

Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon: analysing the Kingdom's 2015 foreign policy shift

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On November 4th, 2017, Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad al-Hariri announced his resignation during a televised speech broadcasted from the Saudi capital Riyadh. However, as would eventually turn out, this was no ordinary resignation and not simply because of the location of the announcement. In a move that sparked wide international outcry, Saudi Arabia had forced Sa'ad al-Hariri to resign during what he had understood to be a friendly visit to the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman ahead of his official meeting with the King. That a head of government of a sovereign state was detained and forced to resign his position in a foreign country by a foreign power is something of the likes which is rarely seen in modern times. However, this event was no self-contained incident, it was part of a policy shift that saw the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Lebanon significantly alter from 2015 onwards, in line with a wider shift in Saudi foreign policy in the Middle East, with the military intervention in the civil war in Yemen in 2015 and the economic and political blockade of its neighbour Qatar in 2017 as prime examples.

Saudi Arabia had always been a key supporter of the Lebanese government after the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 and particularly after the Cedar Revolution in 2005. As part of its geopolitical interests, the Kingdom placed significant value on the political and economic stability of Lebanon, which it tried to maintain through mediating in the country's numerous and frequent political conflicts and upholding the delicate financial and economic stability of Lebanon by being one of its largest donors and creditors. Where its other strategic goals, such as limiting the influence of its systemic rival Iran in Lebanon, would come in conflict with its goal of securing the stability of the small Levantine state, Saudi Arabia had usually aimed to contain tensions, as to not escalate them to the point of inevitable instability. The year of 2015 proved to be a watershed moment, however. From this year onwards, the Kingdom's foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon shifted to a more aggressive and perilous approach substituting an approach which was more defensive, pragmatic, and cautious in nature. The stability of Lebanon, once a primary goal of the Kingdom, became subordinate to the strategic goal of rolling back the influence of Iran and its client Hizballah, Lebanon's powerful Shi'ite paramilitary group and political organization. Mediation efforts were abandoned, as was the role it had played as guarantor of Lebanon's economic stability. It is also in this light that we should see the extraordinary episode of Sa'ad al-Hariri's resignation in Riyadh. Apparently having outlast his purpose, Saudi Arabia sacrificed the key client in its patronage network in order to enforce the formation of a new Lebanese government opposed to Hizballah and the influence of Iran, all while accepting the risks of severe civil unrest or renewed conflict. All this raises the question why and how this shift in Saudi foreign policy has occurred. Hence this thesis' research question is as follows: why did Saudi Arabia shift to a more aggressive and perilous foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon from 2015 onwards?

A relatively straightforward answer to this question might follow from the observation that the influence of Hizballah and by extension Iran, despite Saudi efforts over the years, has not decreased, but rather steadily increased since the Cedar Revolution in 2005. As a result, the Saudi shift in foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon could therefore be seen as an effort to change fortunes by taking a different tack. However, while this likely does play a role – had Saudi foreign policy effectively diminished Hizballahi and Iranian influence in the decade up to 2015,

a radical shift in policy would arguably have been less likely – it cannot explain the timing of the alteration in foreign policy. Furthermore, solely explaining the question through the lens of the rivalry of Saudi-Arabia and Iran, as is often done in media, does not paint the full picture either, as this thesis will make clear.¹ The answer to this research question is more complex than it might appear on face value, therefore. Applying *complex realism*, an approach with its roots in International Relations and political science, and developed by Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, this thesis takes a multi-level approach and will analyse developments that provide an explanation to the shift in foreign policy on three different levels: the domestic level (of Saudi Arabia), the regional level, and the global level. There is no single answer that can provide a clear and comprehensive explanation to the alteration in Saudi Arabian foreign policy, it is the combination of developments on these three levels that can explain this puzzle. Briefly stated, it is the shift in power and, importantly also, the shift in concentration hereof in Saudi Arabia after the death of King ‘Abdullah in 2015, coupled with a vastly changed regional environment as result of the War on Terror and the fall-out of the Arab Uprisings, and the contrasting policies of two US administrations vis-à-vis the Middle East that facilitated, caused, and stimulated the shift in Saudi foreign policy.

To an extent, this thesis touches on a somewhat comparable topic of research as Ehteshami’s analysis through the lens of complex realism of Saudi Arabia’s resurgence as a regional power, a development which he attributes to a gradual erosion of stability in the Middle East since the 1980s, coupled with the changing of the guard in the Kingdom in 2015 on the domestic level, all taking place in the backdrop of increased global influence for Saudi Arabia, in particular arising from its role as an oil swing-producer, and increasing complexity of Saudi global relations after the 9/11 attacks.² Although the dependent variable between this thesis and Ehteshami’s article differs – he takes a holistic focus on Saudi Arabia development towards a resurgent regional power, while this thesis takes a case-specific approach with its focus on altered Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon – some of the (sub-)arguments he makes have potential explanatory value for this thesis’ research question. Therefore, in answering the aforementioned research question, this thesis expands and improves on these arguments by providing additional, more detailed and more solid analysis of the arguments on all three analytical levels.³ Furthermore, arising from the difference in the dependent variable, this thesis has a notably deeper focus on the influence of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and also analyses a shorter time span, but simultaneously also including more short-term factors.⁴

¹ See for example: BBC, 2016b

² Ehteshami, 2018

³ Some of the arguments Ehteshami makes lacks sufficient grounding. Especially his analysis of the domestic level is not convincing enough, which is unfortunate as this level is regarded by complex realism as key in explaining the particularities of an individual state’s foreign policy, as will be explained in chapter 2. Mostly descriptive with its focus on transformations taking place in domestic policy and Saudi society, and the accompanying challenges, he focuses too little on causal factors. Hence, this thesis significantly expands on this by introducing an analysis of the character, perceptions of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, in addition to applying overlooked analytical concepts, particularly the concept of dynastic monarchy. Furthermore, this thesis also elaborates on other arguments which are not sufficiently substantiated, in particular the argument that the Trump Administration further stimulated a more assertive stance of Saudi Arabia, which is limited to only a few sentences in his article.

⁴ This is particularly the case for the analysis on the regional level which focuses more deeply on this “Iranian variable” in the Arab Uprisings and the War on Terror, while Ehteshami focuses on the influence of regional

Naturally, it also contains a stronger focus on factors related to Lebanon. Finally, in order to provide the most comprehensive answer as possible to the research question this thesis has also added wholly different accounts, in particular on the regional level.

Through documenting and subsequently analysing the Saudi shift in foreign policy this thesis aims to contribute to the academic understanding of not only Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon, but also to a lesser extent also the effects of the Kingdom's foreign policy on Lebanese politics and society. While an increasing amount of academic attention is dedicated to the altered Saudi policy after 2015, the majority has taken a holistic approach and focused on Saudi foreign policy as a whole.⁵ Only a minority of scholarship takes a more case-specific approach.⁶ With a focus on the case of Lebanon, this thesis therefore aims to contribute to fill this lacuna by providing in chapter 6 and 7 an extensive account on how Saudi policy had changed. A thorough account of the alteration of its policy towards Lebanon has only scarcely been done and is therefore a major contribution of this thesis to filling the lacuna in academic knowledge. Finally, the application in this thesis of complex realism in chapter 3, 4 and 5, a theory that up to now has only provided limited accounts of states' foreign policies, adds another step, although perhaps a minor one, to the maturing of this theory.

In order to answer the research question this thesis has made use of qualitative research of scholarly books and articles; speeches, interviews and op-eds of key political figures; newspaper articles from renowned outlets, particularly the New York Times; official documents of international organizations and governments; intra-governmental correspondence in the form of diplomatic cables; and given recent developments in political communication even tweets. Where possible, triangulation of these sources has been performed to increase validity.

With regards to the layout of this thesis, chapter 2 will present the theoretical framework of the thesis. It will give a brief overview of the study of foreign policy in International Relations and political science by focusing on the dichotomy between structure-focused and agency-focused accounts. It will continue by explaining the theory which will be applied in this thesis, complex realism, which posits that in order to be able to completely analyse the foreign policies of states in the Middle East, a synthesis of both structure- and agency-focused approaches is necessary. The following three chapters will put this theory to practice, describing the developments on the domestic, regional, and global levels that would come to shape the Saudi foreign policy turn vis-à-vis Lebanon. The analysis starts with the domestic level in chapter 3, which will show how after the death of King 'Abdullah, the traditional decision-making process was altered with a large concentration of power with the new King Salman and his son and crown prince since 2017, Muhammad bin Salman. While this this did not cause the alteration in foreign policy, importantly, it facilitated the alteration in foreign policy. The next section of this chapter will focus more deeply on the persona of Muhammad bin Salman, the *de facto* ruler of the Kingdom, and show how his character, style and perceptions influenced the shift in Saudi foreign policy in Lebanon. Next, chapter 4 will shift the analysis to the regional level and first show how the War on Terror and the fall-out from

instability since the 1980s, in which these developments also play a role, although he does not take the 2006 Lebanon War into account.

⁵ See for example: Karim, 2017; Rich, 2019

⁶ See for example: Daher, 2016 & 2018b; Legrenzi & Lawson, 2016

the Arab Uprisings significantly favoured Iran with regard to the regional balance of power, providing an important backdrop to the Saudi foreign policy shift. In the following section, it shows how a confluence of direct threats to its national security in 2015-2016, all directly or indirectly tied to Iran and a lesser extent Hizballah, provided further incentives for Riyadh to aggressively target the Party of God in Lebanon. Chapter 5 will focus on the remaining level, the global level, and specifically on the effects of the Obama and Trump Administration's policies towards the Middle East and Iran on the foreign policy stance of Saudi Arabia. It will argue that the Obama Administration's policies caused doubt in Saudi Arabia about US commitment to the region, fostering a more independent and assertive stance of the Kingdom vis-à-vis Lebanon and in regional geopolitics. Subsequently, it will argue that the succeeding Trump Administration, keen in coercively reengaging Iran, further stimulated Saudi Arabia in its assertive foreign policy stance. Having analysed the developments that would come to shape the shift in Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon, the next two chapters will describe this alteration in closer detail. Chapter 6 will describe the foreign policy of the Kingdom vis-à-vis Lebanon between the end of the Lebanese Civil War and 2015. It will do so by dividing it into three different categories or pillars of foreign policy and then describing for each pillar how it operated. The final substantive chapter of this thesis, chapter 7, will then describe and analyse how Saudi foreign policy changed from 2015 onwards, building on the pillars presented in the previous chapter and the analyses in chapters 4, 5 and 5.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

In order to analyse the alternation in Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon, it is helpful to apply to this case an analytical lens, that on the basis of its theoretical underpinnings, can provide a relevant frame to analyse numerous amounts of factors that potentially could have influenced the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. As mentioned above, the analytical lens that will be applied in this thesis is *complex realism*. Developed by Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, this theory is an off-shoot of realism, one of the field of International Relations (IR) most influential schools of thought, and still is particularly niche to the study of international relations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Before this theory is discussed, however, it is relevant to explain why this theory will be applied and for that, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the study of foreign policy in the field of IR and political science.

The study of foreign policy: between structure and agency

Within the scholarly body of work in IR and political science that focuses on explaining the foreign policies of states, there is a dichotomy between two branches: a structure-focused approach and an agency-focused approach.^{7 8 9} The structure-focused approach posits that a state's foreign policy is the product of the constraints and opportunities provided by the structure of the international or regional system. Belonging to this approach are the so-called grand theories in IR, (neo)realism, (neo)liberalism, but also Marxist and dependency theory in IR, although their proponents disagree among each other about the exact amount influence of structure and its exact implications. Most influential in this approach, particularly regarding international relations in the Middle East, has been a branch of the realist school of thought known as neorealism, which due to the relevance for this thesis will be explained in further detail.¹⁰ Neorealists argue that the international system is inherently anarchic - there is no sovereign power above the state - and as a result, each state is in essence responsible for safeguarding its own security.¹¹ They assume that a state will act rationally and therefore will seek relative advantages over other states in order to ensure its survival in this self-help system, or in other words, each state will seek to become more powerful vis-à-vis other states.¹² To neorealists, each state faces these systemic constraints and since they all act rationally, the internal make-up of a state does not matter, and therefore neorealists consider states to be so-called unitary actors. To analyse a state's foreign policy, neorealists will look at the specific systemic conditions a state is faced with and the amount of power of a state, as a great power obviously has more options than a small power. However, within the realist tradition, there has

⁷ Heywood, 2014, p. 76

⁸ This division is also part of a wider debate in social sciences known as the structure-agency debate.

⁹ In their discussion of foreign policies of Arab states, Korany & Dessouki (2008) have made a comparable distinction between what they call external-systemic and psychological-idiosyncratic approaches. With this distinction, however, they have neglected a whole scholarly body of work on foreign policy in particular from Foreign Policy Analysis. The psychological-idiosyncratic approach in this thesis is therefore replaced and widened by what I prefer to call agency-focused approach and by extension, the external-systemic approach is replaced by structure-focused approach.

¹⁰ For a key neorealist work focusing on the Middle East, see Walt, S. (1987). *The Origins of Alliances*. London: Cornell University Press.

¹¹ Heywood, 2014, p. 63

¹² Ibid.

been a debate on whether neorealist approaches are sufficient in explaining individual foreign policies of states. One of the most influential neorealists, Kenneth Waltz, has posited that they are not.¹³ He makes a distinction between theory of international politics, to which in his view neorealism belongs and which takes an abstract view and seeks to explain general patterns of the outcome of state interaction, and theories of foreign policy, which seeks to explain the foreign policy of individual states.¹⁴ Waltz argues that in order to explain difference in foreign policies between states faced with the same conditions of the international system, it is necessary to look beyond structural factors towards the internal composition of the state.¹⁵ Scholarly work from the realist tradition that acknowledges this distinction and have formed a distinctive realist theory of foreign policy is classified by Gideon Rose as neoclassical realism.^{16 17 18} Adherents of this theory agree with the neorealist contention that opportunities and constraints arising from the structure of the international of regional system shape the possibilities of foreign policy, however they argue that analysis of domestic variables are crucial to understand foreign policy and that foreign policy is formed by a complex interaction between these external and internal variables.¹⁹ In the neoclassical realist view, these domestic variables operate as intervening variables, weakening or strengthening the influence the independent variable, the structure of the international system, has on the dependent variable, the foreign policy of a state.²⁰

The structure-focused approach is generally criticized for its overly focus on the role of systemic factors on a state's foreign policy and lack of attention on domestic variables, and then in particular neorealism with its depiction of the state as a unitary actor.²¹ This leads to a rather deterministic depiction of states' foreign policy in which society and humans are not assigned agency to affect foreign policy.²² This critique is partially neutralized by neoclassical realism with its focus on domestic variables and the role they play as intervening variables between the system and a state's foreign policy. However, it is possible to argue that it still focuses too much on the system level and that some domestic variables possess enough explanatory power to be independent variables in its own right, and not intervening variables that can weaken or strengthen the influence of the independent variable, the structure of the international system, as neoclassical realists argue. Or in other words, the primary focus must be on agency, instead of structure, in this line of thinking.

This is exactly what the agency-focused approach argues. The most dominant agency-focused approach explaining foreign policy in IR and political science is Foreign Policy

¹³ By contrast, the key proponent of the ability to use neorealism to explain foreign policy has been Colin Elman. See for example: Elman, C. (1996). Horses for courses: Why not neorealist theories of foreign policy?. *Security Studies*, 6(1), 7-53.

¹⁴ Waltz, 1996, p. 54

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rose, 1998

¹⁷ Also known as post-neorealism.

¹⁸ For a key work, see for example: Zakaria, F. (1998). *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

¹⁹ Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006, pp. 121-122; Rose, 1998, pp. 150-155

²⁰ Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006, p. 122

²¹ Korany & Dessouki, 2008, p. 22-23

²² Heywood, 2014 p. 76

Analysis (FPA).²³ It is a multi-level and multi-disciplinary approach, taking concepts from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology and economics, that explains foreign policy behaviour of states through focusing on human-decisionmakers and not abstract concepts such as the state and the international system.²⁴ In the FPA view, the source of all foreign policy and change in foreign policy is specific to humans using their agency either individually or in groups.²⁵ The multi-disciplinary character of the approach means that by extension there a different number of sub-approaches, all trying to explain the foreign policy behaviour of states. One of these sub-approaches has focussed on group decision-making.²⁶ Within it, several scholars have focused on small group dynamics and the result of taking decisions in small groups. A landmark study has been Irving Janis' book on the effects of a well-known concept what he calls groupthink and how this drives policymakers to potential irrational and sub-optimal outcomes for the sake of cohesion.²⁷ Others have focused on the effects of organizational processes and bureaucratic politics. Classic herein is Allison Graham's analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis in which he showed how the unitary actor model used by many structure-focused approaches was insufficient in explaining this nail-biting event in recent history.²⁸ A second sub-approach borrowed from political psychology and focuses on the characteristics, and perceptions and misperceptions of key decision-makers and how these influence foreign policy.²⁹ Robert Jervis, for example, has shown misperceptions of the intentions and motivations of adversaries can have significant and dangerous consequences for deterrence strategies.³⁰ The third sub-approach moves from the individual level towards the state and societal level and focuses on the influences of national and societal characteristics on foreign policy making.³¹ Especially influential in this regard has been Kal Holsti's concept of "national role conception," which posits that foreign policy is influenced by the decision-makers' perceptions of the national role of a country.³²

Complex realism: a synthesis

Following from the last section, it is without a doubt that the agency-focused approaches of FPA can provide valuable insights into the foreign policies of states. However, this does of course not imply that the structure-focused approaches cannot provide any insights into foreign policy making. According to Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, the realist school of thought actually lends itself particularly well for analysing foreign policy in the MENA region due to its regional

²³ Despite its usefulness in explaining foreign policy behaviour, Foreign Policy Analysis is still not always recognized as part of mainstream IR theory (Hudson & Day, 2020, p. 30). This thesis seeks to avoid partaking in this discussion but incorporates it by virtue of the explanatory power it has.

²⁴ Hudson & Day, 2020, pp. 5-7

²⁵ Hudson & Day, 2020, pp. 7

²⁶ Hudson, 2006, p. 7-8, 14-17; Hudson & Day, 2020, pp. 17-19

²⁷ See Janis, I. L. (1982) *Groupthink*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

²⁸ See Allison, G. T. (1971). *Essence of decision: Explaining the Cuban missile crisis*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

²⁹ Hudson, 2006, pp. 10-11, 17-18; Hudson & Day, 2020, pp. 21-22

³⁰ See Jervis, R. (1976). *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

³¹ Hudson, 2006, pp. 12-13, 18-19; Hudson & Day, 2020, pp. 22-25

³² See Holsti, K. (1970). National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy. *International Studies Quarterly* 14(3), 233-309

and global environment.³³ Described by Hinnebusch as the “epicentre of world crisis,” the region suffers from large-scale instability which has increased “the thirst for power, both as a shield and as a means for intervention,” according to Ehteshami.³⁴ Such a conflict-ridden and power-focused environment fits particularly well in the realist narrative described above. However, they acknowledge the shortcomings of neorealism with its structural approach and argue for additional attention on agency-focused accounts, as the MENA region is more complex than realists depict.³⁵ Aptly named complex realism, their approach is a synthesis of both structure-focused as agency-focused accounts in order to describe the foreign policies of states in the MENA region most accurately.

To analyse the effects of structure on the foreign policy of states in the MENA region, Hinnebusch and Ehteshami make a distinction between two international levels: the global environment and the regional environment. The MENA region is highly penetrated by external large powers, for the last decades most prominently the United States, that lay down the formal and informal rules to a certain extent.³⁶ Regional inter-governmental organizations that are still present, such as the Arab League, are effectively moribund.³⁷ As a result of this external penetration, the global environment of the MENA states should be classified as a hierarchy, and not an anarchy.³⁸ This hierarchic global environment provides both constraints as opportunities; it can be a constraint on the autonomy of states, however, it can also be a source of support for states to confront both regional and domestic threats.³⁹ Some states will cooperate with outside powers, providing political support in return for economic benefits or protection, thereby diminishing their autonomy.⁴⁰ A prominent example of this is Saudi Arabia, which safely resides under the security umbrella of the United States for almost three quarters of a century now and in return supports US policies in the Middle East, though with some major exceptions in the past.⁴¹ Not all states will cooperate though, a few states will rebel against this system, such as post-revolution Iran, particularly in its most staunch revolutionary phase in the 1980s. For these states, the global system is a source of threat, which is reflected in their revisionist foreign policy.⁴²

The regional environment is rather unique due to its dual character, in the words of Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, it is “a state system, embedded in supra-state (pan-Arab, Islamic) communities and cross-cut by trans-state and sub-state identities”⁴³ As result, states face not only conventional military threats, but also threats to the legitimacy of their regimes from trans-state movements or so-called interrelated threats.⁴⁴ An example of the latter is Egyptian President Jamal ‘Abd al-Nassir’s mobilization of pan-Arabism to try to undermine the

³³ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, pp. 225-226

³⁴ Ehteshami, 2018, p. 76; Hinnebusch, 2003, p. 1

³⁵ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 225

³⁶ Brown, 1983, pp. 3-5; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 226

³⁷ Ehteshami, 2018, p. 77

³⁸ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 226

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Alnasrawi, 1991; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 226

⁴¹ Ahmadian, 2018, pp. 139-140

⁴² Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 226; Nahas, 1985

⁴³ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 226; Noble, 2008

⁴⁴ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 226

traditional Arab monarchies during the so-called Arab Cold War.⁴⁵ However, the regional environment can also be a source of domestic legitimacy, such as when a state champions goals shared in the supra-state community as, for example, the Palestinian cause.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in a more recent development, the large regional powers do not have a monopoly on power anymore and as a result power has become more fluid.⁴⁷ States like Qatar, which despite their small size are well-endowed with resources, have been playing an increasingly large role in the region. This fluidity of power has only increased instability, leading to further securitization of both states as the regional sub-system.⁴⁸

For states in the Middle East, their foreign policy is therefore partly determined “by the global and regional environments in which they operate,” as Paul Nobel once noted.⁴⁹ However, Hinnebusch and Ehteshami dissent from his claim that these systemic conditions necessarily “shape” foreign policy, as neoclassical realists also argue.⁵⁰ For that, too much variance remains unaccounted for. Especially in the Middle East, the pressures exerted by the global and regional environment often push or pull in diverging directions, sometimes directly contradictory, and therefore choices need to be made between different policy values.⁵¹ For example, going back to the example of Saudi Arabia, protection given by the United States greatly increased its security, but also decreased its autonomy in foreign policymaking. In this case, there is therefore a direct offset between security and autonomy. To understand a state’s foreign policy completely, the “black-box” of foreign policymaking must be opened, according to Hinnebusch and Ehteshami.⁵² To analyse this black-box and provide a complete account of foreign policy-making in the MENA region, Hinnebusch and Ehteshami draw on approaches from FPA. They include four components that can influence the foreign policy decision-making process of MENA states: foreign policy role, power concentration, leadership, and intra-elite bureaucratic politics.⁵³

Foreign policy role is a form of identity or ideology constructed by the elite in interaction with other states and with their own public and incorporates the experiences of the elite in “balancing and reconciling such elements as economic needs, geopolitical imperatives, domestic opinion, and state capabilities.”⁵⁴ The foreign policy role defines the orientations of a state towards its neighbours, great powers, and the system. It can explain why states see their neighbour as a friend or an enemy, a great power as a threat or as a patron, and whether they take a status-quo or revisionist stance towards the system.⁵⁵ For example, Iran’s role conception in the 1980s as revolutionary state with an imperative to spread its anti-monarchic and anti-imperialist ideology has led it towards a staunch revisionist view of the regional system, and a hostile view of the United States and its Gulf neighbour Saudi Arabia.

⁴⁵ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 226

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ehteshami, 2018, p. pp. 76-77

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ehteshami, 2018, p. 77; Noble, 2008, p. 67

⁵⁰ Ehteshami, 2018, p. 77

⁵¹ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 227

⁵² Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, pp. 227-228

⁵³ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, pp. 227-230

⁵⁴ Hinnebusch, 2002, p. 15; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 228

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Although one can speak of the elite in the form of a singular noun, it is obviously not a uniform construct. Internal conflict within the elite can occur and, in that case, it is the power distribution among members of the elite and vis-à-vis society that decides the outcome for foreign policy behaviour.⁵⁶ However, in Arab monarchies with tribal origins, such as Saudi Arabia, conflict within the elite is generally avoided and decision-making is generally based on consensus, which leads to more cautious status-quo-focused foreign policy, as will be described in more detail in chapter 3.⁵⁷ In contrast to realist assumptions, the internal distribution of power can also affect the rationality of decisions. A concentration of power with only a small group or a single person, such as in personalized style of government has a higher risk of irrational decisions.⁵⁸ On the other hand, a wide distribution of power among different branches of government, each having large amounts of autonomy might result in incoherent policies due to fragmentation.⁵⁹

It is in the regimes in which power is personalized or at least very highly concentrated that the personal attributes of a leaders, such as personal style and values, but also perceptions and misperceptions, can have a significant influence on foreign policy.⁶⁰ This idiosyncratic variable, as Hinnebusch and Ehteshami call it, was for example an important factor in the differing foreign policies of Syria and Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s. Both had a similar (neo)-Ba'athist state ideology and the same personalized style of government, but the more aggressive and risk-taking character of Saddam Hussayn, in contrast to the more cautious and calculating character of Hafiz al-Assad, seemed to play a role in the more aggressive foreign policy stance of Iraq during that period.⁶¹

The final component that Hinnebusch and Ehteshami consider is intra-elite bureaucratic politics. As in every polity, there are a range of actors that try to influence the leader or key-decisionmakers towards certain policy directions based on their material interests or professional point of view. MENA states are, however, characterized by the relatively high number of actors from military or intelligence background and a low amount of foreign ministry officials that enjoy this direct access and ability to influence the key decision-maker.⁶² This has a result that there might be a bias in foreign policy decision-making towards more coercive measures and a heightened focus on issues of national security.⁶³

As a synthesis of structure-focused and agency-focused accounts and thereby able to compensate for the flaws in each respective account, the approach that Hinnebusch and Ehteshami offer is well-suited to be applied as an analytical frame to answer the research question how the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia shifted from a cautious to a much more aggressive foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon from 2015 onwards. The next three chapters, starting with the domestic level, will describe more closely the developments on the three levels that caused this foreign policy shift.

⁵⁶ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 229

⁵⁷ Herb, 1999

⁵⁸ Hinnebusch, 2002, p. 17; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 229

⁵⁹ Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 229

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Hinnebusch, 2002, p. 17; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2012, p. 230

⁶³ Ibid.

Chapter 3: Domestic level

It is no coincidence that the shift in Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon from 2015 onwards took place in the same year as the passing of King ‘Abdullah and the subsequent coronation of his half-brother Salman as the new king of Saudi Arabia. The effect of this transition of power has been two-pronged. Elaborated on in the first section, under King Salman there has been a shift in the decision-making process towards a much more centralized governance in the highest levels of power, which effectively facilitated the foreign policy turn. To follow in the next section, the leadership style, character, and perceptions of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman - widely regarded as the man pulling the strings in the country - had a significant influence on the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, steering it to towards a much more aggressive course. It is this constructivist element of complex realism that provides a causal explanation on the domestic level of analysis of the altered Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon from 2015 onwards.

A new decision-making process: an end to the dynastic monarchy

In contrast to what is commonly thought, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia cannot be accurately described as an absolute monarchy for the period of the last four decades up to 2015. Absolutism is a “political doctrine and *practice of unlimited centralized authority and absolute sovereignty* [emphasis added], as vested especially in a monarch or dictator,” as defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica.⁶⁴ Rather than an absolutist form of monarchy, it would be more accurate to describe the Saudi state under the reigns of the King Khalid (r. 1975-1982), Fahd (r. 1982-2005) and ‘Abdullah (r. 2005-2015) as a dynastic monarchy, a classification coined by Michael Herb in his well-known book on Middle Eastern monarchies.⁶⁵ Key aspects of a dynastic monarchy is the monopolization of the key state institutions by members of the ruling family and the presence of “robust mechanisms for the distribution of power among their members, particularly during successions.”⁶⁶ Another key aspect is that consensus among senior members of the ruling family is a key principle in decision-making, in contrast to an absolute monarchy.⁶⁷ All these aspects have been present in the Saudi monarchy from the accession to the throne of King Khalid in 1975 to the death of King ‘Abdullah in 2015. Most cabinet positions and other important state positions were traditionally occupied by senior princes who were politically independent and enjoyed significant extent of ownership over policy in their department.⁶⁸ Sometimes this even comprised certain portfolios within Saudi foreign policy, such as a senior prince being responsible for the policy towards a specific country.⁶⁹ Successions did not take place according to primogeniture succession, as in most monarchies, but the crown prince was always selected among the highest-ranking sons of Ibn Sa’ud (r. 1932-1953), the founder the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, seeking consensus had always been a key principle in Saudi governance, which not only included the circle of senior princes, but often also other actors which had influence on policy-making, such

⁶⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020

⁶⁵ Herb, 1999

⁶⁶ Herb, 1999, p. 8

⁶⁷ Alsultan, 2013, p. 458

⁶⁸ Alsultan, 2013, p. 459; Karim, 2017, p. 75

⁶⁹ Gause, 2002, p. 204; Nonneman, 2005, pp. 335-336

as the religious establishment and prominent tribal or commercial families allied to the Al Sa'ud.⁷⁰ In this governance system, the King took the role of broker to ensure consensus was reached among the senior princes.⁷¹ In this regard, while the King was granted extensive powers by the Saudi Basic Law, the Saudi Kings had acted more as a *primus inter pares* than an absolute monarch.⁷² Exceptions to this were King Ibn Sa'ud and his son King Faysal (r. 1964-1975). These kings are regarded as strong kings and had centralized more power in their hands than the others.⁷³ The overall effect of this dynastic monarchy model on the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is that it was more prone to risk-averse and reactionary behaviour. As already described by William Quandt in the 1980s, but also valid for the reigns of King Fahd and 'Abdullah, the Saudi leadership, "pushed and pulled in various directions, will try to find a middle ground, a consensus position that will minimize pressures and risks."⁷⁴ Furthermore, due to conflicting views among the leadership "decisions may be postponed, or compromises forged to preserve the façade of consensus."⁷⁵

Under the reign of King Salman (r. 2015-) Saudi Arabia has broken with the dynastic monarchy form of government, with significant repercussions for the country's foreign policy stance. Principle in this development is the centralization of power with Muhammad bin Salman, King Salman's son and crown prince since 2017, and the replacement of many senior princes in the highest positions of power with non-royal technocrats, thereby upending the traditional system of distribution of power in the dynasty. Immediately after his coronation in 2015, King Salman started with a series of personnel changes at the highest positions of power. After just two months as King, he replaced his half-brother Muqrin as crown prince, appointed by King 'Abdullah, with his nephew Muhammad bin Nayif and positioned the young Muhammad bin Salman (b. 1985) as the deputy crown prince.⁷⁶ Muhammad bin Salman was also placed at key positions of power, being appointed Minister of Defence, head of the Royal Court and designated to head the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, in which position he is responsible for the country's ambitious plan to diversify its economy, known as Vision 2030.⁷⁷ In addition, he was also made responsible for Saudi Aramco – the world's most valuable company – in a move that saw the oil company being removed from the umbrella of the Ministry of Oil.⁷⁸ Never in the history of the modern Saudi state has such a young prince gathered so much influence.⁷⁹ Power was further centralized in the hands of Muhammad bin Salman, when after an internal power struggle King Salman issued a royal decree, stripping Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayif of all his positions and replacing him as crown prince with his son Muhammad bin Salman.^{80 81} Hereafter, King Salman and his son Muhammad were the only two power-brokers left with a deciding influence on the country's domestic and foreign

⁷⁰ Nonneman, 2005, p. 336

⁷¹ Alsultan, 2013, p. 459

⁷² Korany & Fattah, 2008, p. 366

⁷³ Gause, 2002, p. 204; Nonneman, 2005, p. 335

⁷⁴ Nonneman, 2005, p. 337; Quandt, 1981, pp. 83-86

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Al-Rasheed, 2018, p. 46

⁷⁷ Kirkpatrick, 2015

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Al-Rasheed, 2018, p. 46

⁸⁰ Hubbard, 2017b

⁸¹ For an interesting account of this power struggle, see also Filkins, 2018

policy, and with doubts expressed about the health of the King and his capability to actively govern, Mohammad bin Salman is often regarded as the real power behind the throne.⁸² As stated by a prominent Saudi journalist, the late Jamal Khashoggi: “He can do whatever he wants now,” (...) “All checks and balances are gone.”⁸³ Indeed, centralization of power with Muhammad bin Salman went hand-in-hand with the removal of family members from key positions of power. Under King Salman, there are fewer princes in the cabinet than any time since the reign of King Faysal (r. 1964-1975).⁸⁴ Importantly, from early 2015 until late 2018, the Foreign Affairs department was led by Adel al-Jubeir, a non-royal diplomat. The fact that he does not belong to the Al Sa’ud family means that he has no real power or constituency with the ruling family, which increases the influence of Muhammad bin Salman over foreign affairs.⁸⁵ All in all, it would be difficult to speak of Saudi Arabia from 2015 onwards as a dynastic monarchy. The resulting effect on the country’s foreign policy is that the balancing and consensus-seeking effect that the dynastic monarchy form of government had on Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy has been removed. Instead, the centralization of power with Muhammad bin Salman has allowed him to shape foreign policy in his view and thereby facilitated the aggressive turn in foreign policy that took place from 2015 onwards. While this institutional change does not necessarily causally explain why Saudi foreign policy altered, but it does provide the necessary explanation as for how this change was possible in a country of which its foreign policy was arguably as less prone to radical change as its conservative social norms were.

The young prince: the character, perceptions, and ambitions of Muhammad bin Salman

For a causal explanation on the domestic level for the alteration in Saudi foreign policy, it is necessary to focus on the personal style, values, and perceptions of Muhammad bin Salman as the key power broker with regard to foreign policy since 2015. Following complex realism, leadership characteristics have the possibility to shape foreign policy when a single or a very limited number of leaders possess large amounts of power, hence these characteristics of the Crown Prince warrant attention in this thesis.

The personal style of the young Muhammad bin Salman stands in sharp contrast with the much more senior Kings, both in experience as in age, which ruled the country before 2015. Through the limited number of well-sourced profiles written about him, it is possible to establish a picture of the personal style and character of Muhammad bin Salman, one which portrays him as a starkly ambitious man, seeking not only success in his personal life, but also striving for the success of his own country, and with a particular penchant for risk-taking behaviour. According to Karen House, Muhammad bin Salman’s character is marked by three different aspects: a particular high level of self-confidence, a distinctive amount of energy, and a firm reliance on his political instincts.⁸⁶ It is in these three characteristics of the man who has been the real power behind Saudi foreign policy since 2015, that it is possible to see why Saudi foreign policy suddenly shifted towards a much more aggressive and risk-taking stance.

⁸² Henderson, 2016; Karim, 2017, p. 77

⁸³ Quoted in Filkins, 2018

⁸⁴ Gause, 2018, p. 40

⁸⁵ Karim, 2017, pp. 76-77

⁸⁶ House, 2019, p. 4

Already in his youth, did the ambition and self-confidence of the future crown prince reveal itself. Feeling disadvantaged by his older half-siblings, whom he regarded as more privileged, he is said to have been striving for distinction from an early age on as a result.⁸⁷ Young Muhammad bin Salman went after what he wanted and the more often he got his way, the more assured he became.⁸⁸ In his early adulthood, his ambition was reflected by his remarks to his co-students that he aspired to be the next Alexander the Great and his openly declared desire to get involved in governance and implement change.⁸⁹ During this time, it also turned into the cold-bloodedness and boldness that he has shown during his leadership. He once threatened a judge by sending him bullets in an envelope, earning him the nickname *abu rasasa*: father of the bullet.⁹⁰

His ambition is accompanied by a high-level of energy in his dealings. He is described as a man who rarely relaxes, a typical workaholic like his father once was.⁹¹ He applies the same energy and dynamism in his policy and his vision of Saudi Arabia. When King ‘Abdullah died, Muhammad bin Salman immediately put together an informal advisory group to help him reshape the government, despite not even been designated as deputy crown prince. In his own words: “From the first twelve hours, decisions were issued. In the first ten days, the entire government was restructured.”⁹² A year later, he would present his starkly ambitious Vision 2030 program in which he seeks to radically reshape both the country’s economy as society. Much of his decision-making seems to be informed by his political instincts. He has a particular penchant for risk-seeking behaviour and invariably chooses action over caution.⁹³ He regards risks inherent in change as less problematic than the risks associated with doing nothing, according to his aides.⁹⁴ When applying complex realism with its focus on what Hinnebusch and Ehteshami have called the “idiosyncratic variable” to the case of Saudi Arabia, it is possible to see how a ruler who is incredibly ambitious, keen on uplifting his country in which he doesn’t fear, but rather embraces radical change, and prefers risky over cautious behaviour and action over standing idly by, is an important causal factor in the alteration of a country’s foreign policy from a cautious stance to a much more aggressive stance.

Secondly, next to his character and leadership style, Muhammad bin Salman’s hostile perception of Iran most likely has been a key factor in the heightened aggressive approach against Iran and its proxies, which in Lebanon has led Saudi Arabia to increasingly try to target Hizballah, as will be described in chapter 7. While the administration under King ‘Abdullah certainly held negative views about the Iranian government and its proxies and allies in the Middle East, Mohammad bin Salman, known for his hawkish demeanour, holds particularly vehement anti-Iranian views. The Crown Prince has publicly espoused a narrative blaming not only the woes of both the Middle East as Saudi Arabia itself on Iran, but also portraying the Iranian regime as expansionist and terroristic, on par with the region’s most violent and heinous terror groups and even Nazi Germany. Next to linking the (in)stability of states in the region to

⁸⁷ House, 2019, p. 8

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Hubbard 2020

⁹⁰ Filkins, 2018; Hubbard, 2020

⁹¹ House, 2019, p. 15

⁹² Waldman, 2016

⁹³ House, 2019, p. 15

⁹⁴ Ibid.

the presence or absence of Iranian activity, he has accused Iran of seeking to take over the holy sites in Saudi Arabia, to which he responded with a belligerent stance: “We won’t wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia. Instead, we’ll work so that the battle is for them in Iran.”⁹⁵ In an interview in *The Atlantic* magazine his narrative takes further shape; it is not sectarianism that fuels Iranian expansionism and regional conflict, but the ideology of the Iranian regime, according to Muhammad bin Salman.⁹⁶ He accuses the regime of spreading an extremist Shi’a ideology. In his narrative, he draws analytic comparisons of Iran with Al-Qa’ida, Da’esh, and the Muslim Brotherhood, which are all connected in an awkward construct which he calls “the triangle of evil.”⁹⁷ ⁹⁸ What these three groups composed of this triangle, the Iranian regime, Salafi-jihadist groups, and the Muslim Brotherhood, allegedly all have in common is that they want to spread the word of Islam and re-establish the caliphate or a Muslim empire by force, according to the Crown Prince, thereby posing a threat not only to regional, but also global stability.⁹⁹ Iran’s presumed expansionist ideology has even led the Crown Prince to make comparisons with Nazi Germany. “I believe that the Iranian supreme leader makes Hitler look good,” he stated in the interview in *The Atlantic*, “Hitler didn’t do what the supreme leader is trying to do. Hitler tried to conquer Europe,” (...) “But the supreme leader is trying to conquer the world.”¹⁰⁰

While the analytical validity of Muhammad bin Salman’s narrative is highly questionable at best and this thesis will not address the multiple fallacies in it for the sake of conciseness, it does point to the fact that he harbours staunch anti-Iranian views. Following complex realism, it is therefore most likely that next to his self-confident and risk-seeking character and leadership style, his radical anti-Iran view has had an influence on Saudi Arabia’s aggressive shift in foreign policy towards Iran and its proxies and allies, both in Lebanon as in the region itself. This is supplemented and facilitated by the shift in decision-making away from dynastic monarchy, which significantly reduced checks and balances in the highest level of the Saudi polity, thereby sharply increasing the ability for Muhammad bin Salman to implement radical changes, be it in regard to domestic policy or foreign policy, which explains why he was able to significantly alter the Kingdom’s foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon.

⁹⁵ Hubbard, 2017a; Time, 2018

⁹⁶ Goldberg, 2018

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Da’esh is also commonly known as the Islamic State.

⁹⁹ Goldberg, 2018

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Regional level

As the death of King ‘Abdullah heralded key developments on the domestic level of Saudi Arabia, developments on the regional level would also have a determining influence on the course of Saudi foreign policy. As established in chapter 2, the regional environment can structure the foreign policy of a state to a significant extent. Following from this, any significant developments on the regional environment can therefore subsequently lead to an alteration of the foreign policy of states. In the case of Saudi Arabia, its regional environment is to a large extent structured by its rivalry with Iran. The first section will elaborate on how key developments, particularly the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Uprisings, led to an increasingly strengthened influence of the Kingdom’s systemic rival Iran in the region, or in the case of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 - particularly relevant for Saudi foreign policy towards Lebanon - effectively failed to decrease Iranian influence. It was these developments that provided the backdrop for the aggressive turn in its foreign policy. The following section will focus on more short-term developments, showing how Riyadh in the period of 2015-2016 was faced with several direct threats to its state security from its immediate surroundings, linked to Iran and to a lesser extent to Hizballah, thereby explaining why Saudi Arabia lashed out aggressively to the latter in Lebanon.

The War on Terror and the Arab Uprisings: Iran’s window of opportunity

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 resulted in the implosion of a state that for decades had operated as the main balancer to Iran in the region.¹⁰¹ As a result, the regional balance of power was significantly altered. Although limited by the occupation of US and coalition forces, Iran managed to steadily expand its influence in Iraq over the years by allying local, mainly Shi’ite, political parties, and training and funding Shi’ite militias.¹⁰² Iran’s influence in Iraq, which would further increase after the US withdrawal in 2011, subsequently not only gave it strategic depth for its own national security, it also facilitated closer access to its allies in Lebanon and Syria.¹⁰³ This new strategic reality subsequently increased both Saudi vulnerabilities as its concerns of a resurgent Iran in the region, which would provide the backdrop for its foreign policy actions up to this date.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, that Saudi Arabia became worried by this development was made clear early on by their tacit support for Iraqi Sunnis fighting against Shi’a fellow countrymen during the most intense phase of Sunni-Shi’a sectarian strife in Iraq by allowing Saudi private individuals to join the fight and to transfer money to Sunni groups and, in addition, by its refusal to fully recognize the legitimacy of the Shi’a dominated Al-Maliki government (2006-2014).¹⁰⁵ That fact that Iranian influence actually increased in Iraq and the region after the fall of the Saddam regime was certainly unintended and highly ironic, given that both the Iraqi as Iranian regimes were part of the same narrative of the “axis of evil” coined by US President George W. Bush and which, together with narrative of the War on Terror operated as a legitimizing framework for US military operations in the region.

¹⁰¹ Ehteshami, 2018, pp. 85-86

¹⁰² Eisenstadt, Knights & Ali, 2011, pp. 3-11

¹⁰³ Ehteshami, 2018, p. 86

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Kostiner, 2011, pp. 102-103

Next to Iraq, the narrative of the War on Terror was also applied to Syria and Lebanon in order to legitimize and to further the geopolitical interests of the US there, which in this case came down to reducing the influence of Iran and its allies and proxies in the Levant. Prominent in this regard was the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, which, next to accusing Syria of supporting international terrorism, called for the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the eviction of “all terrorist and foreign forces from southern Lebanon, including Hizballah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards”¹⁰⁶ Unsurprisingly given this context, the War on Terror also came to define the US-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, which was sparked after a Hizballah cross-border commando raid in Israel.¹⁰⁷ Behind this narrative however, were geopolitical interests of both Israel and the US to eliminate Hizballah’s military wing and diminish its support base in Lebanon, thereby reducing Iranian influence in not only Lebanon, but also by extension the Arab-Israeli conflict, and further isolating Iranian ally Syria.¹⁰⁸ Although never publicly voiced due to the sensitivities around the Arab-Israeli conflict, there are indications that Saudi Arabia tacitly supported the Israeli operation against Hizballah behind closed doors. In a statement delivered a day after the capture of Israeli soldiers, Saudi Arabia condemned the act as an “uncalculated adventure” and that Hizballah should “shoulder full responsibility for this irresponsible behaviour.”¹⁰⁹ Given the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, this sharp condemnation of Hizballah led many to think that the Kingdom tacitly supported Israel in its war with Hizballah.¹¹⁰ Indeed, Saudi Arabia was allegedly not only informed about the Israeli attack beforehand, but also supported the US in its effort to delay any decision on the conflict, with the aim to give Israel time to defeat Hizballah.¹¹¹ Despite its advanced military capabilities, the Israeli Defence Force quickly became bogged down in southern Lebanon, however, and the whole operation would turn into a fiasco. Rather than diminishing its military and political power, the one-month-war actually consolidated Hizballah’s power position domestically, thereby shifting the local balance of power towards Iran, undoubtedly to the frustration of the Saudi leadership.¹¹²

Five years later, the massive popular demonstrations that erupted regionwide and which would quickly become optimistically known as the Arab Spring would prove both a substantial threat as an opportunity to Saudi regional geopolitical interests. In Bahrain, popular protests threatened the survival of the Sunni Al Khalifa regime in what is a Shi’a majority island state. Acting under presumption that Iran was somehow involved in these protests, Saudi troops, under the flag of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s Peninsula Shield Force, were deployed to Bahrain to crush the popular protests in order to prevent that Iran could potentially expand its sphere of influence there and prevent spill-over effects to the sizeable Shi’a community in Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province.¹¹³ In Yemen, the situation for Saudi Arabia initially looked less bleak. A Gulf Cooperation Council brokered agreement facilitated a transfer of power to a president favourable to Riyadh, allowing it to retain its decades-old sphere of

¹⁰⁶ US Congress, 2003

¹⁰⁷ Makdisi, 2011, pp. 6-8

¹⁰⁸ Kerr, 2012, pp. 28-29

¹⁰⁹ Korany & Fattah, 2008, p. 374

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Keynoush, 2016, pp. 206-207

¹¹² Kerr, 2012, p. 28

¹¹³ Mabon, 2012

influence over the country.¹¹⁴ The accord miserably failed to stabilize the country, however, and led to a struggle for power between different groups. In 2014, the Shi'ite movement Ansar Allah, better known as the Huthis, managed to capture the capital Sana'a, leading to a full-blown civil war between roughly speaking groups associated with the Huthis and the former president, and groups still loyal to the current president.¹¹⁵ ¹¹⁶ Although it does not stroke with reality to describe the Huthis as an Iranian proxy force and the conflict is too complex to be able to describe it accurately as Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict or a Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict, it is safe to say that fall of Sana'a and the displacement of the Saudi-favourable government caused Yemen to slip out of the Saudi sphere of influence and enlarged Iranian ability to expand its influence in Yemen if it wished to do so.¹¹⁷

By contrast, the uprisings in Syria marked an opportunity for Riyadh to dislodge the 'Alawite dominated regime, closely aligned with Iran, in a Sunni-majority country. Next to the strategic gain for Riyadh of Iran losing an important ally, Syria was also seen as strategically important for its neighbouring countries of Lebanon and Iraq. An allied state in Syria could consolidate the Kingdom's position in Lebanon and provide a springboard to expand its influence in Iraq.¹¹⁸ Hence, Saudi Arabia began to arm and fund Syrian rebels, initially secular and associated with the Free Syrian Army but later also groups with an Islamist or Salafist background.¹¹⁹ Despite support for armed opposition groups from a range of countries, the Syrian regime, supported by Iran with its Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) together with Hizballah and Shi'ite Afghani and Pakistani proxy militias, began to score important strategic victories from 2013 onwards. The Russian military intervention on the side of the Syrian regime in 2015 proved key in tipping the balance firmly in favour of the Assad regime, which now steadily began to recapture opposition strongholds. By 2015, in contrast to what Riyadh had hoped and viewed suspiciously in some circles in Damascus, Iranian influence in Syria had been consolidated due to the partial dependence of Syria on Iran in its civil war.¹²⁰

Confluence of direct security threats to Saudi Arabia in 2015-2016

Next to these long-term strategic developments, there were a number of direct threats to Saudi national security that converged in 2015-2016.¹²¹ In Yemen, faced with growing power of the Huthis, Muhammad bin Salman had orchestrated a military intervention in support of the pro-Saudi government, only two months after his appointment as defence minister in January 2015. After some initial successes, the intervention soon foundered. Naturally, the intervention made Saudi Arabia itself a target for the Huthi coalition, hence the south of the country, particularly the city of Najran, was frequently targeted in cross-border rocket and artillery attacks.¹²² Crucial this regard, is the fact that Iran has provided weaponry to the Huthi coalition, included advanced and heavy weaponry such as anti-tank guided missiles, man-portable anti-air missiles

¹¹⁴ Darwich, 2018, pp. 5-6

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Although Ansar Allah is Shi'ite, its Zaydi strand is different from the Twelver strand practiced in Iran.

¹¹⁷ Darwich, 2018, pp. 7-8; Juneau, 2016, p. 647

¹¹⁸ Blanga, 2017, p. 57

¹¹⁹ Blanga, 2017, pp. 52-55

¹²⁰ Alam, 2016, pp. 12-16

¹²¹ Legrenzi & Lawson, 2016

¹²² The Iran Primer, 2019

and ballistic missiles, which in recent years were also used to target the capital Riyadh.¹²³ In addition, Hizballah and the IRGC have also trained Huthi fighters both in Yemen as Iran.¹²⁴

In Iraq, the rapid advance of Da'esh had sparked the formation in 2014 of umbrella organization of predominantly Shi'a militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces. Composed of dozens of militias which can be subdivided into three factions of which two are loyal to Iraqi Shi'a clerics, the third and most prominent is loyal to Iran and well-armed and funded by the IRGC.¹²⁵ Escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2015-2016, for example after the execution of the Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr by the Saudi authorities, which sparked an attack by a crowd on the Saudi consulate in the Iranian city of Mashhad, led to increasingly hostile attitude of these militias towards Saudi Arabia with Iranian loyalist militias increasing their presence near the Saudi border, where they had replaced the regular Iraqi army, while voicing threats of attacks.¹²⁶ In addition, the visit of representatives of the Popular Mobilization Forces to Damascus in early 2016 to talk about their common security interests, confirmed according to Riyadh the close links between Hizballah, the Popular Mobilization Forces and Syrian pro-regime militias.¹²⁷

Next to providing missiles to its allies and proxies in the region, Iran also allocated significant resources in the development of new generations of ballistic and other missiles, proving a heightened threat to the Kingdom. In 2015-2016, it accelerated the pace of its missiles program and tested a new precision-guided medium-range ballistic missile that was now able to accurately strike targets within Saudi Arabia with the potential to also carry a nuclear warhead.¹²⁸ The attacks on the Saudi oil facilities in Khurays and Abqaiq in 2019 by the use of suicide drones and cruise missiles would eventually show the real capabilities of the Iranian missile program in practice. The missiles, established by UN investigators to be of Iranian origin, evaded US and Saudi missile defence systems and subsequently caused the oil production of the world's largest oil exporter to temporarily drop by 50%.¹²⁹

By 2015-2016, the new Saudi leadership, radically changed following the death of King 'Abdullah, was faced with a resurgent Iran that had enjoyed a steady winning streak on the regional playing field since 2003. It was this shift in the regional balance of power that provided an essential backdrop to the aggressive turn in Saudi foreign policy that began at that time. In respect to limiting Iranian influence in the Middle East, Saudi foreign policy under King 'Abdullah had been a stark failure *grosso modo*, given the above. Although it is always difficult to look into the mind of leaders, this can to a certain extent explain why Riyadh shifted to a new set of tactics in Lebanon, especially given the character of Mohammad bin Salman. Furthermore, this was further added to by a confluence of a number of direct threats to Saudi national security from its immediate neighbourhood. What these short-term threats tied together is that they were all directly or indirectly related to Iran and a lesser extent Hizballah, thereby not necessarily stimulating the Saudi turn in foreign policy, as this was already on its

¹²³ Jones, 2019, pp. 7-8

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Jones, 2019, p. 8

¹²⁶ Legrenzi & Lawson, 2016, p. 35

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Legrenzi & Lawson, 2016, pp. 33-34

¹²⁹ UN Security Council, 2020

way by then, but providing further incentives for Riyadh to target Hizballah more openly and aggressively in Lebanon.

Chapter 5: Global level

As was noted in the theoretical framework, the global environment for states in the Middle East is a highly penetrated one, with external great powers having a large influence on the regional playing field. In addition, it was noted that the most prominent external power in this regard, the United States, has traditionally operated as a patron for Saudi Arabia shielding the Kingdom from external threats with its security umbrella. Analysing the remaining level, this chapter will look at the Middle East policies of two subsequent US administrations, under the presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, and how these marked a changed in the global environment for Saudi Arabia and subsequently influenced its foreign policy stance. The first section, focusing on the Obama Administration, will argue that the Administration's policies towards developments arising from the Arab Uprisings, and the diplomatic outreach towards Iran sparked fears of abandonment in the Saudi leadership, fostering a more independent and assertive foreign policy of the Kingdom. Next, it will be argued that the policies of the subsequent Trump Administration, aimed at coercively reengaging Iran, passively, but to an extent also actively, further stimulated Saudi Arabia in its path of an assertive foreign policy stance.

Middle East policy under the Obama Administration: Saudi Arabia fears abandonment

As part of its privileged relationship with the United States, Saudi Arabia generally supported US policies in the Middle East. A major exception has been their rift on the controversial issue of the Arab-Israeli/Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in which the Arab oil embargo of 1973 particularly stands out. In other areas, Riyadh followed the US line, so too with regard to Iran in which it has closely followed the capricious character of the US-Iranian relationship.^{130 131} For example, under President Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005), when Iran continued its shift towards a more moderate course, US-Iranian tensions thawed and was accompanied by a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This Saudi-Iranian rapprochement came to an end, however, when the Bush Jr. Administration began to depict Iran as part of his "axis of evil" in the context of the War on Terror and the US stance to Iran became more hostile again.¹³² This pattern of foreign policy congruity began to unravel under the Obama Administration, however. There were a number of factors that caused Saudi Arabia to stray away from the US line in this period. First of all, the Riyadh's stance to the Arab Uprisings and their aftermath widely differed from the Washington's. As the fall-out of these uprisings created chaos and instability in, amongst others, Yemen and Syria, Saudi Arabia was wary of increased Iranian influence in these states. Particularly in Syria, where it saw an opportunity to roll back Iranian influence in the Middle East, it became frustrated with the US refusal to commit sufficient resources and instruments that could make a difference in the civil war there, especially after the well-known "red line" issue, a decision which it saw a dangerous.¹³³ This led the Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom to argue in an op-ed that Saudi Arabia had no choice but

¹³⁰ Ahmadian, 2018, p. 139-140

¹³¹ Obviously, this does not imply that Saudi-Iranian relations were solely the product of developments in US-Iranian relations.

¹³² Ahmadian, 2018, pp. 139-140

¹³³ Al-Rasheed, 2013; Blanga, 2017, p. 54, 58

to become more assertive in international affairs.¹³⁴ Secondly, in this context of increasing Iranian involvement, real or perceived, in countries destabilized by the Arab Uprisings, Saudi Arabia was disgruntled with the diplomatic approach that the Obama Administration took towards the issue of Iran's development of nuclear weapons. The whole process, which would culminate in 2015 in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), more commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, sparked fears of abandonment in the Saudi leadership.¹³⁵ The Saudis feared that the agreement would lead to US disengagement in the region, as a main threat to its national interests, a nuclear Iran, was now neutralized by the deal.¹³⁶ The fact that the agreement was reached through secret bilateral US-Iran talks in Oman only worsened the Saudi fear that their security umbrella would start leaking.¹³⁷ Furthermore, Riyadh was also alarmed by the vision of the Obama Administration of some sort of balance of power and cold peace between Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹³⁸ This vision becomes particularly clear in an interview with *The Atlantic* in which President Obama insisted that Saudi Arabia needs to "share" the Middle East with Iran.¹³⁹

At the core of these disagreements on regional developments and particularly on how to deal with Iran were differing policy priorities leading to what Eman Ragab has called a "priorities gap" between the United States and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁰ While both states still shared core interests, their policy priorities had been drifting apart during President Obama's term. The US was mainly focused on combatting and eradicating Salafi-jihadist networks in the Middle East, such as Al-Qa'ida and Da'esh, and inhibiting Iranian development of nuclear weapons.¹⁴¹ However, the Obama Administration was simultaneously trying to reduce the massive US military and political investments in the Middle East and was hence wary of new large-scale military interventions with the risk of being drawn into another quagmire, like the Iraq War had become.¹⁴² Other regional developments, like the increasing Iranian and Hizballahi involvement in the Syrian Civil War, were less of a priority. For Saudi Arabia, the opposite was the case, as it tends to view regional developments through the lens of its rivalry with Iran.¹⁴³ Given Iranian activity in Syria, this is why Riyadh urged Washington to play a more active role in the Syrian crisis.¹⁴⁴

Middle East policy under the Trump Administration: reengagement of Iran

Saudi concerns about the US role in the Middle East would wither away fairly quickly after the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Despite his critical comments on Saudi Arabia both during as before his election campaign, as his administration's policies towards the Middle East fleshed out in the first few months of his term, they would be enthusiastically received in Riyadh. Whereas the Obama Administration operated a more

¹³⁴ Al Saud, 2013.

¹³⁵ Ehteshami, 2018, p. 87

¹³⁶ Ahmadian, 2018, p. 140; Ehteshami, 2018, pp. 87-88

¹³⁷ Bianco, 2020, p. 95

¹³⁸ Ahmadian, 2018, p. 140

¹³⁹ Goldberg, 2016

¹⁴⁰ Gause, 2016, p. 116; Ragab, 2017, p. 41

¹⁴¹ Gause, 2016, p. 116

¹⁴² Lynch, 2015, pp. 18-20

¹⁴³ Gause, 2016, p. 119

¹⁴⁴ Al-Rasheed, 2013

balanced regional policy aimed at improving regional stability, the Trump Administration quickly shifted back to the status-quo ante by countering US traditional rivals in the region and firmly backing its traditional allies.¹⁴⁵ The Obama Administration’s diplomatic approach towards Iran gave way to an aggressive policy of containment in which Iran and to a lesser extent Hizballah were subjected to crippling sanctions and previous steps made were reversed, most notably eventually the US decision to step out of the JCPOA in 2018. President Obama’s so-so relations with the Saudis – he had described it once as “complicated” – were replaced with warm relations in which President Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner was said to enjoy a particularly strong bond with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, it was no coincidence that President’s Trump first overseas visit was to Saudi Arabia. It was during the Riyadh Summit there that the tone and frame of US policy towards the Middle East was clearly set. President Trump accused Iran of being “responsible for so much instability in the region,” and continuing by stating that “from Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region. For decades, Iran has fuelled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, he made no mention of any Saudi involvement or responsibility for these regional crises and, according to Fareed Zakaria, the United States thereby adopted the Saudi line of terrorism, in which the Kingdom absolves itself from any blame and redirects it firmly towards Iran.¹⁴⁸ In contrast to his predecessor, President Trump therefore strongly accommodated the Saudi strategic concerns about Iran.¹⁴⁹

It appears that the public acknowledgment of the Saudi strategic vision and narrative further emboldened Saudi Arabia towards a more assertive and aggressive foreign policy. Just weeks after the Riyadh Summit, Saudi Arabia, joined by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen, launched an economic embargo, imposed travel restriction and broke-off all diplomatic relations with Qatar after long-standing frustration with Doha’s independent and often conflicting foreign policy.¹⁵⁰ That the Saudi leadership might have felt supported by the Trump Administration was later validated by a number of tweets by the President in which he indirectly voiced his support for the blockade.¹⁵¹ Insider accounts also indicate that the Trump Administration not only passively, but also actively induced Saudi Arabia towards a more assertive foreign policy. Former senior advisor Steve Bannon stated, referring to regional leaders and regional politics: “We said to them - Trump said to them - ‘We’ll support you, but we want action, action.’”¹⁵² Another insider more closely noted the conviction of the Trump Administration to induce Saudi Arabia to a more assertive foreign policy: “The judgment was that we needed to find a change agent. That’s where M.B.S. [Muhammad bin Salman, ed.] came in. We were going to embrace him as the change agent.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁵ Ahmadian, 2018, pp. 140-141

¹⁴⁶ Goldberg, 2016; Filkins, 2018

¹⁴⁷ The White House, 2017

¹⁴⁸ Zakaria, 2017

¹⁴⁹ Ahmadian, 2018, p. 142

¹⁵⁰ Barnard & Kirkpatrick, 2017

¹⁵¹ See for example: realDonaldTrump, 2017

¹⁵² Filkins, 2018

¹⁵³ Filkins, 2018

In short, it is the Middle East policies of two US presidents, both of which marked a break with their predecessor's, which caused a significant change in the global environment for Saudi Arabia, which, by extension, contributed to the alteration in Saudi foreign policy. Under the Obama Administration, fear among the Saudi leadership that they were being abandoned by their major ally due to what they perceived as disengagement by the United States in the region, in the context of the increased Iranian foothold in the region following the Arab Uprisings, induced the Kingdom to take a more independent and assertive foreign policy stance in the region. Subsequently, President Trump radically changed the US stance that his predecessor had taken towards Iran, strongly accommodating Riyadh's concerns about its rival, and not only passively strengthening Riyadh's assertive foreign policy through this accommodation, but also actively. It is this more independent and assertive stance that led Saudi Arabia to alter its traditional approach to Lebanon and significantly ramp up the pressure on both its rivals as its allies there, as will be made clear in the next two chapters.

Chapter 6: Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon pre-2015

Having outlined in the previous chapters the developments on three different levels that would come to shape Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon from 2015 onwards, this thesis will now look more closely at this foreign policy turn. Before describing how it altered from 2015 onwards in chapter 7, it first describes in this chapter how Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon had operated up until 2015. It does so by analytically dividing it in three different pillars: Saudi mediation efforts, the political-economic strategy known as *riyalpolitik*, and the operation of a clientelism network.

Saudi mediation in Lebanon

With Lebanon's dynamic and recurring intra-state conflicts, mediation as a tool of Saudi foreign policy had for decades been a key pillar in its approach to the small Levantine state. To understand why Saudi Arabia held an active mediation policy in Lebanon, or to understand Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon up until 2015 in general for that matter, one must look at Riyadh's foreign policy goals and factors specific to Lebanon itself. To the Kingdom's ruling royal family, the core objective of both the state's domestic as foreign policy has always been state and regime security.¹⁵⁴ By extension, its foreign policy towards the region has been guided by the objective of maintaining regional security and political stability with this key goal in mind.¹⁵⁵ In the Saudi foreign policy toolbox, mediation in conflicts to prevent wider regional instability or spillover effects with potential negative repercussions to the Saudi state is therefore an important tool to ensure state and regime security. In addition, mediation is also a tool to enhance the legitimacy of the leadership of the Saudi regime on the international as the domestic level, thereby also contributing to the goal of state and regime security.¹⁵⁶ Security has indeed been a key motivator for the Saudis to mediate in Lebanon's conflicts. Lebanon's numerous conflicts and fragile political system has rendered the country chronically unstable. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has mediated in Lebanon to avoid spillover effects potentially negatively affecting regional stability and/or the stability of the Saudi state.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, in light of the Kingdom's relationship with Iran, which over the last decades has been marked more by rivalry than a form of *détente* or *rapprochement*, the aim of mediation has also been to attain grip on the continued ascent of the Shi'ite community in Lebanon and in particular the increasing influence of Hizballah, which is regarded increase the influence of Iran over the country by extension.¹⁵⁸ Lastly, both countries are connected to each other through the many commercial and familial ties between the Saudi royal family and the Lebanese Sunni elite.¹⁵⁹ In Saudi foreign policy, in which the interests of the royal family play a key role, this undoubtedly is taken into consideration.

The first major Saudi mediation initiative, the 1989 Ta'if Agreement, can simultaneously be considered the most significant of Saudi mediation efforts in Lebanon up to

¹⁵⁴ Gause, 2002, p. 206; Gause, 2011, p. 169

¹⁵⁵ Kamrava, 2013, p.157; Kostiner, 2009a; Long & Maisel, 2010, p.159

¹⁵⁶ Kamrava, 2013, p.158; Kostiner, 2009a, p. 417; Kostiner, 2009b, p. 370

¹⁵⁷ Kamrava, 2013, p. 159

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

the present.¹⁶⁰ The accord, which brought an end to the 15 year long civil war, stabilized Lebanon, at least for the short term, and paved the way for economic reconstruction. However, despite these merits, it failed to significantly alter or replace the country's sectarian political system, which essentially lies at the basis of the country's chronic instability.¹⁶¹ The end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 2005 after the Cedar Revolution opened up the country to more interference from other outside powers, as a result, Riyadh has mediated in multiple Lebanese conflicts that have plagued the country since. Taking place almost yearly since 2005, the mediations mostly focussed on the many political deadlocks that afflicted the country since the Cedar Revolution due to the high level of polarisation between the opposing political alliances of March 8 and March 14.¹⁶² ¹⁶³ In 2011 however, during a new round of mediation in which the King was personally involved, Saudi Arabia abandoned all its mediation efforts out of frustration with lack of progress.¹⁶⁴

All these mediations were marked by a pragmatic approach of the Saudis in which they tried to maintain open lines of communications with many Lebanese political actors, including Hizballah, despite its often hostile views of it.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, the close ties between Lebanese domestic actors and external forces operating as patrons, such Syria, Iran and of course Saudi Arabia itself, had as an effect that during these mediations Saudi Arabia was dependent on the cooperation of Syria and Iran.¹⁶⁶ Consequently, Saudi mediation in Lebanon became entangled within regional geopolitics, which might explain why its mediation has not been particularly successful.

Riyalpolitik: financial aid and investment as politics

A second pillar of Saudi policy vis-à-vis Lebanon is the so-called *riyalpolitik* - a combination of the German *realpolitik* and the name of the Saudi currency - which is a political economic strategy of Gulf states which entails using financial investment or other financial transactions as a means to achieve political aims. Playing with another German phrase, in this case Carl Von Clausewitz' famous definition of war, *riyalpolitik* is thus the continuation of politics by *financial* means. One aspect of *riyalpolitik* in Lebanon took the form of financial aid and investment, together with other states and international organizations, to ensure the stability of the fragile Lebanese economic system. Another aspect was financial aid and investment for reconstruction projects, taking place since the end of the civil war and after the 2006 Lebanon War, of which the latter will be focused on here.

Saudi Arabia has played a key role in avoiding potential meltdowns of the Lebanese economy in the past, arising as a result of the Lebanese government's exorbitant public debt-

¹⁶⁰ Kamrava, 2013, pp. 160-161

¹⁶¹ Traboulsi, 2012, pp. 250-251

¹⁶² Arsan, 2018, pp. 127-128; Keynoush, 2016, p. 209; Schenker, 2007, ¶ 3-5

¹⁶³ The Cedar Revolution, sparked by the assassination of the Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafiq Hariri, a critic of the Syrian occupation, led to a dichotomy in Lebanese politics between two opposing camps named after two dates of mass protest in 2005 and which dominate Lebanese politics up to this day: the pro-Syrian (and pro-Iranian) March 8 alliance, dominated by the Shi'ite Hizballah political party, and the anti-Syrian (and anti-Iranian) March 14 alliance, dominated by the Sunni Future Movement, the party of Rafiq al-Hariri and after his death of his son Sa'ad al-Hariri (Arsan, 2018, pp. 40-52).

¹⁶⁴ BBC, 2011

¹⁶⁵ Kamrava, 2013, p. 159

¹⁶⁶ Kamrava, 2013, p. 161

to-GDP ratio. Since the end of the civil war, Lebanon's government debt in percentage of GDP has risen from below a normal 60% in 1992 to an almost unbearable 180% in 2005, which initially could be attributed to the country's need for reconstruction.¹⁶⁷ With such percentages an eventual financial crisis is likely. However, none took place, nor in the years following it, not even after the shock of the 2006 Lebanon War.¹⁶⁸ According to the authors of an IMF working paper, one major reason for this was that investors and depositors in the country had the perception of an implicit guarantee by Lebanon's donors that they would not allow the government to default on its loans and slip the country in an economic crisis.¹⁶⁹ One country that turns out to have played a significant role in this implicit guarantee by virtue of being a consistent and generous creditor and donor is Saudi Arabia.¹⁷⁰ The instances are multiple: in 1998, Saudi Arabia deposited \$600 million in Banque du Liban, the country's central bank; 4 years later, together with other Gulf states, the Kingdom pledged a large portion of financial aid during the Paris II donor conference for Lebanon; in 2006, after the war, it deposited a \$1 billion loan in the Banque du Liban to boost its foreign currency reserves and two years later another \$1 billion dollars loan was announced by Saudi Arabia for the same reason.¹⁷¹ As the authors of the IMF paper suggest, the reasons behind this implicit guarantee are at least partly geopolitical.¹⁷² Indeed, a severe financial crisis potentially followed by political and social instability as a result would indeed run counter to Riyadh's foreign policy goal of avoiding instability in its regional surroundings. In addition, standing in between Lebanon and a financial crisis, it would also have increased Saudi Arabia's leverage with Lebanon's domestic political actors.¹⁷³

Next to ensuring the economic stability of Lebanon through its implicit guarantee, the tool of riyalpolitik has also been wielded with regards to reconstruction in Lebanon, of which the most prolific case was after the war in 2006. Next to the \$1 billion dollar deposit to Banque du Liban aimed to avoid a monetary collapse, the Kingdom earmarked a huge financial amount for reconstruction. The exact amount of aid is uncertain, as the contributions of Saudi Arabia, but also other Gulf states and Iran have not been fully officially registered, unlike the aid of other major donors.¹⁷⁴ All in all however, the Gulf states reportedly have been the most generous donors.¹⁷⁵ Unsurprisingly given Lebanon's many external stakeholders, reconstruction aid was very much political in nature and could not escape the influence of regional geopolitics.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, Saudi reconstruction aid was predominantly routed through the prime minister's office, a key Saudi ally, and designed to support his administration and avoid destabilizing spill over effects in the region.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, Saudi reconstruction projects were much more prominent in Sunni-dominated areas.¹⁷⁸ The size of the Saudi reconstruction aid

¹⁶⁷ Schimmelpfennig & Gardner, 2008, pp. 4-5

¹⁶⁸ Schimmelpfennig & Gardner, 2008, p. 6

¹⁶⁹ Schimmelpfennig & Gardner, 2008, pp. 17-19, p. 23

¹⁷⁰ Baumann, 2016, p. 140

¹⁷¹ Baumann, 2016, p. 140; Baumann, 2017; The Daily Star, 2008

¹⁷² Schimmelpfennig & Gardner, 2008, p.17

¹⁷³ Baumann, 2016, pp. 140-141

¹⁷⁴ Combaz, 2013, p. 3

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Mac Ginty & Hamieh, 2010

¹⁷⁷ Hamieh & Mac Ginty, 2010, p. 108; Mac Ginty, 2007, p. 473, 476

¹⁷⁸ Hamieh & Mac Ginty, 2010, p. 110

can also partially be explained by the backlash it received from the perception of the Lebanese and Arab public of early Saudi support for Israel during the war, as noted in chapter 4.¹⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, this did not sit well with the Lebanese and Arab general public, fostering the influence of Syria and Iran in the country.¹⁸⁰ However, generous humanitarian and reconstruction aid delivered by Riyadh allowed it to retain its influence and credibility in Lebanon.¹⁸¹

The Saudi patron: external clientelism and patronage in Lebanon

The third pillar of Saudi policy vis-à-vis Lebanon is the operation of a clientelist system in which Saudi Arabia operates as a patron for a number of predominantly Sunni, but also Christian and Druze politicians. In return for support for Saudi political goals in Lebanon, these clients are provided with Saudi support, primarily in the form of financial funds. As such, Saudi clientelism could therefore be regarded as a form of riyalpolitik and while this argument is valid to an extensive degree, Saudi clientelism takes such an important and distinct role in its foreign policy that it requires its own subsection in this chapter.

The most important Lebanese client of Saudi Arabia for decades had been the Al-Hariri family, first under the aegis of Rafiq al-Hariri and after his assassination, under his son and political heir Sa'ad. The foundation for this relationship was laid in the 1980s when as a result of his political connections with the help of his business interests in both Lebanon as Saudi Arabia, Rafiq al-Hariri became the “Saudi man” for the Kingdom’s mediation efforts in Lebanon.¹⁸² Hariri wasn’t the only one of the so-called “contractor bourgeoisie” that had sought political careers, later prime minister Miqati being another example, but the support from Saudi Arabia he enjoyed eventually made him one of the most powerful domestic actors in Lebanon in the 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁸³

One important aspect of their patron-client relationship was Saudi financial support for the Hariri Foundation. This philanthropic organization providing a range of social services was Rafiq al-Hariri’s prime vehicle to attain leadership of the Lebanese Sunni community and still operates as a main instrument in the Al-Hariri family’s own clientelist network.¹⁸⁴ Although the amount is uncertain, Saudi support for the organization, whose expenses ran in the tens of millions of dollars was acknowledged at several instances.¹⁸⁵ Apart from funding the Al-Hariri family’s redistributive network, which allowed Rafiq time after time to electorally defeat the traditional leaders of the Sunni community, such as the Salam, Al-Sulh and Karami, the Saudis have also more directly intervened in Lebanese elections in support of their clients by direct campaign funding, which was extensively allocated to vote buying and transporting expatriates back to Lebanon to vote.¹⁸⁶ During the 2009 parliamentary elections, in which these practices were especially rampant, total Saudi funding of March 14 candidates in the election allegedly

¹⁷⁹ Keynoush, 2016, p. 210

¹⁸⁰ Keynoush, 2016, p. 10

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Baumann, 2016, p. 27

¹⁸³ Baumann, 2016, p. 55

¹⁸⁴ Dib, 2020, p. 14

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Corstange, 2012; Daher, 2018b, ¶5

ran into the hundreds of millions of dollars, according to an anonymous adviser to the Saudi government.^{187 188}

Perhaps the most remarkable example of Saudi clientelism in Lebanon was the financial request of Christian politician Samir Ja'ja' in 2012 to the Saudi authorities.¹⁸⁹ Revealed in the string of leaked diplomatic cables known as the "Saudi Cables," Ja'ja' requested his patron to relieve his party Lebanese Forces of its severe financial troubles, which allegedly made it almost unable for the party to pay the salaries of his bodyguards, in return for which he was prepared to do whatever the Saudi authorities asked of him.¹⁹⁰ Although the Saudi response to this request is unknown, the fact that this request was made is in itself quite telling about the extent of Saudi patronage activities in Lebanon.

¹⁸⁷ Corstange, 2012, pp. 493-495; Salloukh et al., 2015, p. 100; Worth, 2009

¹⁸⁸ That Saudi Arabia offered March 14 candidates financial funds in 2009 is also backed up by a leaked diplomatic cable from the US Embassy in Lebanon (US Embassy in Beirut, 2009).

¹⁸⁹ Also spelled as Samir Geagea

¹⁹⁰ Barthe, 2015; Daher, 2018b, ¶25

Chapter 7: Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon from 2015 onwards

As has been made clear in the previous chapter, Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon had been fairly consistent since the end of the Lebanese Civil War. However, from 2015 onwards, Saudi foreign policy altered significantly. While before this period, the Kingdom's policy was pragmatic, consistent, reactionary, and cautious, although with some exceptions, from 2015 onwards, its foreign policy took an assertive, aggressive, and less predictable turn. This chapter will elaborate on this alteration in foreign policy by focusing on the change in the pillars of the pre-2015 Saudi foreign policy explained in the previous chapter.

Mediation: "pulling his hands out"

Saudi mediation in Lebanon is actually one of the three pillars that saw its approach significantly alter before 2015. Indeed, as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Saudi mediation in 2011 ended in frustration with the Saudi Foreign Minister declaring that the King was "pulling his hands out of Lebanon," referring to his mediation efforts.¹⁹¹ Since this event, Saudi mediation efforts in Lebanon have been put on the backburner. Minor efforts have occurred in 2013 and 2014 though, when Saudi Arabia and Hizballah reached out to each other on multiple occasions to find a solution to the formation of a new cabinet.¹⁹² However, this should probably be seen more in light of Riyadh's stakeholder position by virtue of its role as patron of the March 14 camp than in its role as mediator, as it had been in the past, although it should be noted that there undoubtedly is overlap between the two. It is also telling that in the political crisis that directly resulted from one of the most destabilizing events since the 2006 Lebanon War - the explosion in Beirut's port in August 2020 that damaged large parts of Beirut - Saudi Arabia has been virtually absent. Further instigated by the protests of 2019-2020, reforming the current political system widely seen as corrupt and complicit to the event, immediately became the pressing issue in society, which the political establishment was unable to ignore. French President Macron immediately jumped in the gap, even personally visiting the disaster site, with its mediation efforts were quickly followed by Turkey, while Saudi Arabia remained on the sidelines, limiting themselves to humanitarian aid.¹⁹³ It is therefore important to note that although the year of 2015 operated as a watershed, the shift in Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon did not mark a full and clean break in that year, as the alteration in Saudi mediation policy in 2011 acted as a precursor to this grand policy shift in 2015 and was continued afterwards.

Saudi approach towards Hizballah: from dialogue partner to terrorist organization

As Saudi mediation efforts were abandoned, the pragmatic approach towards Hizballah that marked Riyadh's foreign policy was eventually also substituted for a more aggressive approach towards the Party of God, fostered by the developments on the domestic, regional, and global level. Already before the foreign policy shift, there were a number of episodes where the Kingdom held an unconventionally aggressive stance towards Hizballah, in particular the brief support for Salafist militiamen as a counteraction towards the Shi'ite organization in the years

¹⁹¹ BBC, 2011

¹⁹² Keynoush, 2016, p. 219

¹⁹³ Bar'el, 2020

2006 to 2008.¹⁹⁴ However, these instances should be seen as exceptions rather than archetypical for Saudi policy vis-à-vis Lebanon before 2015. Although Saudi foreign policy aimed to check the rising influence of Hizballah, it rarely turned to measures that could escalate tension and potentially destabilize Lebanon.¹⁹⁵ During and after 2015 however, Riyadh took increasingly severe measures against Hizballah and individuals, businesses and organizations linked or presumed to be linked to it. In May 2015, it sanctioned two alleged Hizballah leaders for “spreading chaos and instability.”¹⁹⁶ In the following November, it put on its terrorism list an additional 12 individuals associated with Hizballah and deemed to have been involved in “operations throughout the Middle East.”¹⁹⁷ In January 2016, Riyadh disconnected Hizballah-operated Al-Manar news station in the country, days after the attack on the Saudi consulate in Mashhad after the execution of Shi’a cleric Nimr al-Nimr.¹⁹⁸ A month later, even more Lebanese businesses and individuals were sanctioned for their presumed ties to Hizballah.¹⁹⁹ Eventually, on March 2nd, 2016, instigated by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council classified Hizballah as a terrorist organization, accusing it of “hostile acts” within its member states and of terrorist acts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.²⁰⁰ A week later, the Arab League followed suit with a similar declaration, although without the support of member states Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria and later also Tunisia.²⁰¹ Although these declarations did not spark a flare-up of regional or Lebanese domestic tensions, it should be considered a highly symbolic step in the deteriorated relationship between Saudi Arabia and its regional allies on one side, and Hizballah and its patron Iran on the other. An even further unprecedented step came in November 2017 when the Saudi minister for Gulf Affairs stated that the Lebanese government would be treated as if it had declared war on Saudi Arabia, because of Hizballah’s - which took seat in the cabinet - alleged “acts of aggression.”²⁰² Within the span of less than a decade, Saudi Arabia went from being one of the biggest supporters of the Lebanese government to, in its own words, being at war with it.

Riyalpolitik: cutting-off Lebanon

The Saudi riyalpolitik also saw a significant alteration in its purpose, from being used to support and sustain the policies of successive Lebanese governments to turning it the other way around and using the threat of withdrawal, postponement, or refusal of financial support as a leverage to influence the politics of aid-dependent Lebanon. It was particularly used to enforce a stronger anti-Iran stance, reflected by the developments on the domestic, regional, and global level. The prime example of this is the suspension in February 2016 of a \$3 billion aid package for the Lebanese Armed Forces, pledged at the end of 2013 and in addition to this, a suspension of another \$1 billion in aid, which Sa’ad al-Hariri had been given the opportunity to divide between the armed forces and Lebanon’s multiple law enforcement agencies to his

¹⁹⁴ Wehrey et al., 2009, p. 83

¹⁹⁵ Daher, 2018a, ¶6

¹⁹⁶ Reuters, 2015a

¹⁹⁷ Reuters, 2015b

¹⁹⁸ Daher, 2016, ¶11

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ BBC, 2016a; Legrenzi & Lawson, 2016, p. 31

²⁰¹ BBC, 2016b

²⁰² Al-Jazeera, 2017b

discretion.²⁰³ These suspensions were a repercussion for Lebanon's refusal a month earlier to support an Arab League communiqué that condemned the attack on the Saudi consulate in Iran due to its objection to a paragraph that also accused Hizballah of interference in Bahrain.²⁰⁴ The significance of these suspensions lay not only in the scale of the amount, the \$3 billion package amounted to almost twice Lebanon's annual defence budget, but also in Lebanon's fragile security situation, as it was still threatened by spillovers from the Syrian conflict.²⁰⁵

A second element of the Saudi shift in its riyalpolitik towards Lebanon is its inactive response to the economic crisis that fully erupted in late 2019, but whose roots lay years before; a response which marked the end of the implicit guarantee that had kept Lebanon away from financial meltdown and economic crisis for years. In hindsight, the suspension of the \$4 billion in aid can be seen as an early indicator that Saudi commitment on this level was wavering. That the quarrel could have further significant implications for Lebanon's fiscal stability if unresolved, became clear when the governor of Banque du Liban urged his government to mend ties with Saudi Arabia.²⁰⁶ Indeed, Banque du Liban increasingly had to turn to more risky financial engineering to attract the foreign currency it needed to keep the Lebanese pound pegged to the US dollar at the same rate, which was seen as vital for Lebanon's fiscal and economic stability.²⁰⁷ If, for some reason, the inflow of foreign currency would drop sharply, which eventually would happen in 2019, the country's fiscal and economic stability would be at risk.²⁰⁸ Ironically, it might have been Saudi Arabia that seemed to have tipped the Lebanese economy over the edge spiralling into a vicious cycle of crisis in one of the most remarkable acts in the Saudi-Lebanese patron-client relationship, according to Fadi Hassan and Ugo Panizza.²⁰⁹ As will be described in more detail in the next section, in November 2017, Saudi Arabia pressured its client Sa'ad al-Hariri into resigning the office of prime minister. It seems that this strange act of figurative fratricide scared off wealthy Lebanese depositors and encouraged them to relocate their funds abroad.²¹⁰ Immediately after the event, bank deposits of Lebanese residents collapsed, interest rates spiked upwards and bank lending by local banks to the private sector declined.²¹¹ The exact effect of these factors on the economy is not the point here, but seems that the event disrupted the precarious balance of Lebanon's economic and fiscal structure, sending the economy on a downward path. As the Lebanese economy was slowly deteriorating, there was one final act of the Kingdom in their role as financial guarantor. During the Paris IV donor conference in April 2018, Lebanon was pledged \$11 billion in loans and grants, including a renewal by the Saudis of a \$1 billion credit line.²¹² However, when the economic crisis erupted in the Fall 2019 and which would eventually also lead to substantial crises in the social and political domain, Riyadh was not as keen anymore to write further

²⁰³ Barnard, 2014; Daher, 2018b, ¶32

²⁰⁴ Daher, 2018b, ¶32

²⁰⁵ Barnard, 2014

²⁰⁶ Perry & Bassam, 2016

²⁰⁷ Rivlin, 2019

²⁰⁸ The details of the Lebanese fiscal policy and its relation to the stability of the economy are too complicated to address here. See Rivlin (2019) for a detailed explanation and how the political class was invested in maintaining an unsustainable policy, which would eventually lead to a collapse of the economy.

²⁰⁹ Hassan & Panizza, 2019

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Irish & Pennetier, 2018

cheques. One reason is the fact that the Lebanese government had not implemented the reforms required by Paris IV, and as a result also was not granted the promised funds. The second major reason however, is the discontent and frustration of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies with the powerful position Hizballah had amassed in the Lebanese political system in recent years.²¹³ Any further financial support for Lebanon had become conditional on the independence of the government from Hizballah, something which had become practically impossible given the Party's large influence in domestic politics and constitutional requirements for a cabinet.²¹⁴ As such, Lebanon's stability, once a key goal for the Kingdom, had become subordinate to its other goal of reigning in the power of Iran and Hizballah under influence from the developments described in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Clientelism: pressurizing the March 14 coalition

Saudi Arabia's own clients in Lebanon would not be able to remain on the sidelines in the increasing efforts by the Riyadh to target Hizballah. The Saudis had always operated on the basis of a "flexible" type of clientelism, they had their goals and demands, but understood the need for its Sunni (and Christian) clients to maintain a tolerable relationship with the Shi'a community, wary of the country's violent past.²¹⁵ After 2015 however, the Saudis began operating in a more authoritative manner, less susceptible to this need. Under Prime Minister Tammam Salam, the Future Movement repeatedly tried to pass Saudi directives aimed at blocking Hizballah through the cabinet.²¹⁶ March 8 responded with institutional paralysis by thwarting the election of a new president, resulting in a vacancy in the presidency for nearly two and a half years.²¹⁷ However, what was really novel in the altered approach of Riyadh with regard to clientelism was that it also began to target its clients itself both directly and indirectly. The suspension of \$4 billion in aid was not only a blow to Lebanon's armed forces and law enforcement agencies, but it also had negative repercussions for Sa'ad al-Hariri and March 14. As mentioned, Al-Hariri had been given the discretion to divide the \$1 billion reserved for the armed forces and law enforcement agencies, a decision which had reflected his own clientelist priorities. The suspension was therefore a blow to his clientelist activities, one which was aggravated by his party's own financial troubles.²¹⁸ Secondly, the suspension of \$3 billion military aid, which was duly welcome given the country's precarious security situation due to the Syrian conflict, was also a blow to March 14, which had always advocated the position that national security is a matter of state institutions only, contrary to March 8 which argues that Hizballah also has an important role in that regard.²¹⁹ To March 14 then, this was a missed opportunity to strengthen the role of the army in the domain of national security.

It also became clear that not only political interests, but also personal interests of Saudi Arabia's clients could be in harm's way. As part of its new strategy of shifting away from oil and reducing government spending, the Saudi government cancelled state contracts for lavish

²¹³ Abu-Nasr, MacDonald & Shahine, 2019

²¹⁴ Oweis, 2020

²¹⁵ Daher, 2018a, ¶7

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Daher, 2016, ¶14

²¹⁹ Daher, 2018b, ¶32

construction projects with Saudi Oger, one of the country's construction tycoons and owned by the Al-Hariri family.²²⁰ Dependent on state contracts and troubled by years of mismanagement, Saudi Oger as a result went bankrupt in late 2017.²²¹ As the crown jewel in the business empire and basis of the wealth of the Al-Hariris, the bankruptcy of Saudi Oger put Sa'ad's ability to dispense patronage and with it the future of his political career, under threat.²²² While it seems unlikely that actions were directly aimed at bankrupting Saudi Oger, the fact that it was allowed to go bankrupt should be seen as a sign of an altered attitude amongst the highest circles of Saudi government, one which doesn't hold back to harm allies if considered necessary, given the company's preferential access to state contracts for decades and close ties between the Al-Hariris and the Saudi royal family.

The best and most remarkable example of the Kingdom turning on its clients, however, is the bizarre sequence of events that saw Sa'ad al-Hariri being detained in Riyadh and forced to announce his resignation as prime minister. It is in brazen acts such as these, that it is best possible to see the influence of the character of Mohammad bin Salman on Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon. Expecting to have a meeting with the Crown Prince, Al-Hariri was instead met by Saudi security officials which made him read a speech on Saudi TV announcing his resignation as prime minister and in which he outed unusually harsh criticism on Hizballah and Iran, accusing the latter of fostering "disorder and destruction" in the country and accusing both of plotting to kill him.²²³ It took diplomatic intervention from France and other countries for Al-Hariri to be able to return to Lebanon, where shortly afterwards he suspended his resignation.²²⁴ With this daring move, the Saudis apparently wanted to force the formation of a new Lebanese government, one without Hizballah, as major political actors were expected to rally behind the Future Movement and against Hizballah because of the alleged destabilizing activities and assassination plan on yet another prime minister of the Al-Hariri family the Saudis accused the organization of.²²⁵ It backfired massively however, with the majority of the Sunni community condemning Al-Hariri's resignation and even portraits of Mohammad bin Salman being burned in the Sunni stronghold of Tripoli.²²⁶

²²⁰ Nereim, Algethami & Martin, 2017

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Young, 2017

²²³ Al-Jazeera, 2017a; Barnard & Abi-Habib, 2017; BBC, 2017

²²⁴ Hubbard & Saad, 2017

²²⁵ Barnard & Abi-Habib, 2017; Daher, 2018b, ¶36

²²⁶ Daher, 2018a, ¶24; Daher, 2018b, ¶37

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon thus went through profound change from 2015 onwards. Fairly consistent since the end of the Lebanese Civil War and marked by pragmatism, cautiousness, and reactionary behaviour, from 2015 onwards it became characterized by a more assertive, aggressive, and less predictable stance. Mediation efforts were halted and the pragmatism that had marked its relationship with Hizballah was turned into hostility. The so-called *riyalpolitik*, which for more than two decades was used to support and sustain the closely allied Lebanese government, now became a tool to compel and coerce the Lebanese government to adopt a harsher stance towards Hizballah and Iran. Lastly, even Riyadh's own clients were not immune from the new foreign policy approach, being put under pressure to toe the aggressive anti-Iran and anti-Hizballah line Riyadh had adopted, influenced not only with the carrot, but now also with the stick.

The causality for this heightened anti-Iran stance and the aggressive and assertive manner it was applied in the foreign policy vis-à-vis Lebanon can be found in the developments that transpired on the domestic, regional, and global level. On the domestic level, the death of King 'Abdullah led to a sharp shift in power and the concentration hereof, which would facilitate the foreign policy turn. In addition, it brought to power an ambitious and daring young prince, whose character and perceptions contributed to this more aggressive and assertive stance towards its rival on the other side of the Gulf. This stance was also fostered by developments on the regional level, which had seen the position of Iran on the regional balance of power steadily improve arising from developments in the War on Terror and the fallout of the Arab Uprisings. In addition, a confluence of direct security threats in 2015-2016, which could all be linked to Hizballah and Iran, gave even more incentive to the Kingdom for its newly adopted stance vis-à-vis Lebanon. Finally, it was also the Kingdom's ally and security guarantor, the United States, which contributed to this development. Creating doubt in the minds of the Saudi political elite about its commitment to the region and their long-standing alliance, the Obama Administration contributed to a newfound assertiveness in Saudi foreign policy. Subsequently, this assertiveness was directly and indirectly stimulated by the Trump Administration, whose strategic vision of the region much more closely mirrored Saudi Arabia's strategic views than the Obama Administration's had.

A still remaining open question, one that also was not part of this research, is to what degree the Saudi turn in foreign policy in Lebanon was actually successful if not counterproductive. A quick glance paints a bleak picture for the Saudi leadership. Politically and militarily, Hizballah has not been weakened and it seems that Saudi relationship with its clients and the reputation among the Lebanese public has only been harmed. The Lebanese public also seems to be the real loser in all of this, at the moment of writing suffering under the weight of a severe economic crisis, a pandemic and for Beirut's residents, the destruction caused by one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded. Obviously, Riyadh cannot rightfully be blamed for all of Lebanon's woes, but it certainly is to an extent complicit in the continuance of a political system that has been negligent at best when it comes to Lebanon's economic troubles and the massive explosion at the Port of Beirut in 2020.

It remains to be seen in what way Saudi foreign policy will develop in the future. Faced with backlash and limited returns on his foreign policy adventures from 2015 to 2017, in recent

years the Kingdom has not embarked on any new adventurous foreign policy initiatives. Nonetheless, it has not backtracked either, but rather has continued on the path it has taken with the Saudi war in Yemen soon to enter its seventh year, Qatar still under embargo and Hizballah still firmly in its crosshairs. Future research is therefore needed to analyse whether the adventurous acts of Saudi of foreign policy were simply a short phenomenon or whether the Kingdom is waiting for better times and has not played all its cards yet. However, in the case of the latter, the recent election of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States is undoubtedly a disappointment for Riyadh, given his more critical stance towards the Kingdom and less hostile stance towards Iran than President Trump's. Tellingly has been the historic meeting between Muhammad bin Salman and fellow Iran hawk Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu only weeks after the US elections. It is therefore likely that in the coming years the global level will again alter significantly for Saudi Arabia, however, what influence this might have on Saudi foreign policy and by extension what this will bring for Lebanon remains an open question for now.

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