabia) made the US decide to back off. Ultimately the US and its European allies, are never going to intervene in Syria in the way that the Saudis would like, nor are the Saudis likely to put their own men into Syria or risk an aerial confrontation with the Russians.

There is a significant strand of opinion in Saudi Arabia that has been sympathetic to Russia throughout the Syrian conflict. Moscow's backing for the Assad-led regime is not remotely appreciated in Riyadh, but Russia's decisive stance and then its military intervention is seen as somehow putting the US and its western allies to shame. The Saudis are not comfortable with a reawakened Russian power seemingly intervening in the Middle East with more effectiveness than it ever did in its Soviet guise after 1945. However, they admire its determination. Whether Assad is in power or not, the Russians will have a major role in Syria, so the Saudis will periodically seek to influence Moscow's behaviour there. That said, the Saudis grossly miscalculated that Putin was more interested in defence sales to the Kingdom than Syrian real estate. The Turks have necessarily sought to cooperate in Syria with Russia, which is awkwardly allied with Iran in Syria, while the Turkish-Russian interests are in contradiction in Iraq. In the paradoxical Middle East, the relatively powerless Saudis will see benefit in Turkish cooperation with Russia in Syria. In fact the Saudis prefer a Syria in which the Russians lead the show, rather than Syria being left to Iran to control. Russian-Iranian-Turkish cooperation on Syrian political solutions is tentative, while the Russians and Iranians have more reasons to fall out than the US and Iran do, both historically and in the Middle East. However any progress in Syria involving Iran and Russia would put limits on the already shaky prospects of a US/western-Iranian rapprochement. The bottom line remains that the Russians are backing Iranian/Shia-aligned interests in the Arab world. The Saudis understand a strategic reality that simultaneously makes the Russians worth talking to, especially over the oil price but almost impossible to influence geo-strategically

Lebanon

Saudi policy in Lebanon is jettisoning the uncharacteristic irresponsibility seen since Mohammed bin Salman's political ascent. The official withholding of promised security-related aid, which in practice had been slow to materialise under Abdullah, and the effective downgrading of diplomatic relations after followed attacks on Saudi diplomatic offices in Iran in January 2016. Lebanon's Hizbollah-influenced Lebanese foreign minister Gibran Bassil would not condemn Iran over assaults that the regime was ultimately responsible for, even while backing Arab League criticism of the Islamic Republic. Saudi annoyance led to it announcing it was cancelling (much of) the promised military aid. However, this particular deal had been initiated, and then held up, under King Abdullah. The Saudis feared that Iran's penetration of Lebanon was so extensive that even giving money to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), where Shia are significantly represented, could advantage it. It was this that partly held up the first (and only) delivery of kit under the \$3bn deal.^{xiv} This was a concern that the Saudis also shared with Israel, which was believed to have been lobbying France over the (now delayed) delivery. However, the Saudis remain closely involved in Lebanese affairs, especially through a range of local, primarily Sunni Arab allies.

Saudi Arabia has never stopped encouraging Lebanese Sunni clients to seek the least worst option for the vacant presidency. The Kingdom understood that the presidency, important to Lebanese external relations, would remain Hizbollah's to decide. Although Saudi Arabia was able to upset an Iranian plan to appoint Assad ally Suleiman Frangieh as president once again, the outcome was latter-day Hizbollah ally, General Michel Aoun, getting the job. Aoun has a record of poor relations with Saudi Arabia going back to 1989 when he fought on after the Saudi-backed Taif peace deal had been accepted by most Lebanese factions. However, in January 2017 President Aoun conducted a successful visit to the Kingdom. He may shape up as a better bet for Saudi Arabia than rejected presidential aspirants implacably opposed to their interests. To facilitate Aoun's ascent, Saad Hariri, the son of firm Saudi ally Rafiq Hariri, seemed to slip his patron-client leash. This may in part have been due to the financially chastened Saudi state stalling on paying the Hariri family firm Saudi Oger what it owed.

In any case the Saudis seemingly didn't prevent Saad Hariri, who, like his father before him, holds Saudi as well as Lebanese nationality, from backing Aoun for the job in a deal that gave Saad the premier's job. Gibran Bassil is Aoun's son-in-law; a radical adjustment in the Lebanese stance toward the Iranian-Saudi dispute therefore may not happen.

The Saudis proved their ability to keep the presidential seat empty while the traditionally Saudi-backed Sunni Muslim premier attempted to assert authority. The Saudis have long had a range of Lebanese representatives. Their suspension of much of the promised military and security aid was in part a knock-back to the man they had previously favoured, Saad Hariri, as he had been allowed to announce himself as the deliverer of at least \$1bn in security-related Saudi subventions. That seemed to have been put on ice, along with most, but by no means all, of the \$3bn French-supplied kit that the Saudis promised for the regular Lebanese armed forces.^{xv} Seeing Lebanon through a more distinct Iranian prism partly reflects how much the territory and politics of Lebanon has become more susceptible to the conflict in Syria. This further polarised Lebanese politicians whose extant foreign

loyalties became more overt as the conflict literally crossed over into Lebanon, and Hizbollah, as well as Lebanese Sunnis, have fought in Syria. The consequence is that the Saudis have not been able to replay their previous ameliorative approach in Lebanon. Rising competition with Iran was already making this difficult – most obviously following the assassination of Saad Hariri in 2005 and in their different approaches to the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006. That said, it is unlikely that the Saudis will maintain a zero-sum approach. Saad Hariri re-engaged with the Saudi leadership over the Lebanese presidency. This suggested a resumption of Saudi interest in this “file”, although his father’s company Saudi Oger was continuing to suffer from the Kingdom’s fiscal travails even as other construction giants were being bailed out. It subsequently collapsed. Saad announced his resignation as PM when in Riyadh in November 2017. Perhaps the Saudis calculation was that once again denuding Lebanon of a key governmental leader would give it leverage over Hizbollah and Iran. That was not the lesson of the 29-month impasse over appointing a new president. Hariri’s resignation came in the context of an inflammatory comment by the highly outspoken Saudi “minister for Gulf affairs” Thamer Sabhan, who came close to saying that Saudi and Lebanon were in a state of war because of the alleged Hizbollah-Houthi connection that, if true, probably enhanced the Houthis’ ability to launch a missile deep in Saudi territory. However the fact that the Saudis went so far as to encourage (at the least) Hariri to announce his resignation, and to do from the Saudi capital, suggested that MbS wanted to up the *ante* against Hizbollah and Iran, believing that the US had his back and possibly thinking that he could leverage the periodic Israeli chatter about its need to revisit the strategic defeat of its last military encounter with Hizbollah. The Israelis will not necessarily play this game, however, even if they would consider resuming military action in either Lebanon or Syria should their border with these countries be judged vulnerable. For Israel to act other than coolly and solely in pursuit of that aim would be akin to being the Saudis’ air wing in the Levant, and arguably not for the first time. The 2006 Israeli-Hizbollah encounter was cheered *sotto voce* in Riyadh until it became too politically uncomfortable^{xvi}.

If another proxy Saudi stand-off with Iran over the governance of Lebanon becomes too uncomfortable, or MbS simply realises that, short of the dubious benefits of an Israeli or US-led bombing campaign, this situation will only disadvantage Saudi Arabia even more, then presumably the Saudis will look to a return to the premiership by Hariri or try to impose one of their alternative candidates. Nouad Machnouk, the interior minister and a member of Hariri’s bloc, is perhaps more plausible than Hariri’s arch rival (and former ally) Ashraf Rifi, whom the Saudis have been grooming as an alternative Sunni leader in Lebanon.

Iraq: Same as it ever was?

Reining in ISIS in Iraq is disadvantaging Sunni Arab leverage there. The crushing of ISIS in contested Mosul meant that the city was bound to be contested by its co-Iraqi liberators: Shia militias and the Sunni Kurdish Peshmerga. Iraq’s Kurds, divided among themselves and from the Turkish PKK and its Syrian variant, are effectively aligned with the Turks, tactically aligned with the west, and, naturally, open to more Gulf money.

Iraqi Kurds have argued that such largesse could bring Saudi influence.^{xvii} However, the Kingdom sees Turkey as providing Sunni muscle in the north of Syria and Iraq, expanding at these states' internal expense but not seeking to overturn the regional order, which a Kurdish secession state would as likely do. Turkey, like Saudi Arabia, sometimes uses Sunni Arab militants for tactical advantage too. The Kurds, in Iraq or Syria, are similarly tactically useful to the Saudis if they expand at the expense of a Saudi foe.

The manner of the apparent ISIS defeat in Mosul left nobody holding the ring there for a definable Sunni Arab interest, to the concern of the Saudis. However, the Saudis have little influence either way. The Arab League's formal backing for the Mosul operation was sanctioned by Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states. However this Arab diplomatic nicety reflected the Saudis' impotence over the issue as much as anything else.

For many years after the US-led regime change in Iraq, King Abdullah was resistant to even a fig-leaf diplomatic presence there. Following greater US pressure on Riyadh, in tandem with the removal of the widely loathed Nouri Al-Maliki from power and the rise of ISIS across Iraq and Syria, the Saudis engaged with the new Iraqi leadership. They naively hoped that they could somehow reboot an Arab solidarity from a Shia Iraqi leadership with roots in an Iranian alignment against the Saudi-backed Saddam Hussein regime. This was never going to fly. In fact it soon crash-landed amidst the inability of Saudi-Iranian relations to maintain even minimum diplomatic niceties. Under Mohammed bin Salman, Iraq has received a bit more attention, with MbS' engaging with Moqtada Al-Sadr, a high profile Iraqi Shia Islamist politician who is keen to project an inclusive Iraqi national image, and distance from Iran, ahead of elections that will not bring him to power but might increase his faction's strength.

Cash continues to flow from the Kingdom, usually given to petitioners from Iraq or deployed via Saudis at some remove from the formal apparatus of the Saudi government. It is mostly deployed with Sunni Arab politicians, but has long been spent on tribal amalgams with whom the Kingdom has some affinity. None of this does much to alter the realpolitik of a Baghdad government that is majoritarian Shia, Islamist, dependent for its survival on Iranian firepower, whether state or para-state, and in need of western weapons, training and special forces. There is little that Mohammed bin Salman or the wider Saudi leadership can do about this situation other than to learn to live with it. The political realities of Iraq are part of why the Saudis are angry with US Middle East policy, but there isn't much that the US can do to alter this either. The possible worsening of US-Iranian relations due to frustrations on both sides over how the nuclear deal plays out could sour their de-confliction on the ground in Iraq. However, the US, its western allies, and for that matter Russia and China, will continue to talk to the Baghdad government as long as it is functioning. None of that will make it accommodate the Sunni Arabs. In any case accommodation is arguably meaningless. The talk, as in Syria, is increasingly of functional separation. In Iraq that is more demographically possible, but without a stake in Mosul - or rather its oil fields - then a Sunni Arab *iqlim* (regional entity) cannot function.

For the same reason Iraq's Kurds were eager to maintain their hold over Mosul's oil and its urban sprawl. However when Mosul was cleansed of ISIS, the Shia militia, under both Prime Minister Abad's and Iran's encouragement, switched from being the Iraqi Kurds' tactical

allies to being the enforcers of an attempted Iraqi state hegemony in the face of Iraqi Kurdish secession ambitions. If there was to be a major implosion in which Sunni Arabs sought to expand without the bloodlust of an ISIS and with the tactical skill of the Saudis themselves when they first established their modern kingdom, then Riyadh may well fund it and arm it as best it could. Short of that, the weak Iraqi state in which Sunni Arabs are perpetually frustrated will continue. Pluralism in Iraq will as ever be a veneer over a brutal assertion of power in the name of sect and ethnicity. The Saudis can't promote meaningful federalism in Iraq, Syria or anywhere else where state leadership, like in the Kingdom, is an expression of crude power backed up by a tightly managed military and selective socio-economic patronage.

Egypt

The Saudi-Egyptian relationship is a little like the Saudi-US relationship: up close, and seen on a short term basis, it looks really bad. Media wars, limited economic cooperation despite a wider framework of mutual dependence, similar strategic interests but key divergences that appear to challenge strategic assumptions. It's there in both sets of bilateral relations, and of course between Egypt and the USA too. It's a truism but one worth repeating that many important relationships in the Middle East are tempestuous but essentially solid. Sisi allows the media that he either controls or that operates within the context of state pressure to spout venom about the Saudis, but the Kingdom holds a lot of Egyptian debt. Saudi is the regional financial kingpin that Egypt needs to keep reasonably sweet for wider funding packages. The Saudis will use oil as a weapon with a relatively dependent power like Egypt, but they know they cannot leave it dangling for too long. They never really expected Egypt to fight their war for them in Yemen, even if they would like the symbolism of a few Egyptian boots on the ground there. In the Red Sea, however, the relatively advanced Egyptian navy provides a maritime back-up to the Saudis' anti-Houthi blockade of Hodeidah port.

Symbolism is what the new Saudi leadership continues to value. The Saudis have led a pointless struggle for influence over Yemen. While susceptible to cash inducements and brute force, Yemen cannot be managed by Yemenis in any way that fits an academic's definition of the state. Given Egypt's bitter military experience in Yemen in the 1960s it is not ever going to be a substantive presence there again.

The Egyptians have made some military moves toward the Russians as an expression of their frustration. Russian paratroopers and kit were on Egyptian soil for the two countries' first ever joint exercise in October 2016 (aside from a joint naval exercise in 2015). Given that Egypt strategically aligned with the US as a precursor to Camp David in 1979 (abandoning the Russians whose pilots had aided them in the 1973 war) this is perhaps more than an idle flirtation with potential protectors other than the US. There has even been talk of Russia accessing a base in Egypt as they have in Syria. From another perspective, the Egyptians need all the help they can get in crushing Islamist militants in Sinai and their joint exercise had that in mind. A Russian base (that would have given Moscow a privileged position over

Washington) was an idea that some Saudis seemed to take seriously but that was essentially a Russian media invention. Such a development is highly unlikely and was categorically denied by Sisi in mid-October 2016. It should be filed with the media claim that, contrary to its publicised role, Egypt has in supposedly facilitated Iranian arms supplies to the Houthis via Hodeidah.^{xviii}

The Saudis understand Egypt's need to raise its bargaining price, both with itself and with its US ally. However, these are essentially tactical Egyptian steps. There is little prospect that the military-run deep state would actually disinter the Russians' patron role and risk losing the US military aid that underwrites the Egyptian regime's power and the military's capability. If Egypt was to throw off Saudi subventions it would have to turn to Russia or China. This would give the US and the Saudis a lot of pause for thought but it would be implausible for an Egyptian military elite closely tied to an American patron that buys and supplies a lot of its kit. The Russians are a poor alternative, even though deals will no doubt continue to be done. Egypt will diplomatically posture, however, as it did when the US got cold feet over promised kit in 2013. The public meeting between Sisi and Syrian intelligence chief Ali Mamluk was evidence of this posturing and was not appreciated by the Saudis, even though Mohammed bin Salman, or another senior Saudi official, met with Mr Mamluk in private.^{xix} It is also true that the Egyptian regime identifies with the Assad Alawi state in Syria far more than the ragbag of Islamist orientated Syrian Sunni rebels. For the same reason Egypt strongly welcomed Aoun's appointment as president. Lebanon's stability, and thus constraining Egypt's *bete noire*, Sunni jihadis, was Cairo's priority over hostility to Hizbollah in Lebanon or Syria^{xx}. This shouldn't be a surprise. To an extent this is true about the US too. The Saudis' linkage to the MB in Yemen (see above), and to *salafi* fighters in Syria and elsewhere, doesn't sit well with Egypt, or with the US.

US president Donald Trump is likely to accept that a Russian and Iranian backed Assad holding much of the populated parts of the country is better than a semi-perpetual, Afghan style conflict. He will not want an interminable Syrian war in which the US' Gulf allies have some influence, but where prevailing poisonous, anti-western ideology makes blowback against the Gulf state and/or the US highly likely without boots on the ground. Russia reawakening as a Mediterranean power is still limited when set against US assets in the Levant theatre, and unless Iraq shifts alignment there is no Russian footprint in the Gulf. All of this is likely to mean that Egypt stays in the US' orbit, and underlines for the Saudis Egypt's importance as a regional and Red Sea ally if not a Gulf player. The Saudis' have a surprising desire for sovereignty over two tiny Tiran Straits islands that the Egyptian navy used to block Israel's Red Sea access in May 1967. This was pivotal to the Arab-Israeli war that year and was why the Saudis have hitherto been happy for Egypt to regard them as their own^{xxi}. President Sisi's equally surprising willingness to give them to the Saudis in order to curry political and financial favour ahead of King Salman's visit in 2016 could paradoxically unsettle Saudi-Egyptian relations. Egypt is a genuinely nationalist country with a degree of media and legal pluralism that has provided a platform for some popular discontent over the issue. That said, as long as Sisi or a comparable de facto military leader is in power in Cairo then the deal is not going to be undone.

Saudi Arabia's relations greatly improved with (north) Sudan due to anti-Iranian initiatives during the latter period of Abdullah's reign. Egypt reacted to this too, turning away from its long standing animosity to pursue better relations with what had become a more isolated regime in Khartoum. Egypt's primary security interests are in Africa - as much to its west and south, as in Sinai. Arabia only directly concerns Egypt if security threats emanate from the Peninsula's western shore. This is why Egypt helped Saudi Arabia police Yemeni waters, but not its *terra firma*.

Libya is an Egyptian cause broadly held in common with the Kingdom. The Egyptians, like the UAE, have been keeping their options open, betting on the renegade general, Khalifa Haftar, in the east as well as supporting the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Some reports suggest that Haftar also enjoyed the discreet support of France even while the US sought unequivocal European backing for the GNA. The Saudis are less preoccupied with this game than Egypt but want to avoid anything that makes Libya even more unstable, given that jihadis, some with Qatari backing, run amok there. Broadly speaking, Saudi and Qatar back a GNA that contains some Islamist elements, something that Egypt (and the UAE) obviously don't like. The Saudis resume a mediation role largely dormant since their half-hearted efforts over Lebanon and Somalia in the Noughties. However, the Saudis are unlikely to want to risk bringing the world's attention to their limited mediation skills^{xxii}. Unless, like the 1989 Lebanon peace accord, there is a deal in place for the Saudis to publicly showcase and fund. Don't hold your breath.

Israel

The Saudis are widely seen as having forged unofficial but state to state relations with Israel. The evidence is circumstantial, but it seems plausible that the Saudis were approached by Israel prior to the finalisation of the nuclear deal to ensure de-confliction should the Israelis conduct air strikes on Iran via Saudi airspace. Subsequently there was an absurd degree of hype about hand-shakes on semi-academic platforms involving Prince Turki Al-Faisal (no longer a Saudi official nor a floater of his brother's trial balloons, but obviously well connected to the Saudi leadership). That, and the September 2016 visit to Israel, East Jerusalem and the West Bank by retired Saudi military man, General Anwar Eshki, who runs a Jeddah think tank, has created the impression of an explicit Saudi policy to engage with Israel against a common foe Iran, or even to try to explore how the Saudis' (and officially the Arab League) peace plan might be applied in practice. Then there is the hoary old cliché of Gulf states seeking Israeli technological prowess including drip water technology. Trade via third parties has always gone on, and undoubtedly the Arab boycott no longer has the bite it once had when US companies were penalised for trading with Israel as recently as the Second Intifada. None of this justifies the assessments from normally cool-headed observers.^{xxiii} There is not going to be a substantive confidence-building mechanism (CBM) such as an Israeli or Saudi interests section in the other's country, whatever some Israeli^{xxiv} and western pundits may hope. Israel, needy for the perceived legitimacy of even de facto recognition, talks up the prospect of engagement with Saudi Arabia^{xxv}, and some Israeli

reports wilfully confuse retired Saudi officials and academic fora held in third party western countries with Saudi official engagement.

Expect more third party and even possibly some 'Track 2' exploration in European capitals, but, as before, in the company of foreign academics and all plausibly deniable. One reason why efforts vis-à-vis Israel will be afforded a low priority by the Saudis is that they don't expect to have the diplomatic cover of a meaningfully sovereign Palestinian state on the horizon, they know the risks to Jordan and therefore to Saudi security of one being established, and are not inclined to again risk political capital^{xxvi} in promoting such a project. In any case a Palestinian state is unlikely to be a regional policy priority under President Trump, any more than, in practice, it was under President Obama.

Iran

The ultimate *aim* of Saudi foreign policy, at least when it is applied to the Greater Middle East (including east Africa and south Asia), is to counter Iran. Their regional power struggle is overdone however, in the sense that the Saudis will not put skin in the game. In Yemen it is another country's skin, such as Emirati special forces, who were doing the fighting for the Saudi-led cause. There were a limited numbers of Saudi special forces on the ground but these are no longer a factor, while the Saudi Arabian National Guard, like the Border Guard, may periodically cross the border but are unlikely to move far south, while Saudi pilots, by definition, are removed from the territorial struggle for power.

That said, the Saudis under King Abdullah and de facto king Mohammed bin Salman are waging the same struggle for regional influence. Yemen is also a partial exception to the rule that the Saudis work through proxies. Partial because, as stated, they still rely on the elements they encourage to coalesce on the ground. Otherwise the regional war continues. From a Saudi perspective, allowing Iran what it argues is its proper role in regional cooperation (without superpowers) would allow it to dominate any meaningful Gulf security arrangements. There is also a genuine Iranian craving for regional acceptance of the kind that was not fully there under the Shah and obviously has not been there since 1979.

Across the Iranian political spectrum there is contempt for a Saudi Arabia viewed as the new "little Satan." The Saudis are seen as politically and culturally inferior and as American agents, by both moderates and hardliners alike. There are no votes in Iranian elections in giving ground to the Saudis. This is why a US-friendly figure like Javad Zarif, President Hassan Rowhani's foreign policy mouthpiece, can join in the intemperate Saudi-bashing from the vantage point of the *New York Times*.^{xxvii} Rowhani might go back to exploring whether understandings can be reached to ease the fire in Yemen and Syria^{xxviii}. For Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei to sign-off on this, the position of Houthi and aligned Saleh forces in Yemen would have to be weakened, but not so much as to encourage Saudi triumphalism. A Yemeni compromise could then in theory be encouraged by both Iran and Saudi Arabia based on the power-sharing ideas promoted by the US. That wouldn't guarantee that the Yemeni parties, not least the relatively rogue Ali Abdullah Saleh who has a strong grip on large sections of the former Yemeni armed forces, would toe a line imposed by outside

powers. After all, he never has before. Furthermore, the Houthis do not just follow Iranian orders, in fact they are as free an agent as the Yemeni actors and groups that the Saudis have tried to influence over the years.^{xxix}

On Syria there is not a plausible compromise that the two countries could conceivably sign up to that would affect their Syrian alliances, funding, messages, or diplomacy. In Lebanon, despite the obvious overlap, the two countries have held back and in effect coalesced around General Aoun as president – coalescence should not of course be taken to mean partnership or even substantive discussions. In the past they have had high level engagement to avoid war in Lebanon, and periodically to try to resolve an intra-Lebanese impasse^{xxx}, and it is not impossible that this would happen again. However damage limitation in Lebanon starts from the basis that the post 1990 ‘peace’ cannot be threatened without both countries losing out. This does not guarantee that another civil war won’t break out in addition to the wash-back from a Syrian conflict in which the Lebanese are intimately involved. But the Saudis know that Lebanon, like Iraq, is a fait accompli – diffuse Sunnis cannot impose their will on a Shia plurality.

Saudi oil production policy is largely about Saudi economic interests. The global oil production deal finalised at end-2016 agreed cutbacks to try to push up the oil price. Oil output deals are an unlikely vehicle for a political, much less strategic, understanding. They easily flounder on states’ unwillingness to be tied to production quotas. Specifically the deal was the result of Iran, eager to at least maintain its post-sanctions oil output, being absolved from making a cut in a deal mediated by Russia. Saudi agreement with Russian efforts, given Riyadh’s perilous fiscal position, could easily come undone given Iran and Iraq’s oil ambitions, and the tendency for any output deal to only be observed in the breach.

USA – déjà vu all over again?

Ultimately the Saudis’ most important Middle Eastern relationship is with the country that will continue to be the preeminent regional player, the USA. Mutual recrimination and exasperation may well continue. The Saudis are angry at Congress for passing JASTA (Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act) and for Congressional pressure over US arms sales to Saudi Arabia in light of the Yemen war. The US reportedly became less attractive for Saudi state investment due to fears of legal action^{xxxi}. However, the Trump Administration may seek to soften the impact of JASTA in practice or by upholding Saudi Arabia’s sovereign immunity or seeking Congressional reconsideration. At bottom the lack of evidence of Saudi state complicity in the 9-11 plot, will probably ease bilateral tension over the issue, something that Saudi officials are obviously keen to happen.

The US under Donald Trump will continue to be obliged to treat the Saudis as an ally for fear of the alternative, conditioned by the strategic reach that defence sales, training and basing access gives it in the Kingdom. On the Saudi side, what they perceived as an Iran-friendly American paper tiger during Obama’s presidency may, under President Trump, show its claws. Theoretically the Saudis would like this if it sets back Iranian gains in Syria, and were pleased with the initial signs at the beginning of the Trump presidency of a greater US

willingness to use the military weapon^{xxxii}. The US' military presence among the Kurds in the north-east of the country is, however limited, the American boots on the ground that the Saudis have long urged^{xxxiii}. However Trump has also acted on his talk of working with Russia to focus on ISIS, and the Iranians, and their ally Assad, have been the beneficiaries.

The Saudis may resume their periodic complaints about US regional policy whilst quietly recognising that they don't have, and don't want, any other protector. They know that they aren't capable of being, nor do they want to be, the Arabian Peninsula policeman, however many weapons they buy and even if they eventually develop a strategic maritime capability.

These two mutually contemptuous companions never had a love to rekindle, but this doomed marriage, to overuse an already well-worn set of clichés about their matrimonial state, is not going to be terminated any time soon. The ongoing reduction of US oil dependency on the Gulf (and other external suppliers) does not mean that the Gulf's importance to global security will decline, at least for as long as Arabia is a major source of global energy. In short Mohammed bin Salman isn't doing anything different to what Mohammed bin Naif would have done regarding Saudi-US relations.

The Trump administration might go back to the future and promote Gulf Arab military capabilities as a trip wire for a rescuing western intervention, buttressed with serious Gulf collective and individual kit purchases of a kind the US has long favoured, including ballistic missile defence. It is notable that in 2015, under President Obama, the US agreed an eye-watering \$37bn worth of arms deals with Saudi Arabia. There has been a more active display of collective Gulf Arab military capability already, albeit sometimes less strategic than symbolic.^{xxxiv} Into this mix comes Mohammed bin Salman's talking-up of an Arab, and later what he called an Islamic, coalition. This followed King Abdullah's 'Arab military force' proposal i.e. loose intra-GCC cooperation with some other Arab partners tacked on, often as political rather than military allies, as seen over Yemen.

President Trump, who prior to entering the White House was never a fan of regime change, doesn't want changes of government in the Gulf (aside from maybe in Doha). His more isolationist instincts do not preclude losing-off US armaments as has long occurred via US drones in Yemen. It doesn't mean that he thinks that the upheaval that followed the Arab Uprisings is a good reason to embrace democracy promotion, in Saudi or anywhere else. Getting the Gulf to "pay its way" seemed like it could cause US friction with Riyadh, but Trump's disdain for the Iranian nuclear deal and his talk of working with "friends" has meant that he has been reaffirming existing alliances – principally with Saudi and Israel. These were two of the American Middle Eastern security props that, after over-exposure in Vietnam, the US wanted to take on greater regional responsibility. The third part of the then US regional security tripod, Iran, is off limits as it pushes home its regional advantage to the anger of more established US allies.

In this context the Gulf balance of power strategy sought by Obama may continue but remain difficult to realise. However, giving Middle Eastern allies a greater regional role equates with Trump giving the Saudis the nod to take on Qatar (in order to offset Iran) and continuing to assist the Saudis in Yemen with kit and intel (the kit part had suffered a hiccup

under Obama). The Saudis seem to be adjusting to the downside of this, that whether Obama or Trump, the US is more disengaged militarily even if its armed forces' basing rights and access in the Gulf remain in regular use. There is also an ongoing US and European distaste for what they perceive Wahhabism to mean in Iraq, Syria, Yemen etc. MbS is very aware of this as he seeks to better manage the Saudi state's compact with Islamic clerics. Hillary Clinton is on record as saying privately (when out of office) that the Saudi and Qatari "governments" were giving "clandestine financial and logistical support to ISIL" (i.e. ISIS or Da'esh).^{xxxv} President Trump might get one of his team to privately talk tough to *any* Gulf state where professed (and internationally monitored) funding controls are leaky. However this is what the US did after 9-11, even if some Gulf states did not deserve the public praise the US gave them. Under Mohammed bin Salman, the periodically dysfunctional Saudi-US marriage will continue.

Conclusion

The young prince has not made that much difference to the challenges facing the Kingdom he desires to rule, and has compounded some of its problems. Under MbS' heavy influence Saudi Arabian foreign policy has been bedevilled by the same issues as under King Abdullah and his lieutenants. Only on Yemen can there be a greater degree of Saudi muscle-flexing, and, in political terms, there is toward Qatar. However there has been little practical achievement for Saudi security and regional influence, and a lot of questioning in the US and UK about their country's intimate relationship with the Kingdom. For now at least, President Trump is a Saudi fan. That may not last.

Saudi frustration with the US hasn't wholly gone away, especially over Syria and Iraq. The Saudis will remain relatively impotent in these countries, backing proxies in Syria for as long as it is practically and politically possible to do so, and allowing money to reach Sunni Arabs in Iraq who fight turf battles with Iranian-backed Shia while stepping up the Kingdom's long standing engagement with Shia politicians they believe they can do business with.

Palestine, and US equivocation over it, is way down the totem pole of Saudi priorities, and was never that strategically important. It was, and periodically will be, an ideational constant that projects soft power. In strategic terms the Saudis look at Palestine in terms of the priority of keeping Jordan as the Kingdom's western buffer. The Saudis wanted, and still want, to literally keep distant from that conflict and prefer periodically disbursing cash to any direct exposure. When they used economic muscle over Palestine in 1973-4, the west, and ultimately themselves, got burned.

MbS has brought more bluster to Saudi foreign policy, and with this comes the proven risk of miscalculation. Yemen is an obvious case in point. In Lebanon, Saudi policy had helped make its domestic politics an Iranian-led process, even if the eventual resolution of the presidency crisis needed Saudi Arabia on board. Saudi coffers could be opened up again for Lebanon, assuming that a resolution of the latest crisis, over the premiership, is resolved. None of this constitutes a new Saudi foreign policy. It is more the old one repackaged but with less caution. Not a good situation for Saudi Arabia to be in.

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ⁱ See page 220, Neil Partrick (ed.), *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy – Conflict and Cooperation*, London, IB Tauris: 2016.

ⁱⁱ Off the record interview with an Emirati national security analyst, London, November 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Neil Partrick, ‘Saudi Arabia – Economy’, *Middle East North Africa 2017 63rd edition*, London, Europa Publications/Routledge: 2016

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Nasser Nafeh Al-Barrak, April 4 2016, *Okaz*. The Saudi writing in this semi-official Saudi newspaper was using a label he argued was used by the “Saudi popular class”. Among the latter, he noted, there is “noticeable support” for this perceptibly determined Saudi approach to foreign policy.

^{vi} Interview with Jamal Khashoggi, September 2016.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Speaking at an on the record briefing at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI; the defence and security think tank in Whitehall, London).

^{ix} Off the record interview with leading Saudi journalist, London, December 2015

^x See also page 255, “Saudi Arabia and Yemen”, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy - Conflict and Cooperation*

^{xi} The father of the notorious brothers who had been in a pivotal position among Islamist-inclined and Gulf friendly Yemeni leaders until they lost Saudi backing. Without Saudi money they could not play the old patronage game that has bedevilled Yemeni and much of Arab politics. “Saudi Arabia and Yemen” Ibid.

^{xii} Literally, the ‘victory in Syria bloc’ i.e. the former Al-Qaida fighters *Jabha Al-Nusra*

^{xiii} Spencer, Richard, *The Times*, October 18, 2016

^{xiv} *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*. Op.Cit.

^{xv} *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*. Op.Cit.

^{xvi} Off the record interview with an advisor to a senior Saudi prince, July 2006

^{xvii} See page 136. Op.Cit.

^{xviii} The Qatari-owned (UK-based) news website *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* (Arabic and English editions) alleged this on October 15 2016. Wajdi Salemi, ‘Yemen’s Houthi rebels receiving Egyptian military hardware’. He wrote that Egypt had supplied the Houthi with small craft, using an unnamed Yemeni source as his basis for the claim and asserting that this had happened within the ‘last two months.’ The contact was supposed to be a Saleh associate.

^{xix} See “Saudi Arabia’s Relations with Syria and Lebanon”, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*. Ibid.

^{xx} For example, *Al-Safir*, October 25, 2016, ‘Aounist reassurances to Cairo: openness to the Sunnis and the Arabs’ (translated and given this headline by *Middle East Wire*). Albeit from an unreliable source, this rings true.

^{xxi} See footnote 7, page 72, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*. Ibid.

^{xxii} See page 25, “Limits of Being Helpful”, Neil Partrick, *The World Today*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, December 2010.

^{xxiii} The lead editorial in the *New York Times International Edition*, October 8 2016, talked of Saudi-Israeli economic and intelligence cooperation.

^{xxiv} See for example “Israel must seek Saudi Arabia’s friendship”, Edy Cohen, *The Jerusalem Post* (opinion), 27 November 2016

^{xxvi} As with the 2007 intra-Palestinian deal agreed with King Abdullah’s blessing. See pages 59-60, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*. Ibid.

^{xxvii} Zarif, Mohammed Javad, *New York Times International Edition*, September 13, 2016, 'Let us rid the world of Wahhabism'.

^{xxviii} Former Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal never actually met his Iranian counterpart, despite their mutually lukewarm efforts to do so after Rowhani's election.

^{xxix} See for example pages 245-6, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*

^{xxx} See for example pages 215, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*

^{xxxi} "Saudi Arabia considers US investment freeze", December 20 2016, Economist Intelligence Unit (online, subscriber-only report), London

^{xxxii} Off the record conversation with a former Saudi official, London, May 2017

^{xxxiii} See 'Saudi—Syrian/Lebanese relations', *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*

^{xxxiv} A Saudi naval exercise in September 2016 began with the ambitious title Gulf Shield 1 and was talked up as involving mine counter measures and battleship exercises. In practice it focused on putting small numbers of marines ashore. See Neil Partrick, 'Why US-Saudi relations will remain firm', *The National Interest* blog. In October 2016 Bahrain hosted a GCC defence exercise that was actually ministry of interior led.

^{xxxv} From private email correspondence over 2014 between Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, the then counsellor to President Obama, Wikileaks, <https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/emailid/3774>