

The Gradual Tilt to Asia: Cause for Re-Defining Saudi Arabia's Regional Environment?

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ROBERT MASON, OCT 3 2012

Asia's rise in global political and economic spheres has contributed to a re-evaluation of whether Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia could in time re-define their regional environments to include member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).[1] One facilitating factor for closer ties, other than enhanced bilateral cooperation with certain OIC members such as Malaysia, would be if the Saudi – Iranian Cold War manifested itself in alliance building internationally. This has already occurred to some extent as Saudi Arabia has sought to isolate Iran and Iran has sought to attract new allies and trade partners. However, more important is the medium-term imperative for Saudi Arabia to diversify its international relations more than has been historically necessary to reflect a changing international balance of power. The tilt towards Asia amongst many states (including those in the Gulf Cooperation Council[2]) could provide significant opportunities for Malaysia, and other 'small states'[3] in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). They could find themselves in stronger regional positions and better able to participate in dialogue and actions on regional and inter-regional issues directly related to their national interests.[4]

In the short-term, Saudi foreign policy responses to the Arab Uprisings will continue to be conditioned by growing 'local' threats relative to international threats, including pressure from youth, the Iranian nuclear programme and further instability in the Gulf. Saudi attention has therefore been drawn back to building and consolidating relationships in the GCC rubric (notably with Morocco and Jordan), and to a lesser extent through the Arab League, as the primary means through which it can address its most important national security interests. This means that states such as Malaysia must be patient in waiting for a realignment of geopolitical interests to converge which best serve their policy choices.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf

Scholars have continued to identify Saudi Arabia closely with the Gulf due to tribal and sectarian ties with other Gulf monarchies and Saudi de facto leadership of the GCC. Twinam specifies Saudi regional hegemony as being derived from its large landmass and its borders with every other Gulf State, its command and control of the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), and its oil revenues and reserves which are the highest in the GCC and OPEC.[5] Gause notes that the perceived threats of Iranian irredentism after the Islamic Revolution, the emerging Iranian-Qatari axis post-1992, the outstanding territorial dispute between the UAE and Iran over Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands, and the Iranian nuclear programme, have all drawn Saudi attention back to the regional theatre.[6]

Niblock asserts that the Arab-Israeli conflict, the struggle with Iran for leadership of the Islamic world, and the base agreements signed with U.S. troops after the Gulf War (making the U.S. a local power) have been paramount in this regard.[7] Over the last three to four decades, these threats in the regional environment have shaped Saudi domestic policy because of the grand bargain between the ruling Al Saud family and Saudi citizens, which includes a national security guarantee. Others, such as Nonneman, identify that foreign policy decision making fluctuates between the domestic, regional and international environments according to various priorities, pressures and constraints.[8] It is this shift in foreign policy patterns which, (combined with growing economic and political multi-polarity), leads to the speculation that Saudi Arabia's regional environment could be reconceptualised. Many OIC member states already

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look to Saudi Arabia for Islamic leadership, through its custodianship of the two holy places and through aid.

A Potential Saudi – Malaysian Partnership

The challenge of building strategic partnerships outside of the Gulf remains difficult. The relatively loose OIC alliance tends to include broad soft power issues such as Islamophobia initiatives and capacity building rather than substantive issues such as trade and defence cooperation. The former are less conducive to strengthening bilateral relations. Furthermore, Saudi relations with most OIC members are immediately disadvantaged because many members are so-called small states, like Malaysia, which cooperate with all states, not just Islamic ones in the OIC.[9] Therefore, the extension of Saudi bilateral relations across the OIC is necessarily rooted in firstly helping poor Muslim communities to develop. For example, Saudi Arabia could support more tourism to Malaysia where Saudi families feel “at home” in Kuala Lumpur due to a similar Islamic way of life, whilst promoting more trade and investment.[10] This is already beginning to happen. Trade increased between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia by 10.9% between 2009 and 2010 and Malaysian migrant labour is increasing to the Kingdom, including to the Western Province.[11] Saudi aid and support helps countries such as Malaysia to afford more imports and so it is in Saudi interests to develop the relationship through whatever means are most appropriate. In 2012, these included strengthening bilateral ties through an agreement on science and technology as well as a memorandum of understanding on standardisation, which is important to facilitating more bilateral trade.[12]

The long term benefits of growing the internal markets of friendly states will eventually lead to a point where Saudi Arabia gives and takes more to ensure it keeps its growing customer base.[13] There is also potential for Saudi Arabia to extend counterterrorism training to Malaysia which has experience of guerrilla warfare but requires greater preparation to fight on the front line of violent extremism in South East Asia. This, along with the traditional leadership qualities of Saudi Arabia, puts Saudi Arabia in a dominant position vis-à-vis other OIC members, and importantly vis-à-vis Iran. Relations will never be a partnership of equals, but it is important to Saudi security that OIC states remain aligned with its core interests.

The Arab Uprisings and the Continued Relevance of Saudi Leadership in the GCC

The Arab Uprisings alarmed the Saudi government and led to its understanding that stacked against domestic pressure for democratisation and reform, the Saudi regime can no longer rely on the U.S. for its own survival. Saudi Arabia must therefore show greater independence and a greater dexterity to employ resources beyond “throwing money at the problem”. [14] The combination of an intensifying threat from Iran and the Arab Uprisings has led Saudi policymakers to focus on the domestic sphere where it is dealing with its own uprisings in the Eastern province.[15] Saudi foreign policy has been reconfigured and now aims to enlarge the GCC to include Morocco and Jordan through the implementation of a five year economic development plan.[16] The process should eventually lead to the formation of the Arab Gulf Union Council[17] and possibly a much closer political union.[18] The combination of intense regional threats means that Saudi Arabia must consolidate and crystallise sectarian divides to isolate Iran in the Gulf before facilitating alliances with more peripheral states.[19]

Syria has also risen to become a Saudi foreign policy priority, with Saudi funding giving way to arming the Free Syrian Army through intermediaries on the Turkish-Syrian border.[20] Saudi Arabia is working through the Arab League and with the UN Security Council members to oust Assad's regime; a Shi'a regime in a Sunni majority state and a close ally of Iran. Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in the Lebanese political opposition, the March 14 grouping, led by the Saudi aligned Future movement's Saad Hariri, who has shown strong sympathy for the revolution in Syria.[21] Until the Arab Uprisings have settled and the sectarian struggles have been resolved, Saudi policy towards the OIC states is likely to remain in a holding pattern of supporting development without undertaking major policy commitments.

Conclusion

In ordinary circumstances, Saudi Arabia may have been more likely to focus on developing strategic relations with OIC states such as Malaysia. However, Saudi attention has been drawn back to the traditional MENA environment

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by the combined threats to Saudi national security: Iran and the Arab Uprisings. The Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran, including Iranian nuclear proliferation, has led to a multilateral response from Saudi Arabia through the GCC, the Arab League, OPEC, and increasingly through bilateral channels with western allies. Saudi Arabia is relying more exclusively on its closest allies, the GCC member states, to secure its own borders and territory. The deployment of the Peninsular Shield Force to Bahrain is one example of this increasingly assertive policy.

By working to consolidate the institutionalisation of the GCC, Saudi Arabia will have access to more resources from more reliable allies in order to better defend itself. The \$100 billion cost to develop a "Special Forces Command" which could permanently unify the Kingdom's Special Forces, and deploy abroad if necessary, is part of that strategy and could be rolled out across the GCC.[22] By promoting and continuing to dominate the sub-regionalisation of Middle East foreign policy through a more integrated and assertive GCC, Saudi Arabia could stand itself in good stead to gain from a tilt to Asia. For example, burgeoning markets and greater inter-regional cooperation could give Saudi Arabia greater access to economic and diplomatic groupings through which it can pursue its various foreign policy objectives. The benefit for Malaysia is that greater Saudi multilateral engagement in the region can only reinforce, and perhaps facilitate, growing bilateral relations.

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Dr Robert Mason is currently based at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, where he recently completed his PhD. His research focuses on economic factors in the foreign policies of Middle East states with particular reference to Saudi Arabia and Iran. Prior to the PhD he obtained a BA (Combined Hons) International Relations and Politics from the University of Westminster, having spent 6 months studying at the University of Tampa in the U.S. He also holds a Post Graduate Certificate in Diplomatic Studies (international law and foreign policy analysis) from the Diplomatic Academy of London.

[1] A full list is available at http://www.oic-oci.org/member_states.asp

[2] Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah completed a well documented tour of Asia in 2006, taking in the states of China, India, Malaysia and Pakistan. P. K. Abdul Ghafour, 'Abdullah Begins Four-Nation Asia Tour Sunday', *Arab News*, 18 January 2006, available at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/279079>

[3] There is no common definition of a 'small state', but the World Bank attributes features such as remoteness and isolation, susceptibility to natural disasters and environmental change, poverty and limited capacity to small states. 'Small States', The World Bank, available at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/PROJECTS/0,,contentMDK:21431090~pagePK:41367~piPK:51533~theSitePK:40941,00.html>

[4] Evidence of Russia's tilt towards Asia was highlighted by its hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in September 2012. China Daily, 'Russia's 'Historic' Asia Tilt', 10 September 2012, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2012-09/10/content_15746107.htm

[5] Joseph Wright Twinam, 'The Players: Six Uneasy Pieces', *The Gulf, Cooperation and the Council*, (Washington D.C., United States: Middle East Policy Council, 1992), p. 20

[6] Gregory Gause III, 'Challenges', *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994), p. 167

[7] Tim Niblock, 'Redirecting the Polity: 1979 to Present', *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 81-86

[8] Gerd Nonneman, 'Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy: 'Omnibalancing' and 'Relative Autonomy' in Multiple Environments', in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance*, (London: Hurst &

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Co., 2005), pp. 315-351

[9] Evidence of this can be found in Petronas, the Malaysian NOC, which operates in 32 countries outside of Malaysia. D. Yergin, 'Epilogue', *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*, (New York: Free Press, 2008), p. 770

[10] Interview with H.E. Professor Dato' Syed Omar Al Saggaf, Malaysian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, 5 June 2011, Riyadh

[11] Khalid Abbasi Abdul Razak Mohd, 'Malaysia Special: Saudi Arabia and Malaysia Share Strong Historical and Religious Ties', *Arab News*, 30 August 2011, available at <http://arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article495912.ece>

[12] Rodolfo Estimo Jr, 'Kingdom, Malaysia Bolster Ties', *Arab News*, 23 April 2012, available at <http://arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article615072.ece>

[13] Interview with H.E. Professor Dato' Syed Omar Al Saggaf, 5 June 2011, Riyadh

[14] K. C. Ulrichsen. 'Approaching a Post-Oil Era', *Global Affairs*, 24 September 2011, available at <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Approaching-a-Post-Oil-Era-15328>

[15] Toby Matthiesen, 'Saudi Arabia's Shiite Problem', *Foreign Policy*, 7 March 2012, available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/07/saudi_arabia_s_shiite_problem

[16] Arab News, 'Morocco, Jordan Inch Closer to GCC', 11 September 2011, available at <http://www.arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article500539.ece>

[17] SUSRIS, 'Arab Gulf Union Council - What's in a Name', 8 March 2012, available at <http://www.susrisblog.com/2012/03/08/arab-gulf-union-council-whats-in-a-name/>

[18] Middle East Policy Council, 'GCC Debates Gulf Union', 22 May 2012, available at <http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/gcc-debates-gulf-union>

[19] Gregory Gause III, 'Saudi Regional Policy in the Wake of the Arab Upheaval', *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Center for Preventative Action, Council Special Report No. 63, December 2011), pp. 20-21

[20] Justin Vela, 'Exclusive: Arab States Arm Rebels as UN Talks of Syrian Civil War', *The Independent*, 13 June 2012, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/exclusive-arab-states-arm-rebels-as-un-talks-of-syrian-civil-war-7845026.html>

[21] Gregory Gause III, 'Saudi Regional Policy in the Wake of the Arab Upheaval', *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*, 20-21

[22] Nawaf Obaid, 'Is Riyadh Ready to "Recalibrate the Partnership"?', 15 May 2011, *SUSRIS*, available at <http://www.susris.com/2011/05/15/is-riyadh-ready-to-recalibrate-the-partnership/>

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