

Chasing the Dream: The Salman Doctrine and Saudi Arabia's Bid for Regional Dominance

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ABSTRACT *Saudi Arabia's massive air campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen initiated a major shift from the Kingdom's traditional policy of restraint, to a force-based foreign policy approach unofficially dubbed the "Salman Doctrine." The doctrine aimed at repositioning the Kingdom as the Middle East's preeminent power by rolling back its archrival Iran. This commentary argues that the Kingdom has made hardly any progress on the war and diplomatic fronts so far to achieve this objective, due mainly to a glaring mismatch between the doctrine's ends and the means to achieve these ends.*

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud has made a big break from his predecessors by redefining and re-strategizing the Kingdom's foreign policy approach, particularly in the Middle East region. Marked by an abrupt aggressiveness in the pursuit of foreign policy goals and interests, his foreign policy approach relies more on force (as in Yemen), and less on diplomacy and backdoor negotiations or financial leverage to defuse tensions and hammer out deals with opponents (as with Iran). This approach is a clear shift from the traditional policy of restraint to the use of force to realize nation-

al interests. Analysts and the global press have dubbed this foreign policy shift the "Salman Doctrine." Though not officially formulated, the doctrine has a number of significant features: firstly, for the first time in contemporary history and unlike other regional powers, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has come to be associated with a foreign policy doctrine; and secondly, the doctrine looks like an attempt to latch an Arab tradition onto the American tradition of articulating and proclaiming a new foreign policy or security doctrine after the election of almost every new American president, starting with George Washing-

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 21 / No. 3 /
2019, pp. 41-51

The Saudis feared that a deal with the U.S. would allow Iran to economically prosper, help it to rise as a hegemonic power in the region, and dilute the relatively strong Saudi influence in the Persian Gulf neighborhood and beyond

ton (1789-1797) down the road to incumbent Donald Trump (2017-).

But unlike the American foreign policy doctrines, which have had a global thrust – a thrust to reshape or significantly influence the course of global politics to suit America’s interests as well as the interests of its allies – the Salman doctrine has a limited geographic focus in the Middle East and it primarily aims at serving the Saudi bid for regional dominance vis-à-vis Iran, the Kingdom’s arch regional competitor. The doctrine came to the forefront after the Kingdom launched a massive air attack, code-named “Operation Decisive Storm,” on Yemen on March 26, 2015, just three months after King Salman ascended to the throne, to punish, and if possible, eliminate the Houthi rebels who had seized control of the Yemeni capital Sanaa in September the previous year, and to teach their regional backer Iran some hard strategic lessons. The air attack was soon followed by a Saudi-led land assault on the rebel-held territories to restore President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi

to power. Hadi had fled to Riyadh just a day before the air campaign started. But four years after the onset of these air and land offensives, Saudi Arabia is nowhere close to defeating the Houthi rebels who continue to control Sanaa and serve as the de facto rulers of Yemen. The Kingdom is rather caught in a quagmire with no exit strategy in place and has been incurring spiraling material, human, and financial costs from its military adventures in Yemen, which many commentators often refer to as Saudi Arabia’s “Vietnam.”

This commentary has two purposes: firstly, it contends that the Salman doctrine was a major misstep in Saudi foreign policy. There was a glaring mismatch between the doctrine’s ends and the means to achieve the ends, relegating it to the status of a dysfunctional doctrine. Secondly, the doctrine has done more damage than good to Saudi national interests and reputation in terms of the Kingdom’s standing in the global community.

The Context and Rationale of the Salman Doctrine

On a general level, the direct military strikes against the Houthi rebels have marked a clear shift from soft power to hard power in Saudi foreign policy under King Salman, but the shift was not definitely precipitated by that incident alone. The Houthis were just a part of the broader post-2003 geopolitical competition for power and influence between the Middle East’s two archrivals – Iran and Saudi Ara-

bia. The Saudis, as well as other Gulf officials, rightly or wrongly perceive the Houthis, a group of Zaydi Shias, as a proxy of Shia Iran. They interpret the Houthi takeover of Sanaa and other Yemeni cities as an Iranian bid to gain a foothold in the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, after having gained influence in the Levant, and thus pose an existential threat to Saudi national security. Iranian scholars and commentators dispute such interpretations, however.¹ They contend that Yemen, compared to Iraq or Syria, has never been a high priority area for Iran. Indeed, the Islamic Republic has deployed elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) troops in and committed huge financial resources to Iraq and Syria, while its support for the Houthi rebels is more political and less material in nature. That clearly means that the real motives of Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen were critically defined or determined by developments in other political and strategic areas.

The post-2003 geopolitical power play in the Middle East has more or less favored Iran, often at the expense of the Saudis. The Iranians emerged much emboldened and more powerful in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Ironically, it was Iran's nemesis, the U.S., that dislodged two of the former's erstwhile formidable foes – Afghan Taliban on the eastern border and Saddam Hussein's Iraq on the western border. The collapse of the anti-Iran ultra-Sunni Taliban regime and Saddam's secular Ba'athist regime, which had fought an eight-year long devastating war against

Iran (1980-1988), created an unprecedented strategic breathing space for Iran which it swiftly utilized to cultivate and nurture ties of solidarity with Iraqi Shias and to oppose the American occupation of Iraq. Saudi Arabia soon found itself on the margin, since political power in Baghdad shifted from the minority Sunnis to majority Shias, first through the January 2005 elections for a Transitional National Assembly and thereafter through the parliamentary elections of 2010, 2014, and 2018. The U.S. withdrew from Iraq by the end of 2011 and could do little to stop Iran's growing ties with Iraq's Shia-dominated government and other pro-Iran Shia political and militia groups. The Saudis helplessly stood by to witness the U.S., before its exit, hand over the Iraq platter to Iran.

The outbreak of the Arab spring (or Arab winter) in early 2011 produced another chapter of despair for the Saudis. The pro-democracy movements, spurred by strong desires for freedom from oppression, freedom from want, and the freedom to live with dignity² swept away four powerful Arab dictators, including Saudi-backed President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. The Saudis furiously criticized the Barack Obama Administration for its inactions to defend the Mubarak regime and simultaneously pursued a double-track pro- and anti-status quo policy to assert their power and interests. They sent troops to Bahrain in March 2011 to stamp out the Shia-led pro-democracy movements, and thus safeguarded the minority Sunni al-Khalifa regime. In Syria, the Sau-

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dis militarily and financially backed anti-Bashar al-Assad Islamist rebel groups (excluding al-Qaeda and the ISIS groups) to effect a regime change in Damascus. But unlike Bahrain, they lost the battle for Syria, notwithstanding the U.S. and Israeli supporting roles, to their rivals Iran and Russia. In reality, with the help of Russian air support, Iran and Syria have nearly won the civil war. Much to the chagrin of the Saudis and the Americans, Iran has succeeded in extending its zone of influence from the Persian Gulf to the Eastern Mediterranean coast via Baghdad and Damascus, putting more constraints on the maneuverability of Saudi foreign policy.

Furthermore, the Saudis were appalled by the fluid strategic environment created after the proclamation of the ISIS in the summer of 2014. They were initially unperturbed by the threats posed by the ISIS, but soon changed course once the caliphate claimed sovereignty over all Muslim lands, including the two Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina. For Iran and the U.S., however, the ISIS

had unveiled itself as a threat of disproportionate magnitude from the beginning, as it seriously challenged the security interests of both countries. The Islamic State was avowedly anti-Shia, and did not hide its intention to eliminate the U.S. from the region. The strategic rationale to fight and contain this common menace put the Iranians and the Americans on the same page, though their mutual hostilities did not cease. The election of reformist and moderate President Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 had already motivated the Obama Administration to approach and conduct secret talks with the Rouhani government, facilitated by Oman, to resolve the nuclear dispute and move away from confrontation with Iran to better ensure regional peace and security.

Dismayed by the prospects of a nuclear breakthrough, Saudi Arabia and Israel vehemently opposed Iran-U.S. nuclear negotiations. Israel projected, and still continues to project, Iran as a serious threat as Iranian leaders have often called for the annihilation of the State of Israel and openly supported Hezbollah and Hamas, Israel's two powerful enemies. The Israeli leaders perceived that a possible Iran-U.S. rapprochement would weaken U.S. security commitment to Israel and put its competitive military edge in jeopardy. The Saudis, on the other hand, feared that a deal with the U.S. would allow Iran to economically prosper, help it to rise as a hegemonic power in the region, and dilute the relatively strong Saudi influence in the Persian Gulf neighborhood and



beyond. Saudi and Israeli opposition notwithstanding, the U.S. and other world powers clinched a nuclear deal with Iran in July 2015, recognizing Iran as a dominant actor in the Middle East (the deal was, however, ditched by newly-elected U.S. President Donald Trump in May 2018). Not only that, President Obama even labelled the Gulf Arab allies as “free riders,” and advised them to share the Gulf neighborhood with Iran in a move that unmistakably drew fire from the Saudis.³

King Salman and his advisors, exasperated by the Obama Administration’s apparent tilt towards Iran, decided to carry the battle against Iran on their own. The young royals took the lead role in the anti-Iran battle. Then Deputy Crown Prince as well as Defense Minister Mohammad bin

Salman, known for his anti-Iran tirade, unofficially declared the Salman doctrine by personally planning and guiding the war on the Houthi rebels. In an interview with *The New York Times* in November 2017, he likened Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to Hitler and promised to take a hard line on Iran.⁴

A Critical Look at the Doctrine’s Ends and Means

That the Iran factor defines Saudi official security discourse, as mirrored in the Salman doctrine, and largely drives Riyadh’s policy of flexing military muscle in the region is beyond doubt. A Saudi Middle East affairs analyst identified a broad range of objectives driving the Salman doctrine: the removal of Iran’s ally Syrian

A man inspects a house in Sana’a after it was hit by airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition leaving nine innocent people, including five children, killed on December 26, 2017.

MOHAMMED HAMOUD
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President Bashar al-Assad from power, an outright denial to Iran's nuclear ambitions, the destruction of the Iran-supported Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, and Yemeni Shia militia groups, and the elimination of the ISIS.⁵ These high sounding goals failed to curry favor with the Obama Administration but they have resonated well with the goals of incumbent President Trump's Middle East policy.

Two emphatic goals underlie Trump's overall policy approach to the Middle East region –annihilating the ISIS and rolling back the Iranians. The first goal of eliminating the Islamic State has nearly been achieved, ironically with active Iranian support and cooperation in Iraq. The second goal of forcing the Iranians to scale back their presence and role in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen remains a tough goal. The Trump Administration, with strong Saudi and Israeli support, has reversed Obama's détente with Iran by scrapping the 2015 nuclear deal, reimposing unilateral sanctions on Iran to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero, and by organizing the Warsaw security conference in February 2019 to build an anti-Iran coalition to force Iran to renegotiate the nuclear deal and to give up its ballistic missile programs. These measures, better termed “maximum pressure” policy, do not bode well for regional peace and stability, as Iran's surrender to U.S. pressures is inconceivable while a turn to open armed hostilities sounds more probable.

The Saudi government, on its part, has designed and executed a two-tier

strategy to back up the Salman doctrine. The strategy heavily relies on two elements –high defense spending and military alliance building– but these measures have proven unrealistic in achieving the objectives. The Kingdom is a major buyer of foreign arms and ammunitions, from fighter jets to sophisticated missiles, artillery pieces, and battle tanks. It was the world's largest importer of military hardware in 2014, with total military spending shooting up by 275 percent between 2011 and 2015, compared to the previous five years. A recent research report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute shows that Saudi Arabia has topped the list of the world's arms importers from 2014-2018. Saudi arms imports recorded a 192 percent increase in this period, compared with the 2009-2013 period.⁶ A lion's share of the imports originated from the U.S., Britain, and France, and the imported arms were mainly used to fight the war in Yemen. Yet, the Saudi armed forces, with logistical support from the U.S., have not so far succeeded in effectively mounting a serious fight to defeat the ragtag army of Houthi rebels.

Alongside massive arms purchases, the Saudi government embarked on a course of regional military alliance formation to curb Iran's power and push back its regional proxies. First, it formed a nine-nation Arab coalition in April 2015 to fight and defeat the Houthi rebels. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman announced the formation of a broader alliance –the 34-nation Islamic Military Counter

Terrorism Coalition in December 2015 to fight ISIS terrorism and other regional extremist forces. The formation of the two military alliances was driven by strong Saudi desires to force Iran to cave in and retreat from Iraq and Syria. The much-publicized U.S. push for a Saudi-led “Arab NATO,” if it ever becomes a reality, is also set to survive on hostilities against Iran.

In the last three to four years, the two Saudi-led military alliances have hardly made any major achievements to report, however. The war in Yemen is dragging on with no end in sight; Iran is ever-more-stubbornly defying not only the Saudis but also their powerful ally, the U.S., and making inroads into Gulf affairs to the detriment of both Saudi and American interests. The Saudi-led blockade of Qatar, imposed in June 2017 on charges, among others, that Qatar finances regional terrorism and maintains close relations with Iran, forced Qatari rulers to quickly approach and cultivate strong diplomatic, military, and commercial ties with Iran and Turkey, Saudi Arabia's other Sunni rival in the region, creating a lasting chasm on the western coast of the Persian Gulf and undermining the very foundation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The blockade brought for Iran an unprecedented opportunity to win another Arab ally, after Syria in the Levant, in the Arabian Peninsula which the Saudis consider their underbelly.

Causes of Failures

The real problems behind the lack of success of the Salman doctrine are

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largely internal to the two-tier Saudi strategy. Saudi Arabia for the majority of its existence since 1932 was never a major military power; the Kingdom has been rather known as an oil superpower, recently upgrading its status as a prestigious member of the G-20 Group. Its policy of extensive purchases of military hardware is fraught with weaknesses and dangers. Imports of high volumes of arms create dangers of high dependence on foreign arms exporters who can exert undue influences during domestic and regional crises. The initiatives of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to end U.S. military support for the Saudi war on Yemen are a case at hand. Major regional and global powers mostly depend on their domestic arms industries to equip their militaries, while Saudi Arabia remains solely an importer, not known for producing any major weapon systems and military tools to export to the outside world.

The poor capacity of the Saudi military to integrate the imported ad-



U.S. President Trump and Saudi Arabia's King Salman came together following Trump's arrival in Saudi Arabia on May 20, 2017. MANDEL NGAN / AFP / Getty Images

vanced weapon systems and sophisticated military technologies into its organizational setup and war fighting strategy is another cause of serious concern. Until Riyadh's recent shift to a proactive foreign policy backed by military force, the Saudi military was a neglected institution. The Kingdom intentionally kept its armed forces underequipped and underfunded, driven by the suspicion that a strong military might play an assertive role in politics or take over political power, as it happened in neighboring Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The sudden turn to military force as a foreign policy tool, especially following the outbreak of the pro-democracy Arab uprisings, has exposed more weaknesses than strengths in the Saudi military. The Saudi government now greatly depends on foreign military advisors

and contracted soldiers or mercenaries to train its armed forces and lead the war on Yemen. Foreign military advisors and soldiers are currently "employed in key military specialties and technical areas within the Kingdom."⁷ Yet, Saudi Arabia cannot win a war depending on contracted foreign soldiers and military advisors while its own armed forces lack professional training and fighting skills, regardless of how much sophisticated weapons and military gear it buys from external arms producers.

Coupled with the incapacity of the military to fight and win wars, there are also reasonable doubts about the nature and usefulness of the two military alliances the Saudi government has formed to back its anti-Iran drive. Some GCC states, such as Oman, refused to be a part of the nine-nation

Arab Coalition, while Pakistan outright rejected the Saudi invitation to join the coalition. Sudan offered to participate in the war after it had received guarantees for financial aid of \$2.2 billion from Saudi Arabia and Qatar; Egypt only committed itself to be a coalition partner after securing oil concessions and an \$8 billion investment commitment from the Saudi government.⁸ There was no spontaneous Sudanese or Egyptian commitment to Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran cause, rather their commitment was bought through economic largesse.

Similarly, the 34-nation Islamic military alliance is more aptly a Saudi-led Sunni alliance, as no Shia country was invited to join it. A host of Sunni states like Algeria and Central Asian Muslim countries opted to not become a part of the Iran-Saudi rivalry. Algeria refused to agree with the Saudi policy of branding Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemeni Houthis as terrorist organizations. Oman initially balked at the alliance but later decided to join it. The efficacy of the alliance is also subject to question, both in terms of actual military might and willingness to project military power. Yet, the alliance's wide geographic expanse from northwestern Africa (Morocco) to Southeast Asia (Malaysia), the negligible military capabilities of many of its members, and the domestic religious compositions and political fissures of a good number of member states (such as Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Turkey) undercut its effectiveness as a military bloc. There are hardly any common strategic points of harmony

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or political convergence between the alliance members.⁹ It is also questionable how many alliance members would be willing to fight for Saudi Arabia against another Muslim country, Iran, and risk imperiling their relationships with the Iranians and their powerful allies in the Middle East region.

On the contrary, the Salman doctrine has taken a heavy economic toll on the state exchequer and created a political and diplomatic image problem for the Kingdom. The Kingdom spends nearly \$700 million every month for war operations in Yemen. The cost of the Yemen war was over \$5 billion in 2015 alone,¹⁰ and the total war costs are estimated to have surpassed \$100 billion by the end of 2018.

What is of more international concern is that Saudi troops and their Emirati allies are committing war crimes in Yemen by violating international humanitarian and human rights laws. In August 2018, the UN Human Rights Council accused Saudi Arabia and its coalition partner the

United Arab Emirates of committing international war crimes in Yemen.¹¹ As of September 2018, the Saudi war has killed at least 10,000 Yemenis; it has created the largest humanitarian disaster in world history, forcing 22 million Yemenis, 11 million of whom are children, to survive on humanitarian assistance on a daily basis; 1.8 million children under the age of five are suffering from acute malnutrition; 2,310 Yemenis have died of cholera and there have been 1.1 million suspected cases of cholera since April 2017; and dwindling food imports have pushed 8.4 million Yemenis to the verge of starvation.¹² Still, the Saudi war frenzy continues, despite international condemnations and protests. Major human rights organizations, particularly the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have condemned the war, and a host of states, including Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, have imposed arms embargoes on Saudi Arabia to end the horrific war in Yemen. In brief, the Kingdom, in addition to its military failures, has been suffering from high diplomatic and political reputational costs.

Conclusion

The Salman doctrine has had no promising chance of success from the beginning, as there were wide gaps between perceptions and realities. The Saudi government acted from a false perception that it could win a swift military victory against the Iran-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen and force Syrian President

Bashar al-Assad to step down, while lacking the necessary military skills and warfighting experience to succeed. The anti-Iran drive, in reality, has proved a chimera for the Kingdom, a notable misstep in its foreign policy. It has already lost the northern tier of the Middle East, i.e. Iraq and Syria, to Iran and may lose Yemen in the future. So is the case with the U.S. and Israel, which are frantically trying to force Iran to retreat from Syria to relieve Israel of Iranian and Hezbollah military pressures.

It is enigmatic for many people to make a clear sense of Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran drive. In the Middle Eastern context, Iran primarily leads a resistance front against the U.S. and Israel, but Saudi Arabia exclusively competes against Iran. While Saudi Arabia is a strategic nuisance for Iran (in the sense that the Saudi regime throws its weight behind the U.S.), the U.S. views Iran as a strategic recalcitrant (not conforming to U.S. interests). While Iran's power originates from its domestic bases—a large and educated population, an industrial base, a battle-hardened military, sizable defense industries, and a geographic location that connects it to Central and South Asia, Europe through Russia and the Arab heartland through Iraq, Saudi Arabia's power is primary based on its oil resources and security partnership with the U.S., though it has recently launched an ambitious plan dubbed "Vision 2030" to modernize its society and diversify away from high dependence on oil revenues. From this angle, Saudi Arabia is engaged in an unequal competition

with Iran, a competition it is unlikely to win. ■

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