

Master Thesis

A Thesis Submitted to Leiden University for the Master Degree in
Middle Eastern Studies

**The change in foreign policy of Saudi Arabia under the
leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman
through his quest of legitimacy**

The cases of Iran, Yemen and Qatar

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Abstract

The reforms of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman are already well established in the historiography, both domestically and externally. Nevertheless, the association of his reforms with Mohammed bin Salman's need to demonstrate his ability to rule and his legitimacy to become King of Saudi Arabia in the future has received little attention. The thesis focuses primarily on Mohammed bin Salman's controversial rise to power within the Saudi family and his increased anti-Iranian foreign policy since his appointment as Defense Minister in 2015. The innovative character of the thesis is in the more precise analysis of this anti-Iranian policy by taking three case studies, respectively, the policy exercised by Mohammed bin Salman towards Iran but also Yemen and Qatar. The main argument is that he undertakes this more hostile foreign policy because he needs to show his ability to rule, his power in the region and especially his legitimacy to become future King of the Kingdom.

Key Words: Mohammed bin Salman, Iran, Yemeni civil war, foreign policy, Qatar, legitimacy.

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1. Introduction

Within the context of the master "Middle Eastern Studies" at Leiden University, I chose to write my thesis on the foreign policy adopted by Mohammed bin Salman towards the Middle East and in particular Iran, Yemen and Qatar. Indeed, upon his rise to power, first as Defense Minister in 2015 and then as Crown Prince in June 2017, Mohammed bin Salman, undertook a more aggressive policy than his father Salman bin Abdelaziz al-Saud.¹ Therefore, this thesis researches the following question: "How did foreign policy of Saudi Arabia change under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman through his quest of legitimacy? The cases of Iran, Yemen and Qatar."

In the al-Saoud dynasty, power passed from brother to brother. Mohammed bin Salman is the King's son and not his brother. His appointment as Crown Prince was thus very controversial and he therefore had to demonstrate his legitimacy to become the future King. Indeed, being appointed Crown Prince does not necessarily mean that one will become King no matter what. Since MbS's appointment is controversial within the Saudi royal family, he must acquire some legitimacy towards his future role. That is why he wants to become a central player in the international community and demonstrate his ability to govern and control the region. To do so, he undertook a good number of reforms in domestic and foreign policies. This paper focusses on his increased anti-Iranian policies and how these policies affect him.

The innovative character of this thesis lies in the analysis of the changes in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran following MbS² rise to power. Furthermore, his intervention in Yemen will be analyzed, following the Houthi revolt supported by Iran. Lastly, to have another example of the evolution of Saudi Arabia under MbS, its relation with Qatar and the embargo

¹ Mehmet Koç, "Interpretation of the Rise of the Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman and Saudi Foreign Policy According to the Barakah Circle Theory," *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies* (December 17, 2019): 167.

² Mohammed Bin Salman.

imposed on it will be considered. These three case studies have in common the conflicting relationship that MbS has with Iran and they also emphasize his need to demonstrate his legitimacy and power over the countries of the region. The argument is that this more aggressive foreign policy undertaken since 2015 as Defense Minister such as the Saudi intervention in Yemen or since 2017 as Crown Prince is related to MbS's need to demonstrate his legitimacy within the Kingdom due to his eventful takeover.

1.1 Research methodology

The methodology used for this thesis is the Case Study methodology. The role of the case study is to generate a hypothesis by exposing different cases.³ In this thesis, the hypothesis that Mohammed bin Salman is following a more aggressive foreign policy is supported by three different case studies. The analyst begins with a theory, uses it to interpret a case, and simultaneously utilizes the case to suggest important refinements in the theory, which can then be tested on other cases. The case study plays a role in providing an explanation for individual historical episodes by linking them to a more global theory and in contributing in the generation of hypothesis. In addition, the case study can also be used to test hypotheses or theories. This is Lijphart's theory-confirming and theory-infirming roles of case studies. However, Lijphart recognizes that the use of case studies can be problematic because there are many variables in conjunction with a relatively small number of cases. The consequence of this is that it is impossible to be certain that a change in a country's foreign policy, for example, is related to the hypothesis. In order to provide as much support as possible that the hypothesis or argument is relevant to each case study, one solution is to increase the analysis of the case studies as much as possible at the temporal level.⁴ This is done in this thesis by starting the case study as early as possible and ending it as late as possible.

³ Frank P. Harvey, Michael Brecher, *Millennial Reflections on International Studies: Evaluating Methodology in International Studies* (United States: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 136.

⁴ Ibid, 138.

1.2 Choose of sources

The literature used in writing this thesis is described in the "Literature review" chapter. In addition to the literature, many press articles and interviews are used. The analysis of Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy is done through the analysis of his speeches and events that take place in relation to him. Reading and listening speeches and interviews made by Mohammed bin Salman or his father, the King, is essential in addressing the research question.

1.3 Thesis outline

This thesis is composed of an introduction followed by 6 chapters and the conclusion.

First of all, a chapter divided into two parts. One on the historical overview of the different theories used in international relations and one on the chosen theoretical framework.

The second chapter presents the literature review. The purpose is to go back over the authors who have already written on these subjects and to highlight what they have contributed to them.

The third chapter is a chapter to contextualize the topic. The circumstances of Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power are explained as well as his crusade to legitimize his ascension to the throne. In this chapter a historical review is given on how the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman is seen as controversial by recalling the Saudi traditions since its creation. This is followed by the explanation of the various challenges that MbS will face, apart from his questionable legitimacy to become the future King. Finally, in the last part of this section, the reforms that MbS is undertaking on the economic, religious, social and foreign affairs levels are presented.

In a fourth chapter, the evolution of diplomatic relations between MbS' Saudi Arabia and Iran will be analyzed. This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the various historical rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Afterwards, the change in the policies that Mohammed bin Salman exercises with the Islamic Republic of Iran following his rise to power is analyzed.

In the fifth chapter, the intervention of MbS in Yemen and how this intervention is an essential point in the legitimization of his power is explained. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate through another case study that Mohammed bin Salman is pursuing an aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East in order to support his legitimacy and show his and his country's power. First, an overview of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Yemen as well as a brief political and ideological history of Yemen is presented. The chapter continues with the arrival of Mohammed bin Salman as Defense Minister and the changes that this implies in the relations between the two countries.

In the last chapter, a third case study is conducted to support the argument that Mohammed bin Salman's arrival in Saudi Arabia has triggered a more aggressive foreign policy towards the countries in the area mainly to support his legitimacy within the Kingdom. This last case study analyzes the relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the evolution of these with the arrival of the young Crown Prince. The chapter is articulated like the first two. The historical tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia are reviewed and then the increase in tensions following the arrival of Mohammed bin Salman and his more aggressive policy towards the regional country are analyzed.

Following section six, section seven presents the conclusion of this paper.

2. Theoretical Framework

A really brief summary of some of the theoretical frameworks used so far in international relations is given in this chapter and then the framework that will be used in this work is explained.

Different theoretical frameworks have been used to analyze international relations. In the 1950s and 1960s, foreign policy analysis emerged as a sub-discipline of international relations.⁵ Many scientists from different fields and backgrounds are entering the discipline of international relations with the idea of adding scientific concepts and reasoning. This provoked a counter-attack from scholars such as Morgenthau or Hedley Bull who defended a more traditional approach of realism which resulted in a division within international relations. On the one hand there are the non-positivists (traditional strands) and on the other hand the positivists (scientific strand). The traditionalists are more concerned with questions of history, philosophy or law, while the positivists are more interested in a descriptive and explanatory form of inquiry.⁶

Later in the 1970s and 1980s, neo-realist theories analyzing the Middle East became the norm.⁷ Kenneth Waltz's neo-realism is an answer to realism. Waltz seeks to use a more scientific approach. He moves away from Hans Morgenthau's (non-positivist) theory that is shaped in the struggle for power that Morgenthau associates with human nature. According to Waltz, states in the international system are like companies in the domestic economy and therefore have the same interest, i.e., to survive. The fact that states have a common behavior over several centuries would be explained by the constraints on their behavior that are imposed by the

⁵ Robert Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015), 4.

⁶ W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018).

⁷ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran*, 4.

structure of the international system. Finally, the originality of Waltz and the neorealist theory is in the methodology and scientific rigor of the analysis.⁸

At the end of the Cold War, at the same time as the transition from a bipolar to a unipolar world took place, the FPA⁹ received renewed attention. In the nineties, constructivism became popular. Constructivism denounces the deficiencies of neorealism. It analyzes the social facts that inspire states to take action. It was originally born and developed in disciplines other than political science. Its origins come essentially from sociology, philosophy and anthropology. This theoretical framework relates the production and reproduction of social practices to their specific context which is situated in particular contexts such as historical, economic or political contexts. Another particularity of constructivism is the importance of contextualizing social phenomena before starting an analysis. These concepts influenced the development of constructivism in international relations.¹⁰

2.1 Nonneman's theoretical framework

The analysis of foreign policy has continually evolved. Different theoretical approaches in the elaboration of this thesis will be used but one in particular seems judicious for this subject. Nonneman's theoretical framework seems to me to be the most comprehensive in the analysis of the Middle East in general, and in the analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in particular. He analyzes foreign policy at a "multi-level".¹¹ Indeed, while the realistic approach focuses on national interests and the state, Nonneman's approach focuses on a plurality of events and theories. It takes into account the interwoven factors between the domestic, regional and international environments. This concept is called "omni-balancing". In his view, it is important

⁸ Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations".

⁹ Foreign Policy Analysis.

¹⁰ Audie Klotz, Cecelia Lynch, Rachel Bouyssou, and Marie-Claude Smouts, "Le constructivisme dans la théorie des relations internationales," *Critique internationale* 2, no. 1 (1999) : 51-53.

¹¹ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran*, 9-10.

to integrate these three environments to understand the overall foreign policy of a country and in particular Saudi Arabia.¹² Therefore, in my work, I would like to integrate these three environments to have a better understanding of MbS' foreign policy with Iran, Yemen and Qatar. This theoretical framework will allow me to understand the problem of legitimacy of MbS at the domestic level, which is felt, at the regional level, in his foreign policy towards the Middle East region. It is necessary to take into account different factors at the domestic, regional and international levels in order to analyze the Crown Prince's policy in his quest to demonstrate his legitimacy.

¹² Gerd Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy: "Omnibalancing" and "Relative Autonomy" in Multiple Environments," 316-318.

3. Literature Review

The rise of Mohammed bin Salman and his foreign policy has been the subject of various publications. The purpose of this chapter is to go back over the authors who have already written on these subjects and to highlight what they have contributed to them.

3.1 General literature review

Before beginning the research and the writing of this thesis, I felt it was important to read a general book on the history of the Middle East to better understand and analyze the dynamics of today. In order to do so, the book by Betty S. Anderson's book entitled "*A History of the Modern Middle East: Rulers, Rebels, and Rogues*" is quite comprehensive.¹³ In this book, Anderson describes the Middle East from the inception of Islam to the present day. The book gives a very good and detailed summary of the history, reforms, conflicts, relationships, and ideology of the Middle East and its countries.

In order to familiarize oneself with the foreign policy and history of Saudi Arabia, different works provide a first approach to the subject. I first read the works of Simon Mabon¹⁴ and Robert Mason.¹⁵ In his book "*Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East*"¹⁶, Mabon analyses rivalries in the Middle East and in particular those between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He discusses the politics, religion, history, and international relations of Iran and Saudi Arabia and by doing so provides a lot of background information. The second work is Robert Mason's book¹⁷ in which he provides an economic and diplomatic analysis of the Iranian's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia and vice versa, as well as their policies towards the wider

¹³ Betty S. Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East: Rulers, Rebels, and Rogues* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London, New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018).

¹⁵ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran*.

¹⁶ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*.

¹⁷ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran*.

Middle East. He studies the ideology, the geostrategy and the economy of these two countries which allows them to dominate the region. These two books give a summary of the different theoretical frameworks already used in the field of international relations. This will be discussed later.

Other earlier authors have written about Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in general. Jacob Goldberg¹⁸ wrote a book in 1986 about the creation of Saudi Arabia in 1932 by Ibn Saud and the change in Ibn Saud's policy towards foreign powers. This analysis, which may seem far from my thesis topic, provides an important historical background of Saudi Arabia and its traditions in order to better understand contemporary issues and dynamics. In 2003, Anthony H. Cordesman¹⁹ published a book on Saudi Arabia's entry into the 21st century. In it, he analyzes the politics, the economy and the energy dimension of the Kingdom. This book of almost 600 pages is very comprehensive and covers a variety of topics. King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman were not yet in power in 2003, so the analysis does not focus on the Salman family. Nevertheless, Cordesman is a useful read, especially in the analysis of Saudi Arabia's relations with regional countries in the early 2000s. These two books together with the more recent ones by Mabon and Mason provide a comprehensive overview of Saudi Arabia's history, foreign policy, and regional relations.

3.2 Historical background on the rising of MbS

More focused studies have been conducted on the rise to power of Mohammed bin Salman and the implications this has on Saudi Arabia.

A well-documented book²⁰ has been written about MbS. This one explains how he and Mohammed bin Salman's father came to power. The book then focuses on the life of MbS and

¹⁸ Jacob Goldberg, *The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia, the formative years 1902-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic, and Energy Dimension* (London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003).

²⁰ Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (London: William Collins, 2020).

his domestic and foreign policies. It is a good basis to have a historical background and to understand why the young Crown Prince needs to support his legitimacy through a more aggressive foreign policy.

In 2018, two articles, in particular, were written. In the first one²¹, Simon Mabon analyzes the rapid political transformations that took place under the rule of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The article provides information on both MbS's domestic policy and his increased anti-Iranian policy. The author looks at the influence that the Crown Prince had on Saudi Arabia and more broadly on the Middle East. A second article²² written by Jihan Chara allows, together with the one by Simon Mabon, to understand the functioning of the al-Saoud dynasty and thus to understand how the coming to power of the new Crown Prince is controversial.

In 2019, Thomas Demmelhuber and Judith A. Cochran also wrote about the rise to power of Mohammed bin Salman. In his article²³ Demmelhuer analyzes the changes in Saudi foreign policy following the Arab uprisings of 2011. He discusses Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power and his policies, which go beyond the traditional alliance with the United States to diversify Saudi Arabia's corpus of traditional international partners. Demmelhuber explains this change in policy with the concept of hedging, which refers to an approach aimed at minimizing risk. A final article written²⁴ by Judith A. Cochran is published in 2019. It examines in greater depth the "Vision 2030" program that Mohammed bin Salman launched on 25 April 2016. This program is the cornerstone of the Crown Prince's policy. Cochran explains the three components of this program which are the economic diversification of the country, making the country the heart of Islam and Arab culture and making it an economic and geographical hub

²¹ Simon Mabon, "It's a Family Affair: Religion, Geopolitics and the Rise of Mohammed Bin Salman," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 51–66.

²² Jihan Chara, "Saudi Arabia: A Prince's Revolution," *European View* 17, no. 2 (October 1, 2018): 227–234.

²³ Thomas Demmelhuber, "Playing the Diversity Card: Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy under the Salmans," *The International Spectator* 54, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 109–124.

²⁴ Judith A. Cochran, "The Rise in Power of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 369–385.

in the region. These four articles provide a better understanding of Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy in the region by analyzing his rise to power, its implications and complications, as well as the solutions that the Crown Prince is trying to provide, especially with his "Vision 2030" program but also with a change in policy towards the countries of the region.

3.3 Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy towards Iran

In 2016, Banafsheh Keynoush²⁵ published a well-researched book on the history of relations that Saudi Arabia and Iran have. This part allows to put the historical background of the relations between these two countries to see the evolution of them until the arrival of the Salman family. In the third part of the book, Keynoush analyzes the shift in relations following the Iranian revolution of 1979 as well as the religious dimension.

The thesis²⁶ written by Aras Syahmanssuri in 2020 traces and analyzes the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since the 1979 revolution. Syahmanssuri analyzes in one of his chapters the relationship between King Salman, who is the King of Saudi Arabia and the father of Mohammed bin Salman, and Hassan Rouhani, who is the Iranian president. Syahmanssuri analyzes in one of his chapters the relationship between King Salman, who is the King of Saudi Arabia and the father of Mohammed bin Salman, and Hassan Rouhani, who is the Iranian president. The thesis explains the relationship of these two men and their respective countries starting with the Iranian nuclear deal of July 14, 2015 and continuing on the rise of tensions and the arrival of MbS on the political landscape. Only that part of this thesis will be used in my work but reading the whole of it has provided the historical background of the two countries in question.

²⁵ Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (New York: Plagrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁶ Aras Syahmanssuri, "A rivalry of necessity: an analysis of mechanisms of contention between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (PhD diss., Old Dominion University, 2020).

In addition to this thesis and the book of Keynoush, three authors in particular address Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran. An article²⁷ written in French in 2016, when Mohammed bin Salman was still Minister of Defense, by Agnès Levallois and Clément Therme is interesting to read. They analyze the new Cold War in the Middle East. This term is often used to talk about the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It's a small article which brings a first approach to a more complex subject. Dilip Hiro, a journalist specializing in the political problems of South Asia and the Middle East, writes a book²⁸ in 2019 in which he will go deeper into the subject. He examines the rivalry of influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran, that has been going for the past four decades. Hiro analyzes this rivalry going back to 18th century Arabia and ending with the entry into power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia and his anti-Iranian policy, particularly in the Yemeni civil war. The book therefore also makes it possible to approach the subject of Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy towards Yemen and provides the evolution of the tensions between the two major countries of the Middle East. In the same year, Vrushal T. Ghoble publishes an article²⁹ that also analyses these two major players in the Middle East. According to Ghoble, the new cold war can be explained by the divergence between these two countries and the influence on the situation from foreign powers. He examines the geostrategic importance of the Middle East as a region and influence of Middle Eastern countries. The author argues that the current state of the Middle East is determined by the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as the positioning of the USA and Russia.

²⁷ Agnès Levallois, and Clément Therme, "Iran, Arabie Saoudite : la guerre froide," *Confluences Méditerranée* N° 97, no. 2 (June 29, 2016): 9–13.

²⁸ Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²⁹ Vrushal T. Ghoble, "Saudi Arabia–Iran Contention and the Role of Foreign Actors," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 42–53.

3.4 Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy towards Yemen

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Yemen and the invasion of Mohammed bin Salman's troops is analyzed by different authors. In 2018, Leonie Dorsch provides in his thesis³⁰ information about the Saudi Arabian military campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen in March 2015. He explains why Mohammed bin Salman opted for this military intervention by analyzing the foreign policy of the country and MbS. The study uses two models which are the analysis of foreign policy by analyzing the bureaucracy and the sociology of power. This thesis provides a good understanding of the tension between the Saudi prince and the rebels in Yemen. Dorsch provides concrete explanations and a sustained bibliography. As the thesis is written in 2018 it is necessary to use more recent sources as well, in order to see the evolution of the troubled relations between the two countries. In the same year May Darwich wrote an article³¹ that provided an unusual explanation as to why Saudi Arabia suddenly launched an air strike on Yemen. The argument is that the attack is not conducted for material needs but for reasons of recognition of the Kingdom's status in the region. Two authors have written on the subject more recently in 2020. Firstly, Professor Stephen W. Day and Dr. Noel Brehony have written a book³² that provides an analysis of the Yemeni crisis and its evolution. The introduction gives a good idea of the causes and consequences of this crisis, although this is further elaborated on throughout the reading. The first part of the book provides an explanation of the global dynamics around the Yemeni crisis and civil war. In the second part of the book, the authors are more interested in the regional dynamics, including to a large part the involvement of Saudi

³⁰ Leonie Dorsch, "The sociology of power applied to Saudi Arabia's elites and its impact on foreign policy. The case of the military intervention in Yemen (2015-2018)" (PhD diss., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2018).

³¹ May Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 125–142.

³² Stephen W. Day, and Noel Brehony, *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020).

Arabia in the conflict. Secondly, also in 2020, Jeremy Sharp examines in an article³³ the evolution of the civil war and the military entry of Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and the humanitarian disaster that this crisis has caused on the other hand. Indeed, the conflict has caused tens of thousands of deaths since 2015. In a final section, he analyses the arrival of the Covid-19 and the complications it has engendered. This article looks at the subject differently from the other two by providing important information about the humanitarian crisis that the conflict has brought about.

In addition to these articles and thesis, two books in particular have helped me to lay the historical foundations of the relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia as well as a mainly descriptive explanation of Mohammed bin Salman's intervention against the Houthis and the dynamics that this implies for the further relations between the two countries. One of the two is written in French by Laurent Bonnefoy³⁴. I chose a book in French to have a diversification in the language and to see how the points of view can differ from one book to another. The second is a book written by Ginny Hill³⁵. It has been very well received by critics and has an extensive bibliography which makes it trustworthy in its description of the facts.

3.5 Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy towards Qatar

For the last chapter of this thesis, which is Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Qatar, Mehran Kamrava's book³⁶ is a good start to understanding the 2017 Gulf crisis and the conflicting relationships taking place in the Persian Gulf. Kamrava lays out an outline of the unrest and insecurities within the Persian Gulf and states the belligerents and the interests of each.

³³ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention," *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention* (April 23, 2020): 1–19.

³⁴ Laurent Bonnefoy, *Le Yémen : De l'Arabie Heureuse à La Guerre* (Paris: Fayard/CERI, 2017).

³⁵ Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁶ Mehran Kamrava, *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018).

First, in 2016, Yoel Guzansky³⁷ writes about the relationship between Qatar and Saudi Arabia since the 1992 border clash. He traces in a few pages the conflicting events that led to the severing of diplomatic ties with Qatar in 2017. Then in 2017 and then 2018, Rachid Chaker wrote a series of articles in French on the progress of the Gulf crisis. In his first article³⁸, he highlights the growing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar since 1992 and gives an explanation on why declared an embargo on Qatar in 2017. He analyzes the different reasons that pushed the Quartet to cut all diplomatic ties with the emirate. In his second article³⁹, written one year later, he revisits the facts and explores the evolution of the embargo. According to him, the embargo is a failure for Saudi Arabia because the expected results are not achieved and Qatar continues to develop in another way. These two articles provide a good analysis of the crisis and its evolution.

Later in 2019, Rory Miller⁴⁰ provides an in-depth analysis of the region's relationship with Qatar. The article gives a better understanding of the overall state of Qatar's foreign relations with countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia. It is a good outline for the beginning of my fourth chapter. Then, in April 2020, Ibrahim Fraihat published an article⁴¹ on the Gulf crisis in Qatar in 2017 following the embargo imposed on the country by Saudi Arabia in particular, but also the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt. He writes about the various mediation initiatives that have been undertaken between Qatar and its opponents. On the one hand the United States is attempting mediation and on the other Kuwait.

³⁷ Yoel Guzansky, "Lines Drawn in the Sand: Territorial Disputes and GCC Unity," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 2016): 543–559.

³⁸ Rachid Chaker, "Retour sur la crise du Golfe de 2017," *Politique étrangère*, no. 3 (September 6, 2017): 73–83.

³⁹ Rachid Chaker, "La crise du Golfe de 2017 : un an après," *Politique étrangère*, no. 3 (September 14, 2018): 77–87.

⁴⁰ Rory Miller, "Managing Regional Conflict: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Embargo of Qatar," *Global Policy* 10, no. 2 (2019): 36–45.

⁴¹ Ibrahim Fraihat, "Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 79–91.

3.6 Conclusion

To conclude this literature review, the articles, books and theses cited are not all used in footnotes because some of them have served me to have a global view on the subject and to understand more precisely the foreign policy of Mohammed bin Salman in the region and how this more aggressive policy towards Iran, Yemen and Qatar in particular has a link with his problem of legitimacy within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In addition, I will refer to various newspaper articles and interviews mainly concerning Mohammed bin Salman.

4. Historical Background: The rising of Mohammed bin Salman

4.1 Context and al-Saud family

In June 2017, Mohammed bin Salman, the Minister of Defense and son of King Salman became Crown Prince. This appointment comes with many challenges because being Crown Prince does not necessarily mean that he will become King no matter what. Indeed, MbS is not the logical successor and various Saudi princes claim the throne.

To understand why, here is a brief reminder of the formation of Saudi Arabia. In 1932, Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman al Saud⁴² established contemporary Saudi Arabia with the help of the British. He wanted to create a united nation and, as there was no collective identity within the Kingdom, he used the technique of intertribal marriage. He married 30 women and thus created a large royal family. The consequence of this was the emergence of more than 10,000 princes and power therefore passed from his oldest son to the second oldest and so on. The father of MbS being one of the last sons of Ibn Saud, the power has to be passed on to the second generation and this one is composed of, more or less, 80 princes who claim the throne.⁴³ Initially, Mohammed bin Salman was far from being the favorite to accede to the throne. Indeed, his father, Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, is the twenty-fifth of King Ibn Saud's children. He, therefore, is unlikely to ascend the throne before a while. He is therefore appointed governor of Riyadh Province. It is a position he will hold for almost fifty years. At first, Salman married his first wife called Sultana bint Turki al Sudairi and she will give him five boys and one girl. Sultana suffering from a kidney disease and being only very rarely with Salman, he married a second woman named Fahda bint Falah al Hathleen who will give him six sons. Mohammed bin Salman is the eldest of these six boys but the children of his father's first wife are older than him. It is by "chance" and two series of deaths that Mohammed bin Salman came closer to

⁴² Also known as Ibn Saud.

⁴³ Mabon, "It's a Family Affair," 51-53.

power. Indeed, between 2001 and 2002, Salman's eldest son died along with another of his sons. In 2011 the successive deaths of his two brothers resulted in Salman being appointed Crown Prince by King Ibn Saud. It is under these conditions that King Ibn Saud appoints Mohammed bin Salman at the head of the Crown Prince's court and the director of his father's office at the ministry. As Mohammed bin Salman is still not the eldest son, it remains unclear why his father decided to appoint him as Crown Prince in 2017 instead of his eldest son. Even though Salman never pronounced himself on the subject, one of the reasons would be that he considered it important to have a Crown Prince who had an education in his own country with its own traditions and its own people.⁴⁴

In these conditions Mohammed bin Salman needs to demonstrate his legitimacy and his ability to become King and strengthen his power in the House of Saud. As soon as his father became King in 2015, Mohammed bin Salman was appointed Minister of Defense and then decided two months later, without consulting the senior royals, to go to war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Shortly after this entry into the war, he arranged to remove Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, who is none other than the former Saudi intelligence head, from the position of Crown Prince. Two years later, in 2017, he did the same thing with the King's nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, which will position him in the direct succession of his father.⁴⁵ As a result, MbS becomes the key power in Saudi Arabia as he occupies five important positions within the Kingdom, namely, Crown Prince, Defense Minister, Deputy of Prime Minister, Chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs, and the Chairman of the Council of Political and Security Affairs.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 8-16.

⁴⁵ Hana Al-Khamri, "MBS and the Saudi Crisis of Legitimacy," *Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/10/mbs-and-the-saudi-crisis-of-legitimacy> Accessed on March 13, 2021.

⁴⁶ Syahmanssuri, "A rivalry of necessity," 228.

In order to strengthen his power, the new Crown Prince surrounds himself with allies by placing them in important positions within the Kingdom.⁴⁷

On November 4, 2017, the Crown Prince will go even further by having hundreds of members of the government and the Kingdom's elite arrested on charges such as corruption or extortion. Indeed, Mohammed bin Salman earlier created the National Anti-Corruption Commission also called Nazaha. During these arrests, the accused were imprisoned for several weeks at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh. This anti-corruption campaign had two main goals. The first was to remove from power those who could be a potential political threat and the second was to make money. Indeed, several accounts have been frozen and the money embezzled from the arrested persons has been returned to the state.⁴⁸

4.2 Challenges for MbS

His legitimacy as future King is not the only challenge Mohammed bin Salman must overcome. Indeed, he was named Crown Prince shortly after the revolts, known as the Arab Spring, upset the balance of the region. The departure of autocrats in countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen has changed the relationship between Saudi Arabia and these countries. Moreover, on June 29, 2014, the Islamic State established a caliphate in the territories under its control. With this caliphate, the Islamic State aimed at unifying the Muslim world against a common enemy. However, most of the Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia, rejected the jihadists. The Islamic state has been a problem for the Saudi Kingdom because it has focused world attention on Saudi Arabia's intolerant interpretation of Islam and violent practices like public beheading. While there are major differences between Wahhabism (the official religion of Saudi Arabia) and what the jihadists preach, such as the fact that Wahhabism does not call for the

⁴⁷ Al-Khamri, "MBS and the Saudi Crisis of Legitimacy."

⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, "Saudi Arabia Detains Hundreds of Government Officials," Al Jazeera, March 16, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/16/saudi-arabia-detains-hundreds-of-government-officials> Accessed on March 13, 2021.

establishment of a caliphate or oppose interaction with the Western world, there are also a number of similarities, which result in the Islamic state using Wahhabi texts in its own schools. This particular attention that Saudi Arabia had, challenged their relations with the West.⁴⁹

Another challenge for Saudi Arabia is that Iran is taking advantage of the chaos of the Arab Spring and the Islamic State to increase its influence in the region. Indeed, Iran is supporting various militias in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq.⁵⁰ The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, one defending Sunnism and the other defending Shiism, and especially the increase in anti-Iranian policy that Mohammed bin Salman will undertake, will be discussed in the next chapter.

4.3 Reforms

Being appointed Crown Prince by his father, MbS has the ambition to reform the Kingdom in different ways. This ambition is due to the fact that he is trying to legitimize his place as the future King of Saudi Arabia, to give credibility to his status as Crown Prince towards the Saudi royal family and to become a central player in the region. He therefore wants to modernize the country and various reforms are therefore undertaken, as follows.

4.3.1 Economic reforms

MbS wants to get out of the two traditional pillars of Saudi Arabia which are oil and Wahhabism. With the price of oil falling and the use of sustainable energy increasing, he decided to diversify his economy. Whether its supporters or detractors, everyone agrees that the country is going through a difficult economic period. This is why with the program "Vision 2030", he wants to redress the country and, at the same time show his capability to govern.⁵¹

The "Vision 2030" program is announced on April 25, 2016. It aims to achieve 96 strategic

⁴⁹ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 27-28.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 28.

⁵¹ Mabon, "It's a Family Affair," 55.

objectives. These objectives will be implemented by different governmental and private entities as well as NGOs. The main idea of the project is to make a roadmap for economic growth, national development and diversification of revenues until 2030. In order to have the capacity to achieve these objectives, the National Transformation Program 2020 is launched on June 6, 2016 and others followed later.⁵² At the heart of this program is the idea of NEOM, the first carbon neutral city in the world.⁵³ He places a lot of hope in his NEOM project in order to move away from his dependence on oil. NEOM means "New future". It is a contraction of "neo" in Latin which means new and the "M" of the Arabic word "Mostaqbal" which means future. The project is to create a futuristic city or country of 26,500km² in the northwest of Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea coast and on the borders of Jordan and Egypt. The project costs \$500 billion and will be built entirely on alternative energies.⁵⁴ He is investing in sixteen different sectors to make this project and diversify its economy. The investment will go in two main sectors which are artificial intelligence and renewable energies.⁵⁵

4.3.2 Religious reforms

The other traditional pillar that MbS is trying to detach from is Wahhabism. In an interview given on April 27, 2021 by Abdullah al-Mudaifer, MbS admits that he is not loyal to Wahhabism. Without denouncing Wahhabism as such, the Crown Prince said that giving special status to the opinions of a particular person was contrary to Islamic monotheism, which recognizes no intermediary between man and God. He went so far as to say that if the founder of Wahhabism were with us today, he would be the first to reject the notion that his ideas should

⁵² Vision 2031 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "National Transformation Program Delivery Plan 2018-2020," *Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en/programs/NTP> Accessed on December 25, 2020.

⁵³ Cochran, "The Rise in Power of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman," 379.

⁵⁴ Ali Y. Kahal, "Geological Assessment of the Neom Mega-Project Area, Northwestern Saudi Arabia: An Integrated Approach," *Arabian Journal of Geosciences* 13, no. 10 (May 8, 2020): 1.

⁵⁵ Oz Hassan, "Artificial Intelligence, Neom and Saudi Arabia's Economic Diversification from Oil and Gas," *The Political Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2020): 223.

be espoused unconditionally.⁵⁶ At the domestic level, he moved away from religious fundamentalism by implementing social reforms for women, for example, and by wanting to reduce the power of religious institutions in the Kingdom. Nevertheless, at the level of his foreign policy, he defends Wahhabism and Sunnism in opposition to Shiism in the countries of the region.

4.3.3 Social reforms

Within the "Vision 2030" program there are also some social reforms that are undertaken for economic purposes. One example is that MbS is opening up the job market to women. Moreover, Saudi women have been able to enjoy a number of leisure activities that were previously forbidden to them, such as being allowed to enter stadiums, in separate stands, to attend sports matches or concerts.⁵⁷

4.3.4 Foreign politics reforms

The rest of this work focuses, in particular, on the foreign policy of the young prince towards three countries in the region, respectively Iran, Yemen and Qatar.

As I mentioned earlier, since coming to power Mohammed bin Salman has been pursuing an increased policy against Iran and Shiism. As Iran has gained more and more influence in the region, he hopes to show his people that Saudi Arabia is not going to be undermined as a great defender of Sunnism by repeatedly intervening against the militias defended by Iran in different countries. By doing this he wants to show his ability to govern and his legitimacy to become the future King. He wants Saudi Arabia to become a central country in the region.

⁵⁶ Middle East Eye, "MBS, Vision 2030 and Religious Reform: An Incoherent Blend of Modernism and Despotism," *Middle East Eye*, May 05, 2021. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/saudi-arabia-mbs-religious-reform-incoherent-modernism> Accessed on May 30, 2021.

⁵⁷ Armin Arefi, "Arabie saoudite : pourquoi MBS fait avancer les droits des femmes," *Le Point*, August 5, 2019. https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/arabie-saoudite-pourquoi-mbs-fait-avancer-les-droits-des-femmes-05-08-2019-2328435_24.php Accessed on May 30, 2021.

In the same perspective, he will go to war, in 2015, as Minister of Defense, against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, which will result in an unprecedented humanitarian disaster.⁵⁸

Finally, in June 2017, Saudi Arabia along with three other countries in the region closed their borders with Qatar and imposed an air, sea and land embargo on the country. The reason for this, is the suspicion that Qatar supports the terrorist group Hezbollah and is too close to Iran.

⁵⁸ Oxfam International, “Conflit au Yémen : la famine menace des millions de personnes,” Oxfam International, October 20, 2019. <https://www.oxfam.org/fr/conflit-au-yemen-la-famine-menace-des-millions-de-personnes> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

5. Foreign Policy of MbS with Iran

This chapter will start with a brief overview of the various historical rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Afterwards, I will show what the rise to power of Mohammed bin Salman has changed in the policy that he exercises with the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is the main chapter because the case studies on Yemen and Qatar also refer to the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This relationship is intensifying with the rise to power of Mohammed bin Salman, as we will see, and this intensification is leading to tensions in the entire region.

5.1 Historical rivalries

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been in rivalry. According to Mabon, this rivalry is felt in two spheres, namely the ideological sphere and the geopolitical sphere. The former leads to cultural and religious tensions, while the latter leads to economic and geopolitical tensions. These two spheres are intertwined and the rivalries have been worsening since the creation of the Islamic Republic.⁵⁹

5.1.1 Ideological sphere

The first ideological tension is a historical military and cultural tension between Arabs and Persians. Even before Prophet Muhammad, conquests in the region often pitted Arabs against Persians. This can be traced back to the rise to power of Cyrus around 559 BC⁶⁰. He played an important role for Persia, which would become Iran much later under Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1935. Cyrus created an empire that stretched from the eastern coasts of Greece to the banks of the Indus River in Asia.

⁵⁹ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*. 41-42.

⁶⁰ Before Christ.

The Arabs, on the other hand, emerged much later in the 7th century AD⁶¹. Indeed, in 654, the Arab armies had invaded a good part of Persia. The Iranian culture being very anchored in the region, the arrival of an Arab culture in the 7th century led to tensions.

The second ideological tension is religious. Iran and Saudi Arabia follow different branches of Islam. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia follows the doctrine of Wahhabism which is a branch of Sunni Islam. On the other hand, Iran follows Shiite Islam.⁶²

To understand these two Islamic thoughts, we must go back to the premises of Islam. In 632, the prophet Muhammad died and left behind four successors. These are the Rashidun caliphs, respectively named, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. They all have a connection with the prophet through marriage. Their role is to build a world where the people follow the faith and the protectors of that faith. At first, Abu Bakr will become the first caliph and will lead the caliphate for two years, until his death in 634. Thereafter, Umar and Uthman ruled from 634 to 644 and from 644 to 656 respectively and both were assassinated. Following this, Ali was chosen as his successor and became Caliph. Ali is the cousin of the Prophet and married his daughter Fatima. The coming to power of Ali will bring a schism within Islam. Ali will be beaten and killed during the war in Kufa in contemporary Iraq by the Umayyad family.

On the one hand, the Shiite ideology only accepts Ali as the successor of the prophet whereas the Sunni ideology accepts the four caliphs.⁶³ This is the major difference between these two ideologies. Within Sunnism, there are four *madhahib*⁶⁴, namely, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali. There are some differences between these schools which lie mainly in the interpretation of the Quran and the *ahadith*. In addition to these four *madhahib*, there are

⁶¹ Anno Domini.

⁶² Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 43.

⁶³ Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 1-7.

⁶⁴ A traditional Muslim legal school.

different schools of thought that are called illegitimate by the *madhahib*. One of these schools of thought is Wahhabism.⁶⁵

After Khomeini's revolution in 1979, rivalries between the Shiite-majority population of Iran and the Sunni-majority population of the rest of the Arab world, and mainly Saudi Arabia, increased. One defender of Shiism and the other defender of Sunnism will do everything to defend their ideology throughout the region and this often results in military action.⁶⁶ In the 1990s, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran went from an ideological difference following the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war to cordial relations⁶⁷ that deteriorated especially with the arrival in power of the Salman family.

5.1.2 Geopolitical and economic sphere

To understand the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is important to consider the geography of the region. Indeed, the Gulf is extremely important for both countries, especially due to their economic dependence on oil. Both countries need security through the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, for the safe transit of oil. The various conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries known as the three Gulf wars have plunged Saudi Arabia and Iran into constant competition, whether direct or indirect.⁶⁸ In addition to the above-mentioned conflicts, Tehran and Riyadh are engaged in various proxy-conflict, notably in Palestine, the Levant, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen. Directly, Saudi Arabia is involved militarily in Yemen for example and indirectly Iran and Saudi Arabia support militias in the countries of the region by helping them economically but also by sending them weapons for example.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 46.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 50.

⁶⁷ Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran*, 54-55.

⁶⁸ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 55.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 65-68.

In terms of regional security, the two countries have different approaches. On the one hand, Iran wants to defend itself and is therefore opposed to the presence of external actors such as the United States, which is considered a threat. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia relies on alliances with external actors such as the United States to establish security in the entire region.⁷⁰

In summary, the rivalry between the two countries oscillates between periods of antagonism and détente. This rivalry increased after the 1979 revolution and the presence of the United States plays a major role in the mutual antagonism. Since Mohammed bin Salman came to power in 2015 as Defense Minister and in 2017 as Crown Prince, Saudi Arabia has pursued an increasingly anti-Iranian policy.

5.2 Anti-Iranian policy of Salman's family

In August 2013, Hassan Rouhani was elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran and was re-elected in 2017. In January 2015, King Salman Abdelaziz, Mohammed bin Salman's father, becomes King of Saudi Arabia and appoints his son as Minister of Defense. Since then, the disputes between the two men and their respective countries have only increased. Various events have escalated tensions.⁷¹ The increase in this tension and MbS's more aggressive policy towards Iran is largely to assert his power over the Saudi Kingdom. Indeed, at the domestic level, the legitimacy of the Crown Prince is being questioned by the royal family, as explained in the previous chapter. He wants to show his power, his ability to govern and not be seen as a weak leader, whether at the domestic, regional or international level. Following Nonneman's theoretical framework⁷², this section analyzes the acts that influence MbS' policy towards Rouhani at different levels.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 58-60.

⁷¹ Levallois and Therme, "Iran, Arabie Saoudite : la guerre froide," 10.

⁷² Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy," 316-318.

Given the threats and dangers within the Gulf from terrorism on the one hand and from the Iranian enemy on the other, it is not surprising that King Salman and especially MbS have taken radical steps in their foreign policy. Therefore, they send a strong message to their allies such as the United States to counter the Iranian threat, whether economic or military. An example of strong action taken, at the regional level, by Saudi Arabia is the intervention "Operation Decisive Storm" in March 2015 in Yemen against the Shiite Houthis. This intervention is of course taken as a threat to their interests by the Iranian government. The next chapter will discuss King Salman and MbS' relationship with Yemen in more depth.

5.2.1 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The Iranian nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, is an agreement reached in Vienna on July 14, 2015 between Iran and the P5+1, i.e., the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, the +1 being Germany. As a result of this agreement, the European Union and the United States have relaxed economic sanctions against Iran and Iran allowed itself to be monitored in its nuclear program. This nuclear agreement poses a problem for Mohammed bin Salman. Iran is once again a major competitor for Saudi Arabia because it is legitimized on the international scene.

In 2016, after Iran had signed the nuclear agreement with the West, a series of events increased the tension between the two countries.

5.2.2 The death of Al Nimr Baqr Al Nimr

On January 2, 2016, Mohammed bin Salman had 47 "terrorists" executed, including the Shiite leader named Nimr al-Nimr. He was a Shiite preacher living in Saudi Arabia considered to be a figure of protest against the Saudi regime. He has repeatedly criticized the regime of the

Crown Prince.⁷³ He was convicted of sedition, disobedience and carrying weapons. His execution led to protests in various countries in the region and above all in Tehran where the American embassy was burned.⁷⁴ The execution of al-Nimr and the 46 other people categorized as terrorists by the Saudi regime has raised tensions with Iran, which believes that the Shiite minority living in Saudi Arabia is marginalized.⁷⁵ In protest, Iranian protesters burned the Saudi embassy in Tehran.⁷⁶ We can see here that a decision taken at the international level has repercussions at the domestic and regional levels.

This act can be seen as a reaction to the nuclear agreements to show the disagreement of MbS and to show the Iranian president's weakness. By having this Shiite cleric assassinated, the Crown Prince is also, once again, trying to demonstrate his power in the region and his capability to take strong decision.

Apart from the religious rivalry, it is clear from this act that the tension also stems from both countries' need for security and influence in the region.⁷⁷

Following these events, various exchanges of messages with Iran and critics from Rouhani, on January 3, 2016, Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry, Adel al-Jubeir, announced that it would cut diplomatic ties with Islamic Republic of Iran and all Iranian diplomats on Saudi soil had to leave the territory within 48 hours. Various Arab countries in the region such as Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Djibouti and Bahrain have decided, following Saudi Arabia's decision, either to reduce their diplomatic ties with Tehran or to stop them completely. This diplomatic disconnect with Iran and the fact that several countries are following Mohammed

⁷³ Le Monde, "Qui était le cheikh Al-Nimr, exécuté par l'Arabie saoudite ?," *Le Monde*, January 03, 2016. https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2016/01/03/qui-etait-le-cheikh-al-nimr-execute-par-l-arabie-saoudite_4841032_3218.html Accessed on May 01, 2021.

⁷⁴ Al Jazeera, "Saudi Arabia Executes 47 on Terrorism Charges," *Al Jazeera*, January 03, 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/3/saudi-arabia-executes-47-on-terrorism-charges> Accessed on May 01, 2021.

⁷⁵ Le Monde, "Qui était le cheikh Al-Nimr, exécuté par l'Arabie saoudite ?."

⁷⁶ Levallois and Therme, "Iran, Arabie Saoudite : la guerre froide," 10.

⁷⁷ Syahmanssuri, "A rivalry of necessity," 227-228.

bin Salman's decision has strong consequences.⁷⁸ Indeed, it shows that MbS has power over the region and by extension it proves the legitimacy he has to further obtain the throne. On the Iranian side, Hassan Rouhani is less radical and still thinks there is a chance to renew the dialogue with Saudi Arabia.⁷⁹

Mohammed bin Salman has a policy of his own. Indeed, he is moderate in his internal policy by wanting to reduce the power of religious institutions in the Kingdom but is radical in his external policy by wanting to reduce Iranian influence in the region at all costs.

5.2.3 The attack on oil facilities of Abqaiq and Khurais

On September 14, 2019, one of the largest military operations against Saudi Arabia will occur. Indeed, a drone attack takes place on the oil facilities of ARAMCO⁸⁰, Abqaiq and Khurais. The Houthi rebels take full responsibility. This attack resulted in knocked down 5.7 million barrels per day of total Saudi oil output. The air attack is due to an escalation of tensions between Tehran and Riyadh since the intervention in Yemen. Following this event and a phone call with the president of the United States, Donald Trump, MbS accuses Iran of being the investigator of the attack by saying that “the Kingdom is willing and able to confront and deal with this terrorist aggression”⁸¹. Iran on its side denies all allegations. This episode has further increased tensions between the two countries.⁸²

⁷⁸ Ibid, 229-230.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Arabian American Oil Company.

⁸¹ Al Jazeera, “MBS Tells Trump Saudi ‘Willing and Able’ to Respond to Attacks,” *Al Jazeera*, September 15, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/15/mbs-tells-trump-saudi-willing-and-able-to-respond-to-attacks> Accessed on May 01, 2021.

⁸² Maysam Behraves, “How Drone Attacks on Saudi Aramco Might Blow up US-Iran Tensions,” *Al Jazeera*, September 16, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/16/how-drone-attacks-on-saudi-aramco-might-blow-up-us-iran-tensions> Accessed on May 01, 2021.

5.2.4 Fluctuation of tensions

Although the tensions between Rouhani and MbS are extremely present, the Crown Prince has nevertheless softened the tone a little after the drone attack of September 14. Indeed, according to MbS a military confrontation with Iran would cause a collapse of the global economy.⁸³

In a September 29 interview with Norah O'Donnell on CBS's 60 Minutes, MbS explains why he prefers a peaceful solution to military intervention.

“The region represents about 30% of the world's energy supplies, about 20% of global trade passages, about 4% of the world GDP⁸⁴. Imagine all of these three things stop. This means a total collapse of the global economy, and not just Saudi Arabia or the Middle East countries.”⁸⁵

He continues the interview by explaining that the Iranian threat and the ARAMCO attack is not only a threat to Saudi Arabia, and by extension to him, but a threat to the whole world.

“If the world does not take a strong and firm action to deter Iran, we will see further escalations that will threaten world interests. Oil supplies will be disrupted and oil prices will jump to unimaginably high numbers that we haven't seen in our lifetimes.”⁸⁶

Relations between the two countries fluctuate almost from day to day. Although MbS and his father, King Salman, say they are not for a direct war, they are pushing the international world to condemn Iran's actions as can be seen in this November 20, 2019 speech by King Salman before the Saudi Shura Council⁸⁷.

⁸³ Al Jazeera, “Saudi Arabia’s MBS: War with Iran Would Collapse Global Economy,” *Al Jazeera*, September 30, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/9/30/saudi-arabias-mbs-war-with-iran-would-collapse-global-economy> Accessed on May 01, 2021.

⁸⁴ Gross Domestic Product.

⁸⁵ Keith Sharman, “Mohammad Bin Salman Denies Ordering Khashoggi Murder, but Says He Takes Responsibility for It,” *CBS News*, September 29, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mohammad-bin-salman-denies-ordering-khashoggi-murder-but-says-he-takes-responsibility-for-it-60-minutes-2019-09-29/> Accessed on May 02, 2021.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ The Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia.

“We hope that the Iranian regime will choose the side of wisdom and realize that there is no way for it to bypass the international commitment that rejects Iranian expansionist and destructive ideology.” “This is a harmful strategy for its people before people of other regional countries.”⁸⁸

He ended his speech by once again calling on the international community to “put an end to the Iranian regime’s nuclear and ballistic program and to take measures to ensure an immediate end on Iranian blatant interference in the internal affairs of other countries.”⁸⁹

King Salman reiterates that he does not want military intervention and wants to solve conflicts through peace: “The kingdom does not seek war because its hand, which has always been extended to peace, is too high to harm anyone, but it stands ready to defend its people firmly against any aggression.”⁹⁰

Almost a year later, King Salman continues to denounce Iran and in particular the attack of drones on the facilities on the Saudi oil structures, and call for international assistance in his speech to the United Nations on September 23, 2020. He said that ‘a comprehensive solution and a firm international position are required’ because, he continues, “our experience with the Iranian regime has taught us that partial solutions and appeasement did not stop its threats to international peace and security” and that the nuclear deal of 2015 has been exploited by Iran to “intensify its expansionist activities, create its terrorist networks and use terrorism” which has “produced nothing but chaos, extremism, and sectarianism.”⁹¹ The monarch justifies his call for international aid against Iran by saying that “my country, ever since the foundation of

⁸⁸ Syahmanssuri, “A rivalry of necessity,” 231.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ajel Saudi News, “King Salman Gives His Annual Address to Saudi Shura Council,” *Ajel Saudi News*, November 20, 2019. <https://ajel.sa/english/king-salman-gives-his-annual-address-to-saudi-shura-council/> Accessed on May 02, 2021.

⁹¹ UN News, “Saudi King Outlines Country’s Contributions to Pandemic Response, Denounces Attack on Its Oil Facilities,” *UN News*, September 23, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073312> Accessed on May 02, 2021.

this Organization [United Nations], has been in the forefront among the nations working to achieve international peace and security.”⁹²

The Iranian president responded through the spokesman of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh to denounce in turn Saudi Arabia and in particular the Crown Prince.

“It has become completely clear today that Saudi Wahhabi ideology was the main source of inspiration for the most dangerous terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, and this country is seen as the key sponsor of these groups with its petrodollars.”⁹³

This vicious circle of mutual denunciations gives the impression that no peaceful discussion is possible between the two countries. Nevertheless, in the course of 2021, tensions seem to be easing between Mohammed bin Salman and Hassan Rouhani. Indeed, on April 9, 2021, “secret talks” took place in the Iraqi capital between the Iranian and Saudi governments. This is one of the first discussions that can be described as "peaceful" since the rupture of diplomatic ties, four years earlier, between the two countries. Saeed Khatibzadeh refuses to confirm or deny whether or not these discussions took place. He nevertheless points to the fact that Iran “has always welcomed talks with the Saudi Kingdom and has deemed it beneficial to the two countries’ people and regional peace and stability, and this thought will continue.”⁹⁴

Although some Saudi and Iranian officials deny the existence of this meeting in Baghdad, others confirm them. According to the "Financial Times" report of April 18, Saudi Arabia is ready to stop its war against the Houthis in Yemen. The easing of relations between MbS and Rouhani can be seen as a reaction to the election of Joe Biden in the United States.⁹⁵ Indeed, the former

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Radio Farda, “Iran Reacts Harshly To Saudi King’s Speech at UN,” *Radio Farda*, September 25, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/30857866.html> Accessed on May 02, 2021.

⁹⁴ Maziar Motamedi, “Iran Says Open to Talks with Saudi Arabia after Media Reports,” *Al Jazeera*, April 19, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/19/iran-says-open-to-talks-with-saudi-arabia-after-media-reports> Accessed on May 02, 2021.

⁹⁵ Financial Times, “Saudi and Iranian officials hold talks to patch up relations,” *Financial Times*, April 18, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/852e94b8-ca97-4917-9cc4-e2faef4a69c8> Accessed on May 03, 2021.

US president, Donald Trump, had withdrawn on May 8, 2018, from the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" or Iranian nuclear deal renewed the economic sanctions exercised against Iran.⁹⁶ Joe Biden has announced that he intends to return to the nuclear deal and to lift many economic sanctions. The United States being a major ally of Mohammed bin Salman, this pushes the Crown Prince to maintain better relations with Iran.⁹⁷

In a television interview broadcast with the Middle East Broadcasting Center on April 27, 2021, the Crown Prince speaks in a good way of Iran: "Iran is a neighboring country, and all we aspire for is a good and special relationship with Iran"⁹⁸ In response, Saeed Khatibzabeh expressed his enthusiasm for the start of new diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. He states that "Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two important countries in the region and the Muslim world, can enter a new chapter of interaction and cooperation to achieve regional peace, stability and development by adopting constructive and dialogue-based approaches"⁹⁹

Hassan Rouhani and Mohammed bin Salman are in the process of reconciliation, something that has not happened since diplomatic ties between their respective countries were cut.

⁹⁶ Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html> Accessed on May 03, 2021.

⁹⁷ "Saudi and Iranian officials hold talks to patch up relations."

⁹⁸ Al Jazeera, "Saudi crown prince strikes conciliatory tone towards rival Iran," *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/28/mbs-us-and-riyadh-strategic-partners-with-few-differences> Accessed on May 03, 2021.

⁹⁹ Anadolu Agency, "Iran Welcomes Saudi Arabia's Initiative for Better Ties," *Daily Sabah*, April 30, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/mid-east/iran-welcomes-saudi-arabias-initiative-for-better-ties> Accessed on May 03, 2021.

5.3 Case study conclusion

Iran and Saudi Arabia, which respectively proclaim themselves defenders of Shiism and defenders of Sunnism, have been in ideological and geopolitical conflict for several centuries. This rivalry has oscillated throughout their history between periods of antagonism and periods of détente. Following the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, the tension has increased year after year. The coming to power of King Salman Abdelaziz in 2015 and the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has further increased tensions with Iran. Although the speeches are delivered by Mohammed bin Salman's father, the Crown Prince is asserting himself and playing a predominant role in Saudi Arabia's diplomacy towards Iran and in decisions within the country.

Two events in particular will strain relations between the Iranian president and Mohammed bin Salman. On the one hand, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action signed on July 14, 2015 and on the other hand, the killing of Sheikh Al Nimr Baqr Al Nimr in 2016 which led to the total break of diplomatic ties between the two countries. The tension has further escalated following the drone attack on September 14, 2019 on some oil structures of ARAMCO. Although the attack was claimed by the Houthis rebel group in Yemen, MbS accuses Iran of being the sponsor which Hassan Rouhani completely denies.

After having reached what could be called a point of no return, the relationship between the two countries has calmed down during the year 2021. Indeed, secret discussions would have taken place in Baghdad on April 9, 2021 between representatives of the two rival countries. This appeasement is perhaps due to the election of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States and his desire to re-enter the nuclear deal.

Iranian presidential elections to be held on June 18, 2021 and King Salman's poor health may signal a new starting point in diplomatic relations between the two countries

In conclusion, the analysis of the actions taken at the domestic, regional and international levels and the link between them allowed for a better understanding of the tensions between the two countries and the Crown Prince's quest for legitimacy. Mohammed bin Salman has further tainted relations with Iran by adopting an anti-Iranian foreign policy. This policy is, among other things, intended to show strength for his country and as a defender of Wahhabism and Sunnism more generally. Moreover, it shows his ability to take strong decisions for his country and therefore his ability to rule and become King. However, nowadays he has been more peaceful and diplomatic with Iran, which has led to the beginning of a possible reconciliation.

6. Foreign Policy of MbS with Yemen

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate through another case study that Mohammed bin Salman is pursuing an aggressive foreign policy in the region in order to support his legitimacy as future King and show his and his country's power.

First, an overview of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Yemen as well as a brief political history of Yemen is done. The chapter continues with the arrival of Mohammed bin Salman as Defense Minister and the changes that this implies in the relations between the two countries.

6.1 Contextualization

Yemen has been a country divided within itself for a long time. Indeed, the south and the north were unified in 1990, but identity, religious and political tensions have persisted.

In order to understand these tensions, it seems appropriate to me to give a brief reminder of the history of Yemen.

6.1.1 South and North

Until 1962, Yemen was separated into two parts, a northern part led by the religious Imamate and a southern part under a British protectorate.¹⁰⁰ The North has never known Western colonization. In 1911, the North of Yemen, led by Imam Yahya, put an end to Ottoman tutelage. The Imamate, then, officially called the "Hashemite Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen", was strongly isolated and kept its religious orthodoxy of Zaydism.¹⁰¹ Here is a brief explanation of what Zaydism is. It is the majority religion of the Houthi rebels.

¹⁰⁰ Bogumila Hall, "Subaltern Rightful Struggles, Comparative ethnographies of the Bedouin villagers in the Naqab, and the akhdam slum dwellers in Sana'a" (Ph.D. diss., European University Institute, 2016): 56-60.

¹⁰¹ Bonnefoy, *Le Yémen : De l'Arabie Heureuse à La Guerre*, 44.

6.1.2 Zaydism

Zaydism is the religion that is practiced by the majority of people in the mountainous areas of northwestern Yemen. This belief is based on the legitimacy of the aristocracy of the descendants of the prophet Mohammed, the *sada* (also called Hashemites), from which the imams come. These imams are mainly non-hereditary. Zaydism is often described as moderate Shiism. The belief has its origins in a split that occurred in the 8th century around Zayd bin Ali who is none other than the great grandson of the Prophet's son-in-law, Ali. Unlike the so-called duodeciman Shiism (the majority religion of Iran and Iraq), the Zaydis do not explicitly reject the first three successor caliphs of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. In this they are closer to Sunnism. Moreover, their jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is considered to be close to Shafiite Sunnism, which is the religion of two thirds of the Yemeni population.¹⁰² Today Zaydism in Yemen is in crisis for two reasons. The first is what can be called "Sunnification", that is the fact that the policy of the central Sunni government favors Shafiite Sunnism in education. In recent years, Zaydi schools are systematically closed by the government. The second is that since the Zaydi Imam must be Sayyids (descendants of the Prophet), this creates tensions between Sayyids and non-Sayyids.¹⁰³

6.1.3 Unification

During the 20th century, North Yemen and South Yemen advanced with distinct trajectories. Their history is fragmented, be it geographically (mountain versus coast), politically, religiously (Zaydi-Shiite versus Sunni-Shafiite) or in terms of identity.¹⁰⁴

In 1962, The religious Imamate is overthrown and North Yemen is replaced in 1970 by the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). In addition, another change took place in South Yemen where the British protectorate came to an end to give way, in 1967, to the People's Democratic

¹⁰² Ibid, 45-46.

¹⁰³ Najam Haider, "Zaydism: A Theological and Political Survey," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 7 (2010): 441.

¹⁰⁴ Bonnefoy, *Le Yémen : De l'Arabie Heureuse à La Guerre*, 49.

Republic (PDRY).¹⁰⁵ Despite a semblance of pacification from 1970 onwards, the economic and symbolic relegation by the republican regime of areas and tribes that fought alongside the royalists is a reality. Indeed, several decades after the defeat of the royalists by the republicans, many Zaydi families, potential contenders to the throne of the late Imamate, as well as allied tribes, cultivate a deep resentment towards the central power. They denounce the marginalization of the Zaydite-Shiite belief in favor of an ideology dominated by Sunnism, which they believe is close to Wahhabism and therefore to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁶

During the Cold War different camps were to clash within Yemen and in November 1989, Ali Abdallah Saleh (president of the YAR) and Ali Salem al-Beidh (secretary general of the Yemeni Socialist Party in South Yemen) met to discuss the unification of Yemen, which took place six months later, on 22 May 1990. Saleh became president and al-Beidh vice president of the United Republic of Yemen.¹⁰⁷

Despite the unification of the country, tensions between the different regions and ethnic and religious groups are still present. One group in particular will take up arms within Yemen: the Houthis.¹⁰⁸

6.2 Evolution of the Houthis movement from 2004 to 2015

The Houthi movement is a political and protest movement also known as Ansar Allah or Partisan of God that is predominantly Zaydite-Shiite. The movement was formed in the northern Yemeni governorate of Saada in 2004 and is led by the Sayyid family of the Houthis. The movement takes its name from one of its leaders: Hussein Badreddine al-Houthi.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Hall, "Subaltern Rightful Struggles," 56-60.

¹⁰⁶ Bonnefoy, *Le Yémen : De l'Arabie Heureuse à La Guerre*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Hill, *Yemen Endures*, 46.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 175.

¹⁰⁹ Sharp, "Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention," 6.

6.2.1 2004-2010

Between 2004 and 2010, the mountainous area of northern Yemen bordering Saudi Arabia will be the playground of various fights between the Houthi movement and government forces. The Houthis want to return to the old Imamate and dethrone President Saleh.¹¹⁰ During these years, Saudi Arabia, in alliance with President Saleh, engaged in several military campaigns against the Houthis but with little success. From 2009, the terrorist organizations of al-Qaeda in Yemen and Saudi Arabia regrouped in AQAP¹¹¹ and wanted to dethrone the House of Saud and the Yemeni President. The Saudi policy towards Yemen at that time is mainly focused on counter-terrorism.¹¹² In February 2010, following international pressure, the clashes calmed down between the Saudis and the Houthis. Indeed, the international community is putting pressure on Saudi Arabia to focus mainly on counter-terrorism, which means that MbS must divert all its efforts in the war in Yemen to fight terrorism.¹¹³

6.2.2 2011

In the following of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, the “Yemeni Spring” arrives in 2011. The uprising will lead to the fall of President Saleh on February 27, 2012. His vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, was appointed for an interim period of two years via a plebiscite held in February 2012.¹¹⁴ The Houthis joined the protests against Saleh and in November 2011 they controlled the province of Saada, advanced into al-Jawf and Hajja and were increasingly present in Sanaa. This expansion of the Houthis is closely watched by Saudi Arabia even though it does not intervene.¹¹⁵ For Saudi ruler Abdullah, the uprising in Yemen was a challenge although it

¹¹⁰ Hill, *Yemen Endures*, 178-179.

¹¹¹ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

¹¹² Day and Brehony, *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, 116-117.

¹¹³ Hill, *Yemen Endures*, 195.

¹¹⁴ Bonnefoy, *Le Yémen : De l'Arabie Heureuse à La Guerre*, 74-76.

¹¹⁵ Day and Brehony, *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, 120.

was not his priority given the turmoil that was going on in the Arab world. He did not intervene in Yemen but allowed Saleh to take refuge in Riyadh.¹¹⁶

6.2.3 2012-2014

In 2012, King Abdullah's health was very poor and the Crown Prince, Prince Nayef, died on June 16, 2012, after a year as Crown Prince. He leaves his place to Salman bin Abdulaziz, the father of MbS. Salman does not have much experience in foreign policy and none when it comes to Yemen, so he simply continues the traditional Saudi policy.

In Yemen, following Saleh's departure, a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was set up. This NDC was concluded on January 24, 2014. As a result, Hadi's presidency is extended for one year, the parliament must be composed of half northerners and half southerners. In addition, the country is being transformed into a federal system with six distinct regions. Four in the north, two in the south and Sanaa was given a special status.

For the reasons mentioned above, namely the political focus on counter-terrorism and the lack of experience of King Salman. the Saudis have little involvement in the negotiations and the national dialogue.

The Houthis accepted the outcomes of the NDC but opposed the creation of a federal system. Following the NDC, they will get closer to the Islamic Republic of Iran on the one hand and to former Yemeni President Saleh on the other, who now has a common enemy with the Houthis, i.e., the Hadi government. Saleh is being opportunist to take his power back. These rapprochements will not please Saudi Arabia and in particular the new Defense Minister, Mohammed bin Salman.¹¹⁷ In September 2014, the Houthis took control of the capital Sanaa and government forces split between two camps. One camp supporting former President Saleh who has, now allied with the Houthis, and the other supporting Hadi and his government.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 117-118.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 118-121.

¹¹⁸ Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen, 128.

6.3 The arrival of MbS and the Saudi intervention from 2015 to 2017

As already said above, in 2015, the new King of Saudi Arabia appoints his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as Defense Minister. Whether domestically, regionally or internationally, the uprisings in Yemen are a problem for Saudi Arabia and in particular for MbS. Indeed, he has just come to power and this does not please everyone within the royal family. He has to take strong decisions to support his legitimacy to later accede to the throne and one of these strong decisions is the Saudi intervention in Yemen called “Operation Decisive Storm”.

6.3.1 2015: Operation “Decisive Storm”

Following the capture of Sanaa by the Houthis, President Hadi resigned and fled to Aden which he made his capital. A few weeks later, on March 22, 2015, the Houthis marched on Aden and Hadi fled to Egypt and then Saudi Arabia and appealed for international assistance.¹¹⁹ The rebels also controlled Yemen's third city Taiz and the Yemeni coast along Bab al-Mandab and Perim Island.¹²⁰

For Mohammed bin Salman, the Houthis are becoming a major threat, especially since they are backed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. If the Houthis control Yemen, it would be to let Iran gain influence on the Saudi borders. Indeed, on March 15, 2012, an article in the New York Times said that according to several US military and intelligence officials, the Quds Force, i.e., the elite army of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC), was sending different types of weapons to the Houthis.¹²¹ This article shows that Iran has been sending weapons since 2012 and as of April 14, 2015 it becomes a violation. Indeed, Iran is in violation of the targeted

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Day and Brehony, *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, 121.

¹²¹ Martin Reardon, “Saudi Arabia, Iran and the ‘Great Game’ in Yemen,” *Al Jazeera*, March 26, 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/3/26/saudi-arabia-iran-and-the-great-game-in-yemen> Accessed on May 18, 2021.

international arms embargo on Yemen which is a resolution of the United Security Council taken on April 14, 2015, quoted here:¹²²

“Imposes a targeted arms embargo against individuals or entities designated by the Committee; designates two additional individuals as subject to targeted measures (assets freeze, travel ban and targeted arms embargo); adds violations of the targeted arms embargo and obstruction of the delivery, access to and distribution of humanitarian assistance as designation criteria; and increases the Panel of Experts on Yemen to five members.”¹²³

Moreover, the Houthis being Zaydists, Mohammed bin Salman, as a fervent defender of Sunnism and more particularly of Wahhabism in the region, wants to show his ability to take strong decision, whether against the Iranian enemy or those defended by Iran.

The role of Iran in Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen is for some exaggerated. Mohammed bin Salman could use this deliberate exaggeration to justify his military intervention in order to support his power over the region but also domestically.¹²⁴

On March 25, 2015, Mohammed bin Salman convinced his father to intervene in Yemen.¹²⁵ Saudi Arabia in coalition with several Arab countries in the region (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates) launched a military operation against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Adel al Jubair, who is the Saudi ambassador to the United States, announced on Wednesday, March 25 that "The operation is to defend and support the legitimate government of Yemen and prevent the radical Houthi movement from taking over the country". The operation is an air attack on several strategic locations such as the capital Sanaa or the main Houthi stronghold in the province of Saada. The Houthi movement sees this

¹²² Sharp, “Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention,” 8.

¹²³ United Nations Security Council, “S/RES/2216 (2015),” April 14, 2015. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2216-%282015%29-0> Accessed on May 18, 2021.

¹²⁴ Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen, 129.

¹²⁵ Day and Brehony, *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, 121.

as a declaration of war against the whole of Yemen and Mohammed Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister, is calling for an immediate end to the military operation.¹²⁶

King Salman declared during the 26th Arab League Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, that military operation "Decisive Storm" will not stop until the country is stable.

The operation "will continue until it achieves its goals for the Yemeni people to enjoy security."¹²⁷

According to a press release from the Saudi Embassy in Washington DC, the operation was a success and fulfilled its objectives, as follows:

“1°The protection of Yemen from a takeover by Houthi militias and their allies.

2°The security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries, especially from ballistic missiles and heavy weapons captured by the Houthi militias and their allies.

3°The neutralization of most of the military capabilities of the Houthi militias and their allies that represented a threat to Yemen and neighboring countries.

4°The prevention of the flow of weapons from outside of Yemen into the country.

5°The protection of the legitimate government and its ability to conduct its affairs.”¹²⁸

Although the war is not over, this success is of great importance to Mohammed bin Salman. As Defense Minister, he is directly responsible for the operation. The cultural and military battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran has repercussions in many countries in the region. In the case

¹²⁶ Al Jazeera, "Saudi and Arab Allies Bomb Houthi Positions in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, March 26, 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/3/26/saudi-and-arab-allies-bomb-houthi-positions-in-yemen> Accessed on May 18, 2021.

¹²⁷ Al Arabia News, "King Salman Vows to Continue Yemen Campaign," *Al Arabia News*, March 28, 2015. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/03/28/King-Salman-arrives-in-Egypt-for-Arab-summit-> Accessed on May 18, 2021.

¹²⁸ The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia press releases, "Operation Decisive Storm Ends, Operation Renewal of Hope Begins With Military Objectives Achieved, Focus Shifts to the Political Process," *The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia press releases*, April 21, 2015. <https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/operation-decisive-storm-ends-operation-renewal-hope-begins-military-objectives> Accessed on May 18, 2021.

of Yemen, “Operation Decisive Storm” is seen as a victory for Saudi Arabia and even more so for Mohammed bin Salman.

6.3.2 2015-2017: Operation “Renewal of Hope”

Following this military success of the Saudi-led coalition, phase two begins on April 22, 2015 and is called "Operation Renewal of Hope". This operation aims to stop the bombing, protect civilians and continue the fight against terrorism and in particular AQAP.¹²⁹ One of the reasons besides the military success is also that the war is very expensive for Saudi Arabia.

During 2015 and 2016, the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi-Saleh coalition continued to fight on the ground on the border between Yemen and the Saudi Kingdom. Moreover, the bombing has not stopped and the fighting is at a stalemate. Only Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are sending troops to the battlefield at great cost to both countries. Indeed, the fact of having troops on site is expensive because there is a continuous maintenance to have. Iran, on the other hand, is content to support the rebels by sending weapons, which costs it much less.¹³⁰

6.4 2017-2021: Impact of the war

In June 2017, Mohammed bin Salman was appointed Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the war in Yemen began to look like a ball and chain for him. Indeed, the young 31-year-old Crown Prince realizes that the all-out war in Yemen is starting to pose different problems in terms of his credibility. Although he wanted to show through this war that Saudi Arabia and, consequently, himself could control the region, the war is beginning to have the opposite effect.

Domestically, the war is very costly and has reached a dead end. The Saudi coalition forces are unable to eliminate the Houthis who are still very much present in their strongholds.

¹²⁹ Al Jazeera, “Saudi-Led Coalition Declares End to Yemen Air Strikes,” *Al Jazeera*, April 22, 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/22/saudi-led-coalition-declares-end-to-yemen-air-strikes> Accessed on May 18, 2021.

¹³⁰ Day and Brehony, *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, 125-126.

Within Yemen, a southern separatist party based in Aden and supported by the United Arab Emirates wants to separate from the country and thus go against the coalition, which creates tensions.

At the international level, Mohammed bin Salman is beginning to feel international pressure because the war has triggered one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. Deaths are increasing every day, due to famine, poverty, bombing or disease.

These different elements make that Mohammed bin Salman begins to be badly seen internationally and within the region what pushes him to want to end the war. In August 2017, he announced to two former US officials, Martin Indyk and Steven Hadley that he "wants out" of the war in Yemen.¹³¹

6.4.1 South Yemen's separatists

Within the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, there are political differences. One of them is the armed group of southern separatists supported by the United Arab Emirates.

The separatists are based in Aden and are loyal to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was established on May 11, 2017 in Aden and advocates a return to southern independence. Following several protests, they put at the head of the council, the former governor of the city, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, who had been removed from office by Hadi in April of the same year.¹³²

In January 2018, the separatists besieged Hadi's presidential palace which is a strategic failure of MbS because until then Saudi Arabia was the main actor of the coalition in Yemen. The

¹³¹ Al Jazeera, "Saudi Crown Prince 'Seeking Exit from Yemen War,'" *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/8/14/saudi-crown-prince-mbs-wants-out-of-yemen-war> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

¹³² Linah Alsaafin, "Who Are South Yemen's Separatists?," *Al Jazeera*, September 20, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/20/who-are-south-yemens-separatists> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

United Arab Emirates thus turns its back on Mohammed bin Salman and the international community, which want the country to be led by Hadi and not separated into two entities.¹³³

This failure is a hard blow for the young Crown Prince who wants to show his power in the region.

6.4.2 Humanitarian disaster and international pressure

The war has caused a gigantic humanitarian disaster. According to UNICEF¹³⁴, 80 percent of the population, or 24 million people, need humanitarian assistance in Yemen.¹³⁵

The conflict has caused, in addition to the direct deaths and injuries from bombing and direct combat, a huge problem of hunger and malnutrition¹³⁶ and a cholera epidemic that has reached 1.3 million people, the largest ever recorded. Efforts to defeat the epidemic are severely hampered by the conflict, which has destroyed the health, water and sanitation systems. Yemen faces a chronic shortage of medical supplies and only 51% of health facilities are still functioning.¹³⁷ In addition, malnutrition affects millions of households who have no means of living due to a ruined economy, extremely high unemployment and unpaid wages. According to Oxfam¹³⁸ numbers, more than 80% of Yemenis now live below the poverty line.¹³⁹

Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Salman are blamed for the humanitarian disaster in Yemen.¹⁴⁰

This bad international visibility of Saudi Arabia and the international call for humanitarian aid

¹³³ Jihad Gillon, “Yémen : la sale guerre de Mohamed Ben Salman,” *Jeune Afrique*, September 13, 2018. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/626022/politique/yemen-la-sale-guerre-de-mohamed-ibn-salman/> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

¹³⁴ United Nations Children's Fund.

¹³⁵ Unicef, “Yemen Crisis,” Unicef.org. <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/yemen-crisis> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

¹³⁶ Al Jazeera, “Yemen could be ‘worst’ humanitarian crisis in 50 years,” *Al Jazeera*, January 05, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/1/5/yemen-could-be-worst-humanitarian-crisis-in-50-years> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

¹³⁷ Oxfam International, “Choléra au Yémen : une course contre la montre pour enrayer l’épidémie,” *Oxfam International*, October 20, 2019. <https://www.oxfam.org/fr/cholera-au-yemen-une-course-contre-la-montre-pour-enrayer-lepidemie> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

¹³⁸ Oxford Committee for Famine Relief.

¹³⁹ Oxfam International, “Conflit au Yémen.”

¹⁴⁰ Al Jazeera, “Saudi Crown Prince ‘Seeking Exit from Yemen War.’”

for Yemen, pushes Mohammed bin Salman to want to stop the conflict. The situation in which MbS is, is complicated. On the one hand, there is this international pressure that urges him to end the conflict and, on the other hand, withdrawing his troops would be seen as a defeat and an admission of weakness towards Iran. This would greatly damage his popularity within Saudi Arabia. In his race to have the support of the royal family, the war in Yemen is not a situation in his favor.

6.5 A possible end to the war?

On April 9, 2020, a two-week ceasefire was declared by the coalition. The withdrawal of the troops of Mohammed bin Salman could be perceived as a defeat, so he needs a strategic exit. The Covid-19 pandemic is an opportunity that the Crown Prince will seize by explaining his withdrawal and the end of hostilities for humanitarian and health reasons.¹⁴¹

The ceasefire is not respected by the Houthis who want economic compensation and humanitarian aid. A year later, on April 27, 2021, Mohammed bin Salman said in a television interview that "We [Saudi Arabia] still have our offer open to [have a] ceasefire and provide economic support and everything they need as long as the Houthis agree to a ceasefire and sitting on the negotiating table"¹⁴²

Already in March, the Houthis had refused a ceasefire. According to them, the marine and air blockade of Saudi Arabia in rebel territory must be removed for the peace process to be launched. Mohammed bin Salman will not remove the blockade as long as Houthi troops are on his border, so the situation is in a stalemate.

¹⁴¹ Imad K. Harb, "Saudi Arabia Is Preparing to End the War in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/4/12/saudi-arabia-is-preparing-to-end-the-war-in-yemen> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

¹⁴² The New Arab, "Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Promises Economic Assistance to Yemen's Houthis for Ceasefire," *The New Arab*, April 28, 2021. <http://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/saudi-economic-assistance-yemens-houthis-after-ceasefire-mbs> Accessed on May 19, 2021.

“No country would accept [having] militias at their borders, or an armed group that operates outside of the law at its borders, this is not acceptable”¹⁴³

Covid-19 may have a positive outcome if the stalled negotiations move forward and the two parties find a common ground.

¹⁴³ The New Arab, “Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Promises Economic Assistance to Yemen’s Houthis for Ceasefire.”

6.6 Case study conclusion

Tensions within Yemen are not new, but the arrival of the Houthis has escalated tensions within the country and with regional powers since 2004. The appointment in 2015 of Mohammed bin Salman as Defense Minister and his launch of Operation “Decisive Storm” and the Saudi intervention in Yemen marks the beginning of heightened tensions between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. After two years of conflict, Mohammed bin Salman, now appointed Crown Prince, wants to get out of the war that is tarnishing his image and is very costly. Moreover, the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is politically divided and the constant conflicts have created a global humanitarian disaster.

The entry into the war in 2015 against the Houthis was intended to support the rightfulness of Mohammed bin Salman and to show his power and control over the region. These objectives have not been met, on the contrary, the international image of the Crown Prince is in a bad way. MbS then finds himself in a dead end since removing his troops would mean an admission of weakness towards Iran and leaving them taints his international image. A possible end to the war is the arrival of Covid-19, which can be used by MbS as an excuse to withdraw his troops for humanitarian and health reasons.

In conclusion, in his race to prove his legitimacy and show his power to the world, the war in Yemen is a huge failure for Mohammed bin Salman who has not achieved his goals.

7. Foreign Policy of MbS with Qatar

In this final chapter, I conduct a third case study to support the argument that Mohammed bin Salman's arrival in Saudi Arabia has triggered a more aggressive foreign policy towards the region primarily to prove his credibility as the Crown Prince of the Kingdom. This last case study analyzes the relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the evolution of these with the arrival of the young Crown Prince.

The chapter is articulated like the first two. I review the historical tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and then analyze the increase in tensions following the arrival of Mohammed bin Salman and his more aggressive policy towards the regional country.

7.1 Escalating tensions from 1992 to 2017

Until the beginning of the 90's the relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia were very good. Indeed, the two monarchies share the same ideology of Wahhabism. In May 1981, Qatar was one of the six co-founding countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which is an economic and political alliance between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. This alliance brings the two countries in question even closer together.¹⁴⁴ It was in the early 1990s that relations between the two countries began to deteriorate.

I will briefly review the various events that have contributed to the deterioration of relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

7.1.1 The 1992 border clash

In 1992, a dispute broke out between Saudi Arabia and Qatar along the border. The dispute took place in the Khufus region. Qatar claimed the area in order to have a border with the United Arab Emirates. Indeed, the region had been officially entrusted to Saudi Arabia in 1974

¹⁴⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Gulf Cooperation Council," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gulf-Cooperation-Council> Accessed on May 21, 2021.

following an agreement made with the United Arab Emirates. In 1992, Saudi troops killed two Qatari soldiers during a skirmish on the border. In response, Qatar decided to suspend the 1965 border agreement and even boycotted a GCC meeting. The border agreement of 1965 is an agreement on the delimitation of the border between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁵ It was also a way for Qatar to show its disagreement with the Saudi hegemony in the GCC and for Saudi Arabia to show its disagreement with the independent maneuvers undertaken by Qatar.¹⁴⁶ From that moment on, relations became tense and several incidents took place. In 1994, Saudi Arabia and Qatar signed the Abu Dhabi Declaration where they agreed to form a technical committee to delineate their shared border.¹⁴⁷ Despite this, the relations only deteriorated and in the same year as the Abu Dhabi Declaration, Qatar boycotted again two meetings of the GCC and refused to sign a mutual security pact that would allow forces of member states to cross border in “hot pursuit” of criminals.¹⁴⁸

7.1.2 The arrival of Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani in 1995

In 1995, Qatari Defense Minister and head of the armed forces Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani took over the country while the monarch, his father Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani was in Geneva, Switzerland. Hamad takes an even tougher stance against Saudi Arabia and their common border.¹⁴⁹

On February 14, 1996, a coup named "Operation Abu Ali" was attempted to overthrow Hamad and replace him with the former monarch, his father. The coup was supported by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Unfortunately for these three countries, the coup proved

¹⁴⁵ Guzansky, “Lines Drawn in the Sand,” 549.

¹⁴⁶ Gwenn Okruhlik, and Patrick J. Conge, “The Politics of Border Disputes on the Arabian Peninsula,” *International Journal* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 235-236.

¹⁴⁷ Guzansky, “Lines Drawn in the Sand,” 549-550.

¹⁴⁸ Okruhlik and Patrick, “The Politics of Border Disputes on the Arabian Peninsula,” 236.

¹⁴⁹ Guzansky, “Lines Drawn in the Sand,” 550.

to be a failure and Hamad remains in power. The attempted overthrow further escalated tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.¹⁵⁰

7.1.3 The creation of Al Jazeera in 1996

Another event that has increased tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is the creation of Al Jazeera by Qatar.

Indeed, in the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia controlled the majority of Arab transnational media. In 1996, Qatar launched the Al Jazeera media. This launch was intended to have more leverage against rival countries in the region, especially Saudi Arabia. Qatar gives more freedom to Al Jazeera than Saudi Arabia gives to its own media, which is afraid that its subjects will have access to information that is considered taboo.¹⁵¹ In an Arab world where the press was then mostly subject to censorship and content to promote the regimes in place, the launch of this 24-hour news channel from Doha, which offered a new critical view of the Arab world and its leaders, revolutionized Arab news. Nevertheless, this unprecedented freedom of tone caused multiple tensions over the years between Qatar and several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia.¹⁵² Tensions are therefore increasing between the two countries over this disagreement.

7.1.4 Fluctuation of tensions from 2008 to 2017

After several years of conflicting relations, Saudi Arabia and Qatar reached an agreement in July 2008 concerning the demarcation of their maritime borders.¹⁵³ Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz is visiting Doha which has not happened since the withdrawal of the Saudi ambassador in Doha in 2002. This gesture marks the beginning of a reconciliation. In addition,

¹⁵⁰ Al Jazeera, "New Details Revealed on 1996 Coup Attempt against Qatar," *Al Jazeera*, March 04, 2018. 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/4/new-details-revealed-on-1996-coup-attempt-against-qatar> Accessed on May 21, 2021.

¹⁵¹ Tarek Cherkaoui, "Al Jazeera's Changing Editorial Perspectives and the Saudi-Qatari Relationship," *The Political Economy of Communication* 2, no. 1 (July 5, 2014): 18-20.

¹⁵² Chaker, "Retour sur la crise du Golfe de 2017," 74.

¹⁵³ Guzansky, "Lines Drawn in the Sand," 550.

in 2010, Hamad pardoned a significant number of Saudi citizens accused of playing a role in the coup d'état undertaken against him.¹⁵⁴

These reconciliations turned out to be short-lived because in 2011 the tensions resume during the Arab Spring. Indeed, unlike Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Qatar supports the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar even welcomes their leader in exile, Sheikh Yussuf al-Qaradawi, which does not please Riyadh at all, which has classified the organization as a terrorist organization.¹⁵⁵ From 2012 to 2013, Qatar provided political and financial support to Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, a product of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar is developing its own foreign policy agenda, sometimes in agreement but usually in opposition to Saudi Arabia's policy. Hamad's abdication in 2013 in favor of his son Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani has also strained its Saudi neighbor.¹⁵⁶ Following this, on March 5, 2014, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar and cut their ties with Qatar. Eight months later in November 2014, relations were resumed and ambassadors returned to Doha.¹⁵⁷ Since 2015 and the enthronement of King Salman, Qatar's perceived ambiguous policy toward Iran has increasingly angered Riyadh.¹⁵⁸ Added to this is Qatar's payment of a multi-million-dollar ransom in April 2017 to Iraqi Shiite militias to secure the release of Qatari royals held in southern Iraq. The payment of this ransom to militias suspected

¹⁵⁴ Al Jazeera, "Timeline of Qatar-GCC Disputes from 1991 to 2017," *Al Jazeera*, June 09, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/6/9/timeline-of-qatar-gcc-disputes-from-1991-to-2017> Accessed on May 21, 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 24, 2014. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/09/24/qatar-and-arab-spring-policy-drivers-and-regional-implications-pub-56723> Accessed on May 21, 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Chaker, "Retour sur la crise du Golfe de 2017," 75.

¹⁵⁷ Marco Ferrari, "Saudi Arabia-Qatar Relations: Timeline of Significant Events in the Gulf Crisis," *Al Arabiya News*, January 5, 2021. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/01/05/Saudi-Arabia-Qatar-relations-Timeline-of-significant-events-in-the-Gulf-crisis-.html> Accessed on May 21, 2021.

¹⁵⁸ Chaker, "Retour sur la crise du Golfe de 2017," 76.

of being in the pay of Tehran was hardly likely to ease the already tense relations between Qatar and its neighbors and in particular Saudi Arabia because Qatar accepts help from Iran.¹⁵⁹

7.2 The cutting of diplomatic ties in 2017

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, often referred to as the Arab Quartet, cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed a sea, land and air blockade on it. The Quartet announces a list of thirteen demands that Qatar must meet to end the blockade. These demands include the closure of the broadcaster Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera offices closed in Riyadh in 2017) and the removal of significant ties with Iran as well as the end of contacts with groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁶⁰

The cutting of diplomatic ties came a few days after the official Qatari news agency broadcast remarks attributed to Emir Tamim, openly criticizing the anti-Iranian policies of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and at the same time praising Hamas and Hezbollah. These remarks provoked strong reactions from the press and officials in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Although Qatar denied it, citing a hacking of its news agency and calling on the FBI to investigate the origin of this hacking, the Gulf monarchies and their Egyptian ally seized the opportunity to end their diplomatic relations with Qatar.

The Qatari government denounced the hacking in a statement: "The information published by the Washington Post, which reveals the involvement of the United Arab Emirates and senior Emirati officials in the hacking of the Qatar News Agency, unequivocally proves that this criminal hacking took place."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Tim Arango, "Big Ransom and Syria Deals Win Release of Royal Qatari Hunters," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/world/middleeast/big-ransom-and-syria-deals-win-release-of-royal-qatari-hunters.html> Accessed on May 22, 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Fraihat, "Superpower and Small-State Mediation," 79.

¹⁶¹ Madjid Zerrouky, "Le piratage de l'agence de presse qatarie attribué aux Emirats arabes unis," *Le Monde*, July 18, 2017. https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2017/07/18/le-piratage-de-l-agence-de-presse-qatarie-attribue-aux-emirats-arabes-unis_5161867_3218.html Accessed on May 22, 2021.

On June 25, 2017, Mohammed bin Salman was named Crown Prince. In this case study, we can once again see the radical steps MbS is taking in its relations with regional countries. Mohammed bin Salman is acting this way to show that he does not tolerate certain actions perpetrated by Qatar. Given his position and his problem of legitimacy he is even more intolerant to show that he has the power and the means to control the region.

The actions that Mohammed bin Salman does not tolerate are the following.

First, Qatar threatens Saudi Arabia by supporting the democratic demands of the Arab people since the beginning of the Arab Spring. MbS is afraid that this will lead to new popular uprisings within the region and especially within the Saudi Kingdom.

Secondly, as already mentioned above, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood movement is not tolerable for MbS. Indeed, the organization is considered as a terrorist organization by Saudi Arabia. To support its power and legitimacy, MbS does not want to let a neighboring country support an organization that it considers terrorist without intervening because this could be seen as a weakness.

Lately, Qatar has tended to follow a foreign policy independent of the regional states and especially Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Salman is therefore afraid that other members of the GCC will start acting independently, which would cause Saudi Arabia to lose control over the region. Moreover, Qatar is getting closer to Iran, which is unacceptable to the young Crown Prince.¹⁶²

According to Qatar, this embargo is not justified. The Qatari Foreign Ministry posted on June 5, 2017 that Qatar feels victimized by Saudi Arabia:

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar expressed deep regret over the decision of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain to close their borders

¹⁶² Ismail Numan Telci, “Qatar-Gulf Rift: Can Riyadh Be Triumphant?,” *Al Jazeera*, June 09, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/6/9/qatar-gulf-rift-can-riyadh-be-triumphant> Accessed on May 22, 2021.

and airspace and cut off diplomatic relations. Such measures are unjustified and are based on baseless and unfounded allegations. Qatar has been exposed to an instigation campaign based on allegations that amounted to absolute fabrications, which proves that there are premeditated intentions to cause damage to the State. Qatar is an active member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), committed to its Charter, respects the sovereignty of other countries, does not interfere in their internal affairs, and carries out its duties in combating terrorism and extremism.”¹⁶³ In this early post Qatar denies the allegations of the Quartet against it.

The purpose of the embargo was to make Qatar bend and to convince it to quickly align itself with the positions of other countries in the region. The result, after one year of the embargo, shows that the objective has not been achieved. Not only has Qatar made no attempt to harmonize its foreign policy with that of its rivals, but it has instead explored new ways to preserve its autonomy. In the wake of the boycott, Doha announced a series of societal measures, such as the rights of foreigners residing in Qatar and foreign investment in the country, in contrast to traditional Gulf procedures. In addition, as many commodities no longer reach Qatar through its only land border, the Saudi border, the emirate has opted to diversify its supplies. Turkish and Iranian assistance are valuable for this.¹⁶⁴

During 2018 tensions between the Quartet and Qatar are increasing and in particular with Saudi Arabia. One event in particular risks tipping the embargo towards a Saudi military intervention. Indeed, on June 1, 2018, the French newspaper "Le Monde" claims that the French President would have received a letter in which Riyadh says it is ready to take "military action" against Qatar if the latter acquires, as it has expressed the intention, the Russian S-400 air defense system. The Saudi ruler is concerned about the consequences that the installation of S-400 in

¹⁶³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs News, "Qatar Regrets the Decision by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to Sever Relations," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs News*, June 05, 2017. <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2017/06/04/qatar-regrets-the-decision-by-saudi-arabia-the-united-arab-emirates-and-bahrain-to-sever-relations> Accessed on May 22, 2021.

¹⁶⁴ Chaker, "La crise du Golfe de 2017," 80-81.

Qatar could have on its territory and on the security of Saudi airspace.¹⁶⁵ It is in these moments that Mohammed bin Salman plays an important role by applying a more aggressive policy. It is important for him to be a central player in the region and that his country's ideology and power are respected.

7.3 The end of the blockade in 2021

In 2021 tensions ease and during the 41st GCC summit on January 5, 2021, the member countries of the GCC including Qatar sign the Al-Ula declaration which takes its name from the city where the summit is held. This declaration puts an end to the embargo in force against Qatar since 2017. The main objective of the declaration, according to Mohammed bin Salman, is "to improve unity and cohesion among the countries of the Cooperation Council and to return the Gulf joint action to its natural course and maintain security and stability in the region".¹⁶⁶ Points 15, 16, 17 and 18 concern Qatar and the beginning of new relations.

“15. The Supreme Council took note of the announcement of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the emir of the State of Qatar, may God protect him, to hold the Shura Council elections next October, praising this step. The council stressed the importance of coordination and cooperation between legislative chambers of the GCC states.”

“16. The Supreme Council congratulated the State of Qatar on the election of His Excellency Mr Ahmad Bin Abdulla Bin Zaid Al Mahmoud, the speaker of the Shura Council, as board chair of the Global Conference of Parliamentarians Against Corruption for the period of 2019-2021.”

¹⁶⁵ Benjamin Barthe, “L’Arabie saoudite menace le Qatar d’une « action militaire » s’il se dote de missiles S-400,” *Le Monde*, June 1, 2018. https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2018/06/01/l-arabie-saoudite-menace-le-qatar-de-represailles-militaires-s-il-se-dote-de-missiles-s-400_5308285_3218.html Accessed on May 22, 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Andrea Polidura, “Fin de la crise avec le Qatar, suite à la signature de la ‘Déclaration Al-Ula,’” *Atalayar Entre Deux Rives*, January 05, 2021. <https://atalayar.com/fr/content/fin-de-la-crise-avec-le-qatar-suite-%C3%A0-la-signature-de-la-d%C3%A9claration-al-ula> Accessed on May 23, 2021.

“17. The Supreme Council praised the preparations made by the State of Qatar to host the 2022 Football World Cup, reaffirming its support for the State of Qatar in anything that leads to the success of the upcoming World Cup.” Before this declaration, the countries that had an embargo on Qatar were against the fact that the 2022 World Cup would take place in Qatar.

“18. The Supreme Council commended the State of Qatar’s hosting of the Horticultural Expo 2021, themed “Green Desert, Better Environment”, which is to be held in Doha from October 2, 2023, to March 28, 2024. The expo aims to encourage innovative solutions, reduce desertification, support agriculture, and promote environmental awareness and sustainability in desert areas.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Al Jazeera, “Transcript: Closing Statement of 41st GCC Summit,” *Al Jazeera*, January 07, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/7/closing-statement-of-41st-gulf-cooperation-council> Accessed on May 23, 2021.

7.4 Case study conclusion

Tensions between the two monarchies began mainly in the early 1990s and escalated until diplomatic ties were severed in 2017. The arrival of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince in June 2017 further soured matters. Indeed, the rather aggressive foreign policy of the young Crown Prince in his demonstration of power and legitimacy is straining relations between countries in the region a little more.

In this last case study, it is clear that MbS plays an important role in relations with Qatar from 2017 with always in his sights the Iranian enemy.

Mohammed bin Salman's campaign against Qatar has not been as successful as expected. He did not succeed in forcing Qatar to close down the Al Jazeera media nor did he force it to change its foreign policy towards Turkey and Iran.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, the objectives of the embargo on Qatar have not been achieved. Not only has Qatar made no attempt to harmonize its foreign policy with that of its rivals, but it has instead explored new ways to preserve its autonomy. In addition, as many commodities no longer reach Qatar through its only land border, the Saudi border, the Emirate has opted to diversify its supplies and Turkish and Iranian assistance are valuable for this. This failure is a real problem for the Crown Prince. The assertion of his power and his legitimacy as a pretender to the throne may be questioned following this.

Nevertheless, Mohammed bin Salman does not only suffer from failures when it comes to foreign relations. Indeed, he maintains good relation with some regional actors, such as the member countries of the GCC, or international actors, such as Europe and the United States.

¹⁶⁸ Al Jazeera, "Qatar's Emir Visits Saudi Arabia, Holds Talks with Crown Prince," *Al Jazeera*, May 11, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/11/qatars-emir-in-saudi-arabia-for-talks> Accessed on May 23, 2021.

8. Final Conclusion

Through this thesis and the case studies we realize the shift in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards a more hostile and aggressive policy towards certain countries in the region with the arrival of Mohammed bin Salman first as Defense Minister in 2015 and then as Crown Prince in 2017. Although his father remains the King and therefore holds the most important position in the country, Mohammed bin Salman through these different positions plays a decisive role in the decisions of the Kingdom. Indeed, MbS holds five important positions within the Kingdom which are respectively: Crown Prince, Defense Minister, Deputy of Prime Minister, Chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs, and the Chairman of the Council of Political and Security Affairs.¹⁶⁹

With power passing from brother to brother within the Saudi leadership, the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince on June 25, 2017, is a first since the establishment of Saudi Arabia by Ibn Saud. To achieve this appointment, MbS and his father will use different stratagems as explained in a previous chapter. Knowing this, the argument is that Mohammed bin Salman supports a more hostile foreign policy towards regional countries at odds with Saudi Arabia and in particular a more increased anti-Iranian policy in order to show his ability to control the region and therefore his ability to rule the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This policy is a way for him to support his legitimacy as the future King of Saudi Arabia.

The question now to conclude this thesis is whether this quest for legitimacy through aggressive policies is a success for Mohammed bin Salman or not.

The answer is obviously nuanced and the young Crown Prince is not only using a more aggressive policy towards Iran, Yemen and Qatar to support his legitimacy, he is also implementing a more social policy within the country itself by giving access to university to

¹⁶⁹ Syahmanssuri, "A rivalry of necessity," 228.

women for example or with the projects he is setting up such as "Vision 2030" and NEOM which aim on the one hand to diversify away from an economy based mainly on oil and on the other hand to improve its image internationally but also within the Kingdom. To speak only of the policy undertaken with Yemen and Qatar, they have proved to be a failure for MbS.

Firstly, the war in Yemen against the Houthi rebels in 2015 proved to be not in his favor. Indeed, the war is very expensive and has not been as quick as expected. This war has led to a huge humanitarian disaster, which has put the Crown Prince under great pressure at the international level. He is then faced with a problem because continuing the war would be extremely badly seen by the international community and withdrawing his troops from Yemen would be seen as an admission of weakness towards Iran. This war is therefore a stalemate that does not serve his quest for legitimacy as the future King, his need to show his control of the region and his ability to govern.

Secondly, as in Yemen, the objectives of the embargo on Qatar have not been achieved. Indeed, not only has Qatar made no attempt to harmonize its foreign policy with that of its rivals, but it has instead explored new ways to preserve its autonomy. In addition, as many commodities no longer reach Qatar through its only land border, the Saudi border, the emirate has opted to diversify its supplies and Turkish and Iranian assistance are valuable for this.

This failure in addition to the military failure in Yemen is a real problem for the Crown Prince. The assertion of his power and his legitimacy as a pretender to the throne may be questioned following these two failures.

To conclude, Mohammed bin Salman's policy in Yemen and Qatar has ended in failure but his need to show his power persists as can be seen in other countries in the region. His main enemy being Iran, the two countries are fighting an ideological war but also an indirect geostrategic one. One supporting Sunni groups and the other supporting Shiite groups in neighboring

countries. This rivalry is in the process of reconciliation since the secret discussions held between the two countries in Baghdad on April 9, 2021.

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