Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy under MBS: decision unit change and its impacts towards Yemen and Syria

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Abstract: If Saudi Arabia's regional strategy involves the containment of Iran's proxies, why, under King Salman, did Saudi Arabia attack the Houthis in Yemen, but give up its attempt to overthrow Bashar al-Assad in Syria? I argue here that both decisions reflect Mohammed bin Salman's willingness to seek 'heterodox' solutions in foreign policy, a feature that guided Saudi foreign policy in the face of a changing decision-making unit in the Saudi regime. While MBS's influence in the case of Yemen is more easily identified, in the case of Syria this is not so straightforward. The crown prince only acquired the ability to manoeuvre Saudi policy towards Syria after consolidating his power within the regime, in 2017, and, from there, he put in place measures that, in practice, facilitated a coexistence arrangement between Saudi Arabia and Russia. In both cases, the objective was to contain the perceived Iranian advances in a scenario of reduced appetite by the United States to provide security for Saudi Arabia. This conclusion is reached through the use of a Foreign Policy Analysis approach, more specifically, the analysis of the decision-making units, to broaden and deepen the observations made from a regime security perspective.

Keywords: Middle East; Saudi Arabia; Mohammed bin Salman; foreign policy; Foreign Policy Analysis; Yemen; Syria.

Introduction

Since the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, a striking feature of Middle Eastern international relations has been the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Keynoush 2016; Mabon 2016; Ghattas 2020). From the Saudi point of view, this antagonism is usually dealt with through the concept of regime security (Nonneman 2006; Gause III 2014), a useful approach, which makes it possible to understand the fact that Iran is perceived in Riyadh as a multifaceted threat, fostering regional and domestic insecurities of the Saudi regime. King Salman's inauguration in January 2015 and the rise of his powerful son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), generated significant interest in the personality

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and performance of the prince (Karim 2017; Mabon 2018; Cochran 2019; Lacroix 2019; Hubbard 2020). The fact that the regime has remained the same, but Saudi foreign policy has undergone changes poses a challenge to the literature on the country. It is no longer enough to limit the analyses to the regime, ignoring whoever formulates this policy. Hence, this article seeks to shed some light on the debate about when and under what conditions the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia changes. To this end, it examines two recent episodes and answers the following question: why, under King Salman, did Saudi Arabia attack the Houthis in Yemen, but give up its attempt to overthrow Bashar al-Assad in Syria? The idea is to expand the literature on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and deepen the understanding of the regime by analysing the decision-making process. This task can also contribute to a broader debate about the nexus between International Relations theories and the study of International Relations in the Middle East (IRME). The analysis of the decision-making process will be done through Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), a sub-area of IR whose application to IRME has the potential to expand both the interaction between these two branches of the discipline and the knowledge about the Middle East (Darwich and Kaarbo 2019).

Over the past few decades, several scholars have sought to reconcile studies on the Middle East and IR theories and have made relevant contributions (Hinnebusch 2003; Halliday 2005; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2014; Fawcett 2016). Still, the Middle East is one of the regions where area studies and IR theories remain largely distanced (Bilgin 2015; Valbjørn 2015; Lynch and Ryan 2017; Darwich and Kaarbo 2019). Valbjørn (2015) argues that, on the one hand, theories continue to be used only incidentally to explore IRME and, on the other hand, episodes that occur in the region are used only to a limited extent to provide general principles for IR theory. This gap also affects the IR subfields. Bilgin (2015) adds that security studies are inserted in this context and suffer due to the distance between the two fields. She argues that the main problem in this area is the lack of curiosity about security concepts developed outside the West, which has made analysts have a long-standing assumption that their particular way of thinking about security was universal. This practice has led to a situation of parochialism, which has not been resolved by researchers outside the West. These have replaced Western concepts with "new" ones, which are in turn merely based on other particularisms (Bilgin 2015).

Valbjørn (2017) offers three ways to bring IR theories closer to IRME. The first one is to use theories to resolve empirical dilemmas that present themselves in the Middle East. Another possibility is to use Middle Eastern cases to test the universality of IR theories and concepts. The third option is to propose an engagement in a meta-theoretical discussion that can debate not only the boundaries between area studies and IR theories, but also the identities of those who conduct it and how the respective perspectives affect the analyses (Valbjørn 2017). Salloukh (2017), in turn, emphasises the intensification of the interaction between domestic and regional issues in the Middle East from 2011 on and underlines the need to combine a mix of realist, regime-security, and constructivist approaches to explain the Middle East.

Based on the same diagnosis regarding the gap between IRME and IR theory, Darwich and Kaarbo (2019) point out the inclusion of the domestic dimension as a

possible solution found by scholars. On the side of constructivism, this was done through the incorporation of factors such as discourse, ideas, identity and roles in the debate regarding foreign policy decisions made by governments in the Middle East. Darwich and Kaarbo argue that this inclusion had limited success, since it starts from the assumptions that identities are indisputable, that there is always a convergence between culture at the social level and at the elite level and that social structures have primacy over the agency of policymakers. In the field of realism and neorealism, the authors identify two attempts that sought to explore the importance of the domestic dimension in the IRME, neoclassical realism and regime security. They argue that problems with these attempts lie in three aspects: a) authoritarian regimes in the region are treated in a uniform manner, which leaves little room for studying the important nuances between them (many of them highlighted in Kamrava, 2018); b) there is little to no differentiation between regime security and the security of the regime's leadership, which, as the Arab Spring showed, often do not coincide; and c) the relationship between domestic and international elements is often presented in a superficial way. Thus, the authors conclude that this strategy was not enough to lead to theoretical progress (Darwich and Kaarbo 2019). As we shall see, the alternative proposed by them is to add the perspective of FPA to IRME in order to make research on the region more relevant to IR as a whole.

This study follows the path laid out by Darwich and Kaarbo (2019) to focus on the decision makers' agency, while combining this approach with the analytical eclecticism argued for by Salloukh (2017), with an emphasis on regime security. This approach is useful when addressing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Firstly, because the Saudi regime is an essential element in understanding the direction of the country, the perception that Iran is a threat has provoked reactions with important repercussions in the region and beyond. Secondly, because the succession of King Salman initiates the transfer of power to the third generation of the Saud family after the founding of the state in 1932, a situation that, for some time, raised doubts about the stability of the regime (Stenslie 2016). Thus, it is up to scholars to deepen the understanding of the Saudi decision-making process in order to gain knowledge about the regime dynamics. Even without using the FPA framework, Karim (2017) pointed out that the internal dispute among members of the regime had repercussions for the Saudi foreign policy; the FPA approach can provide more details as to how this occurs.

Regime security and the decision-making process

In their study on the integration between FPA and IRME, Darwich and Kaarbo (2019) suggest four avenues to be explored in this endeavour: the influence of public opinion; the structure of the decision-making unit; leadership style; and role theory. According to the authors, FPA can, thanks to its emphasis on contextualising the decision-making environment, contribute to bridging the gap between IR theories and IRME. This article joins this initiative, but will use the analysis of decision-making units together with the regime security concept. There is no ontological incompatibility between these two approaches since, in both, the object of study is the dynamics of decision making within the

state. Regime security and FPA, however, have different levels of depth. While it is important to highlight the possibility of diverging security interests between the state elite and the population in general, FPA enables focus on which actors of this elite are making certain decisions and for what reason. The objective is not, therefore, to understand why this abstract entity called 'regime' decided on this or that path in the face of a problem, but why specific leaders in prominent positions in this elite, guided by the regime's security demands, made certain decisions.

First, one needs to underline the relevance of the concept of regime security to the studies of IRME. The concept takes into account the presence of power groups more aligned with their interests than national interest in states in which the legitimacy of the government is frequently questioned. This angle helps to understand a scenario in which the state leadership is concerned with external threats, but also sees domestic threats as serious and often chooses to protect the regime at the expense of national interests (Ayoob 1995; Jackson 2013). In the case of the Middle East, this was clear during the first wave of the Arab Spring in 2010-2011 (Bellin 2012). This is important because such a distinction can be a determining factor in explaining the behaviour of political elites in the region, considering that 'since regime security is normally the first priority of foreign policy makers, threats to it are the main factor driving foreign policy' (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2014: 32). The regime security concept, therefore, brings more precision to the discussion about IRME by specifying a reality in which 'regime interest is essentially the interest of political elites to preserve their own domestic power' (Calculli and Legrenzi 2016: 221). Thus, 'they do not – and cannot – share the same security concerns that are relevant to other segments of society' (Calculli and Legrenzi 2016: 221).

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the literature consistently establishes the link between foreign policy and regime security by emphasising the monarchy's need to ensure its legitimacy (Safran 1991; Nonneman 2006; Gause III 2014). This offers multiple challenges, including, among other aspects: a) the need for the regime to maintain its status as a bastion of Islam; b) state border protection; c) public goods provision; d) coordination of a functional economy for its citizens; e) management of the dissatisfaction of a Shiite minority which largely derives from the discriminatory policies promoted by the regime to protect its legitimacy. Gause III (2014: 185) points out that the two main objectives of the Saudi leadership are 'to protect the country from foreign domination and invasion' and 'to safeguard the domestic stability of the Al Saud regime.' Nonneman (2006) makes the same observation and stresses that the way external security is sought derives from internal security.

In order to deepen the analytical capacity of the concept of regime security, we will use here the analysis of the decision unit structure. We have adopted Hermann and Hermann's (1989) model which shifts the focus of research from the state to the human decision maker. In this process, it is necessary to recognise that not all members of a government elite or regime are or can be responsible for defining the direction of the government. Foreign policy can be influenced by numerous factors – the executive, the legislative, the military, the press, public opinion, lobbyists, bureaucracies – that vary according to the institutional configuration of each country. This government structure

identifies, decides and implements foreign policy, but it also contains a set of authorities that have the 'ability to commit the resources of the society and, with respect to a particular problem, the authority to make a decision that cannot be readily reversed' (Hermann and Hermann 1989: 362): it is the *ultimate decision unit*. Hermann and Hermann (1989) divide the decision-making units into three major types: the predominant leader, the small group and that of multiple autonomous actors (coalitions). The latter type is characterised by the existence of two or more entities that do not have the capacity to commit the resources of society without the consent of other institutions (Hermann and Hermann 1989). To be included in the final decision-making unit, the actor 'must be capable of giving or withholding support that, when combined with the support (or lack thereof) from the other actors, is sufficient to determine whether regime resources will be allocated' (Hermann and Hermann 1989: 368). It is vital, therefore, to differentiate between the members of the final decision-making unit and the pressure forces within the state bureaucracy or in society. A clear sign that an actor is part of this system is the fact that their opposition to a given directive creates paralysis. Both democratic governments (whether presidential or parliamentary) and autocratic governments can have such decision-making systems (Hermann and Hermann 1989).

A small group is the ultimate decision unit 'if all the individuals necessary for allocation decisions participate in a common group and the group makes decisions through an interactive process among its members' (Hermann and Hermann 1989: 366). This decision-making unit needs not be established by law or imply total agreement and, in reality, it is the one that is present in most countries, since serious discussion of a crisis situation, 'almost demands that a leader be able to sit around a table with a set of peers and engage in candid and far-ranging debate of policy options' (Hudson and Day 2020: 75). Hermann and Hermann (1989: 367) argue that the key to this model is to try to understand if the group is able to generate a quick consensus, which is likely to happen if its members share a common ideology that leads, for example, to dispensing specific treatments to a certain enemy. Otherwise, the group can be influenced externally, and, in this case, it is necessary to establish how and under what conditions actors external to the group exercise their influence (Hermann and Hermann: 1989: 367).

The predominant leader-type decision-making unit is characterised when decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a single person. In this scenario, divergent opinions are either ignored or hidden and it becomes important to know the individual characteristics of the leader, as they shape his initial perception of problems (Hermann and Hermann 1989). The FPA literature on this topic is vast and plural. Factors such as individual perceptions, cognition and the personality of leaders are emphasised as responsible for shaping decision making, so new methodological approaches derived from these issues have emerged with the aim of 'reconciling the contingencies of rationality with the insights derived from its various critics' (Alden and Aran 2012: 20). In the last decades, this literature has shown that the importance of the leader in decision-making becomes more prominent in certain conditions (Hudson and Day 2020). The election of Donald Trump in the USA raised debates about the influence of the leader's personality in decision-making (Hudson and Day 2020: 39) and the Middle East is no stranger to

this debate. Even if we assume that a leader alone is not able to formulate and implement foreign policy (Hudson and Day 2020: 75), one should not disregard the particular characteristics of certain leaders, since, 'after all, completely ignoring the role of individuals is as reductive as considering that foreign policy is the projection of a single figure' (Morin and Paquin 2018: 70).

Saudi Arabia is used to high-impact personalities. This polity was founded in 1932 by King Abdulaziz, also known as Ibn Saud. The Saudi state began to take shape as a result of Ibn Saud's efforts to unite the regions under his control (Nevo 1998), laying the foundations for the formation of the regime. Following the establishment of the kingdom, Ibn Saud turned his attention to his line of succession, and by side-lining collateral branches of the Saud family he consolidated his descendants as heirs to the throne (Al-Rasheed 2010). At the same time, Ibn Saud engaged in an 'active strategy of polygamy and concubinage', as a way of forging alliances 'with various sections of the population, especially well-known tribal groups, the religious elite and the sedentary nobility', in order to draw 'the population into kinship relations with the ruling group' (Al-Rasheed 2010: 71-73). By entering such relationships, these groups became 'part of the patronage networks woven around the king and his sons' (Al-Rasheed 2010: 77).

The second period of regime formation has the children of Ibn Saud as protagonists. The reign of his first heir, Saud (1953-1964), was marked by internal tensions caused by the king's attempts to consolidate his own dynasty to the detriment of brothers and half-brothers. This group formed a power bloc against the king that revolved around the positions of crown prince and prime minister, both occupied by Faisal at the time, who would later become king (in 1964) when Saud was forced to abdicate. Faisal (1964-1975) went on to establish a regime controlled by him and his most powerful half-brothers, which would become the face of Saudi Arabia for more than five decades. In the early 1960s, Faisal, Fahd, Sultan, Abdullah and Salman took command of the Foreign, Interior and Defence ministries, the National Guard and the Riyadh government, respectively. The last three would remain in office for more than 45 years. The first two left the ranks in 1975 to enter the line of succession, leaving in their places a son (Saud bin Faisal) and a brother (Nayef) who remained in office for 40 and 37 years, respectively. This division of roles ended up 'merging important branches of the royal lineage with state machinery' (Al-Rasheed 2010: 118). This merger was essential to create a family oligarchy which, in addition to looking after its own interests and those of other members of the dynasty, entangles the al-Shaykh religious family, prominent ulema, mercantile families and tribal clans whose presence in Saudi society is significant (Nonneman 2006). This entire network is maintained with income derived from oil extraction, the main economic factor to ensure the perpetuation of the regime (Malik and Niblock 2006).

The decision-making unit of the Saudi regime raises an interesting discussion. Saudi Arabia is usually classified as an absolutist monarchy, but for four decades, between 1975, when King Faisal died, and 2015, when King Abdullah died, its final decision-making unit was that of a single group type. It is true that the monarch had the ability to determine the allocation of society's resources, which is a characteristic of the predominant leader-type decision-making unit. But the Saudi king was 'only one among

several key personalities who participate in most important decisions' (Quandt 1981: 76). The forced abdication of King Saud in 1964 in the face of a movement led by Faisal is an example of the partial condition of absolutism in Saudi Arabia, at least in critical situations (Abir 1987). Faisal was supported by other prominent members of the royal family and also by the arbitration of religious leaders (Al-Rasheed 2010) to dethrone Saud. The decision to transfer the throne had 68 signatures (Vassiliev 2000). Except for Abdulaziz, Faisal was the only king who was able to concentrate foreign policy in his hands (Quandt 1981; Gause III 2014). Ibn Saud's trusted man, whose mother belonged to the influential al-Shaykh family, Faisal was a dominant force in local politics. Quandt (1981) pointed out that while Faisal 'felt less need to consult and could count on shaping the family consensus on foreign policy matters', his successors would be obliged to spend more time discussing issues until the senior members of the family would come to terms with it (Quandt 1981: 108). In this process, many results are based on the lowest possible common denominator in the face of existing differences. So, in the international arena, 'the Saud style of making decisions is often slow, reactive rather than assertive, elliptical rather than direct' (Quandt 1981: 108). There is in the decision-making process 'fluidity […] depending more on intra-family politics than upon neatly defined bureaucratic lines of responsibility' (Gause III 2014: 201).

Decision-making unit and regime security in post-2015 Saudi Arabia

Abdullah's death and the subsequent rise of Salman in January 2015 changed the final decision-making unit in the Saudi regime. The small group that was in power between 1975 and 2015 ceased to exist, but the new decision-making unit was still being built. Mohammed bin Salman has established himself as a predominant leader and, despite encountering resistance from his father in at least one important subject (the relationship with Israel), he has a high degree of freedom to decide on the kingdom's foreign policy. It would be appropriate to retrace the process of the modification of the decision-making unit.

A central feature of the regime consolidated by Faisal and his half-brothers in the 1960s was its division into different branches of the family of isolated and independent power structures that were in opposition to each other. The idea was to hinder the emergence of strong military leaders, as was the case in the Middle East at the time (Owen 2000), and to ensure the predominance of the monarchy as well as the balance between its representatives. Abdullah commanded the National Guard for 48 years (1962-2010) and was replaced by his son Miteb bin Abdullah (2010-2017). The Ministry of Defence, for its part, was under the control of Prince Sultan for 48 years, until his death in 2011, when Salman took over. The Ministry of Interior came under Prince Nayef between 1975 and 2012 and, after his death and a brief interim administration under Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, passed onto one of his sons, Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN). This structure went through changes when Salman became the king. In January 2015, MBS took over the Ministry of Defence, the newly created and superpowered council of Economy and Development and the command of the royal court, which became unique in the

monarchy in view of the extinction of the crown prince's court (Kirkpatrick 2015). In April 2015, MBS became the deputy crown prince, thus elevated to number 3 in the kingdom. In June 2017, MBS took over the position of crown prince, replacing MBN in a process that, according to reports, was done under coercion (Hubbard, Mazzetti and Schmitt 2017). In addition to presiding the economic council, MBS took over the council for Political and Security Affairs. In July 2017, the royal court took on another strategic role: all domestic and external intelligence agencies that operated under the Ministry of the Interior were moved to a new body, the Presidency of State Security (Arab News 2017). Removed from its main role, the ministry continued under the command of the Nayef branch of the Saud family, but with a fourth-generation prince and, therefore, without political capital to seek succession: Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef. Between November 2017 and January 2019, an ostensible 'anti-corruption' campaign was responsible for a purge that further consolidated the power of MBS. The offensive opened with the arrest of around 200 people, including several businessmen and at least 30 members of the royal family, at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh. Reports by witnesses and prisoners' aides indicated that some were subjected to mistreatment and torture, and many were released only after making large sums of payments and transferring possession of goods to the state (Hubbard, Mazzetti and Schmitt 2017). Among the targets were four children of former King Abdullah, including Miteb, who commanded the National Guard. This military corps came under the command of Abdullah bin Bandar. As young as MBS and seen as close to the crown prince (Stancati 2018), he is also a member of the third generation of the family and former director of a youth centre named after King Salman (Arab News 2018). In a span of two years, MBS established his power over three great security structures that, for almost five decades, were under the command of his powerful uncles.

This new phase of the Saudi regime inherited and continued a foreign policy that has concerns about Iran at its core. The rise of the Iranian power from 2003 (Nasr 2007) presents a multifaceted threat that has affected various aspects of the Saudi regime's security. The 1979 revolution was seen as an existential threat in Riyadh, which sought to reinvent its identity to face the Islamic Republic (Darwich 2016). The death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989 opened a quiet period in the bilateral Riyadh-Tehran relationship, which ended by the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Increasingly, the Saudi leadership felt under siege by an ambitious Iran who was gaining influence across the region. In 2007, Abdullah referred to Iran as the 'source of all problems' of the Middle East (U.S. Embassy Riyadh 2007). In 2009, Muqrin, then head of Saudi Intelligence, pointed out that the 'Shi'ite crescent [wa]s becoming a full moon' that encompassed Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen (U.S. Embassy Riyadh 2009a). Gradually, the Saudi leadership began to consider the need for a more assertive foreign policy.

The Arab Spring exacerbated Saudi fears about Iran, amplified by the growing distrust of the United States' commitment to its historic allies in the region. The perceived 'abandonment' of Hosni Mubarak by Barack Obama and the retreat of the president of the United States, after drawing a 'red line' in regard to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, alarmed the Saudi leadership. The final straw was the opening, in 2013, of a diplomatic channel with Tehran that would culminate in the 2015 nuclear agreement. The

Saudi reaction was furious. At an event in Washington, Turki al-Faisal, already outside the Saudi government but still influential in Riyadh, said that the agreement with Russia on the Syrian chemical arsenal was a 'charade' that 'would be funny if it were not so blatantly perfidious' (Al-Faisal 2013). In the same period, the regime leaked to an American columnist that King Abdullah was 'convinced that the United States is not to be trusted' (Ignatius 2013). In an article entitled 'Saudi Arabia will go it alone,' the then Saudi ambassador to London, Mohammad bin Nawaf, stated that Western policies for Syria and Iran consisted of a 'dangerous gamble and that the Saudi regime could not 'stand idly by' because they 'risk the stability of the region and, potentially, the security of the whole Arab world' (Bin Nawaf 2013). Despite 'all their talk of "red lines", when it counted, our partners have seemed all too ready to concede our safety and risk our region's stability' leaving the kingdom no other choice 'but to become more assertive in international affairs: more determined than ever to stand up for the genuine stability our region so desperately needs' (Bin Nawaf 2013). By examining the cases of Yemen and Syria we can see how this played out.

The case of Yemen

Yemen was, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, the 'most persistent and most immediately threatening foreign policy issue facing the Saudi regime' (Cleveland and Bunton 2009: 453). The unification was consolidated in 1990 under Ali Abdullah Saleh, but instability in the country continued to be a nuisance to Riyadh. In the 1990s, the emergence of Ansar Allah (the Houthis) heightened Saudi concerns, especially as the regime saw connections of this group with Iran. As part of the Arabian Peninsula, the Saudi regime sees the need to maintain some kind of hegemony over Yemen (Gause III 2014). In 2009, after Ansar Allah's men entered Saudi territory to fight Saleh's forces, the Saudi government reacted with a military operation. The action was considered a failure and undermined the prestige of its commander, Khalid bin Sultan, within the monarchy. During the Arab Spring, Yemen became once again a source of tension in Riyadh, amid fears that the Houthis would become a new Hezbollah. The Saudi leadership then chose to mediate negotiations in order to stop the crisis and ensure the continuity of the Yemeni regime with another face: Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.

This political arrangement led by Saudi Arabia was short-lived. In September 2014, the Houthis, now allied with Saleh, took control of the capital Sanaa and, in January 2015, occupied several state buildings, ministries and the presidential palace, forcing Hadi out of the city. The Saudi reacted with a major military intervention, responsible for starting a conflict that triggered an enormous humanitarian crisis, a very different approach from that of 2011. This was another clear example of the will of the regime to maintain its hegemonic role in the Peninsula, but we need to understand what motivated and what made this decision possible. Two motivating elements in the decision to attack the Houthis show a continuity with the previous phase of leadership: distrust of the United States and fear of Iran. Salman and MBS took charge of a regime that had already decided to 'go it alone', distrustful of the United States' actions in the Arab Spring (including

the 'red line' crossed with impunity by Assad) and in the nuclear agreement with Iran. The fact that MBS engaged in the conflict even without being sure if Washington would participate in the intervention shows its intention to demonstrate assertiveness in the face of the USA's retreat. According to a former member of the US State Department, MBS stated at the time that 'they wanted us with them, but that they were going anyway' (Filkins 2018). Another motivating factor for MBS was Tehran's support for the Houthis. At the beginning of the intervention, the Saudi prince's goal was, as the then US Under-Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, revealed, 'to eradicate all Iranian influence in Yemen' (Filkins 2018). With the continuation of the conflict and the rupture of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2016, MBS started to talk about it openly, declaring that the Houthis 'only care about their ideology, the Iranian ideology, the Hezbollah ideology' and that, therefore, 'it is hard to negotiate with them' (Time 2018).

Other factors show the break between the phases of the regime before and after Salman. The first is the psychological component, outlined in the growing debate about MBS's personality (Hubbard 2020). In June 2015, the prince was labelled by a Western diplomat as 'rash' and 'impulsive' (Kirkpatrick 2015), an impression enhanced by a report from BND, Germany's external intelligence service, according to which 'the previous cautious diplomatic attitude of the older senior members of the royal family is being replaced by an impulsive policy of intervention' (Der Spiegel 2015). The impulsiveness of MBS was evidenced in the kidnapping of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, in the blockade of Qatar (both in 2017), and in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi (in 2018), but a personal characteristic of MBS underlined by the BND is also striking: his willingness to take unprecedented actions compared to his predecessors. The prince's personality, however, is only one element at stake. He and the king were now responding to a series of events. Another motivating factor in the decision to attack was the need for the new Saudi leadership to demonstrate strength. Hadi's overthrow came just days after King Salman's inauguration. This was interpreted by the Saudi monarchy as a challenge that needed an answer. Moreover, the Houthi-Saleh alliance had taken control of numerous Yemeni military installations, including airplanes and missile launch bases. It was, therefore, a military threat perceived by the regime's leadership as real. In January 2016, MBS combined these two issues to justify Saudi bombings:

> Why did we forget the fact that Houthis usurped power in the capital, Sana'a, after His Majesty became king? This has nothing to do with the fact that I became minister. It has everything to do with what the Houthis did. I have surface-to-surface missiles right now on my borders […] owned by militia, and militia carrying out exercises on my borders, and militia in control of warplanes, for the first time in history, right on my borders, and these war planes that are controlled by the militia carry out activities against their own people in Aden. Is there any country in the world who would accept the fact that a militia with this kind of armament should be on their borders? (The Economist 2016)

All these aspects demonstrate the motivations of the Saudi leadership with the offensive in Yemen. But what made swift military action possible, despite the failure in 2009, was the change in the decision-making unit of the Saudi regime, which was no longer a small group type and was characterised by the presence of a predominant leader. Once MBS was convinced of the convenience of the military operation, he found few obstacles to move forward with it. The initial attacks were carried out by forces from the Saudi Ministry of Defence, which was under the command of MBS. The National Guard had not even been informed of the start of the bombings and its then commander, Miteb bin Abdullah, who would be arrested months later, was out of the country at the start of the operation (Mazzetti and Hubbard 2016). Supported by his father, MBS had built significant power over Saudi Arabia's foreign policy from the start and could freely decide on the employment of Saudi troops in Yemen.

The case of Syria

In the case of Syria, the analysis of the decision-making unit also illuminates the decisions made in Riyadh. As in the case of Yemen, perceived threats to the regime's security continued to outline the formulation of Saudi foreign policy. The striking combination of fear of Iran and distrust of the United States gave rise to the need for the Saudi to 'go it alone.' MBS's willingness to break with decisions from the previous phase of the regime can be seen in the case of Syria in the same way as in the Yemen's. A decisive difference, however, is precisely the fact that the transition from Saudi decision-making unit took place between 2015 and 2017. This meant that MBS's policy for the Syrian issue took longer to be realised than his policy for Yemen. An analysis of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria over the past two decades helps to illustrate this argument.

During the 2000s, the Riyadh-Damascus relationship was marked by fluctuations. When Bashar al-Assad inherited his father's regime in 2000, the then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah celebrated the transfer of power. Five years later, after the assassination of Rafik Hariri in Lebanon, the relationship deteriorated. The Saudi regime joined the USA in pressuring Syria to end the military occupation of Lebanon. As the notion that the Iranian regime posed an existential threat crystallised in the Saudi leadership, the Tehran-Damascus alliance came to be viewed with greater fear, but not as a priority. In September 2006, for example, King Abdullah informed the US ambassador to Iraq that, in view of Iran's actions in Iraq, Syria was 'a secondary problem' (U.S. Embassy Riyadh 2006). In 2009, the Saudi regime started to reach out to Damascus in an attempt to strengthen Arab unity with the aim of 'squeezing Iranian influence' (U.S. Embassy Riyadh 2009b). Between 2009 and 2010, Assad and Abdullah exchanged visits and travelled together to Beirut. The few months of rapprochement did not sustain a change in relations, especially since the protests against Assad gained momentum. With regard to Syria, the Saudi regime adopted a stance that sought not only to isolate Assad, but also to remove him from power. This was partially motivated by the fact that the Saudi regime bet on the sectarian card to contain the Arab Spring (Al-Rasheed 2011; Kamrava 2012; Matthiesen 2013).

Saudi bets against Assad were high. On the one hand, the pressure against the Syrian regime was political. Between August 2011 and March 2012, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Syria, maneuvered the Arab League to suspend Syria's participation in the organisation and permanently closed its embassy in Damascus. On the other hand, the Saudi strategy was that of belligerence. The first signs of militarisation by the Syrian opposition appeared in June 2011, when the Assad regime began to face an armed insurgency, composed mainly of civilians who took up arms and described their action as one of resistance, but also of deserted military personnel who played an organisational role in these groups (Holliday 2012: 13). In view of the proliferation of armed factions and their sporadic success in certain locations, including the seizure of territories, the regime began to expand the use of force to compensate for the shortage of manpower to control all points of conflict (Holliday 2012). The massacres committed as a result of this strategy then gave rise to local and international calls to arm the opposition against Assad. In February 2012, after Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that condemned the Syrian regime and demanded an end to repression, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal withdrew from a meeting of the 'Friends of Syria' group, stating that humanitarian aid 'is not enough' and that arming the opposition was an 'excellent idea' (Al-Arabiya 2012). The command of this mission came under Bandar bin Sultan, the famous former ambassador to Washington, and his younger brother, Salman bin Sultan, who even began to visit the frontlines in Syria (Entous, Malas and Coker 2013). The Saudi regime paid salaries to Syrian rebels to encourage army defections (Reuters 2012), bought weapons in Eastern Europe to supply anti-Assad groups (Chivers and Schmitt 2013) and, at least until 2013, turned a blind eye to the private financing of the armed opposition, a practice that channelled hundreds of millions of dollars to the insurgents, especially via Kuwait (Dickinson 2013). The Saudi strategy had been built on the certainty that the USA would eventually seek regime change in the country (Phillips 2017: 41). Obama's retreat made Riyadh deepen its support for the Syrian opposition. The first step was the formation of an umbrella group for paramilitary factions with a religious profile. The aim of *Jaish al-Islam*, led by Zahran Alloush, son of a Syrian Salafist cleric based in Riyadh (Al-Khalidi 2015), was to serve, at the same time, as a counterpoint to the Assad regime and the al-Qaeda-aligned militants who proliferated between Syria and Iraq (Yacoub Oweis 2013). This group, which concentrated its actions on the outskirts of Damascus and, therefore, was a significant threat to the Syrian regime and could, in the Saudi view, be the backbone of an army with up to 50 000 men (Saiygh 2013).

The change in command in the Saudi regime reduced the momentum of Riyadh's support for the Syrian opposition. Despite his explosive style of conducting foreign policy, MBS largely abstained from making public comments about Syria between 2015 and 2016. This stands out given that, during this period, members of the Saudi regime maintained a harsh rhetoric towards Assad. Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said in May 2016 that the end of the conflict in Syria would only be possible with the removal of Assad, whether through force or negotiations (Perelman 2016). In September 2016, the then Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN) delivered a speech to the UN in which he cited Assad by name as responsible for 'killings and destruction' (Arab News 2016). In

October 2016, when Egypt, Saudi Arabia's important ally, voted with Russia on a Security Council resolution on Syria, the Saudi ambassador to New York classified the decision as 'painful' (Al-Arabiya 2016). Here one question arises: why, in this scenario, did the Saudi Defence Minister, a rising figure who commanded the war in Yemen, prefer to keep a low profile on this issue? One can argue that this was because Mohammed bin Salman's approach to the Syrian issue was not the same that was inherited by his father. MBS's preference, recognizing Saudi military weakness and the difficulty of overthrowing the Assad regime, was to support Russia's decisive introduction into the Middle East security equation. We cannot establish when Moscow made its decision, but we can demonstrate that MBS sought to be a part of and influence the new security equation. If a Washington-sponsored regime change in Syria was unlikely, Moscow could at least reduce Iranian influence over Bashar al-Assad. This path took a long time to consolidate because this part of Saudi foreign policy was, until then, outside the domain of MBS, preventing the prince from guiding the actions of the regime. The transition from the small group to the predominant leader type of decision-making unit was not yet complete. Five facts support this hypothesis.

The first is the proximity between MBS and Mohammed bin Zayed, United Arab Emirates's president since May 2022, who served before as crown prince. Part of the process of understanding the predominant leader is understanding who influences him. In 2009, MBZ, as the Emirati prince is known, articulated his vision on what he sees as major threats in the Middle East. To American diplomats, he stated that Iran exerts influence over the Muslim Brotherhood to 'agitate the Arab populace and render the traditional leaders of Arab society impotent,' and the Brotherhood, in turn, influences the government of Qatar, perceived as 'part of the Muslim Brotherhood' (U.S. Embassy Abu Dhabi 2009). This set of ideas is relevant here as it bears a striking resemblance to Saudi foreign policy between 2015 and 2020. One of its hallmarks was open hostility towards Qatar and Brotherhood affiliated groups, including the regime in Doha, as was seen in the 2017-2021 Gulf crisis. The connection between these two points is precisely the connection between MBZ and MBS. A British newspaper reported, citing Western diplomats, that the friendship between the two began in February 2015 and that, from there, MBZ influenced the Saudi prince, arguing that, from the Gulf monarchies' point of view, Assad's stay in power in Syria was a lesser evil than the eventual takeover of power by the Muslim Brotherhood, and that it was necessary to approach Russia and China (Borger 2020). After that, an MBZ advisor was the liaison between Vladimir Putin's emissaries and Donald Trump's transition team (Mueller III 2019), and the prince himself was one of the foreign leaders to argue for a 'grand bargain' between Trump and Putin (Entous 2018).

The second point is a statement made by Saad al-Jabri, who, for years, was one of the main advisers to MBN in the Saudi Interior Ministry. In 2020, Al-Jabri filed a lawsuit in the United States in which he accused MBS of sending a team of assassins to kill him in Canada. In the petition, Al-Jabri stated that he was removed from his post in September 2015, after a meeting with the then CIA director, John Brennan, in which he reported to the US intelligence chief about the conversations between MBS and Vladimir Putin,

infuriating the first. Brennan, says Al-Jabri in the lawsuit, 'expressed concern that defendant Bin Salman is encouraging Russian intervention in Syria, at a time when Russia was not yet part of the war in Syria' (Pressman and Harrison 2020). In fact, that June, MBS had led the Saudi delegation that had visited the President of Russia in St. Petersburg at a meeting during which several agreements were signed, including one dealing with nuclear energy (Al-Arabiya 2015).

The third element is precisely the good relationship between MBS and Putin after the Russian intervention in Syria. In the month following the start of the bombings in favour of Assad, both men met in Sochi, and, soon after, there was a strengthening of relations between Riyadh and Moscow, including on the issue of oil prices, a traditional point of contention between the parties. The relationship improved as Russian fighters attacked Syrian rebels, including those organised and financed by Saudi Arabia.

The fourth fact to be mentioned here is that the command of Saudi foreign policy to Syria was MBN's. He had taken on this agenda while under Abdullah, replacing Bandar bin Sultan (Knickmeyer and Entous 2014). His assistant was Miteb bin Abdullah. The duo's strategy involved galvanising a firm Sunni coalition against Assad, so the 'invitation' to Russian intervention was a complete turn in Saudi policy towards Syria. It is relevant to note that the rise of MBS (and the change of the decision-making unit) occurred precisely at the expense of MBN and Miteb bin Abdullah. The departure of these two figures, therefore, gave MBS the possibility to determine Saudi policy towards Syria without adversaries.

The fifth element is the evolution of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Since the coup that removed Mohammed Morsi from power in July 2013, the Saudi monarchy has become the main financier to Abdel Fattah al-Sissi's government, but the course of events in Syria was a point of cleavage between Riyadh and Cairo. The Sissi regime encouraged Russian intervention and reached out to Bashar al-Assad. In October 2016, the Egyptian chief of intelligence received Ali Mamlouk, leader of Syria's National Security Council and one of Assad's top aides. Members of the Egyptian government said it was Mamlouk's third visit, but the first publicly admitted 'as a message to Saudi Arabia that Egypt would pursue an independent foreign policy' (Reuters 2016a). When information emerged that Egypt's oil minister would pay a visit to Tehran, the Saudi regime reacted by suspending oil shipments promised to Egypt (Reuters 2016b). Sissi did not back down and, for the first time, publicly admitted his support of the Syrian Army 'against terrorism' (RTP 2016). In April 2017, when MBS's consolidation of power was at an advanced stage, relations with Egypt suddenly improved, oil supply was resumed and Sissi visited Riyadh (The Times of Israel 2017). The picture is completed by the fact that, in July 2017, less than a month after MBS became crown prince, the United States' government ended the program for training rebels in Syria, which was financed by Saudi Arabia (Mazzetti and Apuzzo 2016). In October 2017, Salman visited Russia, on a Saudi king's first trip to the country, highlighting Riyadh's reverence for Vladimir Putin. Differently from its stand in 2016, when it had voted in favour of a UN resolution (United Nations 2016) condemning the human rights situation in Crimea (annexed by Russia in 2014), Saudi Arabia abstained from the same vote in December 2017 (United

Nations 2017). In return, Russia sided with the Arabs in a dispute between the Saudi regime and the government of Canada also involving human rights issues (Reuters 2018). As of 2018, MBS began to publicly admit that Assad would remain in power, but wanted the influence on him to be Russian, not Iranian:

> I believe Bashar is staying for now. And Syria has been part of the Russian influence in the Middle East for a very long time. But I believe Syria's interest is not to let the Iranians do whatever they want in Syria for the mid-term and long-term because if Syria changes ideologically, then Bashar will be a puppet for Iran. So better for him is to have his regime strengthened in Syria, and also it's good for Russia. Russia, better for them is to have direct strength and they empower Bashar and have direct influence in Syria and not through Iran. So, these interests could reduce the Iranian influence significantly (Time 2018).

It is evident the rapprochement between Riyadh and Moscow had the effect, and most likely intentionally, of replacing the American presence in the Syrian theatre, preventing the Iranian regime from being the main sponsor and, therefore, the main influencer of Bashar al-Assad.

Conclusion

This article brings new evidence regarding Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, adding elements that help to understand the kingdom's decision-making process from 2015, when Mohammed bin Salman rose to prominence within the regime. As Defence Minister, MBS ordered a military action against the Houthis that ignored both the reticence of the United States to join the offensive and the failure of Saudi troops in Yemen in 2009. Like his predecessors, the prince saw in Houthis' actions the hand of Tehran, ready to transform the militia into a new Hezbollah. But unlike what happened in the previous phase of the regime, MBS had the possibility of acting without seeking consensus among the different branches of the family. Also, in the Houthis coup in Sanaa, MBS saw an action to both challenge and threaten his father's kingdom. In this context, his willingness to seek 'heterodox' solutions, an apparently central feature of MBS's personality, has manifested itself with the attack on the Houthis that started the war in Yemen. In the case of Syria, MBS also inherited perceptions from the previous phase of the regime – the most unequivocal was the impossibility for Saudi Arabia to rely on the United States' military umbrella. Again, his solution was heterodox: finding a possible coexistence arrangement between Saudi Arabia and Russia, not only on the issue of oil, but also on security in the Middle East. In this case, MBS's policy was slow to materialise because it was only in 2017 that he acquired full control of the regime, to the detriment of powerful cousins who could also dispute the throne, such as Mohammed bin Nayef and Miteb bin Abdullah, both responsible for Saudi policy for Syria.

From a theoretical point of view, the article demonstrates that, as stated by Salloukh (2017), the regime security concept remains very relevant to understand events in the Middle East and that it should not be dismissed in analyses that propose to be comprehensive. At the same time, it is clear that there is an important limitation imposed by the concept: it serves to open the state's black box, but, at the same time, it can create its own black box, clouding analysts' view of relevant changes that occur within the regimes. Thus, the article also confirms the proposal by Darwich and Kaarbo (2019), according to which FPA can bring important contributions to the IRME-IR theory nexus. Subsequent research would do well to study how and under what conditions internal changes in regimes impact their foreign and security policies. Another important research agenda is the investigation of the role of individuals in international relations, a demand that comes not only from FPA scholars (Byman and Pollack 2001). The Middle East seems to be a favourable region to do this.

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Política Externa da Arábia Saudita sob MBS: mudança da unidade de decisão e seus impactos em relação ao Iêmen e à Síria

Resumo: Se a estratégia regional da Arábia Saudita envolve a contenção dos procuradores do Irã, por que, sob o rei Salman, a Arábia Saudita atacou os Houthis no Iêmen, mas desistiu de sua tentativa de derrubar Bashar al-Assad na Síria? Argumento aqui que ambas as decisões refletem a vontade de Mohammed bin Salman de buscar soluções 'heterodoxas' na política externa, uma característica que guiou a política externa saudita diante de uma unidade de decisão em mudança no regime saudita. Enquanto a influência do MBS no caso do Iêmen é mais facilmente identificada, no caso da Síria isso não é tão simples. O príncipe herdeiro só adquiriu a capacidade de manobrar a política saudita em relação à Síria após consolidar seu poder dentro do regime, em 2017, e, a partir daí, ele implementou medidas que, na prática, facilitaram um acordo de coexistência entre a Arábia Saudita e a Rússia. Em ambos os casos, o objetivo era conter os avanços iranianos percebidos num cenário de redução do apetite por parte dos Estados Unidos para proporcionar segurança à Arábia Saudita. Esta conclusão é alcançada através do uso de uma abordagem de Análise de Política Externa, mais especificamente, a análise das unidades de decisão, para ampliar e aprofundar as observações feitas a partir de uma perspectiva de segurança do regime.

Palavras-chave: Oriente Médio; Arábia Saudita; Mohammed bin Salman; política externa; análise da política externa; Iêmen; Síria.