

No “Arab Spring” in the Saudi Kingdom: Riyadh’s Foreign Policy and “The Saudi-Led Counterrevolution”

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Writing in The Washington Post on February 27, 2011, Rachel Bronson asked: “Could the next Mideast uprising happen in Saudi Arabia ?” Her answer was: “The notion of a revolution in the Saudi kingdom seems unthinkable.”

However, On September 30 the next year, the senior foreign policy fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy Bruce Riedel concluded that the “revolution in Saudi Arabia is no longer unthinkable.”

To preempt such a possibility, the kingdom in March 2011, in a “military” move to curb the tide of the Arab popular uprisings which raged across the Arab world from sweeping to its doorsteps, the kingdom sent troops to Bahrain to quell similar popular protests.

That rapid reactive Saudi military move into Bahrain heralded a series of reactions that analysts describe as an ongoing Saudi-led counterrevolution.

Amid a continuing succession process in Saudi Arabia, while major socioeconomic and political challenges loom large regionally, the kingdom is looking for security as far away as China, but blinded to the shortest way to its stability in its immediate proximity, where regional understanding with its geopolitical Arab and Muslim neighborhood would secure the kingdom and save it a wealth of assets squandered on unguaranteed guarantees.

In his quest to contain any fallout from the “Arab Spring,” Saudi King Abdullah Ben Abdel-Aziz selectively proposed inviting the kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco to join the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), leading The Economist on May 19, 2011 to joke that the organization should be renamed the “Gulf Counter-Revolutionary Club.” For sure including Iraq and Yemen would be a much better addition if better security was the goal.

Ahead of US President Barak Obama’s official visit to the kingdom by the end of this March, Saudi Arabia was looking “forward to China as an international magnate with a great political and economic weight to play a prominent role in achieving peace and security in the region,” according to Defense Minister and Crown Prince Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud who was in Beijing from March 13 to 16 “to enhance cooperation with China to protect peace, security and stability in the region.” He was quoted by a [statement from the Saudi Press Agency](#).

Prince Salman was in Japan from 18-21 last February, hopefully to deepen bilateral cooperation “in various fields.” On February 26, India and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement

to strengthen co-operation in military training, logistics supplies and exchange of defense-related information. On last January 23, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia [signed a defense cooperation agreement](#), the first of its kind.

While a strong Saudi-Pakistan defense partnership has existed for long, it has been upgraded recently. Princes Salman and Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal arrived in Pakistan on February 15. Pakistani army chief General Raheel Sharif was in Saudi Arabia earlier. Director of South Asia Studies Project at the Middle East Media Research Institute, Washington DC, Tufail Ahmad, wrote on this March 11 that “the upswing in the relationship marks a qualitative change,” hinting that the kingdom could be seeking Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities to “counter a nuclear-capable Iran” despite Islamabad’s denial, which “is not reliable.” The kingdom is moving “to transform itself as a regional military power,” Sharif wrote.

On this March 14, the Financial Times reported that Saudi Arabia has given \$1.5 billion (Dh5.5 billion) to Pakistan . In February a senior Pakistani intelligence official told the Financial Times that Saudi Arabia was seeking “a large number of [Pakistani] troops to support its campaign along the Yemeni border and for internal security.” The official confirmed that Pakistan ’s agreement, during Prince Salman’s visit, to support the establishment of a “transitional governing body” in Syria was an important aspect of the deal.

On this March 5, the kingdom led two other members of the six-member GCC, namely the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain , to withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar , risking the survival of the GCC.

Hunting two French and Lebanese birds with one shot, the kingdom early last January pledged a \$3 billion royal grant, estimated to be two-time the entire military budget of Lebanon , to buy French weapons for the Lebanese Army.

The Saudi multi-billion dollar support to the change of guards in Egypt early last July and the kingdom’s subscription to Egypt’s make or break campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) inside and outside the country following the ouster of the MB’s former president Mohammed Morsi reveal a much more important Saudi strategic and security unsigned accord with Egypt’s new rulers.

On the outset of the so-called “Arab Spring,” the kingdom also bailed out Bahrain and the Sultanate of Omen with more multi-billion petrodollars to buy the loyalty of their population.

More multi-billion petrodollars were squandered inside the country to bribe the population against joining the sweeping popular Arab protests.

Yet still more billions were squandered on twenty percent of all arms transfers to the region between 2009-2013 to make the kingdom the world’s fifth largest importer of arms while more Saudi orders for arms are outstanding, according to a new study released on this March 17 by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

While the United States will continue to “guarantee Israel ’s qualitative military edge” over all the twenty two Arab nations plus Iran , Iran is developing its own defense industries to defend itself against both the US and Israel , rendering the Saudi arms procurement efforts obsolete.

Had all of those squandered billions of petrodollars spent more wisely they could have created a revolution of development in the region.

Not Assured by US Assurances

Ahead of Obama's visit, the Saudi message is self-evident. They are looking, on their own, for alternative security guarantees, or at least additional ones. They don't trust their decades - long American security umbrella anymore. The US sellout of close allies like the former presidents of Tunisia , Egypt and Yemen shed doubt on any "assurances" Washington would be trying to convey during Obama's upcoming visit.

President Obama is scheduled to be in Riyadh by the end of this March to assure Saudi Arabia of what his Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns on last February 19 told the Center for Strategic and International Studies that the United States takes Saudi security concerns "seriously," "US-Saudi partnership is as important today as it ever was" and that the "Security cooperation is at the heart of our agenda" with the GCC, reminding his audience that his country still keeps about 35,000 members of the US military at 12 bases in and around the Arabian Gulf.

However, "the Saudi voices I hear do not think that what they see as the current lack of American resolve is merely a short-term feature of the Obama Presidency: They spot a deeper trend of Western disengagement from their region," Sir Tom Phillips - British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia 2010-12 and an Associate Fellow at the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme - wrote on last February 12.

Obviously, the Saudis are not assured, neither internally, regionally or at the international level because as Burns said on the same occasion: "We don't always see eye to eye" and it is natural that Gulf states would "question our reliability as partners" given US efforts to achieve energy independence and US warnings that traditional power structures, such as the gulf monarchies, are "unsustainable."

Obama's upcoming visit to the kingdom has been described as a "fence-mending" one. Saudi Foreign Minister [Prince Saud Al Faisal, at a joint press conference](#) alongside visiting [US Secretary of State John Kerry](#) last November, hinted that fences might not be mended because "a true relationship between friends is based on sincerity, candor, and frankness rather than mere courtesy."

What Prince Al Faisal described as "frankness" is still missing: His brother, prince Turki al-Faisal, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal last December, blasted the Obama administration for keeping his country in the dark on its secret talks with Iran : "How can you build trust when you keep secrets from what are supposed to be your closest allies?"

"The Saudis have good reason to feel besieged and fearful," Immanuel Wallerstein, director emeritus of the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton University and senior researcher at Yale University and Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris , was quoted as saying by AlJazeera America on this March 1.

Senior associate of Carnegie's Middle East program Frederic Wehry on this March 10 wrote that, "There is a growing sense in Gulf capitals ... led by Saudi Arabia " that "the United States is a power in retreat that is ignoring the interests of its steadfast partners, if not blithely betraying them."

What Burns described as “tactical differences” with Saudi Arabia and its GCC co-members, the Saudis are acting on the premise that those differences are much more strategic than “tactical” and accordingly are overstressing their search for alternative security guarantees worldwide because they seem to disagree with Burns that “our Gulf partners know that no country or collection of countries can do for the Gulf states what the United States has done and continues to do.”

Pressured between Two ‘Crescents’

Three threatening developments have led to Saudi distrust in US security assurances. The first was the selling out of a US ally like the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the second was the Qatari, Turkish and US coordination with the Muslim Brotherhood regionally and the third was the assumption to power of the MB in Egypt . The first development set the precedent of selling out of a long regional US ally against the fervent public advice of the kingdom. Mubarak’s ouster set the red lights on in Riyadh of a possible similar scenario in Saudi Arabia .

The second development put the kingdom on alert against the emerging MB, Turkey, Qatar and the US axis that would have encircled Saudi Arabia had the kingdom allowed this axis to hand the power over to the Brotherhood in Syria in the north and in Egypt in the west. The MB is influential in Jordan, the kingdom’s northern neighbor, and in Yemen , its southern neighbor. The Hamas’ affiliation to the MB in the Palestinian Gaza Strip would complete what a Saudi analyst called the “Brotherhood crescent” in the north, west and south, to squeeze the kingdom between the rock of this “Brotherhood crescent” and the hard place of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the east.

The third development surrendered the western strategic backyard of the kingdom to the MB, which has become untrustworthy politically in view of its membership in the emerging US-led ““Brotherhood crescent” after decades of sponsoring the MB leaders who found in the kingdom a safe haven from their suppression in Syria and Egypt and using them against the pan-Arab regimes in both countries and against the pan-Arab and communist political movements.

Unmercifully pressured between the “Brotherhood crescent” and what King Abdullah II of Jordan once described as the “Shiite crescent” extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, let alone the al-Qaeda offshoots, which have deep roots inside the kingdom and in its immediate surroundings and have emerged as a major threat to regional as well as to internal stability, in addition to what the Saudis perceive as the withdrawal or at least the rebalancing of the US power out of the region, the kingdom seems poised to find an answer to the question which Bruce Riedel asked on September 30, 2012 about whether or not the “revolution in Saudi Arabia is no longer unthinkable.”

The Saudi answer so far has been reactive more than proactive. “It is difficult to avoid the impression that Saudi policy is more re-active than pro-active,” Sir Tom Phillips - British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia 2010-12 and an Associate Fellow at the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme - wrote on last February 12.

Proactive Shorter Path Overdue

Following the lead of the United States and Europe who have come to deal with the fait accompli that Iran as a pivotal regional power is there to stay for the foreseeable future, a

more Saudi proactive regional policy that would engage Iran and Syria would be a much shorter and cheaper route to internal security as well as to regional stability, instead of reacting to their alliance by engaging in a lost and costly battle for a “regime change” in both countries.

Or much better, the kingdom could follow the lead of the Sultanate of Oman, which risked to break away from the GCC should they go along with the Saudi proposal late in 2011 for transforming their “council” into an anti-Iran military “union.” Regardless of what regime rules in Tehran and since the time of the Shah, Oman has been dealing with Iran as a strategic partner and promoting an Iranian-GCC regional partnership. Qatar takes a middle ground between the Saudi and Omani positions vis-à-vis Iran . On this March 17, the Qatar-Iran joint political committee convened in Tehran .

Feeling isolated, besieged and threatened by being left in the cold as a result of what it perceives as a withdrawing US security umbrella, the kingdom’s new experience of trying to cope on its own is indulging the country in counterproductive external policies in the turmoil of the aftermath of the shock waves of the Arab popular uprisings, which have raged across the Arab world since 2011, but its tide has stopped at the Damascus gate of the Iranian – Syrian alliance, which is backed internationally by the emerging Russian and Chinese world powers.

At the end of the day, the kingdom’s recent historical experience indicates that the Saudi dynasty lived its most safe and secure era during the Saudi-Egyptian-Syrian trilateral understanding, which was developed as a regional axis of stability, as the backbone of the Arab League regional system and was reinforced by the trilateral coordination in the 1973 Arab – Israeli war.

The revival of the Saudi coordination with Egypt in the post-Morsi presidency was a crucial first step that would lead nowhere unless it is completed by an overdue Saudi political U-turn on Syria that would revive the old trilateral axis to defend Arabs against Israel . A partnership with Iran would be a surplus; otherwise the revival of the trilateral coordination would at least serve as a better Saudi defense against Iran as well.

However such a Saudi U-turn would require of course a strategic decision that would renege on the kingdom’s US-inspired and ill-advised policy of dealing with Syria and Iran as “the enemy,” while dealing with Israel, which still occupies Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories, as a possible “peace partner” and a co-member of an anti-Iran and Syria “front of moderates,” which the successive US administrations have been promoting.

It would first require as well a change of foreign policy decision-makers in Riyadh , but such a change will continue to be wishful thinking until a man of an historic stature holds the wheel at the driving seat at the helm of the Saudi hierarchy. Until that happens, it might be too late. Meanwhile, it is increasingly becoming a possibility that the “revolution in Saudi Arabia is no longer unthinkable.”

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