

Chapter 8: Saudi Arabia's Relations with the EU and Its Perception of EU Policies in MENA

The Gulf region has always been crucial for Europe and the EU both for economic reasons and for the inevitabilities of regional politics. Among the seven Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia occupies a unique place in the Gulf–EU relationship.

While there are political, economic, and cultural dissimilarities, the oil-rich country of Saudi Arabia has been a close ally of certain European countries throughout its history, most specifically the UK and France. More recently, Germany has started to be mentioned as the third European country with improving relations with the Saudi Kingdom. However, despite the fact that there are several reasons for Saudi Arabia and the EU to develop a closer co-operation, it is not easy to argue that there is currently a strong and institutionalized relationship between both sides.

There is in fact an official dialogue between Saudi Arabia and the EU through the Co-operation Agreement signed in 1988 between the European Economic Community and the countries forming the Charter of the GCC. The signatory GCC countries are the UAE, Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh also hosts the Secretariat of the GCC and the EU Delegation to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar as well as the Saudi Kingdom. The EU–GCC dialogue revolves around some major policy areas including trade, security, climate, energy, aviation, and political relations. Notwithstanding certain difficulties noted in the progress of the dialogue, the Co-operation Agreement is still in place.

This chapter aims to look in detail at the bilateral and regional dimensions of the relations between the EU and Saudi Arabia with a

specific focus on the Mediterranean and MENA region. The ultimate goal is to better understand how the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean region are viewed by Saudi Arabia. The findings of the chapter are achieved through desk-based research as well as in-depth interviews as part of an elite survey whose framework is set in the concept paper.¹ The in-depth interviews were carried out with 12 people in Brussels and London in 2018 (see Annex for the anonymous list of the interviewees). Unfortunately, a fieldtrip to Saudi Arabia was not possible due to the rift in the Gulf and domestic turmoil in Saudi Arabia (see the Methodology section). The people interviewed for the survey included researchers, academics, former and active officials, civil society members, and business-oriented people from European countries, who have either worked/served in the Kingdom, visited Saudi Arabia periodically or studied Gulf politics over a long period.

Structured in three sections, the chapter first analyses the domestic and regional dimension of politics in Saudi Arabia, followed by a history of relations with the EU. The elite survey findings are reflected in the subsequent section. The main findings of the elite survey on Saudi Arabia may be summarized as follows:

- (1) The perception of the EU as an institution is progressively improving, however there are no tangible signs to assert that there will be an institutionalized EU–Saudi Arabia dialogue in upcoming years.
- (2) Because threat perceptions of the EU and the Kingdom differ from each other, so do their priorities in security. On one side, Iran has become even more of a concern for Saudi Arabia, notably after the region boiled into chaos in 2011. On the other, the EU seeks a balanced approach in the region and favours engagement with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- (3) Economy is very likely to be the main area of co-operation between the EU and Saudi Arabia. The latter would welcome investments

1 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET', in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>.

in the coming period, which can be seen as an important tool to enhance bilateral relations.

- (4) Last but not least, the domestic politics of Saudi Arabia is evolving. The new Crown Prince has presented an ambitious reform agenda covering items ranging from economics to societal rights. Some minor reforms have already been put in place, yet the bigger picture of the Kingdom remains unchanged. Even though there is a seemingly limited role for the EU to push reform efforts in Saudi Arabia, an enhanced EU–Saudi Arabia engagement through business channels could be supportive.

1. Domestic and regional dimensions in Saudi politics

1.1 Country profile of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 when the territories controlled by King Abdul Aziz Al Saud were unified and officially named the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Al Saud family is the reigning power of the Kingdom. Within the Kingdom's territory lie two of Islam's Holiest sites (Mecca and Medina) and it enjoys the prestige of being the guardian of Islam's birth place. There is a strict Islamic rule in the Kingdom. The population ranges around 33.5 million (including migrants), with half of the overall population being under the age of 30.² According to World Population Review of 2018, the Kingdom is also reported to have 2 million illegal immigrants.

2 The current population of Saudi Arabia is 32,938,000, based on the latest United Nations figures. According to the UN data for 2017, 37 percent of this population is migrants, and half of the population is estimated to be under 30. See UN Data website: *Saudi Arabia*, <http://data.un.org/en/iso/sa.html>. See also the Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM) data: *Saudi-Arabia: Population by nationality (Saudi / non-Saudi) (mid-year estimates, 1974-2017)*, <http://gulfmigration.org/saudi-arabia-population-nationality-saudi-non-saudi-mid-year-estimates-1974-2017>.

Since discovering oil in 1944, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a critical, global economic power, and a dominant regional power that is currently the world's top oil producer. As the world's twentieth-largest economy, the country remains dependent on the oil industry, which generates 43 percent of its real GDP. The private sector of non-oil industries accounted for 39.5 percent of GDP in 2015.³ Saudi Arabia has one of the world's biggest expat communities, akin to other Gulf countries, with more than 6 million migrants working in the Kingdom, mostly coming from South Asia. These labourers at present make up 85 percent of the non-oil private sector workforce.⁴

Although for decades having enjoyed being an oil-rich country, the Kingdom has been facing economic risks recently, due to the decline in global oil prices. There is an effort in the Kingdom to reform the economy under the newly-appointed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

1.2 Political turbulence and economic challenges

In January 2015, King Abdullah, who had ruled the country since 2005 and had been the power behind the throne since the mid-1990s, passed away. His successor was the current ruler of the country, 79-year-old King Salman. King Salman appointed Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud as crown prince and made his youngest son and bin Nayef's cousin, Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, the defence minister and deputy crown prince.⁵ In June 2017, however, the latter was elevated to the position of crown prince, replacing his cousin bin Nayef, who was removed from his position as head of the interior ministry and reportedly placed under house arrest by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

3 Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor and Social Development, *Saudi Arabia Labor Market Report 2016*, July 2016, p. 10-11, <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ff00f1f0/files/uploaded/G20%20Labor%20Market%20Report%202016%20-%20Final%20-%20Low%20res.pdf>.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 13.

5 'Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Power Behind the Throne', in *BBC News*, 22 October 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40354415>.

This was followed by additional measures aimed at consolidating his influence. In September 2017, hundreds of Saudi clerics and intellectuals were arrested; in November 2017, as part of a so-called anti-corruption drive, 11 princes, four ministers, and several influential businessmen were among dozens of people detained, including the billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal and Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, who was also removed from his post as chief of the National Guard.⁶

Changes in the Saudi political hierarchy come amid domestic socioeconomic challenges. With population growth estimated to have increased at a rate of 3 percent since 2000—the number of expatriates has grown by 4 percent annually—Saudi Arabia is aiming to reduce its dependency on hydrocarbons by establishing a knowledge economy and a more expansive, diverse, and robust private sector. Its Vision 2030 project looks to modernize the Saudi economy and society out of economic necessity and envisages a larger, more diverse private sector, less dependency on the state, and greater integration of women and young Saudis into the workforce. As such, the Saudi government aims to secure 450,000 jobs for future generations, including for Saudi women, who currently face a series of social obstacles.⁷ In April 2017, King Salman asked the government to re-examine guardianship policies that prevent women from acquiring access to government services⁸ and in September 2017, it was announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that women will be allowed to drive, a move that was presented by Salman as part of a broader campaign to reform and modernize Saudi Arabia, even though women's rights remain severely restricted in the country.⁹

As it stands, education requires further improvement, as does the lack of local and native teachers, since the country is dependent on foreign migrants. Its labour market will also undergo reform, and initiatives such as *Nitaqat* [Domains] look to expand the number of

6 Ibid.

7 Ben Hubbard, 'Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive', in *The New York Times*, 26 September 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2yrfu5I>.

8 Christopher M. Blanchard, 'Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations', in *CRS Report for Congress*, No. RL33533 (updated 21 September 2018), p. 14, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>.

9 Ben Hubbard, 'Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive', cit.

Saudi nationals working in the private sector.¹⁰ Moreover, Saudi Arabia's overall unemployment rate is 11.5 percent among Saudi nationals. Only 1.8 million of its 13.5 million women (20.2 percent) participate in the work force and the unemployment rate among women is 32.8 percent.¹¹ There has been, nevertheless, tremendous growth in women's employment. In the last four years, based on figures provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, the number of Saudi women working in the private sector increased by 130 percent. From 215,000 in 2012, the number of women in the private sector increased to 496,000 in 2016, an average of 8,500 jobs per month.¹² Literacy has increased dramatically in recent years—population-wide, the literacy rate was estimated to reach 99 percent by 2015¹³—but inadequacies vis-à-vis skills remain; schools currently lack the capacity to meet the needs of the labour market. The Saudi education system has shortcomings in respect of its focus on critical thinking, while students enter the labour market by way of personal and family networks, as opposed to, for example, a culture of internships and volunteering.¹⁴

Further attempts at reform include reorganising ministries and state institutions in a more efficient manner, to the extent that state councils were in some instances replaced with supreme security and economic councils which have additionally served to consolidate King Salman's authority. By late 2014, 50 percent of Saudi government funds supported 'salaries, wages, and allowances', while public land assets are currently

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- 10 Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor and Social Development, *Saudi Arabia Labor Market Report 2016*, cit.; Laura El-Katiri, 'Saudi Arabia's Labor Market Challenge', in *Harvard Business Review*, 6 July 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/07/saudi-arabias-labor-market-challenge>.
- 11 Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor and Social Development, *Saudi Arabia Labor Market Report 2016*, cit. pp. 11, 17.
- 12 Habib Toumi, '130% Spike in Saudi Women Joining Workforce; 11.1 Million Expats in Private Sector', in *Gulf News*, 4 July 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/1.2052841>.
- 13 Harvard Kennedy School Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD), *Back to Work in a New Economy: Background Paper on the Saudi Labor Market*, April 2015, p. 37, https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/hks-mol_background_paper_-_full_-_april_2015.pdf.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

undergoing valuations; the government has also announced strategies aimed at establishing a VAT system by 2018.¹⁵

Although the Vision 2030 plan sounds good on paper, it should be noted that, as mentioned earlier, the reform initiatives have been limited until now and the general outlook of the Kingdom remains the same. What is often quoted for Saudi Arabia is that the plans in the Kingdom are big but the hurdles are even bigger. Lifting the ban on women driving, easing the conservative dress code for women and limiting the powers of the religious police are seen promising and even unthinkable changes for Saudi Arabia, however, it is still a question whether the reforms carried out so far will continue. The long-established conservatism in the Kingdom is not easy to challenge, with for instance reforms in governance structure. There are reports of international human rights organizations concerned with the continued arrests of human and women's rights activists in the Kingdom.¹⁶

1.3 Geopolitical stance: From past to present

As regional superpowers vying for regional hegemony, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been in a state of continuous flux and has yet to make any real breakthrough in a longstanding history of conflict. Although pragmatism has defined the relationship to some extent, geopolitical rivalry and ideological differences continue to underpin the relationship and have an over-arching influence. The 1979 Iranian revolution presented what was perceived as an existential threat to the ruling authorities in the Arab world due to, firstly, perceptions on Iran's ambitions to export its revolution; secondly, the Shiite communities of the Arab world which in some cases, as in Bahrain, constitute a demographic majority; and thirdly, the transnational links these communities enjoy with the region's other Shiite actors, most notably in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon.

15 Christopher M. Blanchard, 'Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations', cit., p. 11.

16 Human Rights Watch, *Saudi Arabia: Unrelenting Crackdown on Activists*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/node/319214>.

By 1999, there were efforts at rapprochement, to the extent that King Fahd of Saudi Arabia stressed it was in the interests of the Gulf to improve relations with Iran.¹⁷ What little progress was being made in the late 1990s and early 2000s was diminished when Saddam Hussein was toppled from power. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US dramatically destabilized Saudi–Iranian relations and, by default, the region at large. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with the rest of the Arab world, were embroiled in an indirect confrontation with one another in a regionalized proxy war, supporting opposing sides in Iraq, comprised of Arab Sunni insurgents on the one hand and, on the other, Shiite militias that were backed by the Iraqi state. The fall of the Baath regime and the ensuing sectarian conflict, as well as turning the Middle East into a global battlefield, intensified the geopolitical rivalry and ideological conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The 2011 Arab uprisings radically transformed the nature of Saudi Arabia’s engagements in the region. Jeddah played a critical role in helping the Bahraini authorities suppress their restive Shiite population.¹⁸ Like the rest of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia also backed the NATO-led military campaign in Libya. The rise in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood challenged the ‘identity distinctions that Saudi Arabia needs for its own existential security’, which saw Riyadh resort to a stronger emphasis on Wahhabism to create this distinction once again.¹⁹ The reason for this, according to scholars, was that the ‘rise of a new rival who attempted to assume the leading role in the Sunni Muslim world’, particularly when former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi demonstrated the Brotherhood’s adherence to Salafism, which challenged Saudi Arabia’s claim as the leader of the Sunni/Salafi Muslims. This prompted Saudi Arabia to discredit the Brotherhood’s identity as a ‘true’ Salafi group,

17 ‘World: Middle East Saudi King Urges Rapprochement with Iran’, in *BBC News*, 6 July 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/387078.stm.

18 Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, ‘Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest’, in *The New York Times*, 14 March 2011, <https://nyti.ms/2Eu9EEr>.

19 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Ariabarzan Mohammadi, ‘Saudi Arabia’s and Qatar’s Discourses and Practices in the Mediterranean’, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 6 (June 2017), p. 7, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13399>.

even denying the Salafi nature of the group.²⁰ The rise of the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups in the region, post-2011, saw Qatar double down on its support for these groups, prompting a series of crises that continue to engulf relations between Doha and the rest of the region, including the current blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain.

Saudi Arabia moved to extend its support to Syria's rebel groups when protests evolved into an uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime. Like others in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia's policies have combined diplomatic, financial, and lethal support to Syria's rebel opposition groups, working through a variety of regional intermediaries to influence the leadership balance in the Syrian opposition.²¹

Sectarian tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran further escalated in January 2016 when Jeddah executed prominent Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, a vocal supporter of the mass anti-government protests that erupted in 2011 in the Eastern Province, where a Shiite majority have long complained of marginalization. The execution prompted outcry in the Shiite Islamic world, and warnings of retaliation from Shiite political and religious communities in Iraq and Iran in particular.

In 2015, when the Yemen conflict broke out, Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched a military operation, that conducted a bombing campaign aimed at the country's Houthi rebels, to restore Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government to legitimacy after a civil war broke out between Hadi's supporters and those loyal to the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was overthrown during popular protests in 2011. Saleh had previously partnered with the country's Iran-aligned Houthi rebels but broke off ties with the Houthis in December in a move that was allegedly orchestrated by the UAE, saying he was open to a dialogue with the Saudi-led coalition that has been at war with him and his alliance with the rebels since March 2015. He was killed in the same month by his one-time Houthi allies.²² The Saudi-led bombing campaign has

20 Ibid.

21 Frederic Wehrey, 'Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict', in *Carnegie Articles*, 9 June 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=55865>.

22 Faisal Edroos, 'How did Yemen's Houthi-Saleh Alliance Collapse?', in *Al Jazeera*, 4 December 2017, <http://aje.io/vkra4>.

received active US military backing but is now widely-recognized as a strategic failure that has not accomplished its goals, while devastating the country's infrastructure and inflicting dire humanitarian consequences for its civilian population.

2. Overview of Saudi Arabia–EU relations

Historically, Saudi Arabia has been a crucial pillar of US and Western foreign policy in the region. This relationship further solidified after the 1979 Iranian revolution, which overthrew the US-aligned Shah monarchy and replaced his regime with a clerical leadership confronting the US since coming to power. However, allegations of terrorism-financing, especially since the 11 September 2001 twin-tower attacks, have strained relations between Saudi Arabia and the US. They recently improved, once again, after Riyadh vowed to suppress financing for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS as part of a broader effort to jointly confront Iranian expansionism in the region with the current US administration.

Saudi relations with the EU are mainly established through the GCC. The EU is the largest trading partner of the GCC, but relations between the two entities continued to be limited, given a preference for bilateralism on the part of both Saudi Arabia and its European allies, and the fact that trade relations between the EU and the GCC have long stalled over questions of human rights and differences over subsidies. In general, relations between the two organizations mainly consist of trade and economic co-operation.²³ The EU is Saudi Arabia's first trading partner, making up 17.1 percent of Saudi Arabia's global trade; trade between the two countries takes place within the framework of the GCC. Forty percent of EU goods exported to the GCC are machinery—including power generation plants, railway locomotives, aircrafts, electrical machinery—

23 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia in the Field of Security and Defence', in *European Parliament In Depth Analysis*, December 2016, p. 11, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO_IDA\(2016\)578029](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO_IDA(2016)578029).

and mechanical appliances. Meanwhile, approximately 76 percent of all EU imports from the GCC consist of fuels and their derivatives.²⁴ According to analysts, the EU, led by France in this regard, is looking to compete with the US for the Saudi arms market.²⁵ This trend suggests that Saudi Arabia could look to Europe to decrease its dependency on the US, particularly if the US moves away from its current role as the guarantor of Gulf security in the coming decades.

Saudi officials, including Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, have said that the country needs to diversify its security relationships away from the US.²⁶ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Saudi Arabia was the third largest military spender in the world in 2017, and the second largest arms importer in the world in the period 1998–2017. In addition to the US, European countries have been its biggest suppliers, including UK and France.²⁷ There has been growing co-operation with France including the strengthening of defence procurements destined for the Saudi Navy. The UK and France both have formal defence accords with Saudi Arabia. For the UK's part, a 2013 parliamentary report on UK–Saudi relations found that defence co-operation underpins the entire bilateral relationship. The UK stations around 130 military personnel in Saudi Arabia: 20 from the navy, 40 from the army, and 70 from the air-force.²⁸

However, EU–Saudi relations have been tested by the EU's support for the nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has also paved the way for greater economic and trade ties between Europe and Iran. Crises in the Middle East, from terrorism to migration and displacement, have resulted in increased EU pressure on Saudi Arabia, including questions over the legality of arms sales

24 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade with Saudi Arabia*, 16 April 2018, pp. 8, 4, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/111845.htm>.

25 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia...', cit., p. 8.

26 Ibid., p. 16.

27 Pieter D. Wezeman, 'Saudi Arabia, Armaments and Conflict in the Middle East', in *SIPRI Commentaries*, 14 December 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/node/4711>.

28 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia...', cit., p. 15.

by some EU member states to Saudi Arabia.²⁹ Former German Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel accused Saudi Arabia of fomenting jihadist extremism.³⁰ A European Parliament report published in 2013 estimated that Saudi Arabia has spent over 10 billion dollars to promote Wahhabism through Saudi charitable foundations,³¹ but its trade and strategic ties have often translated into passive acquiescence towards its foreign policies and regional entanglements, including the campaign in Yemen. For example, the US, UK, and France withdrew their support for a call for an international inquiry at the UN Human Rights Council led by the Netherlands.³² Riyadh's intervention in Yemen has provoked a backlash within both the European Parliament and its member states. In December 2017, the European Parliament renewed its call for an EU-wide arms embargo against Saudi Arabia, which came only a day after UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, had visited Saudi Arabia with a pledge to build stronger ties. Members of the European Parliament voted 325 to 1 to back an embargo against Saudi Arabia.³³ A judicial review launched in the UK resulted in a decision that ensured weapons sales would no longer

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- 29 Eldar Mamedov, 'Is Europe Choosing Iran Over Saudi Arabia?', in *Lobe Log*, 20 January 2016, <https://lobelog.com/?p=32674>. For the recent situation see Daniel Brown, 'US Maintains Support of Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen War Even as NATO Allies Stop Selling Weapons', in *Business Insider*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/germany-norway-stop-selling-weapons-to-saudi-led-coalition-2018-1>.
- 30 'German Vice Chancellor Warns Saudi Arabia over Islamist Funding in Germany', in *Deutsche Welle*, 6 December 2015, <https://p.dw.com/p/1HIJD>.
- 31 Claude Moniquet, 'The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World', in *European Parliament Studies*, June 2013, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO-AFET_ET\(2013\)457137](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO-AFET_ET(2013)457137).
- 32 Marietje Schaake, 'Europe Needs to Toughen Up on Its Saudi Ally', in *Politico*, 10 December 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-needs-to-toughen-up-on-its-saudi-ally-isil-human-rights>.
- 33 European Parliament, *MEPs Demand End to EU Arms Exports to Saudi Arabia*, 25 October 2017, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181018IPR16536>; Jon Stone, 'European Parliament Renews Call for Arms Embargo on Saudi Arabia the Day after Theresa May Visits the Country', in *The Independent*, 1 December 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/saudi-arabia-arms-yemen-houthi-rebels-control-european-parliament-votes-a8086766.html>.

be within the executive's jurisdiction.³⁴ The new German government has announced it will stop all arms trade with countries involved in the Yemen war.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Saudi Arabia

3.1 *Methodology*

Introducing the findings of the elite survey on Saudi Arabia, this research follows a methodology of qualitative data compilation by conducting in-depth interviews with elite actors. The elite survey was conducted in Brussels and London in February 2018 and April 2018, respectively, by two researchers from PODEM, including the author. The ideal and initial plan of the researchers was to visit Saudi Arabia for this research, which seemed possible at the beginning of the project. However, the escalation of the ongoing conflicts in the region, the turmoil in Saudi domestic politics and the Gulf crisis necessitated cancelling a fieldtrip to the country. Therefore, the participants in the elite survey could not involve Saudi nationals but rather interlocutors based in London and Brussels. The researchers tried to get in touch with Saudi officials in Turkey and Brussels, however the attempts proved unsuccessful. In total, 12 interviewees were involved in the elite survey including four women and eight men.

The people interviewed for this research included officials, experts, civil society representatives, academics, and business people (see Annex for the anonymous list of the interviewees). As stated above, the interviewees are either experts on Saudi Arabia politics and society through their previous posts or are still engaged in the Kingdom as country experts or in business relations. Despite the fact that the target audience of Saudi nationals could be not reached due to the difficulties

34 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia...', cit., p. 13.

mentioned above, it was still possible to receive the perception of the EU and its Mediterranean/MENA policies from the perspective of Saudi Arabia.

All interviewees were informed by email about the project before the actual interviews took place. The interviews were based on note-taking and none of the interviewees were recorded. Each interview was around 30–45 minutes in duration and followed the structure and questions that were provided to the research team.

3.2 Perception of the EU as an institution

From the Saudi perspective, the EU does not have much weight as an institution. A civil society member describes the image of the EU in Saudi Arabia with the following words: ‘Europe counts as a region, but the EU does not’, meaning that ‘selected European countries have always been more important for the Kingdom than the EU [itself]’.³⁵

The EU is viewed in Saudi Arabia as an institution to encourage democracy and human rights. One official depicts the Union as ‘a norm-setting institution’, adding that ‘it is not a tangible organization in Saudi Arabia’.³⁶ Unlike many of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries, the Saudi Kingdom is not a receiver of financial assistance from the EU. ‘The EU does not have much to offer to the Gulf as it has to North Africa’, an expert says.³⁷ The expert further commented that, to the contrary, the Kingdom is viewed as a ‘good buyer’ of EU-made technology and defence weaponry. Some interviewees describe this relationship ‘as an equal’ one, referring to the need for negotiations between the two parties if and when the EU wants a certain policy implemented by the Kingdom. A different expert notes that ‘the EU does not have a direct and solid leverage over the country’.³⁸ Also another commentator puts the same argument in different words, saying that

35 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

36 Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

37 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

38 Interviewee 5: Senior foreign policy official, female, Brussels, February 2018.

‘the EU is not and has never been a significant actor in the Kingdom’.³⁹ Indeed, there is a consensus among the interviewees that ‘the EU does not have political weight’.

When asked about the reasons for the EU’s limited role in the Kingdom, most of the interviewees refer to the different ways of doing business between the EU and Saudi Arabia. As put by one expert, the Kingdom and the Union ‘do not speak the same language’⁴⁰. On one hand, Saudi Arabia has always been run by dominant personalities in power with personalized methods and relations. It is underlined by a few interviewees that after MBS took power, one-on-one relations have gained relatively more significance. On the other side, as noted by a former official, the EU is ‘a bureaucratic entity [that] lacks the needed flexibility’.⁴¹ The EU itself being inevitably bureaucratic while representing 28 countries, as well as the way it does business, appear to be among the main factors responsible for its intangible image in the Kingdom: ‘It [the EU] is invisible’.⁴²

As far as individual European countries are concerned, as the leading country of the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia has *sui generis* relations with a number of EU countries, namely the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. However, the US has always remained number one for the Kingdom.

‘The UK comes second, but at a great distance. France comes third. Germany is also on the line, but there again there is a vast distance.’⁴³ ‘Britain, France, Germany; these three mean Europe for Saudi Arabia.’⁴⁴

However, it was noted by the interviewees that the Kingdom has recently begun to place more emphasis on the EU. The main reason behind this change is related to the country’s economic agenda. There is a common view on the Kingdom’s efforts to improve its image in the EU. In this respect, the ambassador dedicated to the EU in Brussels and a specific department on EU affairs in Riyadh are given as examples. According

39 Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018.

40 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

41 Interviewee 3: Gulf expert, male, Brussels, February 2018.

42 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

43 Ibid.

44 Interviewee 10: Research fellow at a policy institute, male, London, April 2018.

to the interviewed experts, Saudi Arabia now stands at a turning point since its foundation. It was reported that the Vision 2030 plan has been introduced first and foremost to keep the country economically capable in coming decades. In the words of a civil society member:

‘Economic success is needed in the country. This would, of course, require more and more European business investment. The Kingdom is not in denial; the new ruler MBS acknowledges that Saudi Arabia needs a [more] welcoming business environment. Not only that, [but also] a social image make-over at the same time. The 2030 plan aims for all of this.’⁴⁵

Respondents further mentioned that the EU is respected in Saudi Arabia at a public level as well as among the business community where a pro-EU stance can be observed. However, it remains unclear for the moment, whether Saudi Arabia will seek out more institutionalized relations with the EU or follow its current path and strengthen its ties with the individual European countries. At present, whether MBS will be able to deliver on the list of changes he has pronounced essential is a critical question on many minds. His moves seem to be able to gather support within the Kingdom, as well as in European circles. An expert from Europe says that, ‘we need to watch and ask for success, there is no other alternative.’⁴⁶

Another unclear point mentioned during the interviews is the future of the GCC after the crisis with Qatar, which would also influence the course of relations between the EU and Saudi Arabia. Most of the interviewees shared the view that because the dialogue with the EU has mostly taken place within the GCC–EU framework, the future shape of the GCC would have great significance for Saudi Arabia. An expert noted that if or when the GCC collapses, Saudi Arabia would look for its own institutional relations with the EU. Although the interviewees describe the GCC–EU dialogue as problematic, especially after the Gulf crisis, it is emphasized that the dialogue is still visible and seen as significant. As put by an active official, ‘[the] GCC needs to be kept alive as an organization. But not the same. The dialogue with the

45 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

46 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

EU also needs to be revised. The dialogue cannot deliver as it is.⁴⁷ There is not much further argument on how and when the GCC–EU dialogue could be revised, but the need for a more effective dialogue is commonly noted.

3.3 Perception of EU policies on regional issues

The Arab uprisings and assessment of the EU's stance from the Saudi perspective

When the Arab uprisings broke out in 2011, the series of events in the region was a surprise for many, including Saudi Arabia. ‘Saudi Arabia was extremely cautious from the first moment’, a civil society expert says.⁴⁸ Another expert further commented:

‘With the turmoil in the region starting with Egypt and turning into unending civil conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Saudi Arabia realized that it needs to revise its regional and broader security arrangements. The breaking point with the EU came exactly at this moment: when the Arab uprisings started.’⁴⁹

What came across clearly in the interviews was the diverging perceptions of the uprisings in Saudi Arabia and the EU, and thus, the frustration with each other’s policies. An interviewee describes the Saudi feeling at that time as ‘an irritation with the EU policies’.⁵⁰ When the EU backed popular demands for governance change, this was described a rather ‘miscalculated’ policy in Saudi Arabia. In contrast to the EU, Saudi Arabia perceived the uprisings as a direct threat, and severely reacted to stop Shiite protests in the Gulf. As the reform demand in the region reached Egypt, Hosni Mubarak was forced to leave power after a thirty-year rule. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was intolerable for the Saudi Kingdom since they consider the Brotherhood as a threat as well. The

47 Interviewee 2: Head of desk on MENA at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

48 Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018.

49 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

50 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

interviewees subsequently noted that the EU's stance towards what was going on in Egypt was 'unacceptable' for Saudi Arabia because—from the Saudi perspective—the chaos expanded and could not be controlled in the region: 'With its improperly studied policies, the EU is seen as responsible for the chaos in the region since the Arab uprisings.'⁵¹

As understood from the interviews, Saudi Arabia has long believed itself to be one the anchors of stability in the region, and thought this role was much appreciated by its Western allies. When the status quo was shaken after 2011, the Kingdom also revised its threat perception, possible to list under three main headings: (1) the threat of Iran (see also next section); (2) the political vacuum that prevailed in the region after long-lasting leaders such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Ben Ali of Tunisia were forced to leave power, and Iran and other rival groups—Muslim Brotherhood was named here—filled this vacuum; and (3) the rise of non-state radical groups.

An expert commented that 'Saudi Arabia felt alone in the first two of its threat perceptions.'⁵² From the Saudi perspective, Europe and the US took the position of supporting change, and this was seen as a divergence of interests as far as regional policies are concerned.

It was put forward that the stability of the region, which is directly linked to security, should be essential for the EU as well as for the region; which is why policies need to be developed accordingly. The policies that the EU adopted at this specific moment in history were a disappointment for the Kingdom. It was further mentioned that this disappointment has led Saudi Arabia to seek new security alliances both in and outside of the region, and this was underlined as one of the main motivations behind the aggressive foreign policy of the new Crown Prince.

According to the Saudi perception retained from the interviews, the regional developments—i.e., Mohammed Morsi ascending to power in Egypt; and Iran filling the power vacuum in Syria—unfolded in a way that did not serve the European interests either. However, the West was not in a position to spend its resources in the region, but wanted to have a say in the direction of the events. Europe raised its voice to the involved parties in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq from time to time but was not able to do

51 Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

52 Interviewee 5: Senior foreign policy official, female, Brussels, February 2018.

something concrete, which is interpreted as ‘Europe is losing leverage in the region’ and seen by the Saudis as a proof of ‘impotent’ EU policies.⁵³

Saudi–Iran divide, the nuclear file and the Gulf crisis

Almost all the interviewees share the view that Saudi Arabia is at a turning point, and not only in economic terms; the Kingdom’s regional policies are simultaneously being revised and reshaped, particularly following the appointment of MBS as the crown prince.

‘Saudi Arabia now seems to be obsessed with the increasing influence of Iran in the region more than ever. Iran’s success in Syria, expanding upper hand in Iraq, role in Lebanese politics are a nightmare for the Saudi ruling elite. It is not only seen as threat to the Saudi role in the region, but is also read as a Sunni–Shia power game.’⁵⁴

‘Iran was, and now has become, the most important foreign policy topic in the Kingdom.’⁵⁵

‘Saudi Arabia under the new leadership is eager to become a regional power; there are two tools for that: use of force such as in Yemen and pushing for new alliances in the region.’⁵⁶

Additionally, it was commonly mentioned by the survey participants that the changes in the Saudi foreign policy have come at a time when relations with the US are being recovered. One respondent highlighted that the Kingdom was troubled by US policy in the Middle East under the Obama administration. When the US supported the Arab uprisings of 2011, Saudi Arabia felt ‘alienated’ and the signing of the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 was a total frustration. The relations between Saudi Arabia and the US were relaunched with President Trump’s visit to Riyadh in May 2017. First and foremost, Saudi Arabia is very pleased to see the current US administration being harsh on Iran.

The interviewees frequently mentioned that the Iran policy of Europe and the EU is strongly criticized for its objective to ‘create a peaceful

53 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

54 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

55 Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018.

56 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

Iran, which will never be the case'.⁵⁷ Most of the respondents argue that Europe's not aligning with the Trump administration to crack the deal, pushed the Kingdom more to the US side. A civil society member summarizes the Iran case between the EU and Saudi Arabia as follows:

'Saudi Arabia is important to Europe for economic reasons; but this is not the full story. The EU cares about geopolitical balance and stability for security additionally. When Obama said Iran and Saudi Arabia need to learn to share the Middle East, this was welcomed in the EU since Brussels has more or less the same plan, they call it a "multi-polar Middle East". However, the EU misses the point that power is zero-sum in the Middle East.'⁵⁸

When the nuclear deal between P5+1⁵⁹ and Iran was announced in late 2013, Saudi Arabia was among the first to announce a cautious concern. 'The Kingdom was careful with the tone of its language to the Western world but definitely perceived the nuclear deal as a betrayal by its allies in the West', an expert says.⁶⁰ Another interviewee says Saudi Arabia felt 'so alienated' that its relations with Europe (and the US) have undergone a shock.⁶¹

Research findings demonstrate that the Kingdom was careful in its reactions against the nuclear deal, however had serious concerns which—three years after the signing of the deal—are allegedly proven to have just cause. According to the respondents, the Saudis were concerned with the deal for the following reasons:

- (1) it would reopen the gates of the West for Iran, and especially those of the US;
- (2) Iran's having the technical capacity of uranium enrichment is an issue for Saudi Arabia, since the belief is that if at any time the deal is broken Iran could have the capacity to develop a nuclear weapon; and

57 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

58 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

59 Referring to the UN Security Council's five permanent members, namely China, France, Russia, UK, and the United States; plus Germany.

60 Interviewee 8: Analyst and researcher, female, London, April 2018.

61 Interviewee 4: Foreign policy official at an institution, female, Brussels, February 2018.

- (3) it would help Iran to gain confidence and reassert itself aggressively in the Middle East scene, especially at a time like today when chaos is widespread.

The Saudis now claim that they were very right in their concerns. Iran has increased its role in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Contrary to the EU which aims to bring balance in the region and foster peace, Saudis see the deal as increasing competition and thus a destabilizing factor for the region.

In line with these arguments, an expert reported that the nuclear deal is described by the Saudis as the ‘worst ever policy of the EU in the region’.⁶² A former official added that ‘if you have some sort of a relationship with Iran, then you should be ready to pay a price in Gulf. The EU has not yet paid but could do so.’⁶³

For the Saudi Kingdom, it is not clear why the EU is insisting on such a deal with Iran. For some respondents, one part of Saudi Arabia’s irritation comes from its isolation from the nuclear deal process. Despite the fact that the EU was in communication with Saudi Arabia during the process, the research demonstrates that the level of communication did not satisfy the Saudi Kingdom, and they were highly disturbed by not being made a part of such a deal, even if in an indirect way.

It is also noted that the Saudi Kingdom is today even more frustrated with the deal, believing that it helped Iran increase its influence given the power vacuum in the region. The future steps of the Kingdom are not easy to estimate, however some respondents mentioned the possibility of Saudi Arabia voicing its desire to have the same nuclear capacity as Iran. Saudi Arabia has made such statements before but this time; some say it could push harder on Europe. Having said that, the interviewees who made this argument also stated that the Kingdom first needs to eliminate its internal challenges.

The observation is that the US has now changed its policy in the Middle East to an anti-Iran direction. In addition, there is an improvement of relations between Israel and the US, and Saudi Arabia has the de facto support of both the US and Israel in its aggressive policies in the region.

62 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

63 Interviewee 2: Head of desk on MENA at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

This situation leads to the conclusion that the Kingdom has less need of European or EU approval for its actions.

Finally, on the recent the Gulf crisis, the perception is that no European country wanted to take sides, and also could not play a mediating role. From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, this demonstrates the limited role of Europe, which is well-received at the same time. An analyst puts the position of the EU as follows:

‘The battle inside the Gulf is a family one. The EU got that and did not want to be involved more than it needs to be. A split in the GCC is not of that much importance to the EU. The GCC does not mean much politically, it matters economically and that’s why now there is a trend in the EU to develop diverse relations with the countries of the Gulf.’⁶⁴

A former official also said, ‘Europe’s message was “our businesses will go on, we’ll keep it away from politics” and this was well received by the Saudis’.⁶⁵ The same interviewee comments that ‘EU is a baby in the Gulf politics’.⁶⁶

According to most of the survey participants, ‘Europe is well-aware that they aggravated the Saudis when asked for evidence on the terror financing allegations on Qatar; however, they could not react any other way’. It is also stressed that Saudis seem to be happy with the EU’s vague policy towards the crisis. One analyst says that ‘they [the Saudis] got what they were looking for from the US and Israelis; Europe not meddling any more is the ideal for the Kingdom.’⁶⁷

This is called a wise policy for the EU, since the argument is, as put by a think-tank expert, ‘Any crisis in the Gulf is big for the EU to resolve. The GCC could change and be reshaped in the future, and Europe may not have much of a say in this reshaping. When this is the case the best is to have enhanced relations with all six countries of the Gulf as much as possible.’⁶⁸

64 Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

65 Interviewee 3: Gulf expert, male, Brussels, February 2018.

66 Ibid.

67 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

68 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

Conclusion

The EU–Saudi Arabia ties have been tested by geopolitical developments in the Middle East, including conflicts in Yemen and Syria, tensions and disputes over the Iran nuclear deal, EU concerns toward human rights in Saudi Arabia, and growing discontent among European and Western audiences toward European arms sales to Riyadh. Nonetheless, the relations have been resilient to these challenges as has defence and intelligence co-operation between Saudi Arabia and European member states. While the Gulf crisis has resulted in political tumult in the Gulf itself, bilateral ties with a number of European countries—namely the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—have strengthened since the blockade, in large part because of Saudi Arabia’s geostrategic importance and its growing trade relations with the West.

The main conclusions of the research can be summed up as follows:

- (1) The EU as an institution is perceived as a non-player in the Kingdom.
- (2) The Arab uprisings were observed differently by the EU and the Kingdom, and their reactions were also different. While the EU took a positive stance towards supporting the popular demands of the Arab societies, Saudi Arabia was, from day one, concerned about the political rocking in its neighbours. When the deposition of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt was followed by the leadership of Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member, Saudi Arabia felt very uncomfortable and reacted strongly.
- (3) When it comes to the nuclear file with Iran, this is still the major issue of divergence between the EU and the Kingdom. Iran is ‘the’ source of threat for Saudi Arabia; therefore, it seems that the Kingdom will continue to challenge the EU’s efforts on the nuclear deal.
- (4) The economy will be an important aspect of the relations between Saudi Arabia and the EU in the future, and the pragmatic approach of the Kingdom will continue especially at a time when there are economic targets to reach.

Europe continues with its approach of non-involvement in the domestic turmoil in the Kingdom. The appointment of Mohammed Bin Salman as Crown Prince was a surprise for Europe, which however was good at delivering the message that ‘this is an internal issue of the Kingdom’. The same attitude came in use when the new Crown Prince made extraordinary moves in the country. The major issue for Europe is that ‘whoever rules the Kingdom, they have to deliver and not collapse; as long as this is happening, we are fine’. The Kingdom perceived and approved the EU’s message. Although there could still be tough times to come for the EU and Saudi Arabia, neither side seems to be willing to sever the ties.

In this context, the EU is advised to follow a more flexible policy route to enhance its ties with the Kingdom. However, it is still acknowledged that the EU is an institution and therefore, may have difficulty in engaging in one-on-one relations. On the other hand, there could be alternative means such as appointing a special Gulf representative to facilitate the communication between both sides.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 2: Head of desk on MENA at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 3: Gulf expert, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 4: Foreign policy official at an institution, female, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 5: Senior foreign policy official, female, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 6: Policy counsellor, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 8: Analyst and researcher, female, London, April 2018

Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 10: Research fellow at a policy institute, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018

