

# Saudi Arabian strategy reassessment since 2003: The emergence of a regional leadership via Neoclassical Realist lenses

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## Abstract

This article argues that the well-discussed international behaviour change in Saudi Arabia, rather than being a consequence of the so-called Arab Spring, resulted from a grand strategy reassessment in the early 2000s. Grand strategy concerns how states assess the geostrategic environment, plan resource allocation and prioritize policy to meet national interests. Since the 1970s, Riyadh judged its geopolitical vulnerabilities concerning Iran and Iraq realistically, supporting the least threatening actor from the two and relying on the United States to protect the status quo. However, the 2003 Iraqi invasion forced strategy reevaluation, as it removed Baghdad from the power competition, empowering Tehran, Washington and Riyadh. In this new scenario, Saudi Arabia eventually decides on regional leadership as its priority interest, promoting, thus, partial autonomy from Washington and competition with Tehran. By employing Neoclassical Realism, this article argues that the reevaluation was gradual and in continuity with the monarchical logic. For that, it explores Saudi power position and shifts within status satisfaction and inter-monarchical preferences. Empirically, the article aims to demystify the image of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman as something that turned the tables within the leadership, arguing that changes in the country's international relations preceded his rise to power, being linked to King Abdullah. It concludes that, while Saudi Arabian geopolitical goal was clear for outside observers only after 2011, the planning process takes precedence. Theoretically, by providing insight into Saudi Arabia's status-seeking behaviour, its motivations and potential limitations, the article also contributes to discussions about de-Westernizing Realism by incorporating Middle Eastern contextuality.

## Keywords

Saudi Arabia, Neoclassical Realism, MBS, grand strategy, regional leadership

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## Introduction

No person represents the image of a changing, modern Saudi Arabia more than Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS). The ‘Salman era’ has turned scholarly attention to shifting state–society relations, regional political transformations, economic reform prospects and debates over cultural overtures (Al-Rasheed, 2018; Cochran, 2019; Hubbard, 2020). Regarding Saudi Arabia’s international relations (IR), MBS is linked to a heightened status-seeking behaviour that promotes the country as a prominent geopolitical actor. The war in Yemen since 2015 and the massive socio-economic reform plan Saudi Vision 2030 are clear examples of this new proactivity. Nevertheless, this article argues that MBS’s rise to power did not transform the country’s posture and attitude; instead, he only consolidated and amplified a strategy readjustment that has been in the making since King Abdullah’s reign (2005–2015). Moreover, this paper disagrees with those that locate the motivation for such changes in the 2011 so-called Arab Spring protests. While those enabled Saudi Arabia to get involved in domestic conundrums in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon and Bahrain, the impetus for shifting Saudi Arabia’s international behaviour must bring us back to how the monarchy perceived the regional environment after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

This article presents a theoretically informed explanation for the shift of grand strategy in Saudi Arabia during the 2000s. It employs Neoclassical Realism (NCR), a structural IR theory that includes domestic factors like ambitions, leadership and identity. The study of grand strategy concerns grasping a state’s understanding of the international environment, how it mobilizes its power and to what for (Kitchen, 2010: 121). This article argues that King Abdullah began a process of strategy reassessment after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq because he perceived that the regional order had transformed, dismantling Saudi Arabia’s traditional strategy of balancing threats from Iran and Iraq while maintaining itself close to the extra-regional actor. The NCR framework explores how, in less than a decade, Abdullah conceived the priority to proactively protect the Persian Gulf order, promoting Saudi Arabia as a regional power as the best alternative to guarantee the national interest. The analysis shows how steady empowerment since 2003 enabled Saudi Arabian to promote this new ambition towards the system. In tandem, it argues that this decision concerned not only a perceived change in the balance of power but also a growing disappointment towards Iran’s and the United States’ role in the region.

The article’s relevance is two-folded. First, it challenges the idea that Saudi Arabia’s increasingly prominent international attitude is the product of MBS’s personal ambitions. NCR enables us to link grand strategy reassessment to the independent causal effect of the Iraqi invasion, whereas Abdullah’s insights and perceptions fashioned how the country should perform after the reordering. Under these lenses, MBS’ Saudi Vision 2030 becomes a central tool for institutionalizing a new strategy that is, in fact, long in the making. Second, the article builds on current discussions about de-Westernizing the Realist intellectual canon by interacting with Middle East Studies literature, bringing Area Studies closer to IR (Foulon and Meibauer, 2020; Hurrell, 2016). The idea is that NCR has the needed flexible paradigmatic boundaries to add insights from MES scholars into the Realist worldview, providing a two-level theorization that emphasizes the importance of state-level factors – such as identity, perception and ideational preferences, issues that area specialists constantly stressed as vital to understanding the region. Therefore, this article offers evidence of the benefits of applying NCR to Global South regions by contextualizing Saudi Arabia’s decision-making and exploring the influence of perceptions and agency on IR.

For that, this article’s first section discusses the NCR framework to explore Saudi Arabia’s grand strategy reassessment. Second, it presents the country’s traditional grand strategy and, thirdly, explains how the Iraqi war spoiled this strategy’s continuance. Afterwards, it applies the framework

by contextualizing power as the independent variable and analysing status dissatisfaction and intra-monarchical preferences as the intervening variables. Finally, it examines the new grand strategy, the dependent variable. Methodologically, it offers a process-tracing investigation via content analysis of primary and secondary sources focusing on Abdullah's reign. It concludes that the expanded power since 2003, combined with a new sense of uncertainty about the United States' and Iran's behaviours, gave the Saudis a new aspiration for regional leadership.

## **Neoclassical Realism and grand strategy**

For NCR scholars, IR are driven by a country's position within the international power distribution; however, opening the state's black box is necessary to explain why countries act differently upon similar systemic stimuli (Foulon, 2015; Meibauer, 2020; Sterling-Folker, 2009; Wivel, 2005). In other words, systemic anarchy creates permissive conditions but does not control the outcome. In this sense, NCR renounces Neorealism's parsimony for the additional explanatory value of intervening variables. This way, factors such as identity, leadership or strategic culture create meaning for decision-makers to detect interests amidst uncertainty. However, as policies cannot transcend structural limitations, these factors receive the second position in the analysis, only influencing international politics, not determining them. Thus, these factors are intervening variables that fill the gap between systemic stimuli and concrete policies, handling practical problems concerning how actors perceive and respond to the structure.

Typically, Realism has been criticized for its Western-based, selective nature that reproduces the global division of power in its knowledge production and excludes a significant part of the world from the theorization process (Buzan and Acharya, 2019). However, reducing this Western parochialism does not mean necessarily abandoning traditional IR analytical and theoretical categories, many of which remain indispensable despite being today inefficient or inadequate (Ayoob, 2002; Chakrabarty, 2000; Hurrell, 2016). Notions such as security dilemma and power balance, developed by Western academia, are pertinent still worldwide. Therefore, what is needed is a recalibration of what the international is, promoting an understanding of global politics that interconnects the world's diversity and plurality.

One way to recalibrate this is by bringing Area Studies into how we develop the IR disciplinary field, detecting and examining how different scholars study politics in different parts of the world and what we can learn from interdisciplinary dialogue (Buzan, 2009; Hellmann and Valbjørn, 2017). This paper argues that because NCR eliminate word abandons Neorealism's parsimony to include domestic variables in its analytical model, it can effectively recalibrate Realism into being less Western-centric and more aware and inclusive of the Area Studies knowledge. This way, it offers space for us to balance agency and structure as well as material and non-material elements – something that most IR structural theories have failed to do. Foulon and Meibauer (2020) had already claimed that NCR could, without provoking ontological dissonance, interact with other non-Western thought and disciplines, learning how to expand its explanative value and improving its relevance within IR. Agreeing with this statement and taking up the challenge, this article expands NCR's scope and range by showcasing the theory's utility to Middle East Studies.

A fundamental analytical advantage of NCR is offering a predefined model with a hierarchical arrangement of variables that identifies the conditions under which domestic politics matter for international policies (Juneau, 2015). It is a straightforward model: unit-level variables are sub-sequential to systemic-level variables because agency is only possible within a perimeter of power-defined options. Thus, the power distribution in the system is the independent variable with a permissive feature: it enables or constrains actions. Moreover, power, the total of capabilities a state

has to seek its interests, is dynamic and multifactoral (Ripsman et al., 2016). That means that evaluating a country's power should not be confined to quantifying a country's military capabilities, being possible to explore other resources through qualitative contextualization.

Moreover, rather than discussing if states accumulate power for defence or offence maximization, NCR proposes that states are influence maximizers: meaning that the more power they perceive to have, the more control over the international or regional environment they will want (Rose, 1998). In this case, the balance of power is not set in stone nor prompts equal rational choices from states. Instead, it is a state's perceptions about the environment that shape its international behaviour because this assessment denotes the possibilities for actions beyond survival. Under this view, policymakers can recognize if the environment is permissive to have the 'luxury' of seeking goals beyond security. In other words, the set of international priorities a country can pursue varies according to how permissive or restrictive the environment is perceived.

This article investigates Saudi Arabia's grand strategy reassessment after 2003. Grand strategy is the statecraft of ranking policy priorities, assessing how resources can be mobilized to guarantee the national interests and outlining a plan to meet goals (Dueck, 2006). The concept appeared first within discussions concerning how to employ military force in war and peace times to protect and promote national interests. Scholars working on grand strategy tend to present extensive historical accounts of how powerful states rise, adapt or fall and how the international system plays with internal politics to formulate the policies that lead to these trajectories (Brands, 2015; Kennedy, 1989, 1987; Yan, 2019). Although some liberal scholars have stressed alliance-building, peace negotiation and cooperation to explain grand strategy, the literature tends to circle back to Realism and how the balance of power creates threats and opportunities to states. Neorealism, in particular, has restricted national interests to assuring security – by becoming and hegemon or continuing the status quo – explaining grand strategy formation or change via the balance of power only.

Conversely, NCR focuses on how states perceive power balance shifts, and explores the process in which outcomes are chosen, accepting the initial hypothesis that nations can have more than a single survivalist interest. Thus, grand strategy reassessment via NCR is a plural decision-making process involving politics, economy and military, all constrained by systemic imperatives (Kitchen, 2010). This way, NCR enables us to grasp the process of altering a strategy, which can be ignited reactively or not, depending on the policymaker's perception of systemic change.

Interestingly, the literature on grand strategy mainly concentrates on Western-centric cases and great powers, as if the 'grand' meant anything more grandiose than how a country manages its resources to achieve its goals. However, middle or regional power can also be expected to have grand strategies. Moreover, while grand strategies are often made official through position papers or big government announcements, that does not mean we cannot empirically explore a profound behaviour change as strategy reassessment without these documents. It is important to stress that such documents or announcements are associated more with great powers, where it is customary to declare new doctrines; middle or regional powers do not tend to do so, making their changes as they go. That does not mean one cannot study how they detect changes, list available options, predict reactions and select the preferable outcome after detecting the need for strategy reassessment. In fact, seeing how non-typical cases like Saudi Arabia readjust their planning with a perceived environmental shift should be recommendable for expanding in which directions this analytical concept can travel.

I argue that Saudi Arabia readjusted its grand strategy, producing variations in ambitions, alliance-making, foreign policy commitment, military deployment and long-term economic plans. For that, I contextualize the country's power broadly and include two intervening variables, following the respective analytical chain: state power after 2003 (independent variable) → status

satisfaction (intervening ideational variable) → monarchical ruling preferences (leadership intervening variable) → new grand strategy (dependent variable). This exercise helps de-Westernize the Realist canon, as it inductively theorizes domestic factors often stressed by the regional studies literature. While power is investigated qualitatively and contextualized, including economic and military factors, alliances and regional appeal, specialized literature and primary sources support the two intervening variables.

The first intervening variable considers Saudi Arabia's ideational motivations towards the regional system. Status concerns the ranking (great, regional, and small) states have in the power distribution. Hence, status is positional, social and subjective, being always relative to others within the system and their perceptions (Renshon, 2017). In this sense, ranking is not about having or not having, but how much one has concerning other peer competitors. Here, status satisfaction relates to a state's estimation of its status based on its interpretation of how others see itself and if that perception corresponds to its ambitions (Paul et al., 2014). States will be discontent with their status when they perceive that they are being ascribed a lower status among peers than they think they deserve. Conversely, they are satisfied when there is congruence between aspired and ascribed status. Hence, status satisfaction, as an analytical variable, shifts the grand strategy's parameters towards revisionism or continuity.

The second intervening variable relates to how the ruling leadership tilts outcomes according to their interests. Many NCR authors stress the importance of a leader's beliefs and personality, as no decisions are made in an intellectual or contextual vacuum (Juneau, 2015; Meibauer, 2020; Wohlforth, 1993). Leaders make policies, assess environmental restrictiveness and interpret their country's role in the system. In the Saudi case, the monarchy is dynastical, and policies are made chiefly through consensus building within the family's higher ranks. While there are important intra-monarchical disputes, the king has the final word, reproducing his beliefs, foreign policy discourse, and inclinations into grand strategy (Al-Rasheed, 2018; Niblock, 2006). Thus, this variable explores how influential monarchical actors' preferences and inherent biases influenced the new grand strategy.

## **Saudi Arabia's traditional grand strategy**

On the one hand, Saudi Arabia is a massive country with abundant energy resources and a very geostrategic position in the Middle East. On the other hand, it is a desert country deprived of underground water resources or permanent river bodies and has a poorly distributed population (Jones, 2010). This way, its geography has dictated both advantages and setbacks to its grand strategy making. Its immediate surroundings, the Persian Gulf, have been ransacked for centuries by external powers while marked by regional rivalry, transnational identities and wars. Therefore, the environment is primarily restrictive, with few opportunities for collaboration between states. Moreover, considering that its social contract is founded on the monarchy's ability to redistribute oil rents and protect Islamic sacred sites, the regime's continuity is highly dependent on the well-function of the global energy market and the regional predominance of the Islamic religion (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Kechichian, 2000).

The Persian Gulf has always been a multipolar regional system. That means no country has accumulated the capabilities to become a hegemon and impose its will over others (Aarts and van Duijne, 2009; Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). Nevertheless, since the British departed in the early 1970s, the two most suitable candidates have been Iran and Iraq due to their size, population and military resources. Back then, Saudi Arabia was a weaker state, its institutions were still consolidating, and there was no considerable military capacity (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Despite the 1973

oil price boom, Riyadh could not still effectively translate its capital into military clout due to human and technical constraints (Safran, 1998).

The Al'Saud regime was acutely aware of these demographical and military vulnerabilities (Long, 1985). Moreover, the memory of stronger neighbours that conspired against ruling dynasties permeated Al'Saud's political ethos (Long, 1985; Riedel, 2018). Therefore, stability has been guaranteed through the auspices of a stronger third party, the United Kingdom, that maintained local order and balanced hubris regional actors (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Gause, 2011). When the British departed, Saudi leaders expected the United States – an external power they were much more sympathetic to – to protect the status quo and assure that Iran and Iraq would not become regional hegemons (Safran, 1998). In a nutshell, aware that it could not promote order and that the two greater regional actors were instability sources, Saudi Arabia expected that an extra-regional actor would secure the regional status quo and block the rise of a hegemon (Aarts and van Duijne, 2009; Gause, 2011).

When it became clear that Washington would prioritize Iran to replace the British role under the Nixon Doctrine, King Faisal sought proximity with Iran to balance Iraq in what became known as the Twin Pillar Diplomacy (Kechichian, 2008; Safran, 1998). Saudis concluded that Iraq was the more prominent threat to the order due to its proximity to the Soviet Union, secular Arabism and Saddam Hussein's aggressive rhetoric. By engaging with the more conservative regional actor in combination with the United States, the king hoped to 'essentially count on Iran to check Iraq, and on the United States to check Iran' (Safran, 1998: 178). This way, King Faisal shaped Saudi Arabian grand strategy, inserting a predilection for a wait-and-see behaviour that avoided taking a proactive stand until having a comprehensive grasp of who – Iran or Iraq – was the more significant threat to regional stability and what the United States' intentions were.

This strategy endured for decades. In the 1980s, after reassessing the political environment following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Riyadh eventually broke relations with Tehran in 1987 and tilted towards Baghdad, supporting Saddam's war against Iran while strengthening security ties with the United States (1980–1988). Later in the 1990s, after Saddam invaded Kuwait, Saudi Arabia invited US troops to protect its borders while reconsidering Tehran's new pragmatic behaviour, tilting towards cautious cooperation with Iran against Iraq (Bahgat, 2000; Okruhlik, 2003). Thus, Riyadh neither competed for regional leadership with the other two actors nor antagonized the United States' predominance in the Persian Gulf, who upheld the conservative order that interested the Saudis. In other words, Saudi Arabia was satisfied with the structure as long as the United States assured no actor would become a regional hegemon. This expectation first emerged with Nixon's dual diplomacy, was officialized with the Carter Doctrine and only shattered with George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq.

## **The 2003 Iraq invasion**

The Carter Doctrine was conceived in 1980, When the United States became convinced that the Persian Gulf's security was endangered and that it was necessary to increase its involvement to protect the order. This way, the doctrine established that the region had high-ranking strategic importance for Washington. In President Carter's words, 'an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America' (Carter, January 23/ 1989). Consequently, it was essential for the United States to fortify friendly governments, consolidate prioritarian diplomatic ties, provide military assistance to partners and promote regional stability (Brands, 2016). While conceived in the

Cold War context, the following presidents continued the strategy uninterrupted, assuming the role of safeguarding the Persian Gulf status quo.

However, George W. Bush's decision to preemptively attack Iraq and force regime change as a retaliation to the 9/11 terrorist attacks went beyond the Carter Doctrine's mandate. Concluding that terrorism resulted from a lack of liberal democracies, the new Bush Doctrine aimed to bring 'the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade' to the Middle East (Dodge, 2013: 243). With bipartisan approval but little support from local allies, Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched on 19 March 2003, to apprehend world mass destruction armaments Saddam supposedly had (Hiro, 2018). On May 1, Bush declared the mission accomplished, dissolving the Iraqi army and proceeding to push for a political transition. By June 2004, Washington handed political control back to the Iraqi government. By this time, insurgency and sectarian disputes dominated the political field, exposing the overall failure of the 'democratization mission'.

The conflict shook the power dynamics within the Persian Gulf. The Iraqi defeat revealed the United States' military superiority in the region, reaching a status of extra-regional power (Ayoob, 2011). Conversely, Iraq could no longer be considered a candidate for regional hegemony, as it scuffled a complex civil conflict and a messy state-building process. Concomitantly, this scenario increased Iran's power in concrete and relative terms. First, Iran's environment became much less restrictive as Iraq's new government transformed into a close partner instead of an enemy. Second, whereas the United States failed to transform Iraq by imposing its Westernized ideals, Iran's strategy of conducting complex political and proxy campaigns broadened its influence and security there (Abedin, 2019). Third, the political empowerment of revisionist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Houthis in the 2000s also contributed to Iran's power, giving it more leverage and influence on local affairs.

Therefore, the balance of power configuration changed, with Iraq becoming an arena for Iran and the United States – both empowered by the conflict – to compete for influence. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia steadily increased its status during the decade due to economic, security and military reasons, as the next section explains. Thus, Iran and Saudi Arabia emerged as the Persian Gulf's most substantial power brokers, which many authors have called a Cold War that began immediately after Saddam's fall (Aarts and van Duijne, 2009; Gause, 2014; Ryan, 2019). However, this term is not the most appropriate, as Saudi–Iranian ties kept on good terms until 2006. In fact, the Iraqi invasion happened in one of the most cordial moments between Iranians and Saudis, which was on an ascending improving period since the 1990s. Yet, by 2011, a rivalry for regional leadership between the two became evident, involving proxy conflicts and a sectarian war on words.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia had a period of grand strategic reassessment from 2003 to 2011 as the United States' decision to invade Iraq annihilated its previous tradition of balancing Iran and Iraq. The following sections provide an NCR assessment that shows how the decade after the invasion represented a moment of transition, resulting in the conception of a new national ambition: to be a regional power in opposition to Iran. It was this new ambition that gradually converted Saudi–Iranian relations from *détente* to competition in the Persian Gulf.

### **Independent variable: Saudi Arabia's power**

The 2000s represented a moment of steady empowerment for the monarchy, as the boom of oil prices allowed economic and military expansion. For example, the GDP rose from US\$ 2158 billion in 2003 to US\$ 6712 billion in 2008 (World Bank, n.d.b). The period also pointed to trade diversification, increasing crude oil sales to Asian markets, particularly China. Furthermore, the country invested heavily in extractivist technology to secure energy facilities,

spending more than US\$ 1.2 billion in infrastructure only between 2002 and 2004 (Barnes and Jaffe, 2006). Finally, the GDP per capita grew from US\$ 9.609 in 2000 to US\$ 25.243 in 2012 (World Bank, n.d.c).

This increase in petrodollars led to more substantial and holistic militarization. The defence budget grew exponentially, from US\$ 18.7 billion in 2003 to US\$ 67 billion in 2013 (World Bank, n.d.d). It consumed between 7.5% and 8.5% of the GDP throughout the 2000s, reaching a staggering 10.6% in 2014. The kingdom invested in quantitative and qualitative terms, focusing on air and land warfare for defence and offence capabilities (Rich, 2012). It sought a suitable air force as the first line of deterrence and an 'over-the-horizon reinforcement by the United States to deal with high-level and enduring regional conflicts' (Richter, 2014: 185). Quickly, its air force became the most sophisticated in the region, the only one with Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) radars for surveillance and defensive operations (Cordesman, 2010; Rich, 2012). In addition, it invested significantly in armoured fighting vehicles, overpassing Iran in quantity and quality (Cordesman, 2010). However, it kept behind in artillery, rocket inventory and, most importantly, military personnel, which only increased from 215 thousand in 2003 to 251 thousand in 2014, roughly half of Iran's numbers (World Bank, n.d.a).

Also crucial for power are a country's alliances and partnerships. Arms sales and counterterrorism operations improved Riyadh's economic and security links with the United States and other European countries (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan, 2007). Likewise, it boosted relations in wide-ranging terms with China and made some overtures to Russia (Saikal, 2016). Moreover, throughout the decade, relations with the majority of the Middle East countries kept positive. For example, there was an unprecedented degree of security cooperation with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, as well as direct political influence in Egypt and Lebanon (Russell, 2005; Saikal, 2016). However, relations with Iran started to stall in 2006, with the Saudis getting more critical of the latter's nuclear program and interventionist behaviour in the region.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's influence was bolstered in the 2000s due to the growing importance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the global financial market and as a creditor for Middle Eastern countries struggling with economic hardship. Finally, as the 2011 Arab Uprising shook the political scenario and weakened traditional Arab leaders, the Persian Gulf monarchies gained prestige in relation to other countries due to their regime stability. As a result, the GCC countries became 'more emboldened in military terms, more ambitious in diplomatic terms and less receptive to outside influence' – in what some called the 'Gulf Moment' (Gaub, 2015: 1). Saudi Arabia notably used the situation to enhance its influence by boosting diplomatic and financial assistance to Arab nations: between 2011 and 2014, it pledged roughly US\$ 22.7 billion in regional aid, mainly to Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon and Oman (Richter, 2014). It also directly assisted militarily and economically Sunnis in the Iraqi conflict and others allied governments facing domestic insurgency, particularly Egypt after the 2013 coup. Finally, it sent troops to Bahrain in 2011 to curb protesters and initiated the 2015 war in Yemen against Houthi rebels.

Saudi Arabia's regional influence emanates from its position as a stable monarchy with solid partnerships, its authoritative voice among the Sunni Islamic community and its reputation as an oil powerhouse. The decade after the Iraq invasion was one of continuous empowerment, resulting in an ever-growing influence and, thus, a more permissive environment. The oil prices warmed the economy, expanded the economic partners and led to unforeseeable numbers in military spending. As a result, Riyadh became less dependent on the United States to train its civil servants and military officers and ship its oil (Lippman, 2011). This way, while still reliant on foreign assistance and training, the Saudis were catching up militarily, improving in virtually every category (Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). Whereas there was no environment openness to conceive a grand strategy promoting Saudi Arabia as a regional power by the 1970s, that changed by the eve of the 2010s.



## First intervening variable: Saudi Arabia's status satisfaction

From 1980 until 2003, the Carter Doctrine mainly controlled Saudi Arabia's unease towards the regional order, as it protected the status quo. However, the Iraqi invasion instigated a growing dissatisfaction with the order of things among Saudis. Although Saddam was an enemy, Riyadh saw his replacement by Shia politicians as highly problematic, as it opened the doors for Iranian influence (Lippman, 2011). They believed Washington offered Iraq to Tehran in 'a golden platter' (Al-Saud, Saud al Faisal bin Abdulaziz, 2005), encouraging, instead of inhibiting, Iranian expansionism. They were also concerned that the Shia political strengthening would have regional spillovers, creating a problem between the kingdom and its own Shia minority in the oil-rich eastern province. Reluctant to engage with the power balance change, Saudi leaders expected to negotiate their acceptance of a more substantial Iranian role in Iraq for more significant participation of Sunni groups in the power-sharing arrangements post-Saddam. However, Washington and Tehran repeatedly ignored Riyadh's requests on that matter (Keynoush, 2016). Thus, with a 'Shia versus Sunni divide' narrative pervading the Iraqi conflict, Saudi Arabia felt the rise of an ideological and geopolitical rivalry against Iran almost inevitable (Gause, 2014; Mabon, 2015).

For the Saudis, George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's performances in the Middle East have been erratic, repeatedly discarding the Carter Doctrine while exposing trouble in enforcing their will. First, the monarchy had been openly critical of Bush's ambitions to promote regime change in Iraq, as they were aware that a forced, liberal democratization would mostly initiate social unrest and instability (Lippman, 2011; Russell, 2005). Second, Obama's reticence towards the 2011 protests in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon, coupled with his leniency on Syria and the promise to shift priorities away from the Middle East, making an 'Asian Pivot', incepted abandonment issues within the monarchy (Rickli, 2016). Furthermore, Obama often talked about the need for Middle Eastern partners to 'share the burden' of security and that the GCC states and Iran should 'find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace' (Goldberg, 2016). For Riyadh, these announcements were a confession that the US power and willingness in the region had indeed limits (Akbarzadeh, 2011).

Thus, Saudi Arabia found itself gradually more dissatisfied with the United States' capability of protecting the regional order. At the same time, it was anxious about Iran's increasing regional interference in Arab affairs. In Lebanon, for example, Saudi Arabia began to accuse Iran of meddling in domestic politics after Hezbollah increased its political grasp, often warning Tehran to 'observe its limits' (Dawn, 2007). Most importantly, Saudi Arabia was highly suspicious of Iran's nuclear program. In February 2006, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported Iran for non-compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In July, Tehran rejected the UN Security Council's Resolution 1696, which demanded the suspension of uranium enrichment activities. These revelations rang several alarms in Riyadh, as such capacities could allow Tehran to hegemonically impose its will in the region (Russell, 2005).

Reasonably, they were displeased when the P5 + 1 nuclear deal was signed in Geneva in 2013 and when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was ratified in 2015 without their consulting or involvement. Already in 2009, the monarchy informed the United States that they were 'okay with nuclear electric power and desalination, but not with enrichment' as 'they [Iran] do not need it!' (Saudi Arabia Embassy, 2009a). Hence, the United States' choice to sign a deal without previously informing Riyadh was seen as a betrayal of trust. There was a noticeable trust deficit despite Obama's attempts to reassure his Saudi counterparts otherwise (Bahgat and Sharp, 2014). Riyadh perceived the deal as evidence that Washington was ready to reckon with Iran's regional indispensability at the cost of the conservative monarchies' security. Therefore, once

again, Iran became the biggest threat to the regional order, a fear hyped by the growing awareness that the United States could not be left alone anymore to guarantee the order.

## **Second intervening variable: monarchical preferences**

During the analysed period, the rule was in Abdullah's hands, first as Crown Prince (1982–2005) and later as King (2005–2015). King Fahd, who suffered from health problems, made Abdullah the de facto ruler around 1995. During Fahd's reign, one group of princes, the Sudayri brothers, became increasingly influential, taking over key ministries, government posts and offices (Al-Rasheed, 2010). The Sudayris – which Fahd belonged – are associated with pursuing an ever-stronger relationship with the United States and a harsher stance against Iran. They tend to lay off calls for affronting Washington if that can damage the partnership, and they are very suspicious of Iran's ability to manipulate Shia minorities or expand its influence throughout Arab countries (Long, 1985; Riedel, 2018).

However, Abdullah was not a Sudayri and often disagreed with them on international policy (Alsultan and Saeid, 2016). Instead, he emphasized ties with regional countries and promoted a more independent pursuit of national interests. Often portrayed as a 'natural reconciler' (Hiro, 2018: 148), the Crown Prince was popular among many tribes and Arab leaders, such as Hafiz al-Asad of Syria and Kamal Jumblatt of Lebanon (Alsultan and Saeid, 2016). He was also seen as 'more closely attuned to domestic voices than Fahd' and less driven by sectarian narratives than the Sudayris (Okruhlik, 2003: 114). For example, during the 1990 Gulf War, Abdullah called for an Arab solution, disagreeing with Fahd and other Sudayris, who eventually invited the US troops to fight Saddam (Riedel, 2018).

Throughout the 1990s, Abdullah developed a *détente* with Iranian presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami. He perceived the regional environment as less restricted, enabling a more constructive relationship. Therefore, he reached out to Iran, showing interest in developing a more collaborative regional system through cautious engagement (Bahgat, 2000). Strategically, Abdullah sought to intensify regionalism, believing it could improve Saudi Arabia's security and its general influence. Moreover, he called for an 'interfaith dialogue' to reduce sectarianism and improve relations between the nations along cross-sectarian lines (Kechichian, 2000: 48). In short, he believed that if collaboration could be achieved via an inter-faith exchange, Saudi Arabia would secure for itself an overall more prominent regional role.

Nevertheless, he understood that the environment became more restrictive after 2003. While the Crown Prince stood against the Iraqi invasion, there was little left to do than implicitly back it, considering the importance of the security partnership with Washington. Moreover, the battle against terrorism at home was a serious challenge to the monarchy, as a hidden Osama bin Laden called for overthrowing all the monarchies of the Arab Peninsula, the 'traitors' of the Islamic people (Riedel, 2018). In parallel, the perception that neither the United States nor Iraq was capable to check an increasingly empowered Iran drove Abdullah closer and closer to the Sudayri clan and their suspicious views on Tehran, eventually abandoning the *détente* by 2006 (Keynoush, 2016). In this scenario, Defence Minister Prince Sultan grew in power backed by Prince Bandar, both Sudayri and known critics of the Iran–Saudi rapprochement (Al Toraiifi, 2012). Probably more receptive to such influence, Abdullah gradually took a stronger stand against Iran. He perceived that Tehran was intervening excessively in Arab countries, even saying to the Iranian foreign minister that 'you as Persians have no business meddling in Arab matters' (Saudi Arabia Embassy, 2009b).

Likewise, Abdullah began to employ the 'Shia crescent' narrative, coined by Jordan's King Abdullah, claiming that Iran coordinated a Shias network to overthrow Sunni regimes (Gause,

2014). While that was closer to a conspiracy theory than reality, many Arab leaders insisted on it, warning about a Shia plot against the order (Al-Rasheed, 2011). Reinforcing the narrative, Abdullah affirmed that 'Iran's goal is to cause problems' (Saudi Arabia Embassy, 2009b). Furthermore, in a meeting with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Prince al Faisal claimed that 'an immediate solution for the Iranian nuclear program's threat instead of a gradual solution' was imperative (BBC News, 2010). Thus, Saudi political leaders ultimately agreed that Iran needed to be proactively contained to protect the conservative status quo. Leaked cables exposed this harsher attitude against Iran:

The position of the King is very clear on Iran,' al-Jubeir said. King Abdullah believes that only a show of US strength will stop Iran's expansionist policies and halt its nuclear program, he said, adding that the program is clearly intended to produce nuclear weapons. He noted that the king rejects the argument that military action against Iran will coalesce popular support around President Ahmadinejad. (Saudi Arabia Embassy, 2007)

Finally, the 2011 Arab Uprisings had a pivotal effect on the king's perception of the regional arrangement. The events brought new challenges to the Middle Eastern stability, and the domestic turmoil reduced the regional influence take off of countries like as Egypt, Libya and Syria (Rickli, 2016). In this context of weakened traditional Arab actors, Abdullah saw an opportunity to promote Saudi Arabia as a new Arab leader with enough domestic stability and resources to sustain order. This way, he kept his inclinations for regionalism while changing his position concerning Iran's ideal role in the region. After 2011, the monarchy intensified its rhetoric against Iran's behaviour, stressing that Iran's expansionist project threatened the whole order due to its revolutionary discourse and Shia narrowness (Al-Rasheed, 2011). Therefore, Saudi Arabia started to promote itself as a voice for the 'moderate Arabs' that could oppose the nuclear project, reject Iran's interference in Iraq and Lebanon, condemn the Syrian-Iranian alliance and criticize radicalized Palestinian groups (Al Toraifi, 2012).

Therefore, this variable indicates a shift within the monarchical preferences during this period, bringing Abdullah closer to the Sudayris' assessment that Iran is an expansionist country aiming for a hegemon position. However, he kept his preferences for regionalism, reorienting the country's foreign policy towards an Arab-centred project, in which he could promote Riyadh as the bastion of moderate Arabs in opposition to Iran's radicalized groups. In conclusion, the king decided that no other Arab could counterweight Iranian influence, so the Saudis would have to 'do the job themselves' (Gause, 2014; 13).

### **The dependable variable: a new grand strategy of regional leadership**

This article argues that, while empowerment was necessary to promote a status-seeking behaviour (a country seeks more influence when it perceives a power gain), escalating status dissatisfaction explains the motivations for regional proactivity since the 2010s. A combination of new threat perceptions and uncertainty towards order continuity led the monarchy to expand its ambitions. Concomitantly, leadership preferences explain the readjustment for Arabic-centric rhetoric, often sectarian and more independent from Washington. In a nutshell, increased power combined with a new sense of insecurity about the United States and Iran gave the country a new ambition: proactively protecting the status quo as a regional power. In this sense, Saudi Arabia did not become a revisionist actor as it did not want to change the conservative order. Instead, it promoted a status-seeking behaviour to increase its role in safeguarding the regional order. This way Saudi Arabia started to present itself as a possible candidate for regional hegemony.

The intervening variables revealed that the Saudi grand strategy's gradual evolution interlinks to the United States' and Iran's regional behaviour. In short, four external strikes led Saudis to decide on a regional leadership strategy: (a) its exclusion from the post-conflict decisions in Iraq, (b) Iran's growing involvement in Arab politics, (c) Iran's nuclear program and (4) the perception that Washington was no longer willing to guarantee regional stability. Thus, whereas the Iraq invasion and economic/military empowerment created the conditions to develop a new strategy, an amplified sense of threat justified elaborating one focused on protecting Arab countries, checking Iran's power and complementing the United States' protection.

This grand strategy aims at guaranteeing Riyadh a position of authority in religious matters and Arab geopolitics, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Hence, Abdullah invested in military capacitation to ensure Saudi Arabia's cruciality in the regional political game. Moreover, he stepped up his regionalism plan, boosting the country's political influence. For example, in February 2010, Abdullah proposed that the GCC move towards a confederation, and in June, he invited Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC, expanding the organization's reach (Rich, 2012). While neither materialized, the proposals show intention. Furthermore, the 2011 uprisings created new momentum as the environment got less restrictive for foreign aid, political interventionism and military assistance to regional countries. As a result, Riyadh extended its economic support to Arab nations struggling after protests and summoned Muslim countries, from Morocco to Malaysia, to join in military exercises to reestablish stability.

Finally, this leadership strategy encompassed a war of rhetoric against Iran, framing Saudi Arabia's growing influence as an alternative to Iran's expansionist and disruptive actions. Initially, the monarchs described Iran as a Persian foreign nation intervening in Arab politics to differentiate Iran from the rest of the region, othering it. However, they eventually stepped up the othering process by employing the Shia versus Sunni narrative to justify their opposition to Arab groups closer to Iran in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. Under this sectarian frame, Riyadh sent more than a thousand troops to Bahrain to defend the Al Khalifa regime against Shia Arab protesters supposedly incited by Tehran. Interestingly, this operation was against the US advice; according to Riedel (2018: 159), Abdullah even warned that if the United States interfered in Bahrain, it would 'provoke a rupture in Saudi-American relations'.

This new grand strategy reflected a dissatisfaction with the US behaviour. The nuclear negotiations with Iran and the lethargy in responding to Egypt and Syria crisis increased Abdullah's disapproval of Washington. Some Saudis said openly that Washington treated its allies 'like it treated the Shah when he was deposed,' warning Americans to 'listen to its friends' (Riedel, 2018: 162). That is not to say that the relations were tainted, but there has been much more open criticism since 2011. That can be linked to Abdullah's preference for greater independence from the United States. However, as the NCR frame makes it clear, that could not be possible or sustainable if Saudi Arabia had not passed through a decade of empowerment that enabled more ambitious behaviour in the first place.

By the end of Abdullah's reign, Saudi Arabia's new ambitions were out in the open. Since the eve of the 2010s, Riyadh has sought to affirm its regional prominence in the context of escalating Iranian threat and perceived US neglect. After his death in January 2015, his Sudayri brother, Salman, became king without disruption or tensions within the monarchy. While the crown prince MBS is widely known as the commander of the 2015 Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen, one must remember that Saudi Arabia has been pushing for a political transition in Yemen since 2011 (Clausen, 2015) and has already intervened militarily in Bahrain before the Salmans reach to power. Nevertheless, launching an air attack without previously being attacked was unprecedented. In this sense, MBS consolidated for the world to see the strategy of regional hegemony that has been in the making for almost a decade. In the same vein, King Salman launched

in December 2015 the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, an alliance of 34 countries for counter-terrorist activities. This coalition and the operations in Bahrain and Yemen stood out for their proactivity and relative independence from the extra-regional power.

This project of regional leadership also involves critical changes in the foundations of the monarchy to tackle tensions within the rentier social contract and create the greater economic sustainability needed to be a regional power. In this context, MBS announced in April 2016 the Saudi Vision 2030, a massive reform plan to transform the oil-dependent economy into an 'exceptional nation' with a 'grandiose role' (Alhussein, 2019; Al-Rasheed, 2018). The plan relies on reaching vast amounts of cash inflow from foreign and domestic investment and counts on the population to join the workforce and increment the private sector. It appeals to people to contribute to progress, linking economic participation with the citizen duty towards the country's transformation – promoting a new sense of nationalism. This incipient nationalism must be linked with the goal of promoting Saudi Arabia as a regional powerhouse rather than a sole bastion for religion values. Finally, while enormous in size and scope, Vision 2030 cannot be dissociated from previous plans of economic diversification and modernization, such as the King Abdullah economic cities – again, it does not indicate a rupture but an enlargement of ambitions set before.

In conclusion, the 'Salman Doctrine' is a continuation of the strategy laid out by Abdullah. It aims towards a conservative regional leadership in opposition to Iran. Accordingly, the country accelerated its military procurement, improved its ties with other Arab countries, promoted diversification and created a nationalist discourse that excels in Saudi exceptionalism. These objectives are comprehensive, and it is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate them or make a prognosis about their sustainability. However, the prolongation of the Yemeni war, the ineffectiveness of the 2017 Qatar Blockage and the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi may have exposed the shortcomings of such a strategy. Most importantly, the country's military still depends on Washington and lacks a consistent command and communication structure. Hence, while an increase in power enabled the emergence of new ambition, pursuing such ambition, paradoxically, can expose the country's power limitations.

## Conclusions

Some authors argue that a Persian Gulf tripolarity, a decades-old competition for hegemony between Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, shapes the power balance (Aarts and van Duijne, 2009; Fürtig, 2002; Gause, 2010). However, this interpretation is unsatisfactory as, from 1971 until 2003, Saudi Arabia did not compete for regional leadership. Instead, it was acutely aware of its limitations, coordinating a strategy with the less threatening regional country while backed by the extra-regional power. However, the 2003 Iraqi War eradicated this strategy, forcing the Saudis to reassess their options to deal with the new regional order. This article argued that the country's new regional ambition was born out of increased power, status dissatisfaction related to the United States and Iran and leaders' preferences for regionalism and Arab leadership.

The Neoclassical Realist framework effectively showcased the evolution of this strategic reassessment. This notion of graduality improves our understanding of grand strategy making. Instead of being dependent on a publicized doctrine or an official document, grand strategies can be evident by observing a steady alteration of international behaviour that results from a process of planning, assessment and mobilization of power elements to guarantee national interests under different conditions. In the Saudi Arabian case, an external factor dismantled its traditional policy and forced it to search for new outcomes. It took almost a decade for the new strategy to be there in the open.

Finally, the article supported the prediction that states are influence-seekers and that a perceived power increase opens the possibility of developing bold motivations – beyond survival. Thus, it empirically sustained the NCR assumption that power is a permissive factor in IR. Nevertheless, it is becoming clear that such a grand strategy may have resulted in a biting-more-than-you-can-chew situation for Saudi Arabia. While the 2003–2013 period represented an expansion of the country's power, now, with the benefit of foresight, it is clear that this expansion exposed limitations, particularly with oil prices dropping since 2014. As a cautionary tale, the economic and military improvement revealed structural constraints that still hamper Saudi Arabia's possibilities to become a regional power, but that is the topic of a different article.

This way, it was not the 2011 Arab Spring that induced change in Saudi Arabia's grand strategy but the 2003 Iraqi invasion. What happened is that the 2011 context provided many opportunities in which the Saudi leadership could, for the first time, project its new ambition to regional and international audiences. To understand how and why Riyadh took a much more proactive stance since 2011, seeking to increase its regional influence while reducing Iran's one, we must look into how 2003 shattered the monarchy's traditional strategy and how its increased power enabled the conceptualization of a much more ambitious national interest.

While it is too early to tell, the decision to reduce tensions with Iran does not necessarily mean a new grand strategy readjustment but maybe an agreed *détente* between two competing regional powers. What one should observe closely now is how this approximation, which culminated in the March 2023 Iran–Saudi agreement to restore relations, is again under the auspices of an extra-regional power, this time China. Beijing has a very different *modus operandi* than the United States regarding how it builds its international ties and what for. The adjustments one sees in the first years of the 2020s may indicate yet another change in the regional balance of power, opening new windows of opportunity and threats for the Persian Gulf actors to take advantage of; only time will tell.

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