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The Saudi Thermidor

FREDERIC WEHREY

On the windswept frontier of northeastern Saudi Arabia stands an elaborate, recently completed border fence. Stretching 900 kilometers from the Iraq-Kuwait border to the town of Turayf near Jordan, it is a multilayered barricade, replete with guard turrets, motion-detection sensors, trenches, and razor wire. The government says the fence is intended to thwart arms smugglers, cattle rustlers, narcotics traffickers, and most recently, the jihadist threat from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). It is the most visible expression of a broader Saudi strategy, a cordon sanitaire meant to insulate the kingdom from the aftershocks of the Arab world’s disorder since the uprisings of 2011.

In the past few years, Riyadh has erected other barricades—of the diplomatic, ideological, juridical, and military varieties—to keep the region’s tumult from upending the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. This is the hidden and oft-neglected subtext that drives much of Saudi diplomacy: the fear that ideological threats from beyond the kingdom’s borders, whether the politicized Islam proffered by the Muslim Brotherhood, Shia activism, democratization, or transnational jihad, will mobilize domestic opposition.

To deal with these threats, the kingdom has shifted its foreign policy into overdrive. In Egypt, Riyadh has bankrolled the government of President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi and its repression of the Brotherhood. In Syria, it has stepped up its participation in the US-led military coalition against ISIS but remains fixated on toppling President Bashar al-Assad. It has tried to draw its fellow monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) into a new

security consensus against the Brotherhood, ISIS, and the regional outlier, Qatar. And despite talk of détente, Saudi policy toward Iran remains clouded by deep suspicions that the United States is pursuing a nuclear deal at the expense of curtailing Tehran’s malign regional influence. All of this has taken place against a backdrop of profound social and economic malaise at home, and misgivings about Washington’s staying power as the kingdom’s outside security guarantor.

With its activist foreign policy, Saudi Arabia has emerged as the most vigorous stalwart of what can best be described as the reactionary period of the Arab uprisings—their “Thermidorian” phase. During the French Revolution, the Thermidor was a conservative backlash against the radical excesses of Robespierre and the Reign of Terror. But the new rulers were unable to address the grievances that fueled the Revolution, and devolved into an unpopular dictatorship that was ultimately overthrown by Napoleon.

The regional and domestic order that Riyadh is bent on building is similarly unsustainable. To be sure, the rival visions proffered by ISIS, Iran, and the Brotherhood are similarly dangerous to the region’s long-term growth and especially to the well-being of its increasingly youthful population. But Riyadh, despite its pretensions to Arab leadership, has yet to articulate a compelling counter-narrative, and its largely reactive foreign policy is likely to incur great costs both at home and in the region.

INTERVENTION IN EGYPT

Egypt has lately been the focus of a massive Saudi counterrevolutionary effort. In July 2013, Sisi led a military coup that ousted the Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi from the presidency. At the time, the United States solicited Saudi and Emirati back-channel help in imploring Sisi to reach a peaceful compromise with Morsi,

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but there is ample evidence that the Gulf states were working at cross-purposes with Washington. Together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait, the Saudis quickly promised \$12 billion in aid to the new military regime. In the aftermath of the coup, Saudi King Abdullah chided US policy makers for supporting “terrorism.”

Riyadh’s Egypt policy is driven by fears that the Brotherhood’s ideology and political activism could inspire opposition inside the kingdom and challenge Saudi Arabia’s quietist form of Salafism (the literalist variant of Islamism propagated by the kingdom’s religious establishment). Although the Brotherhood is technically banned in Saudi Arabia, a number of prominent Salafi clerics from the Sahwa (Awakening) current share similar doctrinal beliefs with the movement. Several of these figures criticized Sisi’s crackdown against the Brotherhood and called for political reconciliation instead of repression—a stark departure from the official Saudi line.

Morsi’s overthrow may have prompted the very politicization of clerical discourse in the kingdom that the Saudis were anxious to avoid when the Brotherhood held power in Egypt. In the Saudi press, commentators defended the move to back Sisi as advancing Riyadh’s objective of stability in Egypt rather than a campaign against the Brotherhood. An unstable Egypt on top of parallel crises in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, they argued, would be too much for the kingdom to bear. Moreover, Riyadh’s support for Sisi was a matter of simple expediency: Given the long-standing Saudi relationship with the Egyptian military, it was a natural partner.

According to the Saudi columnist Khaled al-Dakhil, Riyadh’s aid is intended to pave the way for a resumption of Egypt’s regional role in opposing Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq. The messages underlying Saudi policy and commentary are clear: The United States is increasingly hesitant, weak, and indecisive—and Saudi Arabia (along with the UAE and Kuwait) cannot afford to wait while Washington vacillates.

Riyadh supports Sisi’s regime financially and sees his struggle against the Brotherhood as part of the Saudi fight against political Islamists across the Middle East. On the foreign policy front, Saudi Arabia—together with the UAE—appears to be pushing Sisi toward a more interventionist policy in neighboring Libya. This is intended not

only to protect Egypt’s borders but to shift the balance of power in Libya toward opponents of the Brotherhood and other Islamists. A principal beneficiary of this policy has been Khalifa Hifter, a former Libyan army commander who is leading a military campaign against Islamist militias. But meddling in Libya has failed to produce any real shifts on the ground; instead, it has left the country even more polarized.

THE SYRIAN STORM

Syria lies at the nexus of the regional and domestic security concerns that propel the new Saudi activism. Syria is ground zero for the broader Saudi campaign to reorder the region’s geopolitics and manage the aftershocks of the Arab uprisings. Saudi Arabia’s strategic rivalry with Iran is the principal geopolitical interest driving its intervention in Syria. Riyadh has been wary of great power diplomatic initiatives on Syria, seeing in them at best a dangerous naïveté about the resilience of the Assad regime, and at

worst a deliberate conspiracy by Washington to sacrifice the anti-Assad opposition on the altar of an Iranian nuclear deal.

Believing that local (and especially Arab) states must take the lead, the Saudis have worked through a variety of regional

intermediaries to influence the leadership balance in the Syrian opposition, marginalize al-Qaeda-linked factions, mitigate infighting among its allies, and improve the quality of the opposition’s battlefield performance through training and the shipment of advanced weaponry. Riyadh has set up a joint operations room in Istanbul with Qatar and Turkey, channeled funds through intermediaries in Lebanon’s Future Movement, coordinated military training with Jordan, brokered arms shipments from Croatia, and reportedly solicited Pakistan’s assistance with training.

The Assad regime’s close ties with Iran have long been an affront to the Saudi claim to Arab leadership on Levantine and Palestinian issues. Prior to 2011, Riyadh unsuccessfully used a mix of diplomatic pressure and persuasion in a bid to wrest Syria from Iran’s orbit. The anti-Assad uprising offered the Saudis a new opportunity to roll back Iranian influence. It was a chance to recover from the humiliating “loss” of Iraq and, perhaps more importantly, from Lebanon, where Tehran effectively upstaged Riyadh in 2008, when

A number of new trends are challenging Saudi Arabia’s longtime oil primacy.

Hezbollah forces routed Saudi-backed Sunni factions in sectarian clashes in Beirut.

There are a number of other fronts for Saudi Arabia in the Syrian civil war, all with high stakes for Riyadh's regional standing and domestic security. The Saudis seek to blunt the rise of transnational jihadist groups like ISIS that have the capability and intent to threaten the kingdom, yet these are also the Syrian groups with the strongest capability to challenge Assad, presenting Riyadh with a strategic quandary. At the same time, Riyadh wants to ensure that Brotherhood factions of the Syrian opposition are marginalized in any post-Assad settlement. As smaller Gulf states have increased their support for Syrian rebels, Saudi Arabia has used the war to reassert its primacy within the GCC and, in particular, to check the growing assertiveness of Qatar.

Increasingly, the Saudis have developed deep misgivings about the US commitment to toppling Assad. For Riyadh, the wake-up call came with President Barack Obama's decision not to take military action against Syria in 2013, after threatening to punish Assad for using chemical weapons, and his subsequent acceptance of a Russian-backed deal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. Commentators and officials across the Saudi spectrum cried perfidy. Riyadh stepped up its support to the Syrian rebels with Turkey and Jordan in a demonstration of its resolve.

The new activism had the collateral effect of undercutting Qatar-backed factions in Syria. This trend continued outside Syria, with growing economic and political pressure on Qatar, primarily from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, due to its support for Brotherhood activists inside the kingdom. Although Qatar has toed the line to a degree, by expelling Brotherhood leaders from Doha, it is unlikely to completely abandon its policy of hedging against its domineering neighbor.

Similarly, Saudi estrangement from the United States has faded somewhat, but not fully. The February 2014 replacement of Prince Bandar al-Sultan with Prince Muhammad bin Nayef to oversee the Syria portfolio was a positive signal. As the interior minister and head of counterterrorism, Nayef was more predictable to Washington than the erratic Bandar. His appointment also indicated growing Saudi concern about the threat of terrorism emanating from Syria, including both al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Saudi Arabia joined the US-led coalition against ISIS in September 2014, sending its planes to par-

ticipate in airstrikes against the militant group, along with Jordan, Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain. It also agreed to host the training of up to 7,000 Syrian opposition fighters on its soil. By design, they will be trained exclusively to fight ISIS. But Riyadh likely calculates that by hosting them it can gain leverage to enlarge the current scope of US strategy into a broader campaign against the Assad regime.

INTERNAL RADICALIZATION

This regional activism masks a deep ambivalence at home. Leading commentators have described ISIS as a force for Sunni nationalism that effectively broke the Shia crescent and Iran's reach into the Levant. It was to Riyadh's geostrategic benefit (so the argument goes) that ISIS disrupted the supply lines used by Tehran to support the Assad regime. One columnist went so far as to praise the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, for toppling the despised and highly sectarian prime minister of Iraq, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, who finally agreed to step down in August 2014 under international pressure.

An overriding concern is that attacking ISIS will benefit Assad and Iran. Behind this view is a resurgent anti-Americanism based on the belief that Washington is supporting the region's sectarian and communal minorities—Jews, Shia, Assyrians, and Kurds—at the expense of Sunni Arabs.

But perhaps more ominous than these trends are the glimmers of tacit toleration of ISIS among the kingdom's increasingly youthful population. A July 21 poll of Saudis conducted by the London-based newspaper *Al Hayat* on social media (its methodology has been questioned) found that 92 percent of respondents believe ISIS is in agreement with the teachings of Islam; 71 percent see no difference between ISIS and al-Qaeda. The percentage of Saudis who think ISIS is not extremist is highest among 25- to 30-year-olds.

Despite increased efforts to clamp down on jihadist volunteers traveling to Syria and Iraq, Saudi fighters are still prevalent in ISIS and another jihadist group in Syria, the Nusra Front, both in the rank and file and in key leadership positions. Transnational tribal linkages between Saudi Arabia and the Levant have facilitated the influx; the Shammar tribal confederation, which straddles the region from Yemen to northern Iraq, is a primary conduit.

In response to this threat, the Saudi regime has engaged in a multipronged effort to discredit

ISIS's ideology and highlight the disenchantment of some of its volunteers. State television and newspapers have run high-profile accounts of Saudis who defected from the Syrian jihad. The kingdom's clerical establishment has also been mobilized, declaring ISIS the country's principal threat. The interior and Islamic affairs ministries have engaged in extensive vetting and surveillance of mosque sermons and social media activity—monitoring that began years ago but has escalated in recent months.

There is a danger in relying too exclusively on counter-ideological and religious campaigns against ISIS. Such programs provide a cover for Saudi Arabia to avoid meaningful institutional and political reforms that address the root causes of radicalization.

Clerical exhortations typically focus on protecting the regime and royals from terrorist attacks, while skirting the more intolerant and sectarian features of the radicals' ideology that legitimize attacks on Shia, Westerners, and others they deem heretical. For example, the Saudi cleric Saleh al-Fawzan went so far as to call ISIS "a fabrication of Zionists, Crusaders, and Safavids." Most religious scholars are considered tainted by their close associations with and funding from authoritarian regimes. Their scripture-based warnings are unlikely to stem the tide of recruits.

There is a trend of state-sponsored clerics attempting to use the ISIS threat to discredit Brotherhood-affiliated clerics of the Sahwa movement whose popularity has eclipsed that of the official religious establishment. In articles and talk shows, they draw connections between the intellectual pedigrees of ISIS and the Brotherhood, while absolving the kingdom of any culpability for its dissemination of fundamentalist beliefs.

HEAVY HAND

The interior ministry's de-radicalization campaign is fraught with similar risks. There is disturbing evidence that it may not be working as well as its proponents claim. In mid-October, the newspaper *Al Makkah* cited an official source within the ministry as saying that a total of 334 Saudi militants had rejoined terrorist groups after they were released from prisons or discharged from the Prince Muhammed bin Nayef Counseling Center, where they have been plied with psycho-

logical therapy, theological instruction, vocational courses, and sports. As of October 2014, approximately 1,700 young Saudis had reportedly passed through the center.

Perhaps most alarming is the way the ISIS threat has facilitated an array of sweeping new antiterrorism regulations, promulgated by royal decree in late December 2013 and elaborated on by an interior ministry statement in March 2014. To Washington's satisfaction, they designate al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, ISIS, and the Nusra Front as terrorist groups. Yet the law's elastic definition of terrorism criminalizes any sort of speech, civic activism, or interactions with foreign organizations that are deemed defamatory to the kingdom's reputation.

The Brotherhood is a particular target. Merely displaying the four-fingered "Rabaa" sign—a gesture of support for the group—on one's Twitter account is grounds for prosecution. The specialized criminal court set up by the antiterrorism regulations has been used to prosecute an array of regime opponents, including liberal-leaning activists such as the human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair.

Most significantly, the court recently condemned to death by beheading and crucifixion the popular pro-democracy Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. If carried out, the execution will likely

send tremors across the restive Eastern Province and perhaps beyond.

Nimr's sentencing shows how the monarchy has been under pressure because of its stance on ISIS; the ruling was likely intended to placate conservative Salafi clerics who resent the kingdom's participation in the international anti-ISIS coalition and have bridled at Abdullah's attempts at liberalization. It also demonstrates how the continuing standoff between Saudi Arabia and Iran continues to ripple across Saudi domestic politics, and how sectarianism continues to be a deeply entrenched problem.

THE IRANIAN FACTOR

The rise of ISIS has produced a temporary warming of Saudi-Iranian relations. But broader structural factors prevent the emergence of a true détente. For Saudi Arabia, a November 2013 interim nuclear deal between the powers known as the P5+1 (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) and Iran was a bait-and-switch that bought Tehran time on

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the nuclear front while empowering Iranian nefariousness across the region, particularly in Syria.

Confronted with the prospect of warming US-Iranian relations and the rest of the Gulf's improving ties with Tehran, the Saudis may be compelled to start their own unilateral overtures toward the Islamic Republic. Indeed, talks are reportedly under way between their foreign ministers, with Oman playing a crucial mediating role. But given the ferocity of the Syrian conflict and the current outlook of elites in both Riyadh and Tehran, these initiatives are likely to remain extremely limited in scope. Much will hinge on Iran's willingness to de-escalate its involvement in the Levant to a degree that is acceptable to more pragmatic elements in the Saudi regime.

But given the current strength of Iran's more conservative factions, this scenario does not seem likely over the near- or medium-term. Saudi officials and commentators have reacted cynically and suspiciously to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's charm offensive; they doubt whether he and his cohort can make any sort of lasting bargain, given the power of the Revolutionary Guards. Jamal Khashoggi, former editor of the leading Saudi daily *Al Watan*, has argued that talks would be doomed to fail because the Iranians would never abandon the Assad regime in Syria, and the Saudis would not "abandon the Syrians and their desire for freedom."

A new factor is the recent advance by Iranian-backed Shia partisans, the Houthis, in Yemen—a startling development that appears to be prodding Riyadh toward some sort of face-saving détente on its southern border, given the weakness of any Sunni alternatives. The kingdom's anti-Muslim Brotherhood campaign had undercut one such group in Yemen, the Brotherhood-affiliated *Islah* party.

Riyadh's attempts at containment of Iran are further complicated by intra-Gulf differences about the nature of the Iranian threat and how to deal with it. Perceiving an American retreat from the region, Riyadh has tried to forge a more united Gulf front, calling for a standing joint police and military force with a unified command center. Considering the failure of previous such projects and the reluctance of the Gulf states to place their militaries under Saudi command, this proposal is likely to fail.

The regional and domestic order that Riyadh is bent on building is unsustainable.

In the wake of the P5+1 deal, several of the smaller Gulf states began their own unilateral initiatives toward Iran. US efforts to forge a more robust multilateralism through the Security Cooperation Forum and ministerial meetings have done little to change what is essentially a hub-and-spoke defense relationship among the Gulf monarchies, with the United States at the center. Real cooperation on ballistic missile defense remains elusive, although some steps have been made on counter-piracy and maritime defense.

The most important obstacle to improving relations with Iran is the inescapable reality of the Gulf's structural disequilibrium. Regardless of the type of regime in Tehran, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states will continue to demand US military backing to balance what they see as Iran's inherent hegemonic aspirations. Iran, for its part, will continue to demand a Gulf free from "foreign forces" (that is, the United States) so that it can assert what it sees as its rightful leadership role. In that sense, the notion that the Gulf could wit-

ness a new, more constructive equilibrium between Iran and Saudi Arabia that would facilitate American disengagement is a distant dream.

DOMESTIC MALAISE

While facing a regional maelstrom, Saudi Arabia has been fighting a rearguard action at home. Concerns over the failing health of King Abdullah, questions over the succession of a third generation of princes, and economic woes have compounded the sense of siege in the kingdom. Jockeying over the succession could make for erratic foreign and domestic policy.

In early 2014, Abdullah took the remarkable step of appointing Muqrin bin Abdulaziz as deputy crown prince, creating the first such position in Saudi history. That decision overrode the privilege traditionally given to the crown prince (the aging Salman bin Abdulaziz) to choose his deputy when he becomes king. Since Muqrin is not a member of the so-called Sudairi Seven, his appointment could weaken that group of full brothers. Salman is in poor health and may not rule for long if he becomes king. There are members of the Sudairi Seven ahead of Muqrin in the line of succession.

Muqrin's appointment, and the broader uncertainties about succession, could impede the royal family's traditional mediating role between the two poles of Saudi political life: conservative forc-

es led by Salafis and royal hard-liners, and a more technocratic, progressive elite. They are engaged in a fierce debate about the scope and pace of economic reforms, and the degree to which these changes will jeopardize monarchical privilege and religious mores.

The technocrats are focused on shrinking the bloated public sector and the welfare state, which formed the centerpiece of the Saudi strategy to placate social discontent in the wake of the Arab Spring. The government's ambitious plans for megaprojects—such as “economic cities” intended to diversify the economy away from oil and encourage foreign investment, the expansion of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and new universities—have not injected the necessary dynamism. And in the face of declining oil prices, it is unclear how long this public-sector spending can be maintained. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is currently consuming a quarter of its own oil and could become an oil importer by 2030. The government has talked about diversifying toward more nuclear energy with an ambitious scheme to bring 12 reactors online by 2032, but by all accounts the country lacks the technology and know-how to accomplish such a feat so quickly.

Official estimates put the unemployment rate at 12 percent for men and 33 percent for women (out of those looking for work)—another problem that has induced splits between conservatives and liberals and within the liberal faction itself. The kingdom has tried to tackle unemployment by encouraging a “Saudization” of the workplace—increasing the proportion of Saudis in private-sector jobs, many of which are with foreign companies. It has placed sanctions on those companies whose ratio of Saudi-to-foreign workers does not meet a certain threshold.

Government sources show a slight improvement, with the share of Saudis in the private sector rising from 12 percent in 2012 to 13 percent in 2013 (despite an overall decline of as many as 400,000 private-sector jobs). But the Saudization program has floundered due to loopholes that allow companies to circumvent the restrictions by creating fake positions for Saudi nationals and firing foreign workers without actually increasing the hiring of Saudis. Prominent figures have warned that the program is failing and argue that job creation, rather than shifting existing positions to Saudis, is the better approach. Meanwhile,

an effort since mid-2013 to achieve a sector-by-sector increase in female employment has stalled, meeting resistance from conservative clerics and employers.

ONLY GAME IN TOWN

Much has been made of how America's progress toward energy independence could lead to a cooling of ties between Riyadh and Washington. To be sure, a number of new trends are challenging Saudi Arabia's oil primacy. It faces a shortage of global demand, the reentry of Libyan crude into the global market, and increased Iranian production due to the recent easing of sanctions. If and when Iraq reaches its full production potential, Saudi standing could slip further. US shale production, which is expected to peak in 2018, may force further cuts in OPEC members' output over the next several years.

That said, these trends should not be overstated. Saudi Arabia retains enormous power as a swing producer, and its oil exports are critical to the economic health of global manufacturing heavyweights like China, on which the economies of the United States and Europe depend. Such linkages mean that Washington will continue to protect Saudi supplies, regardless of American shale output.

The road to a real, game-changing breakthrough in US-Iranian relations—to say nothing of a more modest nuclear détente that might fundamentally reshape the alliance structure of the region—will be longer and more uncertain than both Saudi alarmists and Washington optimists believe. If and when it occurs, its effect on US-Saudi relations and the broader region is likely to be less transformative than is commonly assumed.

Finally, Saudi warnings of US impotence in the face of regional threats, as well as Riyadh's moves toward unilateralism and solicitation of new security patrons, are hardly new. If history is any guide, Saudi Arabia will continue to pursue policies aligned with the broad contours of US strategy. It will do so with a creeping preference for hedging and unilateralism that will, in some cases, clash with US interests. Yet the truth is that Washington is still the only game in town. None of the kingdom's potential suitors—not even China—has the capacity or will to replace the United States. The rise of ISIS as a dire threat to Saudi interests has only confirmed this reality. ■