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Riyadh Against the Spring:

Shaping perceptions in the Middle East?

MA International Relations

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Introduction

In March 2015, a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen, in an effort to reinstate the government of President Hadi and defeat the Shi'a revolutionary Houthis, in the context of the popular uprisings commonly known as Arab Spring[1]. Although controversially, the Arab Spring is considered to have had an inherent pro-democratic agenda.[2] In this line, Foreign Affairs, in a 2011 volume titled "The New Arab Revolt" was optimist that the Spring would install democracy in the Middle East.[3] Nevertheless, perceived by the Gulf states, especially by Saudi Arabia, as being a proxy actor of Iran, the Houthis' fight has been portrayed not as a democratic insurgence but as pursuing the hegemonic goals of Iran and Shi'a. Just like that, the Saudi Foreign Minister would justify the need for the intervention in Yemen with Iranian "hegemonic tendencies" and blame the unrest in the country on Iranian "elements of instability".[4]

Notwithstanding after the 2011 intervention in Bahrain, the operation in Yemen represents a novelty in Saudi regional foreign policy. Pursuing a regional power balance with Iran, Riyadh

[1] This term controversially refers to the popular uprisings that, since 2010, swept the Middle East. Indeed, more than carrying an ideological value, the Arab Spring has not meant the same everywhere. It has resulted in the toppling of long-lasting regimes in Egypt and Tunisia but, in Syria, for example, it has degenerated into a civil war and, in Saudi Arabia it is hard to talk of a Spring, given the regime's severe crackdown. Nevertheless, this research adopts this designation due to its broad use both in the academy and in popular culture; Tamamy (2012: 143).

[2] The Arab Spring is also analyzed by many authors through a purely sectarian framework or even a political one that opposes the major players in the region; Gause (2014: 16); Reese (2013: 15).

[3] Rich (2012: 471).

[4] Saud Al-Faisal (2015).

traditionally guaranteed its influence on a soft power basis, through the use of instruments that spread Sunni ideology, instead of the adoption of a particularly "confrontational" attitude.[5] However, since the beginning of the Arab Spring, a more active and vocal Saudi engagement in regional affairs is observed, especially in what Iran is concerned. The Yemeni case, almost unprecedented, is a clear example of this new Saudi approach.

Taking this shift into consideration, this research sets out to understand how the Arab Spring shaped Saudi regional foreign policy and its regional perceptions and what were the effects of Riadh's actions in the region and in its dynamics.

In order to reach its conclusions, the research starts by establishing Saudi perceptions of the Arab Spring and how these shaped Riyadh's regional foreign policy. In the sections that follow, Saudi actions and its effects are compiled and analyzed. Finally, in the conclusion, the findings of the research are explained and important analytical points are made about how the Middle East as a whole has been affected by Saudi policies, both in its politics and in the foundations of regional dynamics and relations. Reflecting on what follows for the region and for the Saudi regime, in the closing remarks, the diverse material results of Riyadh's regional foreign policy towards the Arab Spring are briefly analyzed.

The research entailed the use of different sources. Literature on the international relations of the Middle East and on the importance of identity and ideology was fundamental to understand the driving forces behind foreign policy production, as well as threat perceptions. Particularly in here, the study of literature that extensively considered sectarianism as a political dimension in the Middle East was equally valuable. Scholarly work on the Arab Spring across the region was consulted in order to map Saudi foreign policy and its effects. Additionally, the analytical conclusions on the reasoning behind Riyadh's actions were greatly supported by work focusing on the specifics of each actor in the region. The survey of Saudi regional perceptions had an additional dimension in terms of sources and methodology. Indeed, an analysis of Saudi and regional discourse was necessary to establish a coherent

[5] ECFR (2013: 2); Gause (2014: 13).

strategy towards the Arab Spring and assess its consequences in the regional narrative. In this sense, multiple statements by Saudi and regional authorities were analyzed, as well as official documents from regional and international actors such as the GCC, the Arab League or the UN. Remarks by Saudi officials, more than often challenging to come by, were not only found in speeches from international events, but also through social networks, especially Twitter, using *hashtags* that directed to original statements.

Facing the Arab Spring, the research concludes that Saudi Arabia reacted against what it perceived as an ideological threat to its regime - a Shi'a attack supported by Iran. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that Saudi policies ultimately reinforced the sectarian dimension of the popular uprisings and the regional identification of Iran with the Shi'a cause. This has made both the Arab Spring and regional politics to be nowadays increasingly perceived as the stage of a regional war between, on one side, the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, and Iran and, on the other side, Sunni and Shi'a. This way, the research fundamentally finds that the strategy employed by the regime in Riyadh against the perceived Shi'a and Iranian backing of the Arab Spring has increased the focus of the uprisings and, ultimately, of the region, on a greater sectarian and anti-Iranian agenda. This is the framework according to which, now, both the Saudis and the remaining regional actors are constrained by. Not just in Yemen but, as will be seen, elsewhere in the Middle East.

Threat Perceptions from Riyadh

Understanding the ways in which the Arab Spring shaped Saudi foreign policy entails, firstly, an understanding of how the regime in Riyadh perceived the protests. As will be shown, the inherent characteristics of the Saudi regime led it to understand the Arab Spring as an existential threat, this being the underlying motivation for the change operated in foreign policy.

Making a much broader and scientifically valuable argument about threat perception in the Middle East, F. Gregory Gause III gives particular insight into threat perception in Saudi Arabia.[6] From a historical study of alliance choices in the region, Gause concludes that, in what external threat perceptions are concerned, especially in the Middle East, ideological challenges to the regime are much more feared than those emanating from material factors such as territorial proximity or military capability.[7] This was clearly shown, for example, during the Iraq-Iran war when the Saudis, with Iranian forces still in Iraq, sought a rapprochement with (ideologically-opposed) Iran just due to Tehran's anti-Saudi rhetoric toning down.[8]

Gause's observations support the decisive importance of transnational identities and ideologies, also upheld by this research, in shaping the politics of the Middle East. This premise is not original and has been asserted by constructivists before. Like Gause, many other authors agree on the relevance of ideology towards external threat perceptions in the Middle East and, therefore, in the context of foreign policy definition. Telhami and Barnett clearly state, for instance, that a rationalist approach cannot explain the better part of foreign

[6] Gause (2003).

[7] This study spans three decades, from 1971 to 1991. Nevertheless, the maintenance of the regime and its foundation should support the belief that threat perception remains equally constructed.

[8] Gause (2003: 297).

policies in the region and, although not reaching a concrete framework about how identity and foreign policy interact, the authors confirm the existence of a relation where these are mutually shaped.[9] Equally stressing the importance of ideas, Al-Mani says that "the battle for a sympathetic opinion in the Arab and Islamic arenas is of primary importance to the security of the state and its people."[10]

Especially in the Middle East, identities based on ideology[11] have gained particular relevance due to historical developments of the postcolonial process that prevented the adherence of national communities to artificially created nationalities and, therefore, the existence of strong identities based on such nationalities.[12] This has given space to ideological factors in identity constitution. Neither Gause nor these other scholars or this research argue that ideological factors consequently have the exclusive role in the designs of foreign policies answering to threat perceptions in the region. Like Ewan Stein, they recognize the role played by modern

[9] Telhami and Barnett (2002: 4).

[10] Al- Mani (1995: 93).

[11] Scholars of International Relations of the Middle East have generally resorted to the Marxist definition of ideology, according to which, it explains the reproduction of relations of domination. Through ideology, governing elites portray their own interests as those of the community and are able to lead subordinate classes into pursuing these interests which, more than often, are against their own. This realist conception also determines that, just like within national communities, in the international arena, powerful states use ideology to the extent that "subordinate states accept these ideas, the ideology propagates their subordination"; Telhami and Barnett (2002: 10).

[12] Although Saudi Arabia is not the most prominent historical example of this, it capitalizes on these identities in order to establish a leadership position in regional networks and organizations. Gause (2003: 278); Hinnebusch (2013: 150); Potter (2013: 12); Telhami and Barnett (2002: 13).

state forms and sovereignty, especially in the actual interaction between states.[13] Nevertheless, within the realm of threat perception and foreign policy production, ideological factors cannot be overlooked even if "identified and theorized within and throughout state and society".[14] In this sense, a constructivist approach that brings identity and ideology as factors with a very important role in Saudi threat perceptions clarifies Riyadh's foreign policy options.[15] It is within this framework, recognizing the importance of identity and ideology as shaping perceptions and policies in the Middle East, that this research approaches Saudi perceptions of the Arab Spring. Incidentally, when analyzing the foundations of the legitimacy of Riyadh's regime, one understands just how ideological factors are fundamental, in line with Gause's argument.

The Saudi regime's legitimacy lies, mainly, on the Wahhabi Sunni tradition, whose authorities recognize the ruling Al Saud family, in exchange for the wahhabization of society.[16] This sponsorship entails, in the Saudi political discourse and in the Saudi King's role as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, in Mecca and Medina (the two holiest sites for the Muslim faith), a purported leadership of the (righteous, Sunni) Islam.[17] This is why, for instance, the most urgent question within social issues in Saudi Arabia are the growing

[13] Even in the instrumentalization of identities in these interactions; Gause (2003. 303); Potter (2013: 23); Stein (2011: 882); Telhami and Barnett (2002: 6).

[14] Stein (2011: 905).

[15] As Gause affirms, the realist assumption about power balance through alliance-making is not contested by the conclusion on the type of threats states in the Middle East perceive as being the greatest. As such, Gause's argument does not contend "the primacy of security concerns in understanding state behavior in the international system"; Gause (2003: 275); Lawson (2013: 30); Telhami and Barnett (2002: 4).

[16] Ennis and Momani (2013: 1132); Winter (2015: 4).

[17] Byman (2014: 91).

sectarian tensions between the regime and the Shi'a minority.[18] Simon Mabon, also pinpointing Islam as the focus of the Al Saud's legitimacy, identifies ideological challenges to the regime in policies that might weaken its Islamic standing.[19] This Islamic identity being the repository of (the greatest part of) its authority, the legitimacy of the Saudi regime has, by default, an ideological nature and, as such, its survival depends on its leading role within Islam. This conclusion at once reinforces Gause's premise that an ideological challenge would be an existential one to the Saudi regime.

The previous conclusion should lead to another, important for this research, and containing the connection between the stability and survival of the Saudi regime and its regional foreign policy. Anchored in the leading position of an identity with a transnational character such as Islam, the legitimacy of the Saudi regime has a much greater constituency than that within its own borders; one that is regional in its span. It should, therefore, not come as unexpected that, for Riyadh's regime, regional stability and the maintenance of a *status quo* in which an ideological challenge to the Al Saud is avoided, are of the utmost importance.[20] This way, the purportedly exclusive authenticity-based Islamic legitimacy shapes Saudi foreign policy strategy in the region in a sustained support of regional actors that pursue the same ideologically based interests as Riyadh and by an attack to those that do the opposite.[21] Additionally, because of their (also constitutional) similarity to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh perceives the survival of the Gulf monarchies with particular relevance for the survival of its own regime.[22] Undoubtedly then, there is enormous significance in the connections between

[18] Winter (2015: 12).

[19] Mabon (2013: 215).

[20] This importance of regional affairs to the domestic stability of the Saudis, due to the Al Saud's legitimacy being supported by a transnational identity, is verified in interesting cases studies; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (2013: 241-244).

[21] Berti and Guzansky (2014: 26); Ennis and Momani (2013: 1133).

[22] Ibid.: 1128.

regional affairs, Saudi internal stability and regime survival. In other words, Saudi regional foreign policy is intricately linked to the inexistence of challenges to the Saudi regime and, therefore, to its survival.

In the Middle East, the greatest ideological contest to Sunni Islam and, hence, to the legitimacy of the Al Saud is perceived to come from Iran.[23] Prince Turki Al-Faisal confirmed this perception saying, in 2013, that "Iran portrays itself not just as the leader of the Shiite minority but of all Muslim revolutionaries".[24] Representing a different sect of Islam, growing Iranian influence in the region means, necessarily, not only less Saudi regional material power but, as seen, also the weakening of the basic foundation of the Al Saud legitimacy – as the leader of Sunni Islam. Moreover, historically, the perception of the Iranian threat, on the basis of ideology, is justified as, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has strategically worked for the spread and the unity of Shi'a identity.[25] In this context, the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran has been characterized by a "religious-ideological antagonism (…) and an ongoing competition for regional hegemony"[26]. More than often hostile, the relations between the two countries are substantiated by a race for power and influence and, in order to ensure the regime's survival, the Al Saud have always pursued a regional balance of power in the Middle East, especially in what Iran is concerned. [27]

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[23] See, especially, Warnaar (2015); Mikail (2012: 2); Berti and Guzansky (2014: 26); Peterson (2002: 15); Winter (2005: 4).

[24] Turki Al-Faisal (2013).

[25] Gause (2014: 3).

[26] Berti and Guzansky (2014: 25).

[27] The extent to which Saudi regional foreign policy and threat perceptions are based on the ideological antagonism with Iran is clearly demonstrated by Saudi policy towards Iraq, after 2003 and after the withdrawal of American forces from the country. Despite the lack of full support of the American invasion, after 2003, Riyadh demonstrated an undeniable passivity towards events, even against the election of a Shi'a controlled government. This position was

Having established that Iran is perceived as posing the greatest ideological challenge to Riyadh and that ideological external threats to regime legitimacy are understood as existential by the Saudi regime, we now turn to the Arab Spring. As Gause says, in order for ideological threats to play a role in leaders' calculations and threat perceptions, they have to be supported by serious threats to internal stability.[28] As seen, the characteristics of the legitimacy of the Saudi regime that render it intimately connected to regional affairs already configure the Arab Spring as a threat to internal Saudi stability. By creating political power vacuums, the Arab Spring generates a space where Iranian-influenced actors can challenge the Al Saud core legitimacy element from the outside. Nevertheless, when taking into account some of the early effects of the Arab Spring, it is not hard to find elements that pose direct challenges to the internal stability of the Saudis. The empowerment of Shi'a communities in Bahrain, for example, has historically corresponded to Shi'a rising at the regional level and such was the case after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In fact, just like that, one of the features of the protests in Saudi Arabia was the expected mobilization of its eastern Shi'a population.[29] Additionally, for instance, the Houthi revolts in Yemen, when combined with the social unrest in Bahrain and post-2003 Iraq, make Saudi Arabia surrounded by potentially or perceived Iranian-backed actors.[30] So, as perceived by the Saudis, the Arab Spring not only represented an ideological threat but it also posed a material threat to the internal stability of the country.

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maintained mainly due to perceived American ability to contain Iranian influence in Iraq. However, tensions and threat perceptions in Riyadh grew stronger as soon as Americans started planning the withdrawal from Iraq and the country became more vulnerable to Iranian influence; Al-Mani (1995: 91); Gause (2007: 2); Rafati (2012: 50).

[28] Gause (2003: 303).

[29] Winter (2015: 4).

[30] Rich (2012: 481).

In trying to explain Riyadh's perception of the Arab Spring I have focused on the importance of ideology for the Al Saud's survival. Indeed, the predominance of transnational ideology as a pillar in the legitimacy of the Saudi regime reiterates Gause's findings, establishing ideological threats as existential challenges. On the other hand, its transnational character supports a close connection between regional and internal stability. In parallel, the effects of the Arab Spring, in its potential empowerment of inherent ideological challengers to Riyadh, such as Iran, make it be perceived, by the Saudi regime, as an ideological and, therefore, existential threat. As such, the Arab Spring shapes Saudi foreign policy. The contours of this shaping and its effects are analyzed in the following sections.

Saudi Regional Foreign Policy Towards the Arab Spring

In the face of a perceived existential threat to the legitimacy of its regime, Saudi Arabia acted in three fronts. From the actions in Egypt and Libya to the interventions in Bahrain and Yemen and the policies in Syria, Riyadh always strove to shore up regional monarchies, marginalize Shi'a, and put the focus on Iran. This effort, which will be seen in the following analysis, is not only attested by Saudi individual actions. In fact, the policies adopted by regional organizations, not only due to Riyadh's leading role, but also for their sustained identification with Saudi goals, should be understood, to a great extent, to be determinedly shaped by Saudi policies as well.[31]

In Bahrain, right after the protests began, Saudi Arabia urged the government in Manama, headed by the Al-Khalifa family, to engage in an effort of state patronage and reforms, in order to appease the opposition. The Saudis assisted decisively in this effort by sending

[31] Although this leadership position has been increasingly challenged, especially by Qatar, with the exception of the Egyptian case, Doha and Riyadh's policies towards the Arab Spring have been aligned. In this sense, the Qatari challenge has not prevented Saudi Arabia to prosecute its policies through regional organizations; Beck (2013: 4); Steinberg (2014: 22).

financial aid to the kingdom and mobilizing the GCC countries to follow suit. These moves resulted in the Bahraini regime receiving a $10 billion aid package from its Gulf partners. [32]

Saudi Arabia was also quick to identify Bahrain's opposition movements with Shi'a protests fueled by Iran. When protests started, in the aftermath of the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, the Saudis sent a message directly to the government in Manama saying that no political concessions should be made to the Shi'a community in the country. [33] Simultaneously, Turki Al-Faisal, Former Saudi Ambassador to the United States and a member of the royal family stated that "opposition in Bahrain is supported by Iran", talking repeatedly of an Iranian "meddling" in Arab affairs.[34] The regime in Riyadh and its diplomats around the world have emboldened and maintained this narrative.[35]

These initial efforts were not enough, however, to eliminate the movements against the Al-Khalifa regime. As such, Bahrain invoked a security clause of the GCC treaty, which provided for the organization's Saudi-led intervention in the island, in February 2011. Saudi troops, under the umbrella of a GCC mission, moved into Bahrain in order to support the government against the protestors. The intervention, combined with a sustained campaign of verbal sectarian attacks in the media against the Shi'a community in Bahrain, was very successful and key in shifting the conflict in favor of the regime.[36] A strategy of fear and intimidation was created, with the destruction of Shi'a shrines and the firing of thousands of Shi'a workers for being in the demonstrations.[37]

Towards Syria, Saudi policy during the Arab Spring has mainly relied on the financial assistance of the opposition and Riyadh has proven essential in supporting the war effort

[32] Berti and Guzanski (2015: 37); Ennis and Momani (2013: 1135).

[33] Haykel (2013: 4).

[34] Turki Al-Faisal (2014).

[35] Al-Jubeir (2014); Saud Al-Faisal (2012); Turki Al-Faisal (2011).

[36] Tétrault (2011: 632).

[37] Ulrichsen (2013: 4).

against the regime. In 2012, even if not publicly, the Saudis mobilized the Gulf states, especially Qatar and the UAE, to fund salaries of the rebel fighters within the ranks of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Saudi support became official in 2013, when Riyadh demanded regional cooperation for assistance to the Syrian insurgents and, simultaneously, started directly assisting rebel groups, with reports of weapons being delivered to the Syrian opposition. Despite Saudi statements, not only the FSA but also other movements have been backed by Riyadh.[38] Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has also fought to increase the political status and relevance of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and other opposition forces, especially the FSA. Moreover, with the knowledge of the regime, private religious donors in Saudi Arabia have also transferred large sums of money to the most conservative elements of the opposition.[39]

However, Saudi actions in Syria have not been limited to the financial assistance of the opposition. With the support of Qatar and Turkey, the Saudis organized recruitment and training of rebel fighters. In here also, Saudi help has been vital for the effort against the Assad regime and, today, fighters from Saudi Arabia are an important part of the opposition.[40] At the regional institutional level, Riyadh cooperated with other Gulf States in order to suspend Syrian membership of the Arab League and to support the insurgents.[41] Additionally, making an effort to isolate the Assad regime, the Saudis recalled their ambassador to Damascus in 2011.[42]

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[38] Steinberg (2014: 23).

[39] Riyadh is making, as well, a great effort to organize the opposition as a whole and the elected leader of the Unified Syrian National Council is actually a Syrian-Saudi based in Riyadh; Reese (2013: 17); Tamamy (2012: 151).

[40] Byman (2014: 82); Phillips (2015: 370).

[41] Berti and Guzansky (2014: 27).

[42] Adelphi (2013: 113); Küçükkeleş (2012: 4, 6).

In Jordan, political and economic reforms were the solution that appeased the unrest and the momentum of the Spring had passed in late 2011. Nevertheless, the Jordanian government did not do it alone and, in the economic front, Saudi Arabia was of great assistance.[43] Starting in 2011, to settle the opposition in the neighboring monarchy, Riyadh began to send financial aid to Jordan and ended its old market embargo to the country, also agreeing to strengthen cooperation regarding border control for commerce and travel.[44] After the financial help, Riyadh strove to involve Jordan in its policy against the Arab Spring as well. Indeed, the Saudis assembled the GCC countries to invite Amman into the organization and got the Jordanian government to agree to function as a corridor for the delivery of armed support to the Syrian opposition.[45]

Saudi involvement in Yemen has been a constant since the start of the protest movements in the country and Riyadh was vital in breaking the deal that replaced President Saleh.[46] Likewise, the Saudis were instrumental and the motor behind the GCC and UN plan to reform Yemen during the Hadi Presidency, in order to try and secure a peaceful transition that would appease the revolutionaries.[47] Nevertheless, facing the failure of this plan and the success of the Houthi, Riyadh found its options to still maintain control of Yemen drastically reduced. It was, therefore, following Saudi Arabia that an international coalition began bombing the country in late March 2015, in an effort to oust the revolutionary Houthi government and reinstate the Saudi-sponsored Hadi administration.[48] This coalition relied mainly on aerial offensives but, in May, the arrival of Yemeni fighters reportedly trained in Saudi Arabia has marked an important shift, if confirmed, on the nature and compromise of Riyadh's

[43] Winter (2015: 2).

[44] Steinberg (2014: 17).

[45] Adelphi (2013: 140); Helfont and Helfont (2012: 83); Steinberg (2014: 22).

[46] Al-Batati and Fahim (2015).

[47] Juneau (2013: 410); Tamamy (2012: 144).

[48] Al-Batati and Fahim (2015).

involvement in Yemen. Besides military intervention, the Saudis have been actively funding proxy forces on the ground, such as tribes with long-standing ties with Riyadh.[49] Only since the beginning of President Hadi's government, Saudi financial assistance in Yemen has already amounted to more than $4 billion.[50]

Many of Saudi policies towards the Arab Spring have been channeled through regional organizations, such as the GCC and the Arab League, in which Riyadh plays a key role. This leading position results from a combination of its valuable natural resources, its transnational religious-based legitimacy, its geostrategic position and the prominent part it plays within other organizations such as the G-20, the Organization of Islamic States and the OPEC.[51] In this sense, the policies of the GCC and the Arab League, following the Arab Spring, were very much determined by Saudi Arabia and reflected Riyadh's options towards it.

One of the most blatant demonstrations of this is the successive support for state patronage the GCC provided to the Sunni monarchies, in the form of financial aid. Aside from the already mentioned cases of Bahrain, Syria and Yemen, in Oman, for example, the ruling family also implemented reforms to appease opposition movements and, in 2011, the GCC eventually provided the country with a $10 billion aid package.[52] Following the already mentioned membership invitation to Jordan (also extended to Morocco), the development aid promised by the GCC to both countries ascended to $5 billion. Most appropriately, the assistance provided by the GCC in response to the Arab Spring has made Middle Eastern leaders speak of a "Marshall Plan" for the region.[53]

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Salisbury (2015: 10).

[51] Ennis and Momani (2013: 1128); Helfont and Helfont (2012: 82); Rich (2012: 480); Tamamy (2012: 149).

[52] Berti and Guzansky (2015: 37).

[53] Steinberg (2014: 15, 16).

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia did not use the GCC only to mirror its own efforts of state patronage. Military and political actions were taken by the organization in support of Saudi policies in the region. Both the interventions in Bahrain and Yemen were done within the GCC, in pursuance of decisions supported by the Saudis and in the application of which Riyadh has by far the greatest part.[54]

Just like the GCC, the Arab League has largely followed Saudi Arabia. In fact, the Saudi leadership position was enormously reinforced by the Arab Spring. The Arab League initially answered to the Saudi call by mimicking the GCC's condemnation of the Libyan regime's crackdown of protests and suspending Libyan membership to the organization.[55] Following on the steps of the Gulf States, it has adopted a similar policy towards Syria. On January 2012, Saudi Arabia stopped all financial support of the Syrian regime and, in the same month, shadowing Riyadh, Gulf countries withdrew their observers participating in the Arab League mission in Syria.[56] In the aftermath of the withdrawal of regional ambassadors to Damascus, on February 2012, the Arab League cut diplomatic relations with Syria and proposed the deployment of peacekeepers to the country, making a point for outside intervention at the UN General Assembly.[57] A year later, after diplomatic pressure from the Saudis, the League consolidated the Gulf approach by absolutely condemning the Assad regime and transferring power of representation of the Syrian state in the organization to the opposition movement Syrian National Coalition.[58]

[54] In both the interventions in Bahrain and Yemen Saudi troops make up for the largest portion of the GCC personnel.

[55] Küçükkeleş (2012: 4).

[56] Ibid.: 9.

[57] Ibid., 14.

[58] Beck (2013: 1).

Unpacking Riyadh's Policy: A sectarian and anti-Iran approach

An analysis of the regional foreign policy of Saudi Arabia since 2010 uncovers the ratio behind it, from which it is possible to understand its strategic lines. As will be seen, a study of Riyadh's policies leads to the deduction of a comprehensible strategy based on a sectarian and anti-Iranian framework. This framework provides exclusive justification and reasoning for Saudi policies. Truly, being the only common thread to all of Saudi actions towards the Arab Spring, it is the sole prism through which we can perceive a coherent policy body that can bring together, for example, the interventions in Bahrain and Yemen in defense of the ruling regimes, on one side, and the support of Syrian opposition, on the other. This way, all of Riyadh's and Saudi-sponsored actions towards the Arab Spring pursue a defense of the Sunni ideological foundation of the Al Saud's legitimacy, perceived as being threatened by the Arab Spring, through the weakening of both Shi'a and Iran.

Bahrain was the first major test that the Arab Spring represented to the Saudi regime. Saudi actions in Bahrain are mainly justified (and much more easily understood) by the fact that the island's particularities made it be perceived, by Riyadh, as a zero-sum game in what concerns Iran and Shi'a. The specific sectarian demographics of Bahrain – a Shi'a majority ruled by a Sunni elite - and its proximity to Iran set the Saudi default position regarding developments in the island to one of particular concern.[59] Geographically, a success of the protests would mean an increase of Iranian influence and power in the Gulf, very close to Saudi Arabia.[60] Moreover, according to scholars, even disregarding the veracity of Iranian backing to Bahraini opposition, given the sectarian divide, the strategic importance of the Bahraini ruling family for Riyadh and the history of Iranian influence in the island, "clerical ties and Iranian rhetoric", the Saudis have to work under this assumption.[61] Combining this with Bahrain's

[59] Berti and Guzansky (2013: 147).

[60] Mabon "Battle" (2012: 87).

[61] Ibid., 84.

constitutional similarity to Saudi Arabia, the success of the Arab Spring in the island would represent, for the Saudis, the worst of all possible scenarios: the fall of a monarchy and of a Sunni-led regime.[62] Historically, moreover, Bahrain has had a particular strategic importance for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The island has served as a proxy for the regional war for influence between the two countries, especially due to its strategic position and the fact that the Shi'a community of Bahrain is seen as "a fifth column of Iran" since the 1981 attempt to overthrow the ruling family by the Front for Liberation of Bahrain, supported by Tehran.[63]

In this context, the characteristics of Bahrain provide the explanatory base for the Saudi sectarian and anti-Iranian policy in this kingdom. The urgency of preventing Iranian meddling (and thus a perceived Shi'a crescent) in Bahrain reflects the explained strategic importance of the island for the regime in Riyadh and the need to contain Iran.[64] Accordingly, the GCC intervention in Bahrain was justified to the Saudi regime by the fact that the mostly-Shi'a comprised opposition movements, if successful, would have only benefited Iran. This really reflected the concern among the Gulf monarchies that the advancement of the Shi'a community in Bahrain signified the actual regional advancement of Iranian Shi'a influence, challenging the seating Sunni ruling elites.[65] Conversely, the maintenance of Saudi forces in Bahrain, after the protests were broke down by the GCC intervention[66], indicates an overall Saudi threat perception for the region that is not exhausted in the mere elimination of particular Spring protests but that implies an understanding of regional contagion risks,

[62] Winter (2015: 14).

[63] Mabon "Battle" (2012: 85).

[64] Berti and Guzansky (2013: 143).

[65] The sectarian dimension of this intervention is also clear when, just five days before, Gulf states were supporting the Security Council Resolution 1973, which created a no-fly zone in Libya in order to protect protestors demonstrating against the Gaddafi regime; Salisbury (2015: 7); Sorenson (2012: 13); Ulrichsen (2013: 8).

[66] Berti and Guzansky (2013: 147).

underscoring once more the foundation of legitimacy in transnational identities that can provide for that contagion.

The two strategic orientations that we now perceive by analyzing Saudi policies in detail are not only blatant in the case of Bahrain but elsewhere as well. Historically, Syria has been Iran's longest ally in the region.[67] In fact, scholars are of the opinion that Riyadh did not start supporting Syrian protests when they began, exactly because it feared Tehran's reaction. Only after the Saudis understood that Assad would not turn against Iran, did they officially start supporting the opposition.[68] Saudi strong determination regarding Syria was demonstrated by the appointment of Prince Bandar Al Saud as head of the General Intelligence Directorate, in July 2012. Prince Bandar is publicly strongly anti-Iran and, being responsible for Saudi policy towards Syria, its appointment indicates a clear decision to wage a proxy war against Tehran. Moreover, Riyadh has been, at the official level, supporting Sunni Islamist opposition groups and financial assistance has been mainly steered to Salafist groups such as the Army of Islam[69]. In what recruitment is concerned, Riyadh has also taken particular advantage of its trans-regional tribal ties, focusing on recruiting, from Islamist networks, Syrians that live in Saudi Arabia and who have taken on to Salafism. All of these reinforce the Sunni agenda of the opposition to the regime and underscore the Sunni sectarian focus of the Saudi strategy.[70]

Nonetheless, even without all this data, the condemnation of the Assad regime by the Saudi authorities and their support of Syrian opposition, particularly in the aftermath of the intervention in Bahrain and the Yemeni operation, can only be understood within the broader conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the perceived Shi'a revival that feeds into it.[71] Moreover, Riyadh increased the sectarian tone of the Syrian civil war by approving the

[67] Gause (2011).

[68] Steinberg (2014: 22).

[69] Ibid.: 23, 24.

[70] Adelphi (2013: 122); Ennis and Momani (2013: 1136); Mabon "Kingdom" (2012: 548).

[71] Küçükkeleş (2012: 14); Rich (2012: 481).

formation of the Salafist Islamic Front in November 2013. Syrian Sheikh Adnan al-Arour used his regular slot on the Saudi channel al-Safa to rile against Alawis and, despite more subtly, the Saudi-owned al-Arabiya network consistently employs an anti-Assad and anti-Iranian narrative, while many Saudi religious figures are vocally anti-Alawite, anti-Shia and sectarian in their preaching about Syria.[72]

All of Saudi and international actions in Yemen as well can be justified with the accusations of Iranian meddling, not only through public statements but also through official institutional communications to international organizations such as the United Nations.[73] On the other hand, the Houthis, a Shi'a group long been perceived as an Iranian proxy actor, have been determined by Riyadh as the ultimate enemy in Yemen, once more underlining the sectarian strategic orientation of the Saudis, with Foreign Minister Al-Faisal repeatedly talking of a *coup d'état*.[74] Even the during the tenure of President Saleh (who would be deposed at the hands of the Al Saud), Riyadh supported the regime against the Houthis.[75] Moreover, the Al Saud became reluctant in providing more financial assistance to the country, as it increasingly perceived it to be controlled by Shi'a forces.[76] It was at this time that a more aggressive approach was taken and its justification by Riyadh falls right in its overall strategy. Just after the start of the military campaign in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister not only accused Iran of interfering in the country and of supporting the Houthi rebels but said that if the Saudis would not have acted, the Houthis would become an Iranian proxy, comparing them to Hezbollah and, once more, revealing a Saudi perception of multiple Iranian actors in the region, all connected to Shi'a Islam.[77] Other Saudi officials have repeatedly mirrored this

[72] Philips (2015: 370).

[73] Moghtader (2014); Turki (2014); S/2015/217 (2015).

[74] Saud Al-Faisal (2015).

[75] Salisbury (2015: 9).

[76] Ibid., 11.

[77] Faheem (2015).

discourse. The Saudi Ambassador to the United States, for example, portrayed the war in Yemen, against a "hegemonic" Iran, as a battle between "good and evil".[78]

Riyadh's policy towards Jordan also entails a sectarian and anti-Iranian framework. In fact, Jordan has become strategically very important in the battle between the Sunni monarchies who want the maintenance of the status quo and those groups striving for a more democratic Middle East.[79] In this sense, for the Saudis, it is very important not to lose Jordan as a stable ally and the GCC membership invitation aimed at solidifying the identity of the organization and emboldening the stability and power of Sunni monarchies against Iranian Shi'a influence.[80] Moreover, the characteristics of the political landscape in Jordan should not be overlooked as further pursuing Saudi interests. Within the Jordanian opposition, Islamic political parties are influential and the Muslim brotherhood is very well integrated into the political society of the country.[81] In this sense, and on the assumption that Jordan is secured as an ally of Riyadh, the apparent normal functioning of a political system with the participation of Islamic challengers of the Al Saud delegitimizes and discourages movements whose goal is to overthrow them.[82]

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[78] Milani (2015).

[79] Helfont and Helfont (2012: 83)

[80] Especially being a monarchy, the adoption of the social and economic model of the GCC countries by Jordan falls in line with Saudi regional goals of *status quo* maintenance after the Arab Spring; Ennis and Momani (2013: 1134); Sorenson (2012: 12); Helfont and Helfont (2012: 85); Kamrava (2012: 96).

[81] Helfont and Helfont (2012: 87).

[82] Among them, today, the increasingly relevant Sunni extremist groups that take active part in regional conflicts, especially in Iraq and Syria. In fact, the involvement of Jordan in the Saudi support of Syrian opposition was also a means of Riyadh avoiding any alternative means for such assistance, namely the Muslim Brotherhood; Adelphi (2013: 140).

In what the GCC is concerned, all in all, the response to the Arab Spring has also engaged in a balancing act between the opposition of perceived Iranian-backed actors identified in Shi'a movements and the fighting of extremist Sunni groups that the Gulf monarchies, and especially Saudi Arabia, see as an existential threat. A clear example of this was the response of the GCC countries to the siege of Sana'a by the Houthis. The UAE, according to analysts, acting with Saudi direction, supported President Saleh who, in turn, was aiding the Houthis', whose conquest of Sana'a was preferable to a strengthening of radical Sunni movements.[83]

Additionally, the GCC has also been a stage for a sustained blaming of Iran for the regional turmoil, with Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Faisal accusing Iran of "interfering into the internal affairs of member countries" and influencing the opposition movements of the Arab Spring.[84] Just before the 2015 Saudi-led, GCC-sponsored intervention in Yemen, a Saudi diplomat would say that "Riyadh was strategically patient with Tehran, yet the [Iranians] left Saudi Arabia with no choice but indirect confrontation in the Arab countries where Iran has intervened, including Yemen."[85] More than declarations made by particular actors, it is relevant that the GCC mandates in Bahrain and Yemen were specifically justified by Iranian interference in both countries, especially through its support of (Shi'a) actors involved in the conflicts. In Bahrain, the goal of the GCC mission was, as established by its mandate, "to support the government [of Bahrain] against its domestic challengers and deter Iran from becoming embroiled in the conflict."[86] This should clearly demonstrate the following of Saudi strategy within the GCC.

The Arab League's erratic behavior towards the Spring, mainly not condemning the Syrian regime and supporting protests elsewhere, is telling as well.[87] According to scholars, the "role

[83] Salisbury (2015: 11).

[84] Saud Al-Faisal (2012); Rich (2012: 481).

[85] Hashem (2015).

[86] Kamrava (2012: 99); Mabon "Battle"(2012: 89-90); S/215/217.

[87] Küçükkeleş (2012: 6).

that the Syrian regime assumed in the Shi'a alliance served as the driving force for the Arab League's policy under the leadership of the Gulf countries." In this sense, the actions taken by the League, especially towards Syria, should be perceived within a purely sectarian strategy employed by Riyadh and as an opportunity to tip the balance of power in its favor and against Iran.[88] Speaking at the League's Council in 2014, the Saudi Foreign Minister focused on Iran, saying that Assad's forces were supported by "the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah".[89] Nevertheless, towards the whole region actually, the Arab League's policy pursued the maintenance of the *status quo* of the Sunni monarchies led by Saudi Arabia.[90]

Shaping Regional Politics and Perceptions: The Effects of Saudi Policies towards the Spring

The sectarian discourse and anti-Iranian narrative employed by Saudi Arabia have proven particularly emotional and effective in rallying popular support, as masses are led to pursue the goals of the regimes. Instrumentalizing popular tensions that are intensified by the ongoing conflict, the conflict gains "new funders and recruits". This has made sectarianism in the region and its identification with Iran a consequence of the political conflict rather then a cause.[91]

In Bahrain, for example, Saudi public identification of the opposition movements with Shi'a calls against Sunni Muslims, fueled by Iran, generalized this perception. Sunnis dropped from the protests rendering them effectively almost exclusively comprised of Shi'a and, at this moment, assistance from Iran was not only much more tempting to the opposition forces, but

[88] Ibid.: 15.

[89] Saud Al-Faisal (2014).

[90] Maddy-Weitzman (2012: 2).

[91] Byman (2014: 87); Reese (2013: 7).

perceived connections with Tehran were highly reinforced.[92] As a result, increasingly, as radicalization intensified, more extreme groups have replaced moderate Shi'a movements such as the al-Wifaq.[93] At the governmental level, the Bahrainis, in their discourse and practice, very effectively incorporated Saudi perceptions towards Iran and a Shi'a revival. The very close relationship between high-ranking members of the Bahraini government and Saudi officials, namely between the Saudi Interior Minister (as said, responsible by Riyadh's policy in the country) and with the crown prince, until his death, have facilitated such Saudi influence in Manama[94] Besides the already mentioned policies against Shi'a during the protests, the Bahraini administration, in an effort to reduce the sectarian imbalance in the country implemented a policy of unprecedented citizenship concession to Sunni Muslims, which has rallied even more the Shi'a majority against the ruling elite and effectively created the perception of an exclusively sectarian-based policy.[95]

Gulf allies quickly picked up on the blaming discourse of Iran, started by Riyadh. The Bahraini foreign Minister would declare that the region had "never seen such a sustained campaign from Iran on Bahrain and the Gulf as we've seen in the past two months" and the UAE foreign minister asserted that "Iran has to respect the unity and sovereignty of Gulf countries".[96] Especially Manama and Abu Dhabi have blindly followed Saudi Arabia in discourse against Iran.[97]

The GCC intervention also had the reinforcement effect of sectarianism, not only in Bahrain but also in the remaining parts of the region. According to the International Crisis Group, the GCC mission in Bahrain achieved the exact opposite it aimed at, rallying Shi'a communities

[92] Byman (2014: 81); Gause (2011).

[93] Haykel (2013: 4); Steinberg (2014: 20, 21).

[94] Steinberg (2014: 21).

[95] Berti and Guzansky (2013: 148).

[96] Ulrichsen (2013: 9).

[97] Roberts (2011).

and their sympathy towards Iran in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as well. The sectarian nature of the conflict was also reinforced not only in these countries but generally across the region, for example, with the condemnation of the GCC intervention in Bahrain by Hezbollah and other publicly perceived Iranian proxies.[98]

In Syria, the conflict is increasingly sectarian and this dimension is reinforced by the actions of Saudi Arabia and, following Riyadh, those of the Gulf states.[99] The enormous financial support to the armed opposition groups that, as previously mentioned, was mainly directed at Sunni groups, made Syrian opposition movements who wanted to acquire similar assistance from regional powers, assume in their mission an Islamic sectarian character. This not only imbued the perceived nature of the conflict as sectarian but also is preventing the creation of any Syrian moderate opposition that can separate itself from the sectarian movements. Moreover, the deepening of the sectarian divide by Saudi Arabia has already resulted also in the radicalization of Sunni groups as well. Reports arrive that Saudi-supported groups who retained strong connections with the al-Nusra front are responsible for great atrocities and, like other radical Sunni groups, similarly pose an ideological challenge to the Al Saud. The Saudis themselves have recognized this perception and have signaled worry against these developments, especially after the replacement of Prince Bandar as the head of the Syrian policy with the Minister of Interior, responsible for policies in Yemen and Bahrain. Nevertheless, according to scholars, the support already given to extremist groups can lead the way, paved by Riyadh, to a Syrian takeover by Sunni radicals.[100]

In Yemen, similar developments have been originated by Riyadh's policies towards the Arab Spring. Despite due to internal affairs, the Saudi perception of the role of external actors very much influenced not only the Yemeni belligerent parts but also the actions of regional players

[98] Mabon "Battle" (2012: 93, 95).

[99] Reese (2013: 14, 19).

[100] Steinberg (2014: 25, 27).

in the conflict.[101] After the ousting of President Saleh, there was an increase in Islamist activism, in particular in those regions of the country where the government is less institutionalized.[102] In May 2015, Yemen recalled its ambassador in Tehran[103], in line with the assumption that Iran was the one creating problems in Yemen, meddling in its affairs. Similarly, in their respective addresses to international organizations such as the United Nations, Sana'a and regional authorities have increasingly assumed the conflict as supported by Iran and with a religious base, especially in the wake of the GCC intervention.[104]

Both the GCC and the Arab League have come out of the Arab Spring with new roles. The Arab League has encountered a new relevance in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, supporting policy options pressed by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, in an unprecedented manner and, sometimes, overlooking its own constitutional dispositions.[105] This happened in such cases as the condemnation of the Syrian regime or the support of the GCC-brokered ousting of President Saleh in Yemen.[106] The League is even said to be creating a military force for its own, in the aftermath of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen[107] - which would be a true reformulation of its essence. The attitude of the Arab League, exactly because not pursuing democratic reforms and, like the GCC, revealing a double standard in the policies it applied to the various actors in the region, has therefore prevented the design or outside understanding

[101] Salisbury (2015: 1).

[102] Sorenson (2012: 23).

[103] "Yemen Recalls" (2015).

[104] Security Council Resolution 2216 and addresses dated from 24th and 26th March 2015; S/RES/2216 (2015).

[105] Highly pressed by Saudi Arabia, the suspension of Syrian membership from the League was not unanimous, as the Charter provides; Beck (2012: 2).

[106] Küçükkeleş (2012: 4); Maddy-Weitzman (2012: 2).

[107] "Arab League" (2015).

of a consistent pro-democracy regional position towards the Arab Spring.[108] On the opposite, it has enabled and emboldened one that, at a regional level, follows the same sectarian and anti-Iranian framework. Even within the League, this has been reinforced by actors, such as Iraq and Lebanon that, regardless if actively perceiving the conflict as a sectarian one, in reaction to the Sunni bloc and perhaps inevitably, pursue policy options that align with those pursued by Iran and Shi'a Muslims and that reinforce this dimension of regional politics.

The GCC, on its side, has been transformed into a political and military alliance, losing great part of its economic nature.[109] The renewed importance of the organization after the Arab Spring came with the realization by the Gulf monarchies, led by Riyadh, of a collective security threat. The actions of Saudi Arabia within the organization increased not only military and economic cooperation but also regional integration at a diplomatic and foreign policy levels, as in the cases of Yemen, Syria and Libya. Gulf monarchies understood the importance of the GCC as a weapon to combat the Arab Awakening, internally and externally. The invitations extended to Jordan and Morocco, especially after failed trials at membership by Jordan, are demonstrative of the understanding by the Gulf monarchies that the strengthening of the GCC is paramount to the effort against the existential threat of the Arab Spring.[110]

The narrative of the conflict employed by Saudi media channels has also been appropriated and reinforced by Gulf media, especially Al-Jazeera in Qatar, who also repeatedly frames the events in Syria within a broader conflict against Iran.[111] This regional discourse has shored up anti-Shia feelings in Egypt to a point where anti-Iranian sentiment in the country is bizarre.[112] In the media, the narrative is increasingly inflammatory with important Sunni clerics, such as

[108] Beck (2013: 3); Küçükkeleş (2012: 18).

[109] Helfont and Helfont (84).

[110] Berti and Guzansky (2015: 46).

[111] Phillips (2015: 370).

[112] Byman (2014: 81).

Yusuf al-Qaradawi calling on his followers to attack the Syrian regime over what he calls a "continued massacre to kill Sunnis". Simultaneously, Al-Jazeera runs polls that already have a sectarian framework as an underlying assumption asking the public "Who is responsible for turning the Syrian revolution into a sectarian crisis? Shi'a or Sunni?"[113] In May 2015, the Saudi Foreign Minister openly acknowledged, once more, the assumption of Iranian meddling in regional affairs. When saying that the GCC-U.S. summit at Camp David would "address Iran's support to terrorist organizations and focus on Iran's intervention in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq", the Saudi minister, not only outlined the perception of very broad Iranian intervention in the region but determined the dealing with the perceived Iranian actions as the purpose of the meeting– something that was reiterated by other participants, even the United States.[114]

As seen, the Saudi strategy has had very clear effects not only in the Arab Spring movements but also in the politics of the region, nowadays especially concerned with the revolts. The Gulf's response to events in Bahrain, for example, and its perceived sectarian dimension, were led by Saudi Arabia and echo those of the leader, creating a sectarian-based narrative across the region. This can additionally be seen by regional transversal responses that can only be connected from a sectarian standpoint, such as the expulsion of Iranian diplomats from Kuwait and Bahrain, the closure of Shiite media channels, and the systematic anti-Iranian rhetoric.[115]

Conclusion

The social upheaval that begun in 2010 in the Middle East, widely known as "Arab Spring", started as popular calls for democracy in a region dominated by authoritarian regimes. Against the success of these movements in Tunisia and Egypt, Saudi Arabia encountered a

[113] Reese (2013: 8).

[114] "Saudi FM" (2015).

[115] Berti and Guzansky (2013: 149).

dual challenge. On one side, it struggled to retain regime legitimacy on the face of pro-democracy movements that challenged Sunni Arab monarchies like itself. Additionally, Riyadh was forced to deal with disturbances to the regional balance of power, created by power vacuums seen as potential growing Shi'a and Iranian influence. Therefore, the Arab Spring was perceived as a threat to the ideological foundation of the legitimacy of the Saudi regime and Riyadh's regional foreign policy was shaped to embolden that same ideological element, in opposition to its challenging ideological forces, namely Shi'a Islam and Iran.

Marking a clear change from its traditional regional foreign policy, Saudi Arabia made use of two strategies to face this challenge. On one hand, Riyadh employed sectarian instruments that framed protests as Shi'a calls for rebellion against ruling Sunni elites. Simultaneously, Iran was identified as the main supporter of these popular protests. Capitalizing on its leading regional position, Riyadh tried to engage its partners, bilaterally and through institutional channels, in creating a regional narrative that matched both of these strategic orientations.

As the research shows, continuously blaming Iran for the protests in Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Yemen or Syria and, simultaneously, portraying these protests as a "Shi'a revival", has reinforced Saudi and regional identification of Iran with Shi'a Muslims' struggles. Consequentially, it has inevitably facilitated the determination of any struggle mainly involving Shi'a, regardless of any sectarian dimension in its nature, as exclusively based on religion and, therefore, unquestionably supported by Iran. Moreover, the creation of a regional narrative, through individual actors especially in the Gulf, but also regional organizations such as the GCC or the Arab League that actively support the Saudi discourse, feeds onto this storyline efficiently. This is additionally expedited by the fact that, regardless of actual Iranian meddling and backing of any protests in the Arab Spring, these have been publicly supported by actors not only associated with Shi'a but also historically supported by Iran, such as the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen or the Shi'a community in Bahrain. This only emboldens the Gulf narrative, following on Riyadh's steps.

It is irrelevant, for this research, whether or not the reality of change in the political landscape of the region can be blamed on Iran or on Iranian-backed groups. It is even unimportant if

these are Saudi believed perceptions of Iranian actions in the Middle East. The argument made here is that Saudi actions towards the Arab Spring have transformed its perception of the internal struggles for democracy in the Middle East in a way that they are now part of a broader conflict between the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, and Iran. This is shown not only, implicitly, by Saudi policies towards the various states in the Middle East studied in the research but also, explicitly, by the multiple Saudi and institutional statements concerning regional affairs. Furthermore, successively portrayed by Saudi Arabia within a sectarian framework that supports the accusations against Iran, these conflicts have also become defined within a broader one opposing Sunni and Shi'a. This way, in order to maintain the status quo it perceives as necessary to guarantee internal stability and regime survival, Saudi Arabia has ultimately shaped regional dynamics after the Arab Spring. Framing pro-democracy movements as sectarian Iranian-based revolts, has rallied Sunni and Shi'a sentiments as well as anti-Iran feelings, effectively making those movements and the assumptions under which states and regional organizations act to be constrained by this same sectarian, anti-Iranian framework.

The research also shows that Riyadh's policies had effects that go beyond the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia reinforced the overall sectarian dimension Middle Eastern politics. Reinforcing perceptions of Iran as an enemy on the basis of its Shi'a ideology, i.e., on a sectarian basis, radicalized the region and its discourse and creates, in the words of Charles Tripp, "sectarianism by default".[116] Moreover, Saudi policies are self-serving of an increasing active engagement in the region to secure their own results. The guarantee of Saudi legitimacy through an active engagement in the region has perpetuated this kind of commitment, especially through a sustained reinforcement of the systemic relations and dependence between the actors in the Middle East, which, since the Arab Spring, we have testified in crescendo. Indeed, acting on the perception of an internal threat originating from external regional events emphasizes the idea that, for the Al Saud, its own legitimacy and that of

[116] Byman (2014: 86).

others in the region, resides in the maintenance of a certain regional status quo. On the other side, Saudi policies have given the GCC and the Arab League renewed roles that increase regional dependency on its actions.

In connection with the underlying assumptions of the research, an additional analytical note should be made. I have introduced this research arguing, like Gause, the importance of transnational ideologies in the legitimacy of Riyadh. Indeed, the inherently ideological nature of Saudi policies towards the Arab Spring not only confirms but also shows the strengthening of the role that ideology assumes in the regional perceptions of the Saudi regime and in its perception of the foundation of its own legitimacy. Likewise, the application of this same framework by regional allies supports this conclusion throughout the region.

The strategy employed by Saudi Arabia when confronted with the Arab Spring has, to some extent, successfully pursued its goals. In Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Egypt and Jordan, Saudi Arabia has managed to maintain the *status quo* or secure regimes that are friendly to the Al Saud and that recognize its leadership. But the trade-off of Riyadh's strategy is not yet clear in the cases of Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Here, the conflicts are far from being resolved and, especially in Syria and Iraq, the sectarian narrative against the Alawite Shi'a and the Maliki government respectively, has been appropriated and radicalized by Sunni extremist organizations such as ISIL that, in the same way but to a greater extent than the Muslim Brotherhood, pose a real threat to the Al Saud's legitimacy within Islam and, consequently, in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, perceiving itself in the midst of a refocused conflict, Iran has reinforced its support for the Shi'a warring parties in the conflicts, strengthening its backing of the Assad regime in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen or the Maliki government in Iraq.

Acting in a sectarian and anti-Iranian basis, Riyadh has transformed the nature of the conflicts that make part of the Arab Spring along with the framework according to which regional actors act towards the uprisings. It is not surprising after all, that in May 2015, the Saudi King, in reference to Iran, spoke of an external threat that "focus[es] its endeavor to expand its influence and hegemony to destabilize the region's security and stability, plant sectarian

strife and create a fertile environment for extremism and terrorism".[117] Hostage to their own perceptions and interference, the world starts to resemble more and more how the Saudis perceive it (or, at least, how their behavior makes it seem they perceive it). Only the development of the conflicts that are still ongoing will show if Saudi policies will pursue the long-term stability and survival of Riyadh's regime.

[117] Al-Saud (2015).

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