

THE SALMAN DOCTRINE IN SAUDI ARABIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: OBJECTIVES AND THE USE OF MILITARY FORCES

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Introduction

On January 23, 2015, Salman bin Abdulaziz, son of the founder of the Abdulaziz bin Saud kingdom, was inaugurated as the seventh monarch of Saudi Arabia. One of his first decisions was to appoint his son, Mohammed bin Salman, Minister of Defense and Secretary-General of the Royal Court. Within a few months, the young prince would tally enormous political responsibilities (Malsin, 2017). Since then, the foreign policy of the Saudi monarchy is marked by a series of changes promoted directly by the head of state and his heir to the throne, with the purpose of revitalizing the country's international role and preserving its main interests in the Middle East.

In the particular regime of Saudi Arabia, there is a special convergence of the desire to strengthen a political process of greater institutional reinforcement, a diversified economy and timid socio-cultural changes, promoting a

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significant makeover. If we analyze the external sphere, it is also mutating its foreign policy, traditionally considered a conservative power, by virtue of the generational succession in the al Saud monarchy and the remodeling of the complex scenario in the Middle East, through more active, autonomous and belligerent policies, despite the traditional external dependence on security. The Saudi perception is based on the presumption that the security challenges lie both in the revolutionary movements and in the regional theater, convulsed and lacking a clear redefinition.

King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman will amend the strategy followed by the previous sovereign, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, who had to face the Arab spring in the last years of his reign and the direct effects of such rebellions. The regional political and social environment changes dramatically from the year 2011 onwards. For the current Saudi leaders, the answers given to the various convulsions are insufficient. For this reason, they decide to develop a new doctrine, which allows adapting national strategies and objectives to a much more convulsive and unpredictable local space (Domínguez de Olazábal, 2017). His vision is governed by the need for Saudi Arabia to maintain a significant role and counteract the strength of other movements fostered by regional, international and non-state actors.

The formulation and implementation of the Salman doctrine in Saudi foreign policy is determined by the kind of factual interpretation reached. An intersubjective perspective of the understanding of events, threats and challenges, which are related to each other, and that have regional influence, affecting all States (Buzan, 2003: 140-141). In this logic, it is not estimated that any state or non-state actor enjoys sufficient dominant power to prevail in the region, due to the fragmentation of political dynamics in the area and the inconsistency of interests.

The design of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is built upon three spheres: on the one hand, the essential conceptions that the monarchy has about its role in the country, in the Middle East and the Muslim sphere; on the other, the analysis elaborated on the events that have occurred in recent times that have eroded the security margins and, finally, the conclusions raised on possible threats, risks and opportunities in the face of the complex scenarios opened after the various regional crises.

All this leads to a very particular vision of the responsibility of the Government to carry out a more extensive and ambitious foreign policy. For the top leaders of Saudi Arabia, they start from the premise that the regional status quo broke after the Arab spring and the region is in a restructuring phase (Hippler, 2013: 33-40). The various actors involved in the area must reorient their efforts and attention, in order to influence the future of events. In

the Saudi case to avoid weakening its preponderant and hegemonic position.

Due to the importance and dimension of interpretations, conceptualizations and ideational frameworks to understand Saudi actions in the regional space, the theoretical framework of this article is based on the contributions of the referential authors of social constructivism. In the observation of international relations, the constructivists put the emphasis on the transcendental weight of the construction of meanings and explanations (Lamont, 2015: 17-19). Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is based on a series of objectives and interests, but its trajectory is signaled not only by the achievement of those ends but also by the deduction made of all the circumstances that have recently emerged.

Political dynamics do not involve the calculation of objective causal relationships since they are processes in constant transformation. The characteristics of a political doctrine such as that of King Salman evolve according to interactions with other actors, alterations in the international context and the constitution of judgments and identities (Wendt, 1994: 388-389), which are established individually and collectively. The Saudi monarchy perceives the decline of the status quo in the Middle East as a serious threat to its national interests, based on this, reconfigures its appreciations of the environment and other actors. The most striking changes in its regional strategy occur at the level of valuations, notions and impressions.

The article presents the objectives of foreign policy linking them with the interpretations of the Saudi Government on the consequences of the changes in the region. The current head of state and the crown prince seek to overcome the strategy applied by King Abdullah, paying special attention to those scenarios that are considered essential for the balance and security between the different currents (Gardner, 2016), such as war in Syria and Yemen, the situation in Iraq or tensions with Qatar. Each of these epicenters represents a possible threat to Saudi hegemony, or a new opportunity to broaden their influence within a multipolar and fragmented struggle.

In this analytical framework, the article deepens the reflections and perceptions that are behind Saudi foreign action through the postulates of the Salman doctrine, based on two initial assumptions: A) Saudi Arabia wants to preserve its hegemonic power status and ensure a regional map in accordance with Saudi interests and B) the regional strategy is committed to a more proactive, robust and belligerent leadership, as the safest way to avoid the weakening of Saudi power. The dilemma for the Saud family is to know to what extent these initiatives will be effective and if the country itself is capable of withstanding the considerable and lasting effort they require.

Objectives of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy

The foreign policy objectives of Saudi Arabia are well defined and constitute the logical framework in which the Salman doctrine and regional strategy are situated in a period marked by the lack of stable coalitions and hegemonic authorities. These ends are inexorably linked to the characteristics of the Saudi State, as well as to the unique way of exercising the power of the royal family. Depending on the degree of threat or risk that the Government perceives around any of these purposes, its response will be one or the other. For the king and the prince some fundamental elements are weakened after the Arab spring, understanding that it is essential to propose a different type of action to ensure its durability.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Saudi kingdom is the patrimonialization of the State by the Saud House. Since its founding in 1932, the Abdulaziz bin Saúd dynasty has managed to extend its power in all facets of society, under tight control of the economy, energy resources, political institutions, military devices, as well as religion, thanks to the esteemed alliance with Wahhabism (Martín, 2013: 86-89). There is no substantial difference between the national interests of the state entity and the intentions of the dominant nucleus of the Saudi princes. Therefore, when talking about the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia we are directly mentioning the aspirations and concerns of the family clan.

The power of the Saud has as its key approaches the instrumentalization of religion, the wealth generated by oil and the breadth of its military means. Wahabism and the royal family have been a fruitful alliance since the 18th century. The pragmatic pact between the political and religious authorities constitutes a solid coalition based on mutual aid, the distribution of power and political legitimation with a strong religious base. Saudi princes worry about protecting and spreading this special interpretation of Islam, while the religious dome projects a favorable discourse with the interests of the crown (Valentine, 2015: 223-226). The Wahabite precepts are the main legitimizing tool that the monarchy has, serving as an indoctrinating instrument and also of repression in the face of more critical currents.

Another of the central pillars of the Saudi regime lies in the richness of the country's excess oil, which gives it abundant specific weight in international markets and constitutes the main source of internal financing. Saudi Arabia is one of the leading oil and gas producers in the world, with voluminous reserves of these resources in its territory. Oil revenues have allowed a state of prosperity linked to the Saud regime to prosper (Priego, 2017). The benefits of production and export report sufficient resources to consolidate the power of the royal family within the kingdom and finance its internation-

al operations. In addition, a state rentier and clientele system is configured, which guarantees the support of a large part of society.

The Saudi State has one of the best trained and modern Armed Forces in the Middle East. The Arab nation is one of the main buyers of military weapons in the world, being one of the countries that most public spending on security and defense (Cordesman, 2018). This trend has been reinforced after the Arab spring and the various regional crises. The monarchy has at its disposal a powerful structure against any type of internal or external threat. Although the aspect of these means has been traditionally defensive, with the intervention in Yemen it has decided to go one step further. Prince Mohammed bin Salman is committed to making it a valuable tool for foreign policy.

In 2018, the amount invested in defense spending puts Saudi Arabia in second place in the world ranking, with 58,137 million euros, only being surpassed by the United States. According to the Report on the world arms trade (SIPRI, 2018), 61% of Saudi imports come from the United States, 23% from the United Kingdom and 3.6% from France, Spain occupies the fourth position as a seller with 2.4%, ahead of other countries with figures that are around 1% such as Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Canada, Sweden or Turkey. If the evolution of defense spending is analyzed in the aforementioned year, it represents 24.59% of the total public expenditure, which means 1,725 euros per capita, that is, the second country on a global scale.

Although the national interests of Saudi Arabia have been kept constant since the foundation of the State, their revitalization can be seen since the end of the Cold War with a greater importance on security. In this order of ideas, there are five main areas in which national interests are divided: a) the defense of sovereignty and territorial unity; b) the guarantee of stability and internal order; c) the protection of the Wahabita doctrine; d) the preservation of the authority of the monarch and his lineage; and e) the consolidation of its presence on the international stage (Hernández, 2019: 62-67). These principles are linked to the Saudi regime and, in turn, fragility in any of them poses a real danger to both the nation and the leadership of its rulers. The Salman doctrine is inspired to avoid renunciation in any of these aspects and propel again a preponderant position of the crown.

Regional objectives are expressed based on national interests. The defense of sovereignty and territorial unity results in: 1) defending borders and 2) curbing external interference. Ensuring stability and internal order translates into: 3) preserving areas of influence in the environment and 4) seeking a favorable status quo. Wahhabism pursues: 5) extending its religious program and 6) curbing critical currents. To preserve the authority of the monarch and his lineage it is necessary: 7) to protect both his figure and 8) that of the Saud House itself. International consolidation inevitably involves:

9) achieving leadership in the Middle East and 10) in the Muslim world.

The perception of how events in the area affect each of the objectives will justify that King Salman, together with Prince Mohammed bin Salman, undertake a series of reforms in the local strategy. This reflection is properly collected in the constructivist approach, thanks to the fact that it provides a vision of the political and social reality in which the agents do not act only in terms of rational choice, but that there is a deep background of values and norms that govern their interaction with third parties (Kratochwill, 1989: 65-65). The response of the Saudi State is given by the confluence of changes in the environment, the programmatic framework on which its foreign policy is based and its interpretation of the world and its power.

The objectives of the regional policy of Saudi Arabia are influenced by two nuances. On the one hand, the interests of the Saud House to strengthen and protect its authority within the kingdom and in other international spaces. On the other, the particular conception of the world and its role in it. Wahabism has an enormous significance in this last point, since its religious synthesis offers a very special image of society, politics and government (Ottaway, 2011). The Wahabist current projected from Saudi officialism exposes principles that are consistent with the interests of the monarchy. Saudi princes are instituted as legitimate referents among their subjects and before Muslim communities.

The religious tradition and the geopolitical situation of Saudi Arabia motivate the Saud to be considered as natural leaders for the Middle East and Muslim communities. In addition, there is a strong link between the situation around it and the internal stability of the kingdom (Hartmann, 2016), so it is vital to preserve constant power balance. The achievement of hegemony at the local level and the Islamic sphere is essential to guarantee the political future of the institution, establishing an equation between the survival of the regime and the need to encircle the possible drifts of conflicts through an insulating cord. Any change in the proximity of the country can have negative effects on its power. The Saudi Government directs its foreign policy to promote a status quo in which it occupies a central role and in which the regional regime is in tune with its interests.

The former monarch, Abdalá bin Abdulaziz, maintained a contained profile in the face of the Arab uprisings, under the pretext of not affecting the fragile internal stability. His successors in charge of the country, Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, do not share this approach, since the passive and discreet stance only increased the weakening of their hegemonic positions. Current leaders are committed to revitalizing regional policy with the ultimate goal of making Saudi Arabia once again become the referential pole of the Arab world (Al-Rasheed, 2018a). The complexity of the regional

environment makes the Saudis decide to use all possible resources to achieve it. Any local incident becomes a priority issue for the monarchy, although it entails considerable economic and political expenditure for the country.

The transformations of recent years in the Middle East and the Maghreb, which led to the overthrow of regimes, sectarian conflicts, variable alliances and civil wars, represent considerable damage to several of the basic objectives of Saudi Arabia's strategic vision. Saudi leaders are aware of the difficulties of sustaining a hegemonic position over time, establishing areas of influence, avoiding external interference and countering critical discourses. These circumstances force the crown to undertake a new doctrine, which can curb the deterioration of Saudi leadership and reconstitute a new and auspicious regional map.

The Salman's regional strategy

The international relations of Saudi Arabia are divided into a series of spheres according to their importance for the Saud House (Al-Ghamdi, 2011). On a first level would be the Gulf area including members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iran, Iraq, Yemen, due to its borderline importance and, due to its strong presence, the United States (USA). On a second level, the Arab sphere, includes relations with most countries in the Middle East. The third is the Islamic one that includes all nations where the Islamic religion has considerable weight. The fourth category refers to its links with other regions and powers such as China and Asian economies, Russia or the main states of the European Union.

The segmentation of each of these areas together with the objectives and interests of the Saud house allow us to understand the main priorities of regional policy. Constructivism points out that hegemony, national interests or reason of state are social constructions that give meaning to the actions of political actors (Reus-Smit, 1997: 565-566). The Saudi leadership starts from the vital importance of exercising a preponderant control over the Gulf and the vicinity of the Arabian peninsula. Being a reference in the area and in the Muslim world provides the essential value for the monarchy. Losing prominence in these spaces creates a content void in the foundation of the system created by the Saudi princes.

The Salman doctrine is based on a very concrete interpretation of the facts, both of the response given by King Abdullah and the consequences originated after these years of convulsion and instability. The vector principle of this plan is to restore order and continue to occupy a hegemonic position.

For the king and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Arab revolts marked the end of a stage. A definitive and invariable phenomenon. Saudi Arabia cannot act as a simple retaining wall for changes, but needs to establish a renewed and firm preeminence.

The Saudi State must react to this phenomenon, restoring the status quo and occupying a hegemonic position, as it seems unlikely that external players such as the United States, Russia, the European Union or China can enjoy sufficient political power to determine the final outcome of the regional order, although they still have some influence. In this sense, it is the actors in the area who design their own future, so it is necessary to position and expand the influence through economic, diplomatic and political support to the weakest governments in the vicinity and to the variety of non-state actors involved in the contests.

The current monarch does not share the management carried out in the past by his predecessor in office. In a totally different context, the State needs to undertake new initiatives that revalue its hegemon status. The biggest concern in Saudi foreign policy is Iran (Chara, 2018: 230-231), especially since the signing of the 2015 Vienna Agreement over the suspension of the Iranian nuclear program. The open conflict points allow the influence of the Iranian State to extend its operating margins and counteract that of the other surrounding poles. The Ayatollah regime really represents the only actor capable of shading the Saud.

The Salman doctrine seeks to reactivate the role of Saudi Arabia in the most conflictive and determining points of the Middle East. The goal is to preserve their leadership quota and make their interests prevail over that of other actors (Al-Rasheed, 2016). The Saudi State will face the various challenges with all the resources at its disposal, adapting its actions according to the degree of threat or danger. The mechanisms or tools to which it resorts are political, economic, religious, diplomatic and military. For Prince Mohammed bin Salmán, the main responsible for this new strategy, the situation requires implementing exceptional measures, which have a remarkable scope both in the medium and long term.

During the last decades Saudi Arabia was recognized as a central actor in the region. Its external hegemony was supported by a less coercive and belligerent facet, enhancing its most notable facets in the field of religion, diplomacy or its scope in the energy markets. The Saudis managed to impose their criteria in a less striking and direct way, although the regional horizon was inscribed in an imperfect order, but more structured than the current one, which facilitated the application of a cautious policy. Since 2015, the Salman doctrine introduces important qualitative and quantitative changes, display-

ing a broader and more assertive agenda, which requires the coordination of all possible capital.

Qualitatively this doctrine is characterized by returning to an Arabist, Sunni and inflexible discourse. Saudi Arabia is postulated as the emblem of the Arab world and Sunni populations, while appealing to its status as a vector of stability and order in the region. The Saudis combine a strong religious and ethnic component to mark the political lines of the Middle East. The monarchy tries to resume its role as a vector of stability and order with the image of supremacy before Muslim communities. To serve as a bridge between Western powers and the Arab countries (Kinninmont, 2016), reinforcing its relations with the United States, the main European capitals and the governments of the area closest to the Saudi theses.

The qualitative change can also be seen in the aggressive level of the dialectic towards opposition movements and other actors in the region. The most belligerent reactions fall on Iran and its partners, in what King Abdullah of Jordan called the "Shia growing" alliance (Walker, 2006: 16-17). The quantitative transformation is produced by the deployment carried out by the kingdom on the main fronts of the environment and the resources allocated to it. The Salman doctrine pursues a new regional political, religious and security order, where Saudi Arabia returns to a central role in each of these facets. The strategy led by Mohammed bin Salman presents a tense dichotomy between a pro-Saudi-Sunni axis and another Iranian-Shiite opponent. This Manichaeian discourse eclipses the true reason for the strategy, which is political and not religious.

Never before has the Saudi monarchy been immersed in so many conflicts and crises at the same time and asserting heterogeneous capabilities, spreading its forces on several fronts to record its presence (Berenguer, 2016: 12-15). In each of them it sends the same message: any issues in the Middle East requires the participation of Saudi Arabia. Depending on the nature of the problem, it will resort to military force, or to elements more linked to white power, such as political mechanisms, religious inference or economic maneuvering. The expected results are to strengthen its hegemony again after the Arab spring, weakening all those currents that have managed to counteract Saudi importance.

Changes in foreign matters are accompanied by a series of profound modifications in the kingdom. The most outstanding example is the extensive Saudi Vision 2030 plan, which is close to the postulates of Mohammed bin Salman. The reforms are aimed at expanding State resources, modernizing its economy and improving competitiveness as essential steps to accommodate the new international vicissitudes (Khan, 2016: 36-39). It brings togeth-

er various economic dimensions with the central objective of doubling GDP and positioning Saudi Arabia among the 15 most important countries in the world through economic diversification. The Government ignores substantial changes in the political system, guiding its efforts in consolidating the figure of the young prince and his international projects.

The use of force as a resource in external action

The Saudi State had always shied away from getting involved in the numerous conflicts in the Middle East. The exceptional nature of the Arab spring confirms that the Saudis have to develop new action plans. The foreign policy of Saudi Arabia reinforces its militaristic component starting with the decided support given to the monarch of Bahrain. The activation of the CCG Peninsula Shield, at the request of Emir Al Jalifa in March 2011 (Ulrichsen, 2014: 346-347), represented a starting point towards a more militaristic and more belligerent approach. This trend will end up being confirmed with the entry into the Yemeni war years later. The interests of the Saud House will cease to be defended only thanks to their political and religious weight, but also through the threat and use of their military capabilities.

The militarization of Saudi foreign policy is not a casual event, since for almost two decades the Saudi Government has been working on the modernization and expansion of the powers of its armies. The defense strategy had been virtually detached from internal security measures until the Iraq War in 2003 (Russell, 2005: 66-67). The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime was preceded by a deep disagreement between the Bush and Riyadh Administration, which led a public opposition of Arab monarchies who disagreed with such action in a key state like the Iraqi. Saudi princes feared that Iraqi destabilization would be used by the Iranians to expand their influence.

The crisis of agreement of priorities between Americans and the Saud precipitated the Wahabita regime to finally decide to improve its Armed Forces. The Saudi monarchy no longer perceived the United States as a guarantor of stability for the region and of defense of its allies (Lacey, 2009: 298-301), highlighting the discrepancies in addressing the main security challenges in the zone. This distancing of relations began to occur after 9/11 and the World War on Terror launched by the White House. Suspicion of links between the Saudi State and radical organizations led to a climate of distrust of the main Western powers regarding the religious policy of Saudi Arabia.

Since the unification of the kingdom in 1932, the Saud House had concentrated all efforts to strengthen its power within the kingdom. After World

War II, the alliance with the United States reaffirmed the Saudi princes in the task of preserving internal order while renouncing their defense. Americans would be their political supporter and protector against any kind of external danger (Bowen, 2008: 110-112). This type of association would continue to be replicated with the rest of the Arab monarchies in the Gulf decades later. These regimes promised to contain any type of revolution or anti-imperialist movement in the area, while the Anglo-Saxon power was established as the main trading partner and became an actor in the Gulf.

The invasion of Kuwait in 1991 showed the fragility of these regimes before other States with greater war potential. The immediate assistance of the United States was the confirmation for these dynasties of the need to strengthen ties with their Western counterparts in search of external security umbrellas, to protect the regimes. Saudi Arabia was able to devote much of its resources for decades to developing powerful internal security devices, intelligence and repression services, which facilitated the system's durability. This strategy left it in a smaller place compared to the armies of other surrounding countries.

The Armed Forces became important in Saudi Arabia since the Gulf War in 1991, but always linked to their alliances with the United States' deployed bodies in the region. At the end of the 20th century, the Saudis began to substantially increase the volume of their imports of weapon materials and to diversify the number of partners in this area, improving relations with China (Al-Tamimi, 2012: 4-5). But the real leap in investment takes place at the beginning of the new century. From Riyadh, it is perceived that international circumstances will entail assuming greater responsibilities in defense. The vision is no longer to support the Americans in the protection of the Saudi territory, and the rest of the monarchies, but that the Saudis lead that mission together with the rest of local governments.

Until the Arab spring, King Abdullah was not in the position to resort to military intervention abroad. The entry of Saudi devices in Bahrain to suppress the 2011 protests is a milestone in the Saudi national defense strategy, under the coverage of helping and assisting allied leaders. The members of the CCG are another part of the preferred space that they consider should be protected as natural references of the area (Gimenez, 2018: 300-301). Saudi Arabia conceives its priorities in a much broader sense than the security of its borders. The Bahraini case had a reactive character and contained a clear message to the outside, recognizing that it would not allow interference in those spaces that it considers of its highest priority.

Although the Middle East is not positioned as the geographical space that encourages the greatest number of armed conflicts, it is an area of high

conflict, especially comparing its extension and data with other global figures (Armada, 2017: 48-50). States with a vocation to play the role of regional power make an investment in notable defense expenses, being the most outstanding example in the Saudi Arabia area. Kingdom leaders understand that the effective use of force in different scenarios should be projected as the central point of their predominance position.

Force becomes another tool of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The deployment of military personnel outside the country is done both to stabilize the environment and to preserve Saudi interests. For King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the hegemonic position in the Middle East requires the use of all available resources. For the application of this type of strategy, two factors have to be combined: the perception of eminent danger on any of Saudi interests and the real possibilities of carrying out military action. Only in their immediate surroundings, the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and Yemen, the Saudi leaders are confident that they can overcome some junctures by way of force. In other regional scenarios, circumstances force Saudi Arabia to resort to other elements.

Main challenges for Saudi Arabia in the Middle East

The Salman doctrine encounters numerous obstacles and challenges in the region. The success of the strategy will depend on both the Saudi appreciations and the responses of the other actors to the Saudi initiatives. It is clear that there are numerous parts in the Middle East that want to limit the scope of the leadership of the Saud. Each crisis in the environment becomes a corrector of the correlation of forces. The result in each of the conflictive scenarios will mark the political horizon of the area. The success of the initiatives of the king and Prince Mohammed bin Salman will depend largely on what will happen soon in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt or Qatar.

The approach made by the State of Saudi Arabia on its regional priorities is based both on the calculation of possible revenues and losses that it can obtain from its actions, according to its capabilities and interests and those of the other agents, as well as its knowledge of the present reality and the possible expectations. In this sense, it is constructivism that helps connect the material world and the subjective or meaning world (Adler, 1997: 330-33). The application of foreign policy has the two interrelated dimensions. The military, economic, religious and political force of a country together with the background of conceptualizations, meanings and interpretations.

For the Saudis, the key to the new status quo and the possibilities

of maintaining leadership go through five scenarios: Syria, Yemen, Iraq, the GCC and Iran. The main impediments they may encounter are: the Iranian rise, the Qatari resistance, instability in allied countries and critical currents within the kingdom. The international context is more favorable for the Saudis than during the reign of Abdullah. The Trump Administration is closer to the Saud than Obama (Al-Rasheed, 2018b: 236-238), they have an unexpected ally in Israel and other foreign powers, such as Europeans or Chinese, are in favor of stability over new convulsions .

In each of the key scenarios, Saudi Arabia is betting on different strategies to defend its influence. For the few rebel factions that still face the Al Asad regime in Syria, the Saudis remain the main international support, despite the fact that the president is more consolidated than a few years ago. Similarly, in Iraq the Saudis strengthen the congregation of Sunni groups to counteract the weight of Shiite figures and Iranian interference. In the Yemeni conflict, the Saudi Government has decided to continue with its strategy of supporting specific sectors of society, while intervening militarily on Houthi positions. In the case of the GCC, Saudi diplomacy has undertaken intense political and economic pressure, which reaffirms its authority against the Qatari position.

The most prominent initiative of the Salman doctrine is intervention in Yemen. A firm commitment of Prince Mohammed bin Salmán to claim the Saudi prominence in the area. The particularity of the operation in Yemen is that Saudi Arabia decides to use its military forces as another element of its foreign policy, which helps it preserve its leadership. Never before has the Saudi kingdom been so involved in environmental crises, despite the uncertainty of the result. It is an added effort for the country that was not accustomed to war situations.

King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman decided to take a major qualitative step in the war in Yemen. Until 2015 the monarchy had followed a line similar to that of Syria, but in this case not supporting opposition factions but the Government of Al-Hadi. The military operation is launched because the Saud perceive a growing risk of the possibility of Houthis taking power in a border country (Juneau, 2016: 651-654). The Syrian situation does not have a territorial proximity but the Yemeni situation does. Saudi Arabia wants to prevent an actor contrary to its leadership from taking hold within the peninsula and, even more, can serve as a liaison with Iran. The deployment of forces has served to contain the Houthi push, but not to stabilize the country.

Iraq regains special prominence in Saudi foreign policy due to the strong Iranian presence in the country. The Ayatollah regime has developed

strong political, economic and military ties with its Iraqi neighbor (Katzman, 2009: 6-8), so its presence is well disseminated, in addition to having Shiite parties that control the main institutions. Concisely it can be said that Tehran has been the biggest regional winner after the fall of Saddam Husein's regime by increasing his influence. This Iranian strategy of slow but unstoppable infiltration raises concern from Riyadh, although it has little capacity to maneuver except supporting Sunni groups and opponents of the political system imposed by the occupation. The Salman doctrine is committed to increasing its weight in the neighboring State, rebuilding relations with different ethnicities and confessions and, finally, through economic investments.

The war in Syria is the most decisive front for the political future of the region. The Syrian country has an important role for local balances. The conflict overcomes the contours of an internal dispute, through the intervention of foreign parties through direct actions or interposed actors to guarantee their interests and infer in the priority issues of the regional agenda. In the field, the interests of different actors in the area and international powers converge. It is essential for the Saudis to assert their goals to contain the Iranian push (Demir and Rijnoveanyu, 2013: 70-71). The survival of the Al-Assad regime and the support of Russia and Iran is an unrelated axis for the Saud House. For these reasons, the Saudi kingdom remains a distinguished partner of certain opposition factions despite the adverse evolution of the contest. The purpose is that the Syrian allies of Saudi Arabia can be counted on the possible political reconstruction of the country.

The Syrian contest seems to be in favor of Iran's interests, which would lead to the constitution of the Shiite axis, which some Arab monarchies fear as much as the Saudi one. For this reason, the Government of Salman promotes support for certain political parties and Sunni religious groups with the purpose of rebalancing forces (Wehrey, 2015: 78-79), presenting a front to Kurds, Shiites and secular movements, trying to influence through other actors in internal dynamics to expand power margins and counteract the weight of competitors. Regarding Iran's role it obeys two considerations; first, the Syrian conflict translates into a national security issue with the maintenance of an indispensable partner to implement the current foreign policy of influence in the Middle East and, secondly, it is necessary that the Iranian State preserves a prominent position in the conflict to legitimize yourself as an indispensable interlocutor in local dynamics.

The GCC represents not only a unique integration organization in the region but the ultimate expression of Saudi hegemony. The Saud have always tried to exercise direct leadership over the rest of the members, pressing for them to function as a homogeneous entity always under the Saudi preponder-

ance (Ehteshami, 2012, pp. 264-265). However, relations between the monarchies go through a very complicated phase after the open crisis with Qatar, which represents one of the most fragile points of the Saudi authority and which completely paralyzes the Council.

After the Arab uprisings there is a disintegration among the members of the organization. On the one hand, the block led by Saudi Arabia, which has the support and monitoring of Bahrain and UAE. On the other, Kuwait and Oman, who try to preserve an image of calculated neutrality. Finally, the Qatari State, which is presented as the most disruptive pole within the GCC (Dazi-Héni, 2019). The differences between members are accentuated when addressing regional crises. The elements of security, defense and external action continue to be matters in which the regimes still want to safeguard their level of sovereignty, hindering the possibilities of greater integration.

The strategic vision on the usefulness and viability of the GCC is changing profoundly with King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Saudi Arabia had a keen interest in projecting an image of unity and cohesion during the Arab spring (Kamrava, 2012: 97-98), but the tendency was for each Member State to attend to the changes individually. Saudi leaders begin to set totally different objectives, breaking with the basic premises on which Saudi diplomacy settled in the Gulf. The new proposals involve leaving aside the Council to build other types of alliances in the Middle East and the Muslim sphere.

The problems that have occurred with Qatar since 2017 serve to reaffirm the need for the Saud to reformulate a Saudi axis among related governments in the region. The possible project is underdeveloped and articulated, but its simple approach implies a disrepute and deterioration for the operation of the CCG, which has ceased to function in an ordinary way for more than two years (Szalai, 2018: 5-6). This organization begins to lose validity for Saudi Arabia, which no longer perceives it as a necessary element to strengthen its power but rather a flank of weakness. Saudi security and defense involve creating cooperation spaces where a firm commitment is generated between countries to protect and assist the stability of each regime.

Salman's strategy finds in Qatar another of the most considerable resistance. The Qatari emirate with the Al Thani dynasty in power is developing an active foreign policy (Roberts, 2016: 8-11), which takes it away from the Saudi predominance and the limitations of the GCC. The block on the Qatari peninsula is used by the Saudis as a show of strength, seeking to configure an area of influence that aligns countries of the Middle East and Maghreb with the power of the Saud. However, the most immediate consequences are the breaking of consensus within the Council and the approach of Qataris to

other regional centers such as Tehran or Ankara.

The Iranian rise is the highest concern within the Saudi crown. The weight acquired by Iran in recent years in spaces such as Iraq or Syria, coupled with other links in Qatar, Lebanon, Gaza or Yemen, make the Ayatollah regime the only one capable of presenting a counterbalance to Saudi hegemony. The political dispute between the two countries is involved in religious discourse (Beydoun and Zahawi, 2016: 48-49), masking the true backdrop, the struggle for power and regional supremacy. It does not lead to a direct confrontation, but it does have several tension springs, which exemplify the incompatibility of interests of both poles. Regional leadership is a *sine qua non* condition for the security of the two governments, so they strive to establish axes and alliances that strengthen their position and weaken the other.

Iran is considered an ancient power with a natural vocation to intervene in the region, to protect its security and cut off the isolation to which it has been subjected by the effects of international sanctions. The gradual Iranian influence in different States of the region or in a heterogeneous group of non-state actors, that is, Iranian expansionism, is the main threat to the interests of Saudi Arabia, which has increased unprecedented animosity with the Salman doctrine, overcoming previous stages characterized by discursive hostility or permanent suspicion. The confrontation between the two in the political, economic, religious, diplomatic fields is extended to the warmongering rhetoric defended by the Saudi elites and the most conservative Iranians, although it is unlikely to lead to military conflict.

The opposition within the kingdom can play a transcendental role in the scope of the Salman doctrine. The figure of Prince Mohammed bin Salman has numerous detractors in the circles closest to the royal family. The controversy produced by the case of journalist Khashoggi evidences political disagreements around the crown (Hernández, 2018). The heir to the throne concentrates numerous faculties and it is assumed that he is *de facto* responsible for the external action of the kingdom. Despite being an absolutist monarchy, Saudi Arabia is governed by difficult balances of powers that the king's son tries to alter in a very short time.

Saudi Arabia is managing to strengthen an associative circle with countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt or Israel, while seeking closer relations with Jordan, Kuwait and Oman. The Saudis manage to gain weight in the internal vicissitudes of Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, but they are losing capacity to influence Syria and Qatar. The leadership of the Saud is being strengthened under the initiatives of King Salman (Soler i Lecha, 2018: 152), but its scope may be less relevant than expected. The claims of the Saud House will still have to coexist with other agents of enormous power,

since the context is not favorable to its hegemony.

Final Remarks

The Salman doctrine represents a profound change in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and its regional strategy. Behind its design and implementation is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to whom his father has delegated the main governmental tasks. The Kingdom Government hopes with this initiative to regain the prominence in the Middle East that they thought was lost, containing the thrust of those forces trying to weaken the Saudi hegemonic position. For the interests of the Saud dynasty, it is essential to preserve a preponderant role in the environment, since it is a factor highly correlated with the stability of the country itself.

The foreign action of Saudi Arabia in Salman's reign is characterized as proactive, belligerent and robust. First, the Saudi State wants to reactivate its role in the area, overcoming the phase of responding only to the crises and problems of the environment, evolving towards work that fosters and influences new local dynamics. Second, the current leaders show a higher level of resolution and aggressiveness in defending national interests and safeguarding their regional objectives. Finally, the Saudi nation is expanding its deployment and presence in different scenarios, using all the means available to it.

The Salman doctrine is given by a concrete interpretation of the reality of the country and the region after the Arab spring. Since 2015, King Salman and Mohammed bin Salmán have introduced important changes in foreign action based on several assumptions. On the one hand, they consider the strategy followed by their predecessor wrong when facing the challenges that arose after the riots, which has favored the weakening of Saudi positions. On the other, they recognize the change in the regional status quo and the variety of challenges and threats, which require a renewed strategy and the involvement of all available capacities of the State.

For the leaders of the Saud House since 2011 the area is in a period of enormous importance. The exit to conflicts like Syria or Yemen, as well as the channeling of tensions at points such as Egypt, Qatar or Iraq, will surely mark the future of all countries in the coming decades. The prevailing order in which Saudi Arabia achieved a recognized preponderance has broken, leading to a few years of enormous confusion and uncertainty, characteristic of a transitional stage. It is under these circumstances that the contours of the new regional map are being fixed.

The Salman doctrine relies on the resources and capabilities of the

Saudi State to implement its regional objectives. Depending on each scenario or the purpose of the operation, one or another strategy will be used. In the case of Yemen since 2015, the Saudis opt for a broad military operation. Regarding Qatar, they have preferred to apply mechanisms of political and diplomatic pressure with others of economic blockade and military threat. To erode the Iranian rise, the Saudi government tries to wear down the Ayatollah regime on several fronts: first, by supporting Sunni sections and reactivating investment and trade ties in Iraq or Lebanon; second, it continues to support certain groups of opponents in Syria; third, it reinforces international pressure with the Trump administration and the Israeli Netanyahu executive.

The use of force is a central element in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, which had so far avoided using such a mechanism in the environment. The reasons that lead the Saudi Government to implement this type of operations are due to two purposes, firstly, its implementation under a deterrent aspect in the face of interference from rival powers, secondly, as a real and explicit manifestation of the power of the Saud out of its kingdom. The purpose is to secure the interests of Riyadh and its allies, but also to counteract the strength of potential opponents.

The Wahabita State has spent decades investing in the modernization and expansion of its military capabilities, aware of the need to adapt to new regional circumstances, but it is finally recently when it decides to make use of them. The use of force is conceived as another appendix of the power of Saudi Arabia, which, given the threats surrounding the kingdom, is considered legitimate to use military elements. The Saudi princes definitely abandon their suspicions for intervening in this way in foreign territory, since they traditionally advocated in other ways such as economic support for political and religious factions. In the background of their approach is a maximum confidence in the means at their disposal and the confirmation that only with force can protect certain interests.

The main threat perceived by Saudi leaders is centered on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the 1979 revolution, the former Persian nation has staged the ideological and religious antagonism of Saudi Arabia. The Saud House estimates the Iranian regime as the only regional actor capable of truly displacing Saudi power. The various latent conflicts in the Middle East cause this rivalry to remain at very high levels through an indirect confrontation. Both States aspire to establish themselves as hegemonic leaders of the region and the Muslim sphere, their interests being totally opposed. The impossibility of distension between the two countries to dispute spaces of power and influence and their expansionist propensity, suggests that instability in that part of the world will remain notable.

The limits to regional policy come from internal and external conditions. The economic and political erosion of the war in Yemen and the strong presence in other countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon or Egypt can discredit the image of Mohammed bin Salman, who has assumed full responsibility in this regard. Criticisms can occur within the royal family, among those members who do not support either the prince's agenda or who hold such power. These discrepancies will surely be more noticeable when King Salman no longer occupies the throne.

Imposing the Saudi will in the Middle East is not as feasible as in the past, since resistance is more numerous and solid. There are significant counterweights to the power of the Saud as are the States of Iran and Turkey, which also want to establish their own spaces of influence and reduce the prominence of the Saud. Qatar, Syria or Iraq are other countries that do not want to be totally submerged under the Saudi weight. The Salman doctrine will be successful as long as it is able to adapt to the new realities, promoting a type of hegemony that not only uses force and coercion but also cooptation and conviction.

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is one of the central elements in the analysis of the current dynamics of the Middle East. King Salman and the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, are introducing significant changes in the international activities of the kingdom, through a more assertive and militaristic policy, especially to deal with the different outbreaks of the region and the Muslim sphere. This article analyzes the objectives and strategies that support the responses of the Saudi Government, as well as the use of force as a resource for foreign policy. This paper studies the main challenges and resistance to the power of the Saud House. The formulation and development of the current monarch's doctrine is determined by Saudi interpretations of possible security threats and opportunities at different levels, which may have a direct effect on the interests of the crown.

KEYWORDS

Saudi Arabia; Foreign Policy; Doctrine; Salman; Middle East.

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