

DIVERSIONARY DISCOURSE: A HISTORICAL COMPARISON OF  
SAUDI INTERVENTIONS IN YEMEN

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by  
Caroline F. Tynan  
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Examining Committee Members:

Sean Yom, Advisory Chair, Political Science  
Roselyn Hsueh, Political Science  
Samer Abboud, Global Interdisciplinary Studies, Villanova University  
Sarah Bush, Political Science, Yale University  
Khalid Blankinship, External Reader, Religion

## ABSTRACT

This project seeks to explain the aggressive turn in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy after 2011, most drastically exemplified through its 2015 military intervention into Yemen. It does so through a two-case historical comparison between the Saudi interventions in Yemen in 1962 and 2015. Additionally, it compares the nature of internal regime survival strategies within the kingdom during these two distinct time periods of regional revolutionary upheaval: the Nasserist period of the late 1950s to 1960s and the time during and after the Arab uprisings in 2011. It makes the argument that, despite comparable internal and external threats in each time period, Saudi foreign policy is more openly aggressive in the contemporary period as a function of the regime's *ontologically* weakened ideological legitimation. Whereas the Nasserist period offered an ontologically distinct threat in the form of a rival state ideology (secular Arab nationalism) that could be strategically co-opted and repressed by the Saudi regime, the Arab uprisings embodied a broader threat. This has included movements that have combined variations of both Islamism and liberal constitutionalism to challenge authoritarianism in the region. It has ultimately been threatening in part because of an ontological similarity to the regime's own historic use of Islamic legitimacy. Thus, unlike the mediated Saudi approach to the Nasserist threat, the Saudi regime today has opportunistically engaged in an exaggerated aggression abroad as well as more deliberate, open displays of domestic repression at home.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

On March 26, 2015, a new Saudi defense minister, Prince Muhammad bin Salman, initiated the kingdom's first full-scale war since its founding in 1932 by launching an intervention into Yemen. Two years later, the same prince replaced his cousin as heir to the throne in the first palace coup since 1964. Both moves were unprecedented in one key respect: they were done without the approval of fellow senior members of the ruling royal family. Although Saudi Arabia has been interfering politically and militarily in Yemen for decades, the 2015 intervention marked a major break with its historical foreign policy of cautious reaction characterized by indirect interventions through checkbook diplomacy and reliance upon the UK and US for external military protection.<sup>1</sup> Why would Saudi Arabia change its military approach to Yemen so drastically, when previous responses to external threats involved only indirect force? How might changing domestic threats shape its construction of external threats? Previous theories have connected the inner workings of regimes with proclivity for conflict initiation. Yet, these theories have mixed findings on the role, if any, domestic politics might have in an authoritarian context. As a result, there is little consensus on what mechanisms within a regime might contribute to the use of a diversionary war strategy.

<sup>1</sup> Colgan (2013): 225



This project seeks to understand the relationship between the foreign policy shift and the monarchy's evolving strategies of survival at home. It draws from the literatures on diversionary war, authoritarian legitimation, and ontological security. I argue that foreign policy responses to security threats can be a means of consolidating domestic power in formative moments in which internal instability coincides with leadership succession. An incoming leader will use foreign policy as a means to gain support in different ways depending on the nature of the perceived domestic instability and elite audience.

In what follows I give a brief description of the Saudi regime as well as definition and clarification of concepts key to the dissertation's argument. I then provide an overview of the literature on different types of authoritarian regimes and their strategies for survival, and under what conditions this may include diversionary war. After linking regime survival strategies to the literature on ontological security, I go on to show how the case of Saudi Arabia's turn towards aggressive foreign policy furthers our understanding of the significance of ideology as an authoritarian legitimation strategy. At the same time, the shifting ontological nature of threats helps to explain why foreign policy as part of a legitimation strategy may change over time. From there, I introduce the rationale for my two-case historical comparison of two formative moments in which Saudi Arabia recalibrated its regime survival strategies, including shift in the use of force abroad in response to different threats to the regime's ideology.

### **The Saudi regime: The Royal Family**

The modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 after the ruler of the central Arabian kingdom of Najd, King ‘Abd al-Aziz bin ‘Abd al-Rahman Al-Saud (Ibn Saud) conquered the kingdom of the Hijaz, home to the two holy Muslim cities of Mecca and Medina. Recent work on Middle Eastern monarchies has illuminated the relationship between origins of ruling coalitions and their ability to survive the collapse of so many such regimes across the region since the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Since the first succession in the 1950s, the Saudi monarchy developed into what Michael Herb calls a dynastic monarchism. Unlike the system of primogeniture that characterized the old monarchies of Europe or the current regimes of Jordan and Morocco, dynastic monarchies are defined by consultation across different ruling members of the royal family. Decisions are made by, if not consensus, consultation and compromise across different factions. The kingdom’s founder Ibn Saud had ruled in a personalist manner, giving no one individual authority and distributing provincial government posts solely to his sons. After Ibn Saud’s death in 1953, however, Ibn Saud’s sons competed for power by forming different factions based on competing views of Arab nationalism, relationship with the religious establishment, maternal lineage, and in many cases, alliances of convenience.

<sup>2</sup> Yom (2015)

Within the standard framework on civilian autocracies that differentiates personalist and single party authoritarian regimes, ruling dynastic monarchies might best be seen as containing attributes of both. Michael Herb emphasizes the non-personalistic, consensus-based nature of what he terms dynastic monarchies. In these monarchies, the king works as part of a corporate familial unit, rather than sole dictator.<sup>3</sup> Despite the highly personalist nature of familial-dominated rule inherent to a ruling monarchy, the dynastic monarchies are resilient because of the role intra-familial competition plays in checking the authority of any one actor.<sup>4</sup> Unlike purely personalist regimes, dynastic monarchs have greater accountability to fellow elites. Yet, even within dynastic monarchies, the strength of the regime may differ depending upon when, how, and with whom the coalition that comprises the dynasty was formed. In Kuwait, for example, the dynasty formed in response to merchant notables attempting to seize power from the ruling al-Sabah family.<sup>5</sup> The Saudi dynastic style of rule formed later, in response to major regional threats in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> It thus came to be characterized by consensus building across the regime's competing factions, and consistent deference to seniority in the line of succession, rather than the personalistic rule of the king.

<sup>3</sup>Herb (1999)

<sup>4</sup> Herb (1999): 87

<sup>5</sup> Herb (1999): 87

<sup>6</sup> Herb (1999):87

Thus, Yamani defines four main sources of stability for the Saudi regime:

(1) Unity of the royal family and clear, transparent system of succession, (2) Coherent, persuasive ideology, (3) Economic viability, which thus far has been derived through oil rents, and (4) Effective control of society through state institutions.<sup>7</sup> The first of these two were solidified in response to overlapping domestic and regional challenges the Saudi kingdom faced during the 1960s. The succession struggle between King Saud (r. 1954-1964) and Crown Prince Faisal culminated in a greater solidification of dynastic, rather than individualistic, rule.<sup>8</sup>

Since then, a number of factors go into the decision of which of the founder's sons become king, including, above all, seniority. Additional important factors include maternal lineage, competency, and previous experience in ministerial posts. Faisal, for example, represented the Hijaz region, where he had experience developing more sophisticated governing institutions, including a local *majlis al-shura* (consultative council). His mother was an al-Shaykh, the family descended from the religious establishment's founder Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab. This made for a natural alliance between Faisal and the religious establishment. Faisal gained additional legitimacy through marrying a Sudairi, a powerful family that is based from the seven sons of Ibn Saud's favored wife Hissah bint Ahmed al-Sudairi. As a result, the regime sustained what otherwise would have amounted

<sup>7</sup> Yamani (2009): 90

<sup>8</sup> Herb (1999): 91

to crises of succession in the wake of a number of intra-familial disputes, including King Faisal's assassination by a nephew in 1975.

Since Faisal's assassination in 1975, the Sudairi branch, which includes Fahd (r. 1982-2005), Salman (r. 2015-present), former Defense Minister Sultan, former Interior Minister Nayef, and Ahmed, has dominated the monarchy. Nonetheless, the role of crown prince has remained as a check on the authority of aging kings, and vice versa. Oftentimes overlapping with these maternal divides have been splits along the lines of 'conservatives', characterized by more nationalist leanings, including sympathy towards regional identities like Arab nationalism, and 'liberals' wanting closer ties to the US. When Khalid, a conservative, (r. 1975-1982) succeeded Faisal in 1975, the new king was already in poor health. Although Fahd would not succeed Khalid officially until 1982, as crown prince he took a leading role beginning in 1975. Khalid nonetheless checked the authority of Crown Prince Fahd,<sup>9</sup> who was known for his push for closer relations with the West, rapid economic modernization, and greater hostility towards both Iran and repression of the Saudi Shi'a.<sup>10</sup> Thus during the late 1970s, the different centers of power that had emerged within the monarchy in the 1960s further institutionalized, as the king, the crown prince, and other top princes consolidated their own powers over separate fiefdoms within the Council

<sup>9</sup> Kechichian (2001): 48

<sup>10</sup> Abir (1988): 145-147

of Ministers as well as security branches like the National Guard and Ministry of Defense. These persisted throughout the reigns of Fahd (r. 1982-2005) and Abdullah (r. 2005-2015). Often at odds with the powerful Sudairis, Abdullah played an increasingly powerful role as crown prince when Fahd fell ill during the 1990s.

Since the reign of Abdullah (r. 2005-2015), the question of succession has presented the regime with a sense of uncertainty not experienced since the death of the founder and ensuing struggle between Saud and Faisal. For the first time, Ibn Saud's grandsons are contestants for the throne. Like the period of succession in the 1960s, the regime has recently confronted major sources of regional instability, including threats that challenged its ideological legitimacy. Central to the question of why the regime responded through dynasticism in the 1960s and personalist tendencies after 2011 and correspondingly different foreign policy approaches to threat construction is the interaction between the regime's identity and the nature of the regional-domestic threats in each time period.

In addition to stability through dynasticism, Saudi Arabia has maintained stability through use of religious identity as an ideology.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1960s, the Saudi state's religious establishment has been fragmented in a way that horizontally structures the clerics' authority that is similar to the structure of the

<sup>11</sup> Schlumberger (2010); Yamani (2008): 145

royal family itself.<sup>12</sup> One of the ways through which Faisal was able to formally consolidate power in a palace coup in 1964 was through amassing support from the *ulema* (religious scholars), which he shaped into a sort of coalition, which, while politically subservient to the monarchy, was permitted significant sway in social policies. Unlike in Egypt and other Arab states that have bureaucratized their religious establishments, the Saudi monarchy's institutionalization of its *ulema* (religious scholars) has historically been carried out alongside initiatives that strengthened a predominantly conservative Islamic influence over society. Beginning in the 1960s, King Faisal removed the Grand Mufti's monopoly on religious authority and subsequently created the Ministry of Justice and Committee of Senior Scholars.

Although these changes were aimed at greater incorporation of religious authority as a tool for the monarchy, they were implemented simultaneously to an expanding of the religious establishment complete control over an expanded judiciary, over education.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the regime co-opted various Islamists from abroad to serve as both ideological and institutional tools to defend the regime's ideological legitimacy from secular Arab nationalist threats. Thus, alongside the development of dynasticism, the expansion of a religious coalition

<sup>12</sup> Mouline (2015): 54

<sup>13</sup> Mouline (2015): 56

that served the political interests of the monarchy made for a robust ideological legitimacy.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conceptual clarifications**

Ideologies and their corresponding identities are not created in historical or political vacuums. In the postcolonial Middle East, ideologies have tended to have a transnational element, characterized by various iterations of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism.<sup>15</sup> This stems from legacies of European colonialism, which left states in the region with a false sense of national boundaries, and thus a sense of belonging linked to indigenous identities that transcend those externally imposed borders. Ideology is intertwined with identity, but generally is a narrower concept. Von Soest and Grauvogel define ideology as a belief system that seeks to build a collective identity or specific societal order.<sup>16</sup> It is one of several ways in which a regime uses identity to legitimate itself. Two others that von Soest and Grauvogel identify are foundational myth, and personalism, which focuses on the charismatic and extraordinary qualities of the leader.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Saudi monarchy, all

<sup>14</sup> Duderija (2007): 350. Legal theologian Khaled Abou El Fadl's use of the term 'Salafism' denotes the understanding of a merging between the ultra-conservative Saudi Wahhabism and neo-Salafist Islamism in the 1960s as Saudi Arabia took in Islamists fleeing Egypt and elsewhere where they had been persecuted. This happened as Saudi Arabia both further expanded state use of the former while co-opting and incorporating the latter into its own religious apparatus.

<sup>15</sup> Gelvin (1999)

<sup>16</sup> Von Soest and Grauvogel (2017): 288

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that this conceptualization of personalism is different from the one used interchangeably with 'sultanism' to define the sub-type of authoritarianism in which an



three of these are intertwined with one another through the central role of the ruling family in both founding the state and leading the regime. Likewise, the role of ideology in legitimating the regime has always been dependent upon the monarchy's use of Islamic authority.

Thus, by ideological legitimation, I mean the narratives regarding the righteousness of a given political order.<sup>18</sup> Easton, adapting his definition from Weber's, defines legitimacy in terms of diffuse and specific support for the regime.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Lipset defines legitimacy as "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society."<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is a concept influenced both by the ruler and the ruled.<sup>21</sup> Wedeen has challenged the usefulness of the term legitimacy when studying authoritarian regimes. She has found through her work on Syria and Yemen that authoritarian regimes do not need legitimacy to maintain power, but rely on symbolic displays of their power to achieve domination over and compliance from their populations.<sup>22</sup> When I refer to Saudi regime legitimacy, I do so in von Soest and Grauvogel's adaptation of these classic definitions, including the notion that both ruler and the ruled shape

authoritarian leader consolidates power singly into his own hands with minimal use of institutions or devolution of power to ruling elites in the regime

<sup>18</sup> Von Soest and Grauvogel (2017): 290; Linz (2000); Easton (1975)

<sup>19</sup> Easton (1965)

<sup>20</sup> Lipset (1959): 86

<sup>21</sup> Schlumberger (2010): 235

<sup>22</sup> Wedeen (1999): 144

this concept. Throughout much of the Saudi state's history, it has sought legitimacy through the use of religious ideology as well as, particularly since the 1990s, the positioning of the royal family as the center of stability between chaotic Islamism on the one hand and Western secularism on the other. As I show in the second half of the dissertation, however, the faltering of its legitimacy has led it to rely more on displays of power through physical force abroad and visible repression.

Di Palma differentiates top-down legitimation from bottom-up legitimation in that the former comes solely from the state, and the latter exists only in contexts in which civil society actively gives legitimacy to the regime through [democratic] political participation.<sup>23</sup> For authoritarian regimes, ideological legitimacy claims tend to be a double-edged sword; they are a central pillar of stability, but they can also be used to criticize the regime for being hypocritical by those who see it as not adhering to its own belief system.<sup>24</sup> Referring to the eventual success of those challenging the Soviet Union, Krastev has used this 'perversity of ideology' to explain the Prague Spring as well as Solidarity's 'self-limiting' revolution in 1989. The power of those movements stemmed from the ways in which dissidents and elite reformers alike used the language of Marxism itself to de-legitimize oppressive Communist regimes.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Di palma (1991); Brady (2009): 435

<sup>24</sup> Krastev (2011): 12

<sup>25</sup> Krastev (2011): 13

This example of regime ideology as vulnerable to dissident and reformist language that uses the ideology itself brings me to the final two concepts that are central to the argument: oppositional discourse and ontological security.

Unlike during the Arab nationalist period, the Saudi regime in recent years has faced opposition rooted not in a revolutionary ideology, but from a broader ideational threat. Oppositional discourse is distinct from mass mobilization or revolution. It is defined as a form of public narrative “that consists of openly asserted propositions, questions, counters, and other forms of discursive presentation and contestation.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, because it creates a dialogue that undermines the non-material bases of the regime’s legitimacy, oppositional discourse has the potential to be existentially threatening. In the case of contemporary Saudi Arabia, this threat has not been linked to a regional identity or to a state actor in the way Arab nationalism was associated with Nasser. Instead, it is threatening because it is vaguer, and in turn has emerged across the region in different domestic contexts.

As I explain in greater depth later, the context of the Arab uprisings made oppositional discourse ontologically threatening to the Saudi regime as it included at times both ‘liberal values’ and Islamist movements.<sup>27</sup> Ontological security is defined as a completeness of one’s sense of Self. While this has often been used

<sup>26</sup> al-Zo’by and Başkan (2015): 403

<sup>27</sup> al-Zo’by and Başkan (2015): 411

interchangeably with a secure identity, the concept is more fundamental than identity. States (and other actors) do not simply aspire to secure an identity as an end in itself. Instead, the construction and (re)construction of identities are processes carried out in order to develop and retain ontological security. This distinction is crucial to understanding the significance of identity to ontological security, as it accounts for why a state's ability to adapt identity, rather than merely maintain a stable and unchanging identity, is key to its ontological security.

In the following sections, I provide a broad overview of literature on authoritarian legitimation strategies, ontological security, and diversionary war. From there, I explain how a particular subset of this speaks to my research question on the relationship between regime legitimation strategies and foreign aggression as a response to domestic ontological threats. These theories give useful insight in understanding the relationship between regime and foreign policy in Saudi Arabia. Yet, as I will show, the Saudi case does not fit neatly within the theories on subtypes of authoritarian regimes and their corresponding legitimation strategies. Furthermore, these theories have not been brought together alongside ontological security to examine change over time in a single regime's foreign policy.

### **Domestic legitimization strategies**

Gerschewski identifies three ‘pillars of stability’ for authoritarianism: legitimacy, co-optation, and repression.<sup>28</sup> He has noted that the concept of ideational legitimacy has not been explored in depth for most authoritarian regimes, as it was considered more of a defining feature of totalitarian regimes.<sup>29</sup> Repression is defined as the government’s use or threat of physical sanctions against an individual or organization within the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to the regime.<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, the ‘Law of Coercion’ shows a great deal of consistency in states responding to perceived threats to their rule with repression. Yet, the effectiveness of repression varies from completely effective to only provoking further unrest, with cases of no net effect in between. Davenport refers to this consistency in use of repression but inconsistency in its effects as the ‘punishment puzzle.’<sup>31</sup> One of the many reasons for this puzzle is inadequate understanding of how repression may function in different contexts. Levitsky and Way have distinguished between high-intensity and low-intensity forms of coercion. The former involves highly visible repression in which high-profile individuals or institutions or large numbers of people are targeted. In

<sup>28</sup> Gerschewski (2013)

<sup>29</sup> Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017): 256

<sup>30</sup> Davenport (2007)

<sup>31</sup> Davenport (2007): 8

contrast, low-intensity coercion includes surveillance, harassment, detention of activists, and manipulation of legal measures through libel, tax, or corruption charges.<sup>32</sup> The other question that has been less extensively explored until recently is not only how a regime's perception of threat may induce repression, but which types of threats provoke certain types of repression. For both of these questions, it is important to understand the other pillars of stability for authoritarian regimes.

The concept of ideational legitimacy has not been explored in depth for most authoritarian regimes.<sup>33</sup> Von Soest and Grauvogel's recent work has offered new insight on legitimation strategies, particularly ideational legitimation. They divide authoritarian regimes broadly into the sub-types of closed and electoral authoritarianism. Whereas electoral authoritarianism allows some degree of competition in elections with varied degrees of rigging, closed regimes do not provide any institutionalized space for opposition. Von Soest and Grauvogel identify six types of legitimation strategies and from there find support for the theory that closed authoritarian regimes tend to differ from electoral authoritarian regimes in their primary sources of legitimacy. The first three: foundational myth, ideology, and personalism, are all identity-based forms. These emphasize the transcendental nature of the regime, the superiority of the nation, or the

<sup>32</sup> Levitsky and Way (2013): 11

<sup>33</sup> Dukalskis and Gerchewski (2017): 256

charismatic personality of the ruler (often portrayed as ‘chosen from above’) as justification to rule.<sup>34</sup> The other two, procedures and performance, are based strictly on out-put. Procedural legitimacy is constituted by the use of elections and other rule-based mechanisms to ensure orderly succession. Performance is based on the regime’s ability to satisfy citizens’ material needs through public goods, a successful economy, and guarantor of stability and territorial integrity after a civil war.

Von Soest and Grauvogel find a pattern between their two main regime sub-types and these five legitimation strategies. Whereas electoral authoritarians derive substantial legitimacy from procedural claims, closed authoritarian regimes rely more heavily on identity-based forms of legitimacy, particularly ideologies and foundational myths. On the one hand there are the examples here of Communist and Ba’athist ideologies in the cases of North Korea and Syria as well as the cult of personality under Syria’s Hafiz al-Assad.<sup>35</sup> Their sixth source for legitimacy, international engagement, may overlap in the categories of identity and output-based legitimacy. Von Soest and Grauvogel acknowledge little systematic research has been carried out on international engagement as an

<sup>34</sup> When it comes to most monarchies, this sense of traditional authority is not automatic, but sustained through Herb’s concept of dynasticism. It’s important to point out here that von Soest and Grauvogel’s use of personalism is in the sense of a cult of personality, which is distinct from and only sometimes overlaps with personalist rule as defined by Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014) as well as Weeks (2014), and as used elsewhere in the dissertation.

<sup>35</sup> Christian von Soest & Julia Grauvogel. “Identity, procedures and performance: how authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule,” *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 287-305:298

authoritarian legitimation strategy. On the one hand, international engagement is like an identity-based claim, as it is largely used to reinforce or substitute domestic narratives. The authors allude to diversionary war as one example of this, as it reinforces a sense of nationhood in distinction from an external enemy. On the other hand, performance legitimacy can be gained through the appearance of internationally relative political stability if a regime can depict its neighbors as war-torn or otherwise politically unstable.<sup>36</sup> Since the Arab Spring, a number of states have successfully used this tactic to defend their otherwise weakening forms of economic performance and identity-based legitimacy claims.<sup>37</sup> As I will explain later on, the work on the causes of diversionary war has been inconclusive, which may stem from this gap in international engagement as an authoritarian legitimation strategy.

Generally speaking, repression is highly costly for any regime; so the saying goes, ‘one can do anything with bayonets but sit on them.’<sup>38</sup> High-intensity repression in particular can backfire by provoking further ire towards the regime, and by contributing to unification of otherwise disparate dissident groups.<sup>39</sup> Both

<sup>36</sup> von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) : 298; Bunce, V. J., & Wolchik, S. L. “Defeating dictators: Electoral change and stability in competitive authoritarian regimes.” *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (2010): 43–86.

<sup>37</sup> Schlumberger (2010); Thomas L. Friedman. “Saudi Arabia’s Arab Spring, at Last,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>; “Saudi vows new Islamic alliance ‘will wipe terrorists from the earth’” *Middle East Eye*. November 27, 2017 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-vows-new-islamic-alliance-will-wipe-terrorists-earth-1772349636>

<sup>38</sup> Gerschewski (2013): 21

<sup>39</sup> Davenport (2007): 9



forms are economically costly to maintain, as they require an extensive coercive apparatus. Yet, for closed regimes that can afford to implement both forms of repression because of a high degree of ideational legitimacy and/or a lucrative source of economic revenue that can sustain a robust, internally-aimed coercive apparatus, high-intensity repression can be sustainable long-term.<sup>40</sup> Challenging the institutional focus of most studies of authoritarianism, which tend to emphasize parties and elections, Gerschewski and von Soest and Grauvogel remind us just how important ideational legitimacy remains, particularly in the most closed of authoritarian regimes. But, closed regimes have been required to adapt their ideologies. As Levitsky and Way point out, even the most ideologically robust regimes have had to adapt in a world in which totalitarian rule has given way to various forms of authoritarianism. In their work on the resilience of revolutionary regimes, Levitsky and Way show how the farther removed from the generation involved in its foundational revolution a regime becomes, it must adapt to incorporate non-ideological forms of legitimacy.<sup>41</sup> In addition to institutionalized mechanisms of leadership succession, these regimes have required successful economic development to endure. While China is a case of sweeping economic development and growth, less successful cases have derived legitimacy through foreign policies centered on hostility to rivals in the

<sup>40</sup> Gerschewski (2013): 28

<sup>41</sup> Levitsky and Way (2013): 15

West—Iran and North Korea, as key examples. While Levitsky and Way do not cover the role of co-optation, it is implicit to their argument. Given that economic development and other sources of legitimacy require coalitions of different groups, and more diverse coalition than one characterized only by ties to the revolutionary ideology, the adapted ideology becomes inextricably linked to the other pillar of authoritarian stability: co-optation.

In contrast to brute coercion that characterizes repression, co-optation is the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors to the regime.<sup>42</sup> The most common way in which this is done in electoral authoritarian regimes is through multiple parties which are allowed a certain degree of autonomy from the regime. Co-optation, like repression, can have its downsides, if there is in fact some element of competition in an election, or if parties thought to be successfully co-opted vote against a desired policy outcome of the regime.<sup>43</sup> Maerz refers to previous studies on authoritarian electoral competition to show that they inadequately distinguish between real and simulated electoral pluralism.<sup>44</sup> Simulated pluralism, or the façade of electoral competition, is a hallmark trait of hegemonic regimes, or electoral authoritarian regimes with very marginal opposition. As a function of this, Maerz argues that classification of hegemonic regimes are often inconsistent, with many that simulate pluralism classified as closed regimes.

<sup>42</sup> Gerschewski (2013): 22

<sup>43</sup> Gandhi and Przeworski (2007): 1283

<sup>44</sup> Cheibub et. al (2010)

If hegemonic regimes mimic pluralism through simulated electoral competition, what role might simulation of a different sort of competition play in closed authoritarian regimes today? Can simulated ideological openness compensate for the diminished strength of an ideology in a closed regime that lacks the electoral and party institutions of a hegemonic or competitive authoritarian regime? In such a situation, ideology and co-optation are linked, as groups seen as opposed to the regime's ideology might be used to simulate intellectual debate. Such a strategy would not, however, solve the problem if the ideology itself is under threat. Thus, when ideology weakens, as it may in the case of revolutionary regimes,<sup>45</sup> the regime will face a need to increase repression. Unless it can economically afford to stave off mass unrest through repression and financial co-optation of the masses, it will need an additional option beyond repression, ideology, and co-optation. It is here that turn the role of foreign conflict is considered, which von Soest and Grauvogel have noted has not been systematically studied as an authoritarian domestic legitimation strategy.

<sup>45</sup> Levitsky and Way (2013): 14

### **Regime type and foreign conflict initiation**

Enterline and Gledistch reconcile theories of repression<sup>46</sup> and diversionary war<sup>47</sup> to look at whether regimes substitute one method in place of the other.

Enterline and Gledistch find that regimes engaging in external conflicts are more likely to do so *alongside* domestic repression; diversionary war is not an alternative, but an additional tool to repression.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, there is a slightly greater risk aversion to engaging in external conflict than there is towards domestic repression. It therefore may be best understood as a reckless strategy that nonetheless has a domestic purpose. It connects the use of violence abroad to use of violence at home as regime survival strategies.<sup>49</sup>

The literature on diversionary war is inconclusive as to the role that domestic regime type has. Because of this, it is not settled what role the ideational relationship between the regime and people, (i.e., ideological legitimacy) plays in why and how a regime chooses to use conflict abroad as a means of establishing or reinforcing its legitimacy. A number of works theorize on the relationship between authoritarian regime type, domestic audience, and a leader's penchant for foreign aggression. These all involve some variant of a common typology on authoritarian regimes: non-personalist, civilian regimes rooted in an institution

<sup>46</sup> Davenport (1995)

<sup>47</sup> Dassel and Reinhardt (1999); Levy (1989); Miller (1999)

<sup>48</sup> Enterline and Gledistch (2000)

<sup>49</sup> Josua and Edel (2014); Heydemann (2007); Gerschewski (2013); von Soest and Grauvogel (2017)

like a party, military junta, or a personalist regime in which a single leader monopolizes power with minimal consultation with fellow ruling elites.<sup>50</sup>

For all their similarities, works on domestic determinants of foreign aggression by authoritarian regimes come to conflicting conclusions on which types of authoritarians are the most aggressive as well as the motivation for their aggression. Lai and Slater find that the key variable that influences dictatorships' propensity to initiate military disputes is whether the regime is military or civilian. Military regimes do not rely on ideology or parties to help legitimate themselves. Thus, their lack of what Lai and Slater call "infrastructural power" leaves them vulnerable and more likely to initiate military disputes to win support. They challenge the idea that personalist leaders will be as aggressive as military regimes. Instead, they argue that the correlation identified by others between personalist rule and aggression can be explained by military regimes' tendency to become more personalist over time.

Pickering and Kisangani (2010) challenge the diversionary component of Lai and Slater's argument. They build from similar logic as works linking diversionary war distinctively to democracies,<sup>51</sup> to argue that the greater demands on elites in a single party authoritarian regime will lead it into diversionary war. They do not dispute Lai and Slater's findings of military and personalist leaders'

<sup>50</sup> Geddes, Wright, Frantz (2014); Weeks (2014); Huntington (1991); Peceny et al. (2002)

<sup>51</sup> Pickering and Kisangani (2010): 477; Peceny et al. (2002)

overall greater use of force abroad. Instead, Pickering and Kisangani take issue with the idea that regimes with fewer constraints will be more likely to engage in a war of domestic diversion. When it comes to diversionary war, Pickering and Kisangani argue that regimes with a larger audience to please will have greater incentive during challenging times to initiate conflicts abroad. They offer a ‘political incentive’ theory for diversionary war, in which single-party regimes are most likely to initiate conflict for the purposes of domestic support. Because single party regimes, like democracies, have more elites and a larger part of the general public to whom they must answer to maintain support, they have a smaller difference between their political and economic resources available and the demands of their domestic audience. Thus, when political or economic legitimacy is challenged, they will have incentive to initiate a diversionary dispute in order to maintain support. Their logic, however, is actually similar to that of the infrastructural power theory in one key sense: they are both based on incentive to initiate conflict from domestic insecurity.

In addition to differentiating civilian party regimes from military juntas, Weeks distinguishes civilian personalist leaders, ‘bosses’, from military personalist leaders, ‘strongmen.’<sup>52</sup> Somewhat similarly to Lai and Slater’s findings, Weeks (2014) finds that personalist regimes and military regimes are the

<sup>52</sup> Weeks (2014)

most aggressive, with strongmen leaders being the most likely of her four authoritarian regime types to initiate a military conflict. She notes that strongmen are only somewhat more aggressive than bosses. Like Lai and Slater, then, she finds an overlap between personalist regimes and military regimes, making the strongman category partially redundant.<sup>53</sup> Weeks focuses on the lack of constraints that personalist and military leaders face and their tendency towards perceptions of resolving disputes with violence, with no need for diplomacy. She finds that her cases of personalist and military leaderships are particularly aggressive for the purposes of personal gain, but with no concern for elite or mass audiences. Institutionally speaking, such leaders face few constraints. On an individual level, those who come to lead such regimes are ambitious and have worldviews that look positively on the use of force to obtain their goals. She reminds us, however, that the evidence for diversionary war has been mixed. She points to other works that argue diversionary war is more likely if anything among regimes with more power-sharing and greater domestic audience accountability (democracies and civilian non-personalist regimes).<sup>54</sup> Weeks, after all, is looking at a different question altogether, of what might make a regime more reckless, rather than how a regime might use diversionary force to gain domestic support.

<sup>53</sup> Weeks (2014): 49

<sup>54</sup> Mueller 1970; Brody and Page 1975; MacKuen 1983; Ostrom and Job 1986; Miller 1995; Gelpi 1997; Pickering and Kisangani (2010)

Her findings are nonetheless strikingly similar to those of Lai and Slater: military and personalist regimes are more likely to initiate conflict. What may be overlooked in the differentiation across these theories is that these regime types share characteristics that seem to make them more likely to be aggressive due to recklessness as well as a need to satisfy a domestic audience. In this way, Lai and Slater's concept of 'infrastructural power' overlaps with both Weeks' and Colgan's reference to revolutionary regimes. Weeks and Colgan both find that revolutionary regimes, that is regimes with some transnational aspirations to expand an ideal (Communism, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism), are more likely to initiate foreign conflict. It is not only about expanding an ideal, however. As both Weeks and Colgan show, such aggression is even more likely the case when such regimes come to be led by a personalist leader: Saddam Hussein, Gamal abd'l Nasser, and Muammar Gadaffi, for example. As Lai and Slater find, military regimes, which lack infrastructural power, tend to become personalist over time.

With this understanding in mind, we can continue to make sense of work like that of Colgan and Weeks that explains foreign aggression with the presence of revolutionary ideologies and the previous Saudi minimalization of foreign conflicts with the lack of such an ideology. To do so, however, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which infrastructural power, including ideology itself, was ultimately weak in these regimes. The aggressive revolutionary cases that Colgan and Weeks both point to were, in fact, often ones in which a regime's



ideological, or infrastructural, power, was on the decline. The further this declined, the more foreign aggression continued. The case of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi demonstrates this. Seeking to replace Nasser as the regional head of the pan-Arab movement, Gaddafi attempted, and failed, several times in unifying Libya with other Arab countries, including Egypt, between 1969 and 1974.<sup>55</sup> Following these failures, he increasingly initiated military disputes and other foreign conflicts with neighboring Arab and African states and with the US. Likewise, the case of Saddam Hussein illustrates how such declining infrastructural power, both in terms of the Ba'ath Party ideology and Iraq's oil revenue, further fueled aggression when he attempted to annex Kuwait in 1990. Both these cases support the overlapping works of Weeks and Colgan, which find that regimes with both revolutionary ideologies and personalist leaders tend to be the most aggressive. Upon closer examination of the regional and domestic contexts of these cases, however, one sees that this was fueled by ideological weakness, as these regimes sought to retain their claims to rule in the face of ideational failures.

This returns us to the point that Lai and Slater make, which is that a lack of institutional and ideological legitimation strategies, what they term 'infrastructural power' leads such regimes to use military conflict abroad as a

<sup>55</sup> Colgan (2013): 141

means of retaining authority. If, as Lai and Slater find, military regimes tend to become personalist over time, then most of Weeks and Colgan's cases can be further understood within the context of weakened infrastructural power. This does not preclude the fact that the aggression of such regimes is linked to their revolutionary ideologies. What it shows is that the aggression can be better understood as the sign of such regimes experiencing a sense of weakened or otherwise insecure ideological power. Thus, the framework may potentially be applied to non-revolutionary regimes that nonetheless share the same experience of possessing a legitimating ideology that is central to the regime's domestic and regional justification to rule, but that has become weakened due to some sort of failure.

Much of the point of disagreement on the role of foreign conflict initiation as a regime strategy is whether it is used more by single-party regimes because they have larger constituencies to please, or by military or personalist regimes because it provides a convenient form of legitimacy in the absence of either domestic constraints or legitimating institutions. Regardless of these different understandings of foreign conflict initiation, domestic audience matters in all these cases. Mansfield and Snyder address this phenomenon through the lens of nationalism. Regimes undergoing a transition, typically democratization, are left with weak institutions. Such governments that have not yet produced effective political institutions compensate by constructing ideological motivators for mass

support. In short, they do this through stoking nationalism, a feasible strategy given that these regimes have recently transitioned through mass mobilization. Nationalism in newly formed or transitioning regimes, in turn, fuels belligerence towards some foreign rival or threat.<sup>56</sup>

A form of ‘institutional weakness’ that can be triggered by something other than democratization or mass revolution, I argue, is an ideological weakness brought on by an ontological threat. Although Mansfield and Snyder’s work explains the coincidence of newly democratizing states going to war, there are two key takeaways, which, alongside the literature on diversionary war, offer implications for authoritarian legitimation strategies. One is the utility of belligerent nationalism in situations of institutional weakness. Such institutional weakness includes what Lai and Slater refer to as a lack of ‘infrastructural power’ or what scholars of authoritarianism term ideological legitimacy.<sup>57</sup> The other is that such weakness can be a product of a regime transition in the face of something provoking existential instability in the regime’s legitimacy, even in the absence of a full-scale regime transition in the form of revolution or democratization. Thus, the work on domestic regime survival strategies can be more usefully linked to diversionary causes of war with the incorporation of the ontological security literature. That is, a certain regime’s shift to a proclivity for

<sup>56</sup> Mansfield and Snyder (1995): 6

<sup>57</sup> Lai and Slater (2006); Gerschewski (2013); von Soest and Grauvogel (2017)

diversionary conflict is linked both to its potential underlying ideological shortcomings and the emergence of ontological threats. But, aside from revolutionary or democratizing regimes, in what other situations might the utility or strength of a legitimizing ideology in a closed regime diminish over time? The question to be asked alongside this is, what may give strength to that ideology in the first place, albeit temporarily?

### **Ontological Security**

The work on domestic regime survival strategies can be more usefully linked to diversionary causes of war with the incorporation of the ontological security literature. That is, a certain regime's shift to a proclivity for diversionary conflict is linked both to its potential underlying ideological shortcomings and the emergence of ontological threats. Ontological security is based on a state's stable sense of Self. Giddens defined it as "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action."<sup>58</sup> Since then, IR scholars have transferred this concept of the individual to the state. Steele argues the source of ontological security is in a state's intrinsic narrative about the Self, whereas

<sup>58</sup> Giddens 1991: 92

Mitzen and Wendt emphasize the role social interaction with Others has in a state's construction of its internal Self.<sup>59</sup> Browning and Joenniemi problematize this essentializing notion of ontological security as something that is rooted solely in an internal identity.<sup>60</sup> Rather, identities need not be fixed or stable for ontological security, as identities serve the function of attaining ontological security.<sup>61</sup>

Darwich has shown how these understandings of ontological security need not be mutually exclusive. Although a regime's internal identity may have historical and domestic origins from which it cannot easily detach itself so as not to lose legitimacy, the state can nonetheless evolve in response to external relations with Others. Ontological insecurity is generally thought to be caused by either too much similarity or too much difference. States, like individuals, desire an 'optimal distinctiveness' in which a balance between assimilation into a collective identity and enough differentiation to possess a unique self-identity is necessary for ontological security.<sup>62</sup> Darwich shows this threat of similarity through two cases of foreign threats to Saudi Arabia: the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral victory in Egypt in 2012. While neither of these presented physical security threats to Saudi Arabia, they both

<sup>59</sup> Mitzen 2006: 354; Darwich (2015): 63

<sup>60</sup> Browning and Joenniemi (2017)

<sup>61</sup> Browning and Joenniemi (2017): 35

<sup>62</sup> Darwich (2015): 66

posed ontological threats as both of these regime changes brought Islamic governments to power.

I apply a version of Darwich's 'threat of ontological similarity' from a different angle in two ways. First is to shed deeper light on domestic authoritarian regime legitimation involved in a foreign policy shaped by ontological security. I show how relatively minor foreign threats can be securitized, that is, constructed as existential security threats, as a strategy to reinforce the regime's own legitimacy. In other words, foreign conflict can be either mediated or exaggerated as a strategy to bolster domestic legitimacy in response to different types of challenges. I do this in one case by tracing how ontological security can be strengthened in response to an ideologically distinct threat. Secondly, I examine the domestic implications of a regional 'threat of similarity' to show how such a threat ultimately weakens ideology within, thereby leading to a greater need for securitization of external threats.

While this second case overlaps directly with Darwich's case of the Muslim Brotherhood victory in Egypt in 2012, my historical case uses a different empirical example altogether in order to build upon something that is only implicit in how Darwich deals with the Saudi response to the Iranian Revolution. That is, Darwich notes the need for an even further narrowing of Saudi identity in the Muslim Brotherhood case as compared with the Iranian Revolution. This is because the post-revolutionary Iranian regime 's emphasis of its Shi'a identity

allowed the Saudis the ability to position themselves as the leaders of the Sunni Muslim world, thereby actually strengthening their claim to legitimacy vis-à-vis religious authority over the majority in the region as well as a majority within their own country. With a bit of ideological maneuvering, the Saudis turned an ontological threat into a source of strength in rallying all types of Saudis, with the one exception of the Shi'a minority, behind this more sectarian identity. As Darwich explains, the Saudis faced something closer to an ontological threat from the Iranian Revolution, and again with the Arab Spring in Egypt.<sup>63</sup> Yet, the Iranian threat in 1979 was a containable ontological threat. Thus, what I seek to show is that it allowed for a *flexibly constructed* ideological difference, and this is something that can also be seen in how Saudi Arabia positioned its identity with respect to secular Arab nationalism in the 1960s.

While 1979 triggered a fundamental change in Saudi projection of its identity abroad, there was not an immediate consensus in the kingdom on whether the Iranian Revolution turned Iran into a foe for the Saudis. As with the response to Nasserist Egypt in the 1960s, competing factions within the Saudi monarchy used the relationship with Iran as leverage to form competing identities of the Saudi state. Prince Abdullah (r. 2005-2015) declared the new regime in Iran as having “removed all reservation in the way of cooperation between Saudi Arabia

<sup>63</sup> Darwich (2016): 471

and Iran...Islam is the organizer of our relations...For this reason I am very optimistic about the future of our relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.”<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, as with the Nasserist threat, the Saudis had a readily available means of constructing a counter-narrative. The same pan-Islamic identity the Saudis had constructed as a non-aggressive counter to Nasserism was used by a more ‘pan-Arab’<sup>65</sup> faction of the royal family to embrace Iran as leading the same pan-Islamic project of Saudi Arabia. Thus, even ontologically, the threat of similarity from Iran was not an inevitability, because the Saudis could frame it in either direction, without diminishing their own distinctiveness or failing to retain a sense of collective identity through Sunni Islamic and Arab identities. Thus, when Princes Fahd and Sultan led the ‘pro-Western’ faction of the family towards solidifying a hostile stance towards Iran, the Saudi regime united behind a Sunni sectarian stance, by reframing the pan-Islamic approach away from inclusion of the Shi’a.

Beyond the greater religious proximity along sectarian lines, there was another fundamental point of difference that the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood brought, unlike either that of the Iranian Revolution or the pan-Arabism that

<sup>64</sup> Darwich (2015): 97

<sup>65</sup> As noted, these can be used interchangeably, and the Saudis have done so strategically, meaning those with a greater affinity for regional solidarity and close regional relationships rooted partially in anti-colonialism, would also be sympathetic to the Islamic Republic of Iran’s revolutionary ideology, even if it has otherwise important distinguishing features such as language. This also shows specific leaders’ affinity for ‘pan-Islamism’ is often more about the symbolism of Islam as central to a unifying regional identity—including less proclivity for sectarian divides— than the precise role of religion in politics



swept the region in the 1960s. The Egyptian government of 2012 embodied at once all the aspects of ontological threat the Saudis faced from the Iranian Revolution—Islamic sanctioning of the ousting of a dictator, plus an additional feat that was unparalleled at any other point in time: the culmination of grassroots uprisings in an elected government. This combination of Islamic and electoral legitimacy posed the greatest potential ontological threat the Saudis could ever face. The fact that it was Sunni was an important component distinguishing it from the Iranian Revolution, but at least as crucial was this being combined with the power of organized, peaceful, popular will. It is here that I focus on the role of authoritarian legitimation strategies and how it intertwines with Darwich's findings on foreign policy through the lens of ontological security, as well as Mansfield and Snyder's work on nationalist mobilization.

To do so, I apply al-Zo'by and Baskan's term 'oppositional discourse' used to describe the UAE's threat perceptions during the Arab Spring, to the case of Saudi Arabia.<sup>66</sup> Although oppositional discourse is distinct from mass mobilization or revolution, it nonetheless can produce an existential challenge to a regime by creating a dialogue that undermines the non-material bases of legitimacy. This threat is potentially magnified further when mass mobilization or revolution employing such discourse is carried out simultaneously in a

<sup>66</sup> al-Zo'by and Başkan (2015)

neighboring state. Zo'by and Başkan's example of the Emirati Muslim Brotherhood's questioning of the Emirati state's ability to protect, and advance public and social morality struck at the heart of the UAE's claim to ideational legitimacy. Thus, in the absence of mass protests in the UAE, the overall regional context of revolution, including the Muslim Brotherhood's role in toppling of decades-old dictators in Egypt and Tunisia, considerably magnified the UAE's threat perception regarding its own domestic oppositional discourse. The domestic situation in which the Emirati Muslim Brotherhood "...largely embodied civic and 'liberal values' in its critique and fundamentally challenged the state's claim to political and social legitimacy in diverse public matters," substantially transformed politics in the UAE by opening up a discourse that deeply challenged the legal and moral foundations of the regime.<sup>67</sup> While it is beyond the scope of my argument to explain the foreign policy shifts of the UAE, I build from these frameworks on 'discourse of oppositionality' and the significance of religion to ideational legitimation to argue that ontological threats after 2011 resulted in Saudi perception of domestic threats as existential.

The Saudi regime has generally been considered a special case in which the role of religious authority remains a useful source of legitimacy.<sup>68</sup> As I will show, dynastic rule and ideological legitimation through Islamic authority, the

<sup>67</sup> al-Zo'by and Başkan (2015): 411

<sup>68</sup> Schlumberger (2010): 247

two pinnacles of Saudi rule, were strengthened through the opposing ideological threat in the 1960s. Yet, in the long run, this was unsustainable, as disagreements on what exactly the nature of this Islamic legitimation of the state would be, prevailed. There was still no true sense of what Saudi identity was, beyond the royal family and beyond conflicting definitions of Islamic legitimation. While these questions emerged again in the 1990s, it was not until 2011 that different nationalisms, of what it meant to be a Saudi in a nation-state system, became politically consequential again.<sup>69</sup> As in the 1960s, the regime was faced with a critical moment in 2011 characterized by challenges to the regime's identity. Unlike the 1960s, there was not a useful ideological foil against which to construct an authoritarian ideology to legitimate rule over Saudis outside the royal family. Instead, regional revolutions in 2011 came on the heels of a deteriorating traditional ideological legitimation and an emerging Saudi nationalism. The result, on the one hand, was oppositional discourse that included an 'ontological threat of similarity'<sup>70</sup>. The new leadership that came to power in the wake of this regional mobilization turned this perceived threat into an opportunity—seeking to manipulate and control nationalism its favor to consolidate power, similarly to new elites stoking mass mobilization in a newly democratized regime<sup>71</sup>. In the process of this top-down manipulation of nationalism, previous traditional sources

<sup>69</sup> Email exchange with Sir John Jenkins, February 16, 2019

<sup>70</sup> Darwich's term

<sup>71</sup> Mansfield and Snyder (1995)

of ideological legitimation already in flux since the 1990s—reliance on a robust religious establishment, and co-optation of wayward *ulema*, as well as monarchical coalitions—were rapidly done away with. In the wake of weakening ideological legitimacy, the regional and domestic instabilities brought by 2011 offered this new nationalism as ideology to the next available charismatic leader. In the absence of ideological legitimation that was the response to the previous threats, co-optation has been done away with, and the remaining option has been to increase repression. The regime's evolution in response to threats in the second case has thus included war as it seeks to consolidate its new identity. As in the 1960s, it is turning an ontological threat into an opportunity, but in the case of 2011, the options are fewer—there is no counter-ideology beyond belligerent nationalism— as it faces, not a foreign threat like Arab nationalism, but its own ideological failures.

Finally, this ontological understanding is useful for differentiating the two types of nationalism with which the dissertation deals. When I refer to Saudi nationalism, I work from a similar definition of Mansfield and Snyder's use of the term. Van Evera's conceptualization is useful in specifying that, while there are many different types of nationalisms, specific attributes of certain types of nationalism are conducive to war. The most relevant of these are: "self-images and the images of others...Nations can co-exist most easily when these beliefs converge; when they share a common image of their mutual history, and of one

another's current conduct and character.”<sup>72</sup> From this conceptualization of the role of self-image and the images of others, we can differentiate between the use of a legitimating ideology like pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism on the one hand and a more exclusionary nationalism on the other based more strictly on contradistinction from the Other.

### Cases

In order to explain the change over time towards an aggressive foreign policy that led to the Saudi intervention in Yemen in 2015, I build upon the literatures on authoritarian ideological legitimacy, diversionary war, and ontological security. I offer a theory of externalized repression in situations of weakened ideological power. I do so by studying the Saudi regime’s survival strategies through a comparative historical analysis of two cases. In one, I trace how the regime further develops its ideological strength as a consequence from what I refer to as a *flexibly constructed difference*, which in turn produces a foreign policy that tends towards discretion, relying primarily on indirect use of force and checkbook diplomacy.<sup>73</sup> In other words, Saudi caution in its foreign policy did not simply stem from a lack of an aggressive mechanism such as a

<sup>72</sup> Van Evera (1994): 26

<sup>73</sup> Jeff Colgan (2013): 239

revolutionary ideology. Rather, it was the fact that it could strengthen its ideology in response to the threats of the 1960s, thus precluding the usefulness to exaggerate conflict in response to the threats of that time.



**Figure 1: 1960s Case**

From the late 1950s to 1967, the Saudi monarchy faced an ideological threat from secular pan-Arab Nationalism, spearheaded by Egyptian President Gamal abd'I Nasser. Arab Nationalism was centered on Arab progress and unity and independence from colonial interference. Opposed to the antiquated governments that had ruled the Arab world as Western puppets, Nasser championed revolutions in the region that toppled monarchies, and sought to replace them with secular, socialist republics like the one that had brought him to power through a military coup against the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. Because of Nasser's unwavering opposition to monarchical rule, to the role of religion in governing a state, Arab Nationalism posed an ideological threat to Saudi Arabia.

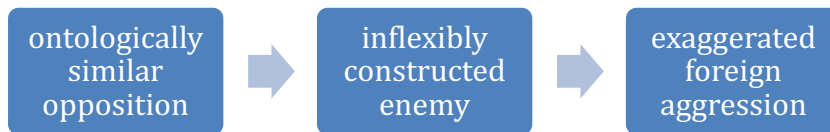
As an absolute monarchy whose rule was legitimated through hereditary succession and an alliance with ultra-conservative Islamic Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia embodied the antithesis of Arab Nationalism. This ideological threat materialized into an external security threat when Nasser backed a military coup against the Yemeni monarchy and subsequently launched a massive military intervention in support of the new republican government.

I use the case of Saudi regime survival strategies in response to the regional and domestic crisis posed to its legitimacy by Arab nationalism to demonstrate three points. First, on the domestic side, I show how an initial aggressive Saudi response to growing hostility from Nasser was met with a regime consensus towards de-escalation after 1958. This helped to facilitate the direction of a succession crisis in favor of the leader seen as more calculating in how to confront the threat. This is important because the new leadership exemplified a balancing of ideological legitimation, hard repression, and co-optation which kept the regime stable throughout the conflict and into the following decades. Secondly, the regime approached Arab nationalism with its own counter- ideology of pan-Islamism as one to supersede secular pan-Arabism. This was possible because secular Arab nationalism was distinct enough from Saudi national identity that the Saudis could strategically position themselves as confronting a foreign challenge that opposed the redeeming qualities of their religiously legitimated monarchy. In response to Egyptian aggression, the Saudis

were able to more easily construct a discursive counter-attack, whereby they could use Egypt's aggressive foreign policy towards fellow Arab states as a source of critique against Nasser's claims to be the legitimate regional leader. The utility of Saudi state identity as an ideological foil to its ideological rival prevented Arab nationalism from becoming an uncontrollable threat, even if it was indeed ontological.

I then use the Saudi foreign policy response to show that this containable ideological threat and ensuing counter-ideological response prevented the usefulness of an exaggerated confrontation for the Saudis. Instead, the counter-ideology was characterized by a depiction of the Saudis as above intra-Arab quarreling, and even going further to include non-Arab postcolonial Muslim states. I trace the Saudi regime's foreign policy from 1958, the year in which potential confrontation first emerged between the Saudi king and Nasser, through the end of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Egypt in Yemen (1962-67). Following the Egyptian intervention into Yemen and threats to similarly topple the Saudi monarchy after 1962, I trace how Saudi construction of the threat was centered on delegitimizing Nasser as the figurehead of Arab nationalism. They did so with a more calculated, covert military response, remaining relatively cautioned even as the conflict escalated with increased US and Soviet military roles on the Saudi and Egyptian sides, respectively.





**Figure 2: Arab Spring Case**

In the second case, I explain how and why the regime experienced an existential crisis that stems ultimately from an *ontologically similar opposition* has been constructed as an *inflexible enemy*.<sup>74</sup> I build upon the works on diversionary war to show that, in the second case, diversionary war is an opportunistic manipulation of nationalism in response to the ontological crisis. To do so, I examine another period of regional revolutionary upheaval that likewise challenged Saudi regime legitimacy from within and without. As with the 1960s case, in the second case I trace Saudi regime responses in terms of Gerschewski's three pillars of stability on the one hand and how this in turn affects foreign

<sup>74</sup> I apply Darwich's 'ontological threat of similarity' alongside Zo'by and Baskan's 'discourse of oppositionality' to describe the nature of the threat the Saudis faced after 2011, in juxtaposition to the threats of the 1960s.

policy. In this case there is a similar initial condition of a succession uncertainty that coincides with a perceived security threat arising from Yemen. First, I show how the emergence of regional revolutionary upheaval has not been approached with the same initial tendency towards caution and de-escalation as in the Arab Nationalist period. Amidst a succession opening, this new predilection for foreign aggression facilitated a regime shift towards further aggression. I demonstrate this by tracing the rise of the ontological threat, and the role the Arab uprisings played in stoking this. In addition to ideological similarity, the Arab uprisings brought a threat of oppositional discourse to authoritarian legitimacy. The combination of similarity and popular elections made it uniquely threatening.

Secondly, I show how external threats in the contemporary period are constructed as existential challenges to the Saudi state. I use the case of Saudi-led intervention in Yemen to illustrate how the different approach to constructing threats culminates in a larger, open military intervention against external threats that are materially and ontologically no greater than that of Arab Nationalism. The primary root of the perceived ontological threat and ensuing construction of an existential external threat comes not from Yemen or other foreign actors but from ontological challenges stemming from within. The absence of a distinguishable ideology against which the Saudis may position themselves makes this threat more fundamental in nature than the one faced in the Nasserist period. Furthermore, the fact that the threat is not linked to a foreign state clearly igniting

revolutions as in the case of Egypt in the 1960s forces the Saudis to construct tangible foreign enemies.

### **Alternative explanations**

Before moving to the cases in the following chapters, it is important to give an overview of other views of the aggressive shift embodied in the intervention in Yemen in 2015. My theory is not incompatible with most of these, but rather sheds light on variables they tend to overlook.

### **Material capabilities**

One intuitive explanation is that the Saudis simply did not have the capabilities to respond to Nasser with a massive military response as they have to the Houthis today. This is not something to be overlooked, as the Saudis have, since the early 1960s, continued to acquire more advanced weapons and training of its security forces from the US and the British. It was only during the conflict in the 1960s that the Saudis modernized their military. When it comes to explaining the difference in these two interventions, it falls short for several reasons. If the Saudis veered from their historic reliance on proxies to engage in a more direct military role in 2015 primarily because of a superior military capacity as compared with the past, then they would not have held out hope for the

Americans to step in earlier on. Although they were not surprised the US did not do more to intervene, there had been a tacit understanding that the US would offer support to the Saudi effort in Yemen as a reassurance of the alliance in the wake of the US's nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>75</sup>

As I explain in Chapter 5, the Saudi decision to intervene when it did and how it did in March 2015 was sudden and rash. This understanding does not conflict with evidence that Saudi planning for a response to the Houthis dated back to the September, 2014, Houthi takeover of Sana'a.<sup>76</sup> Instead, what I argue is that one of the factors that made the Saudis hesitant to intervene in 2014 was the apparent reluctance of the US to get involved on their behalf, as had been the case in Syria in 2013. The fact that a reassuring US military role against the Houthis had still not emerged by the time of Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 thus indicates that nothing in the US-Saudi alliance had changed over those six months to trigger a greater willingness by the Saudis to act with greater military independence. The Saudi decision in March, 2015, to go ahead without having attained a clear commitment from the US of its support was not for lack of Saudi need for US military help, as they continue to rely heavily upon US military

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Michael Stephens, May 3, 2018, London, in which Stephens explained one reason the Saudis may have hesitated to intervene in Yemen sooner, such as when the Houthis took the capital Sana'a in 2014, is that the Saudis had been hoping the Americans would do more to get involved first, even if at that point they were already doubtful given the perception of the Americans as increasingly unreliable.

<sup>76</sup> Hokayem and Roberts (2016): 164

technology and logistics. Rather, by launching the intervention with a degree of uncertainty in just how much the US would involve itself, the Saudis revealed a new level of boldness in their decision-making on the use of force.<sup>77</sup> A fundamental flaw in the different military capabilities explanation, thus, is that it presumes decision-making was methodically and proportionally planned as a response to match an objective threat.

The second issue here is the way in which the Saudis have constructed the threat, and framed the need for their intervention on the one hand, is not consistent with this. If, as the Saudis posit, they intervened in Yemen in 2015 to roll back Iran because the Houthis are Iranian proxies, why did they allow the Houthis to grow to be as powerful as they did in the years leading up to the intervention? There is some evidence to show that the Saudis even supported the Houthis after the Yemeni National Dialogue, up until the Houthis took the capital in 2014.<sup>78</sup> If the Houthis were indeed the primary motive for the intervention, and

<sup>77</sup> Thembisa Fakude. "Operation Decisive Storm: Reshuffling Regional Order," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, April 6, 2015; Dexter Filkins, "A Saudi Princes Quest to Remake the Middle East," The New Yorker, April 9, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>; <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/positionpapers/2015/04/201546102935256939.html>

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London; Interview with Saudi activist 2, August 21, 2018, London; Email exchange with former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine, in which Bodine expressed it is highly probable the Saudis would support the Houthis as part of an effort to keep Yemen divided and thereby easier to control. Similarly but with a more specific argument, a Saudi activist emphasized the Saudi fear of "contagion of the 'spring time peoples' ... the Saudis saw the Houthis as the most capable actors in Yemen to prevent this from spreading"

the Saudis had the capabilities to stop them, then we would expect the Saudis to have done so earlier on.

In the words of former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine, “Even accounting for ‘inflation’ over time, or however you want to put it, in terms of the Saudis having greater military capabilities than in the 1960s, their intervention in Yemen in 2015 is still considerably greater than it was then.”<sup>79</sup> Beyond military response, this can be seen in how their construction of the threat has been fundamentally different, more existential and binary, as opposed to the way in which they at times even sought to play down the threat of Arab Nationalism during the 1960s. This fundamentally different approach to discourse can only be explained through a theory that includes non-material factors.

### **The Realist Argument**

The Saudi military response matches the external military threat of the Houthis, and is thus a rational act of war in accordance with defensive realism. The Houthis’ military gains that have thus far succeeded in ousting the pro-Saudi regime in Yemen have culminated in direct border military threat to Saudi. As an expanding force located on the Saudi-Yemen border that openly professes

<sup>79</sup> Interview with former Ambassador Barbara Bodine, January 19, 2018, Washington, DC

hostilities towards the Saudi state, the Houthi threat in and of itself is great enough to require the degree of Saudi air and ground intervention in Yemen that we have seen since March 2015. If anything, we ought to be surprised that Saudi Arabia did not act with decisive military force against this threat sooner.

While the Houthis do indeed pose a threat to Saudi borders, it is not evident that the Saudi level of military response has been proportionate. Furthermore, this level of military response has destabilized the country so that other threats, like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula *and* the Houthi threat have remained and even grown as a result. We might say then the Saudis are just ill informed on what a strategic military operation would look like. However, it is not as though this is by any means the first time the Saudi border has been threatened—Yemen has long been a source of instability.<sup>80</sup> With any foreign military policy, the Saudis have always consulted with their allies, and been in a position of asking permission, particularly from the US, for tactical and material assistance. But in the case of the 2015 intervention, defense minister Muhammad bin Salman went against the advice of fellow royals as well as the US military by attempting a ‘shock and awe’ air campaign in a country ill-suited for such a tactic.<sup>81</sup> While ground troops from Arab allies in the Saudi-led coalition might have assisted to make the air campaign more productive and precise, cross-

<sup>80</sup> Gause (2010); Salmoni et. al, RAND (2010)

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, London, May 6, 2018

country coordination within the Arab coalition has been poor from the start.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, despite remaining highly reliant upon US military assistance, the Saudis merely informed US officials that their help was wanted and that the Saudi military would go in regardless of whether the US backed their efforts.<sup>83</sup> The realist view thus leaves two questions unanswered. One is why there was not the usual careful deliberation and consultation within the regime and with the US over the use of force abroad. The other is what exactly was the logic of an air campaign against guerilla fighters fighting on rough terrain in a country with scant infrastructure.

### **The ‘Shi’a Crescent’ Argument**

The shortcomings of the realist argument brings me to the second hypothesis: the Houthis represent a dire regional threat that is larger than a rebel movement within Yemen. The Houthis, as a Shi’a revolutionary, anti-conservative force, are religiously and politically aligned with Iran. Iran’s political support of the Houthis makes the Houthi threat even more than a military

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, London, May 6, 2018; Fakude (2015). Even as the Emiratis have taken an increasingly leading role in the coalition, this has not led to either greater gains over the Houthis or to reduced Yemeni civilian casualties

<sup>83</sup> Dexter Filkins, “A Saudi Princes Quest to Remake the Middle East,” *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>



threat to Saudi's southern borders—they represent the growing Shi'a presence of Iran throughout the Persian Gulf and Middle East at large. The Houthis are thus proxies of Saudi Arabia's greatest rival, the revolutionary Shi'a regime of Iran. Whereas the Houthi military threat to the Saudi southern border by itself does not warrant the current degree of Saudi military intervention in Yemen, the fact that the Houthis represent the interests of a more powerful and long-time rival of the Saudis indicates the growing strength of Iran. Furthermore, the sectarian element, of Sunni Saudi versus Shi'a Iran, embodies a historic religious clash between the two major branches of Islam. The Shi'a Houthis are thereby ideologically linked with Iran through the deepest of ties: religious identity. The Saudis need to signal to Iran that they will not accept this encroachment, physically or ideationally, on their territory and sphere of influence.

This view of the Houthis as proxy fighters for Iran has several major problems that are often overlooked in standard accounts of this conflict. First of all, the Houthis are a local rebel movement stemming from feelings of political and religious marginalization by the Yemeni government. Religiously, they adhere to a minority subset of the Shi'a sect: Zaydi Islam, distinct from the mainstream Twelver Shi'ism of Iran. Putting aside religious distinctions, perhaps the more important point to note is that sectarian divisions pitting Sunni versus Shi'a against one another have not always been as they are in the region today. Indeed, as I will examine later, the sort of cold-war proxy conflict between Iran

and Saudi Arabia increasingly emphasized in the Saudi and Western presses over the past decade is not the first cold war among regional actors of the Middle East and North Africa. That previous ‘Arab Cold War’ was so named because it involved intra-Arab divisions, with Iran actually taking sides with Saudi Arabia. Primordial explanations of religious conflict fall into the same conceptual problems as those explaining any sort of cultural or ethnic clashes: they cannot account for variation over time. Thus, an Iranian-focused sectarian explanation does not provide much insight into the heightened level of Saudi aggression in Yemen now as compared with the past.

Beyond the problems with a simplistic sectarian narrative that often comes with emphasizing the Houthis’ Shi’a identity or ties to Iran is the fact that Saudi animosity towards the Islamic Republic has not been consistently high since the revolution in 1979.<sup>84</sup> An intensification of Saudi rhetoric towards the Shi’a throughout the region and against its own minority can be traced back to the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003, which not only dismantled decades of rule by a Sunni Arab minority, but created an opportune vacuum of authority wide for militants from Iran to fill. Nonetheless, it took on a new, even greater level beginning in 2011. One of the clearest examples of this was the Saudi-led military intervention into Bahrain in early 2011.<sup>85</sup> Unlike the situation of Iranian proxies

<sup>84</sup> Gause (2003)

<sup>85</sup> Nuruzzaman (2013): 367; Matthiesen (2013)

in Iraq, or even support to the Houthis in Yemen, protestors in Bahrain were entirely peaceful, and the Bahraini monarchy's own commission failed to find evidence of an Iranian role. Iran, and by extension, unaffiliated Shi'a across the Gulf, had already become scapegoats. Regardless of the degree to which Saudi Arabia genuinely perceives the Houthis, other Arab Shi'a minorities in the region, or Iran as threatening, the view that they are all somehow linked is not based on reality beyond this sense of anxiety itself. Given the inconsistencies and lack of evidence<sup>86</sup> when it comes to Shi'a minorities' links to Iran and the role of Iran in creating the Houthi insurgency, the question this view leaves is: what is the source of this anxiety?

## Oil

Perhaps the most intuitive domestic explanation for the changing Saudi foreign policy is economic crisis precipitated by low oil prices. The Saudi economy is dependent on oil revenues for the majority of its spending. The public sector, which is largely funded by the state-controlled oil economy, accounts for two-thirds of GDP. Heavily reliant upon oil, public spending on education and

<sup>86</sup> Transfeld (2017)

infrastructure all grew during the most recent oil boom, from 2003 to 2014. The sources of rising public spending have only continued to grow.<sup>87</sup> Despite the boom, growing unemployment in a population mostly comprised of those under the age of thirty and strains on public services have led to increasing frustrations. With a drastic drop in oil prices in 2014, the unsustainability of the oil economy has become increasingly apparent. My argument does not seek to downplay the significance of these economic factors, but to instead shed light on the ideational manifestation of these social and economic shifts in the kingdom and across the region. In doing so, I hope to more comprehensively explain Saudi foreign policy shifts that may not seem immediately intuitive as responses to major economic strains.

Colgan finds that the impact of oil on a state's foreign policy is determined by the way in which that regime legitimates itself non-materially. He thus finds that petro-states with revolutionary regimes will use that oil revenue to fund aggressive foreign policy. In contrast, he uses the case of the Saudi regime to show that a non-revolutionary regime which possesses a conservative ideology and is friendly with the West will use its oil revenue in less destabilizing (or at the very least, less overtly destabilizing) ways. Such policies include international cooperation with superpowers to whom it sells its oil, as well as checkbook

<sup>87</sup> Kinninmont (2017): 9

diplomacy. By checkbook diplomacy, Colgan refers to the Saudi monarchy's funding of insurgency in Afghanistan in the 1970s, support to Iraq against Iran in the 1980s, and, as I show in the Yemeni case, historical funding of tribes and other proxies to maintain influence in its southern neighbor.<sup>88</sup>

This raises the question of why peak oil revenues for Saudi Arabia did not coincide with initiation of open military conflicts as it did for the the Libyan or Iraqi cases in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, respectively. Colgan finds that significant reliance on oil revenue does not cause particular foreign policies, but rather will enhance tendencies a state otherwise has due to non-material factors like ideology as well as the state's economic and political relationship with Western superpowers. When Saudi oil revenues first began to boom in the 1960s and 1970s, this came on the heels of Saudi reinforcement of its ideological power in response to the threat of Nasserism. As I show in Chapter 2, this was a key period of Saudi state formation, in which the ideological foundations of the state were institutionalized and strengthened. Because of this, the use of petrodollars for foreign conflict initiation, especially against a fellow Arab or Muslim state, was not useful, and would have been counter-productive to King Faisal's pan-Islamist project. At the same time, the Saudi confrontation against Nasserism eventually worked to consolidate Saudi support from its American and British allies. Given

<sup>88</sup> Colgan (2013): 228

that Saudi exports of oil have historically been so intertwined with the need for reliable trading partners in the West, this has further reinforced its policy to avoid open military conflicts.

Regime reliance upon oil and ideology are interlinked, and the move away from one necessitates the move away from the other. The regime's use of its Wahhabi religious establishment has been highly dependent upon oil. The monarchy uses oil revenues to pay the religious establishment for *fatwas* in support of its policies, including those with which religious leaders outside the establishment strongly disagree, such as support for US troops during the first Gulf War. In many cases, the *fatwas* issued are condemnations of opposition movements. The regime thus uses the religious establishment not only as an ideological in support of itself, but to discredit any potential challengers, whether violent or peaceful.<sup>89</sup> As the regime faces economic challenges pushing it to diversify, its ability to effectively utilize religion as an ideological tool has only been further weakened . At the same time, economic diversification requires more open social policies, particularly with regards to the role of women in the public sphere, as well as the potential for tourism and other globally linked private enterprise.

<sup>89</sup> Yamani (2009): 94

Economic factors, and in particular the issue of the state's reliance upon oil, are a key component to domestic instability in the kingdom. Yet, an explanation of a foreign policy shift based on oil prices alone does not give a comprehensive picture. For one, considering the role of the oil economy in a vacuum cannot explain why dwindling economic resources would be devoted to a war, which has been economically and arguably politically more costly than the standard Saudi foreign policy of checkbook diplomacy. Soon after launching the war in Yemen, King Salman cut the immense economic aid that King Abdullah had been giving to President Sisi's counter-revolutionary regime in Egypt since 2013.<sup>90</sup> Despite cuts to its domestic spending and constraints on its checkbook diplomacy abroad, the Saudi regime had launched a massive military campaign in Yemen. If anything, this shows the complicated relationship between domestic economic strife and foreign policy. A strictly economic argument overlooks the ways in which material and ideational legitimacy of the regime are inextricably intertwined. As a result, an explanation that is focused on the economy without incorporating the ideational element is unable to account for why and how the regime is fostering a belligerent nationalism conducive to unprecedented shows of military force abroad.

<sup>90</sup> Sailer (2016): 7

### **Lagging Western support**

Support from Western allies has been a pinnacle of Saudi stability since the regime's inception. Saudi fears of US abandonment during the Obama administration certainly played a role in provoking the shift in regime survival strategies. However, to say this was an anomaly would be to ignore history. It would overlook the uncertainty in US support to the kingdom during previous crises, the greatest being the 1960s crisis. During the late 1950s and 1960s, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy pushed for good relations with Saudi Arabia's rival, Egyptian President Nasser.<sup>91</sup> As the kingdom faced threats from within and without at the height of the Arab Cold War, Saudi Arabia feared the US would favor Nasser and the Arab republics over the monarchies. This was the case even at the time of Nasser's intervention into Yemen and its proxy war there with Saudi Arabia. US support was not guaranteed from the beginning, and as reassurance grew, Saudi boldness grew with it. In contrast, the Saudis met US hesitancy in 2015 by informing them of their plans to proceed with, or without, the help of the US.<sup>92</sup> This came on the heels of years of disappointment with US policy in the region, and so there was not much surprise when the US did not

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Sir John Jenkins, August 15, 2018, Kent, England in which Jenkins described the Saudi upset over Kennedy's support for Nasser as similar with their disdain for Obama

<sup>92</sup> Dexter Filkins, "A Saudi Princes Quest to Remake the Middle East," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>



offer to do more in the lead up to the March 2015 intervention.<sup>93</sup> Whether or not the Saudi decision-making assumed the US would increase their level of military assistance once the intervention began, is impossible to say. What we do know is Saudi Arabia needed, and continues to rely upon, US military assistance, and decided to intervene without first obtaining permission to act militarily and corresponding reassurances of complete support as in the past.

President Obama's moves to thaw diplomatic relations with Tehran stoked a similar fear in the Saudis, but the reaction has been more assertive. Whereas in the 1960s, it was a doubting of an emerging alliance with the US, after the Arab Spring, it was a fear of abandonment. The EU/E3+3 nuclear deal negotiated with Iran in November 2013 and later signed in 2015 has been a significant source of concern to the Saudis, and this stems from Saudi fears of diminished legitimacy, of which US support has been central for decades. As Saudi elites themselves have stated, it is not about Iranian nuclear power as a force in itself, or even the Iranian use of proxy forces in the region. It is, rather, something more fundamental. In the words of former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki bin Faisal, "Iran is a paper tiger with steel claws," by which he meant: the concern is with perceptions of Iranian power.<sup>94</sup> The primary fear of the Saudis would be for

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Michael Stephens, May 3, 2018, London, in which Stephens gives the example of the Saudi view of the US as increasingly unreliable ever since disagreement over a US intervention in Syria in August 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Joshi and Stephens (2014): 11-12

Iran to demonstrate the success of its 'resistance' model to triumph against Saudi Arabia, despite decades of extraordinary support from Western allies.<sup>95</sup>

Leaving aside the variable of post-Arab Spring regional context, there would have been greater potential for Saudi Arabia to return to its bandwagoning stance towards Iran as in the 1990s.<sup>96</sup> Coming as it did on the heels of the Arab Spring, however, the Saudis viewed it as a reaffirmation of potential US abandonment and inadequate US actions to maintain the decades old status quo in the region. Saudi analysts and policymakers alike have pointed to Saudi disappointment with the US's failure to enforce its August, 2013, 'red line' on Syria as the greatest source of tension and subsequent Saudi decision to formulate a more assertive foreign policy. Yet, this explanation has not held up in light of the Saudis backing away from removing Assad from power.<sup>97</sup> While the presence of Assad has been a thorn in the Saudis side in the way that any projection of Iranian influence and power has been, the triumph of the Syrian dictatorship simply does not pose an existential threat to the Saudi regime in the same way that an outright US abandonment would.

The most important part of the US's role is through a regional context in which the status quo of foreign-backed dictatorships in the region was challenged for the first time in decades, and that this challenge stemmed from within. Thus,

<sup>95</sup> Joshi and Stephens (2014): 12

<sup>96</sup> Joshi and Stephens (2014): 13

<sup>97</sup> Vora (2019)

when the US did nothing to stop its thirty-year Egyptian ally Hosni Mubarak from being overthrown, King Abdullah and the other Gulf monarchs were livid.<sup>98</sup> The same sentiment was there when the US wavered during mass protests against the al-Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain, another close US ally. Upon hearing that US Secretary of Defense Gates had told the Bahrainis that their ‘baby steps’ towards reform were not enough, King Abdullah refused to see Gates in Riyadh.<sup>99</sup> The Saudis had been preparing to use force to crush the protests, which by that point involved at least ten percent of Bahrain’s population. While their disagreements with the Obama administration no doubt were key to their urgent sense of insecurity, these fears were a direct function of the Arab Spring and the challenges it brought to the Saudi regime’s legitimacy. The perception of a successful Iranian model, in turn, was rooted in the same fears spurred by the elections in Egypt and Tunisia, in which alternative models of governance that included a role for Islamic legitimacy, showed their potential for challenging status-quo dictatorships. The US’s role in contributing to Saudi anxieties was in its response—or lack thereof—to these neighboring power transitions. President Obama courted the Saudis with greater effort than had any US president since Franklin Roosevelt, but this was not enough to assuage their disquiet with Obama’s rhetoric in favor of revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>100</sup> The role of US

<sup>98</sup> Bruce Riedel (2018): 158

<sup>99</sup> Riedel (2018): 159

<sup>100</sup> Riedel (2018): 177

support therefore is significant, but my argument reinforces the importance of regional context. In doing so, we are reminded that Saudi Arabia has its own agency. Its decisions on whether, how, and when to go about leveraging support from the US in enacting its own foreign policy can have significant impacts on outcome of international politics.

### **Foreign signaling**

If the supposed targets of Saudi aggression are not sufficient in explaining the level of military response, then we might understand the conflict in terms of some sort of display of resolve or power. First, the Saudis have long been concerned with an international audience, namely their superpower ally the US. In 1962, the US was in the midst of mending relations with Nasser, seeing him as a potential local progressive counter-weight to Soviet Communist expansion.<sup>101</sup> Considering the second, contemporary case: perhaps the Saudis wish to display overwhelming force against the Iranian-allied Houthis in the hopes of signaling to the West (US and its allies, including Israel). Such signaling to the reliable, long-time Saudi allies of the West, particularly the US, perhaps might not be necessary under ordinary conditions. Since the start of thawing relations between US and Iran in the 2015 nuclear agreement, however, the Saudis feel a greater need to

<sup>101</sup> Gause (1990):60

depict Iran as a problematic or ‘rogue’ actor in the region. By exacerbating the level of conflict with the Houthis whilst playing up sectarian and political affiliations of the Houthis with Iran, Saudi Arabia is hoping to prevent any potential positive US relations with Iran and, at the same time, to ensure its own continued amenable relations with the US.

This hypothesis thus accounts for the limitations of the Shi’a Crescent argument: any limits to the religious and political Iranian-Houthi links might be distorted through increased Saudi-Houthi violence and overall instability in Yemen. Saudi Arabia’s thinking is that, if it can tarnish Iran’s image by playing up Iranian support of the rebels, then the more sympathetic and supportive the US will be towards Saudi Arabia. Additionally, it is widely understood that the Saudis thought the US would have to accept their intervention in Yemen in exchange for the US’s participation in the nuclear deal with Iran. This does not mean, however, that the Saudis actually expected the US to become directly involved in Yemen. They were not surprised when the Obama administration did not offer more of a response in Yemen.<sup>102</sup>

The strategy seems to have worked, to an extent, under the Obama administration, and to an even greater degree under the Trump administration. The US’s logistical military support to the Saudis through massive arms sales and

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Michael Stephens, May 3, 2018, London

mid-air refueling has been essential for the military campaign. Despite this reality, the Saudis told the Obama administration in March, 2015, that they wanted their help, but they would be going in regardless.<sup>103</sup> Since that time, US support increased steadily, going even higher after President Trump took office. In contrast, during the 1960s, Crown Prince Faisal sought out US support early on, but nonetheless sought to avoid a confrontation with Nasser in Yemen. The Saudis stepped up their military role only once they had US and British backing assured. While increased military and rhetorical support by the Trump administration emboldened the Saudis in 2017, they have been hoping for a way out of the current quagmire, as they had only anticipated the conflict lasting several weeks. The crown prince, however, is simply unwilling to do anything to appear defeated. In the meantime, US Senators have shown increasing levels of concern for supporting this conflict. In fact, the Yemen war has strained US ties with Saudi Arabia more than it has increased its levels of sympathy, particularly when it comes to the US public and their representatives in Congress. Since 2016, there has been increasing bipartisan criticism of Saudi Arabia. As Senator Chris Murphy (CT) stated on September 21, 2016, regarding opposition to a \$1.15

<sup>103</sup> Dexter Filkins, "A Saudi Princes Quest to Remake the Middle East," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>

billion arms transfer to Saudi: “Never before have so many Senators gone on record supporting a rethink of the US-Saudi relationship.”<sup>104</sup>

Since 9/11, the Saudi government has become increasingly concerned with its Western support. Saudi framing of Iran and Shi’a militants such as Hezbollah as the major sources of regional instability has no doubt been part of a strategy to deflect any ideological connections between Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism from extremists like Al Qaeda and ISIS. Similarly to oil, though, an exclusive overemphasis on foreign audiences and the Western role in sustaining the regime risks overlooking significant domestic ideational factors.

### **Leadership change**

As central as the US is, a primary concern with a Western audience alone cannot explain a number of public displays of brutality carried out since the intervention in Yemen. Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman’s blatant disregard for what the US thinks on Saudi foreign policy and human rights has been exemplified over the last two years through a blockade of fellow US ally Qatar, kidnapping the Lebanese Prime Minister, a drastic increase in death sentences given to peaceful activists, and the murder of US-resident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Many have thus attributed changes in Saudi foreign and domestic

<sup>104</sup> Emmons (2016)

policies alike to the advent of a new leadership in King Salman as king in 2015 and Muhammad bin Salman as defense minister in 2015. Indeed, this brutality has only increased since Muhammad bin Salman became crown prince in 2017. This dissertation does not seek to challenge the central role Muhammad bin Salman has played in driving recent changes in Saudi regime survival strategies. Rather, I seek to help explain through a more comprehensive framework why and how Muhammad bin Salman has been able to do this.

First, it must be acknowledged that the shift to a more aggressive foreign policy predates the rise of Muhammad bin Salman and his father King Salman.<sup>105</sup> Second, in the historical context of previous Saudi regime decision-making on both foreign policy and succession decisions, the rise of Muhammad bin Salman begs the question: how did he successfully consolidate power by breaking so many previous norms? I argue that Muhammad bin Salman's role since March 2015 in vigorously pushing through a preexisting upward trend in aggressive foreign policy has been successful because it occurred during a period in which such displays of aggression have been increasingly attractive to the regime. The new crown prince has proven to be a benefactor of the sense of the regime's post-Arab Spring insecurity while simultaneously taking the regime's response of aggressive displays of power to even greater heights. Furthermore, I use the 1960s

<sup>105</sup> "The military intervention that the world forgot," Amy Austin Holmes, Al Jazeera, March 29, 2014 <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/3/bahrain-uprisinginterventionsaudi Arabiaemirates.html>



case in a similar way to show how and why Crown Prince Faisal was ultimately successful in his own bid for power, and how that was as much a product of regional politics and foreign policy as it was a driver of it.

### **Methods**

This dissertation makes several contributions to the literature on authoritarian regimes and on conflict initiation. While great strides have been made in the study of different types of authoritarian regimes, little has looked at how an intra-regime change over time affects foreign aggression. Secondly, it problematizes culturalist explanations for conflict in the Middle East. Much has been written on the rising sectarian tensions since the Arab uprisings. Traditional IR scholars and policymakers in the West have been receptive to the Saudi narrative of a looming Shi'a Crescent threatening to take the entire region in large part because of how deeply embedded sectarian understandings of the region are in the West. This dissertation challenges that by looking at the constructed and transient nature of national identity. By showing how identity can change over time I challenge essentialist understandings of Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim culture and explanations of violence rooted in primordial sectarian conflicts.

My theory draws from works on regime legitimation strategies<sup>106</sup> and on diversionary war<sup>107</sup> that rely heavily on quantitative methods. These studies, alongside work on ontological security, have been essential to the theoretical framework I have built. Large n studies and use of statistical regression inevitably sacrifice specific case knowledge and historical depth in favor of attaining a broader scope. Because of this, they cannot, on their own, answer a specific question on change over time like the one I address. Both of my cases involve ideological challenges, but the different nature of these challenges, and how and why the Saudi regime interacts differently with them, is dependent upon historical and regional context of the Saudi state in both time periods. I have chosen comparative historical analysis because my research question-- what has driven the aggressive foreign policy shift in one time period but not another in Saudi Arabia—is a real-world puzzle that involves change over time in one country.

Comparative historical analysis is done through process tracing, which involves carefully observing empirical mechanisms within a case to determine causality. In order for this to work, extensive knowledge about the case is necessary, as one factors in all potential causal mechanisms<sup>108</sup>. Cases are chosen based on certain scope conditions required for the theory to apply. The scope is kept however narrow is necessary for the theory to be reliable. With the focus on

<sup>106</sup> Von Soest and Grauvogel (2017)

<sup>107</sup> Lai and Slater (2006); Colgan (2013); Mansfield and Snyder (1995)

<sup>108</sup> Mahoney and Thelen (2015): 16

‘getting cases right’ in terms of matching contexts in which not just variable X’s effect on Y, but potential additional conditions in that particular case are examined, which in turn contribute to the way in which X affects Y<sup>109</sup>. Thus, in order to understand the particular causal mechanisms at work in my two Saudi cases, and from there to determine which parts are applicable and in which ways to other potential cases, a solid foundational knowledge of Saudi Arabia and regional context in both time periods is necessary. This is even more so given that few regimes are as closed as Saudi Arabia, and even fewer perhaps have such an important role for ideology in legitimation, such a large n study may not be possible. General theories and broader testing through larger n regression studies may complement this sort of work, but such methods cannot substitute for the high internal validity that close study of specific case or small number of cases offers.<sup>110</sup> With results from this comparative historical analysis focused on these two cases, one may find points of comparison for a larger statistical study on regimes facing legitimation crises or in which authoritarian regimes initiate wars in the absence of strong evidence for external material threats. Questions of such broad scope are not, however, the goal of this project.

The project, initially inspired from observations that Saudi Arabia seemed to be becoming more militarily interventionist in recent years, and that this

<sup>109</sup> Mahoney and Thelen 2015: 7

<sup>110</sup> Mahoney and Thelen 2015: 12

seemed to coincide with an ascendance of sectarian discourse in the region. It was thus inspired by the questions of why they had intervened in Yemen in 2015, and how their construction of threats through such narratives differed from the past. Upon further reading and consultation with my advisors, I decided that the best way to address my questions would be to compare this current intervention with a previous one with as much overlap in a set of scope conditions as possible. While the Saudis have an extensive history in intervening in Yemen, the only other time in which they engaged in full-scale war was at the time of the state's founding in the 1930s, a clear mission of state-building through territorial expansion. Wanting to understand why they intervened more extensively than any other time since that period in the 1930s, I wanted to choose a conflict that was far enough removed temporally from the current conflict so as to examine responses in a different historical context. With a clear point of difference in historical domestic and regional contexts for Saudi Arabia, the 1960s case offered a number of close parallels so as to keep the scope narrow and rule out too many potential confounding variables. Most importantly, the 1960s was the only other time period characterized by regional revolutionary upheaval, in which fellow authoritarian regimes in the region were being toppled through revolution while local actors questioned the status quo. In both cases this included revolution against a lukewarm allied regime in Yemen. Additionally, in both cases, the regime faced formative moments in succession, as the throne passed to a new

generation in each period; the only two palace coups in the modern Saudi state occurred in each of these periods.

For each case, I trace the different links in the causal chain of the Saudi monarchy's survival strategies, as played out through regime restructuring at home and foreign policy abroad. This includes both official speeches and other official and unofficial press descriptions of foreign and domestic threats, constructions of alliances and rivals, and correspondence with the US and British governments and other researchers regarding Saudi threat perceptions, infighting and complications within the regime, and the shifting nature of the regime's responses to political and social opposition. The nuanced nature of understanding threat perception, construction of different types of threats over the time period from the start of the first case (roughly, 1958) to the second (up through 2018) requires such in-depth, qualitative work. To do so, I have drawn from historical archival work in the College Park, Maryland National Archives, the online database for the Foreign Relations of the United States, from the 1950s through the end of the Saudi-Egyptian conflict in Yemen in 1967, historical monographs, and several dissertations of Saudi scholars who had access to the kingdom during the reign of King Faisal. I have carried out over two dozen interviews in person, over the phone, and through email, with US and British diplomats, Saudi activists living in the US and the UK, policy analysts living in the UK and the Arab region, researchers working for Human Rights Watch, and fellow academics. A large

number of those interviewed were able to provide knowledge and insight on both time periods for each of my cases. To maximize access given restrictions of travel and language barriers, I have drawn extensively from the archives of Mideastwire's database of translated articles from Arab and other regional newspapers from the time of the Arab uprisings through the present, including news sources funded by the Saudi government, and those funded by rival states, in addition to the English-language version of Saudi media outlets such as al-Arabiya. Additionally, I have collected spreadsheets of datasets from pro-Saudi Twitter accounts tweeting on Yemen from January 2012 through March, 2019.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of doing research on an authoritarian regime from abroad, particularly as it goes through a period of intensified repression of researchers and the press. Although contact with those working for the Saudi government has been difficult, I nonetheless have drawn considerably from Saudi-funded media and government statements in both cases. In some ways, I may note that finding Saudis willing to critique their government, even while living abroad, was at times difficult, and became increasingly so in the second year of the project. In my attempts to triangulate different perspectives from those in varying circumstances, I encountered some roadblocks on all ends. Nonetheless, the amount of information I was able to gather from the press, historical archives, think tanks, diplomats, and activists, was advantaged by the historically close relationships the American and British governments have had

with Saudi Arabia, my own proximity to Washington, DC, and ability to travel to the UK twice.

### **Layout of dissertation**

Chapters two and three are devoted to the case study of Saudi regime survival during the Nasserist period from 1958 to 1967. In chapter two, I begin with an overview of the early period of state-building in the 1920s to situate some of the unstable foundations of Saudi legitimacy. I then use Crown Prince Faisal's struggle for power between 1958 and 1964 to show how the regime responded domestically to rising ideological challenges in the region and within the kingdom through a strengthening of the royal family and centralization of religious power. This included the state's expansion of control over, its key source of ideological legitimacy: Wahhabi Islam by implementing a more pan-Islamic approach. The corresponding horizontal fragmentation of religious authority was modeled on the monarchy's simultaneously developing horizontal structure. In chapter three, I use Faisal's limited military response to Egyptian intervention in Yemen to show how the Saudi regime's prioritization of its own cohesion and stability played out through a pragmatic reaction to an aggressive rival.

Chapters four and five cover the case of Saudi regime responses to the Arab uprisings in 2011. I begin chapter four with background context on the

emergence of Islamist challenges to the regime in the early 1990s, in the wake of the first Gulf War. This illustrates the early foundations of contemporary ideological challenges while also showing the regime's success in containing them. I then use the case of the Arab uprisings in 2011 as a turning point in how the regime responds to regional and domestic challenges. I trace a continuum of growing repression without the co-optation of the past from 2011 to 2018. This includes how a new leadership after 2015 is emboldened by the climate of aggressive responses to the Arab uprisings regionally and domestically to consolidate power in a different style than previous leaders, which in turn facilitates more repression without the balancing force of co-optation. Finally, in chapter five, I use the military intervention in Yemen to show how this plays out through foreign policy. The move from co-optation to balance hard repression at home is replaced by foreign aggression. As in the case of the 1960s, foreign policy is guided by the ways in which the regime chooses to construct domestic and regional threats. Unlike the 1960s, the intervention in Yemen in 2015 is shaped by the construction of threats as existential. I conclude in chapter six with a discussion of the potential implications for further understanding of domestic instability, institutional breakdown, and aggression abroad. This includes an overview of other instances of Saudi aggression since the start of the intervention in Yemen, and the question of what implications we can make about the Saudi



regime from there, and, potentially, foreign policies of other closed authoritarian regimes facing ontological threats.

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## **CHAPTER 2: SAUDI RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF NASSERISM: STRENGTHENING IDEOLOGY, DEVELOPING DYNASTICISM**

In this chapter, I examine how the nature of threats to the Saudi monarchy in the 1950s-1960s shaped the regime's attempts to strengthen its institutions and maximize its own ideological legitimacy. The regime's recalibration was provoked by two crises: a succession crisis and the security threat from Arab nationalism. The monarchy was successful in stabilizing itself through dynasticism in the wake of a succession crisis. At the same time, its religious strategy against Arab nationalism served to bolster the monarchy's ideological legitimacy. Because the internal security threats stemmed from foreign sources with little resonance beyond more elite segments of society, the regime could deal with them through a combination of brute repression of any revolutionary or violent threats and co-optation of elites and moderates through talk of reform and modernization, while simultaneously reinforcing the regime's ideological sources of support through centralizing and expanding the religious establishment. Repression was high, but the regime made this sustainable by combining this with co-optation and its own ideology in response to that of Nasserism. I break this chapter into three parts. Part one contextualizes ideological and revolutionary threats to the regime, both at the time of its founding, and during the Arab nationalist period of the 1950s and 1960s. Part two traces how the struggle for power between the two successors to the throne, Saud and Faisal, culminated in a

strengthened regime in the form of dynastic monarchical rule. Part three then shows how the victor of the succession struggle, first as crown prince then as king, successfully handled threats in a way so as to strengthen the regime's sources of legitimacy, including through ideology, co-optation, and repression.

I begin by contextualizing this period with the state's founding in the late 1920s. While the modern kingdom was founded in 1932, its institutions were not consolidated beyond the personalist rule of King Ibn Saud until the unfolding of a succession crisis between the founder's two eldest sons, King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal from 1958-1964.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the early state formation period of the 1920s, the Saudi ruler Ibn Saud had confronted challenges to his kingdom's stability from religious and tribal conflict. I use this initial historical period as a point of contextualization for the ways in which his son Faisal would go on to more comprehensively centralize the state in the 1960s through institutionalization of the monarchy and its relationship to its ideological source of legitimacy. Faisal's reforms of religious institutions strengthened the monarchy in the wake of regional and domestic crises in the 1960s. The threat of Arab nationalism spurred the monarchy to support a new king, who in turn used this support and the security threat to build the coalition that would sustain the regime into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>1</sup> Huyette (1985): 60

The alliance between the al-Saud and Wahhabism had always been a double-edged sword, as this ultraconservative interpretation of Islam clashed with the generally more liberal inhabitants of the Hijaz, the very region containing Mecca and Medina that enabled the Saudis to claim Islamic leadership. This internal threat to the regime's legitimacy was provoked by the external regional threat of Arab nationalism beginning in the late 1950s. On the one hand, Faisal responded with reforms aimed at co-opting the emerging Saudi middle class so as to prevent their defection to the Arab nationalist cause. He combined this with a larger modernization initiative aimed at centralizing the monarchy's authority alongside a decentralized religious establishment. Faisal's attempts at institutionalizing the religious establishment, however, were not aimed at curtailing the role of religion over society. In fact, he offset the monarchy's fragmentation of religious authority by extending their role over education and the emerging judiciary. He informally expanded religion's role over society by embracing Islamists fleeing repression from secular regimes abroad. The regime's power consolidation was based on a constraining of religion at the level of the state in tandem with its expansion over society. This contradiction was offset by a cautious foreign policy centered on a pan-Islamist alternative to, rather than challenge of, Arab nationalism.

### **Early Saudi state formation: an unstable religious foundation**

The greatest threats to the Saudi regime at the time of the state's founding in 1932 were rooted in the contradictions within its ideological source of legitimacy: Wahhabism.<sup>2</sup> The modern Saudi state was founded through an alliance between the ruler of the kingdom of Najd, Ibn Saud, and the descendants of the founder of an ultraconservative sect of Islam, known as Wahhabism. On the one hand, Ibn Saud sought to spread Wahhabism throughout the Arabian peninsula, and to use the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance as a platform to religiously justify his rule over Islam's holiest cities. He successfully conquered much of what became the kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the Wahhabi tribal militia known as the *ikhwan*. At the same time, however, the regime's security was tied up in external protection. Different from most other postcolonial states, the contemporary Saudi state in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century formed through external expansion. Unlike older, Western powers, however, Saudi state formation did not occur without external constraints. It just so happened that the most significant great external power in the early Saudi state formation was one that restricted the greatest regional and domestic threat to Saudi rule. The British presence in the region had increased as a result of the fall of the Ottomans after WWI. Rather than seeking to conquer the Saudi heartlands of Najd and the Hijaz, however, the

<sup>2</sup> al-Rasheed (2002): 62

British facilitated the consolidation of Saudi control over these territories, ultimately at the expense of the most significant threat to the kingdom: the Hashimite family.<sup>3</sup> The Hashimites were the family that had led the revolt against the Ottomans at the end of World War I. They traced their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad, and so their claims to rule the Hijaz threatened Saudi religious authority.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, British support of Saudi conquest of the Hijaz was crucial to the security of the Saudi regime.

The period between the conquest of Hijaz (1926) and subsequent expansion that resulted in war with the Yemeni Imamate (1934) coincided with the 20<sup>th</sup> century Saudi state's greatest initial confrontation with a major internal threat: the tribal militia known as the *ikhwan*. Not to be confused with the same Arabic term that denotes affiliates of the religious organization founded in Egypt known as the Muslim Brotherhood, the *ikhwan* referred to here in the context of the early Saudi state's founding was a tribal military force indigenous to the region of Najd that served as Ibn Saud's source of external military expansion.<sup>5</sup> The *ikhwan* physically enforced the religious tenets of their clerical religious components of the *mutawwa* while conquering new territory for the al-Saud.<sup>6</sup> Distinct from the religious leadership known as *ulema* more standard in other

<sup>3</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 238

<sup>4</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 235; Safran (1985): 41, 55

<sup>5</sup> al-Rasheed (2002): 60

<sup>6</sup> al-Rasheed (2002): 61

regions and throughout the larger Arab world, the majority of Najdi religious specialists—key to Saudi state formation—were the puritanical enforcers of Wahhabism known as the *mutawwa*. Unlike the *ulema* of Mecca, Riyadh, Cairo, Najaf, and elsewhere in the Arab world, the *mutawwa* of Najd were not associated with centers for religious learning.<sup>7</sup> Seeing themselves as the representatives of the traditional Bedouin population and defenders of the puritanical Wahhabi faith, the *ikhwan* militias and *mutawwa* clerics were at once both the forces of successful Saudi military domination in the region of the Hijaz and the source of ideational threats to Saudi stability<sup>8</sup>. On the one hand the *ikhwan* provided a potent military force to capture territories beyond Najd, including the Hijaz. They also acted on behalf of the *mutawwa* to consolidate the religious legitimacy of the al-Saud in the form of the distinct Wahhabi claims to rule over the Arabian Peninsula. At the same time, however, the puritanical views of the *mutawwa* and the *ikhwan*'s militant aggression threatened to alienate indigenous populations of the Hijaz and other conquered territories with more theologically diverse and outward-oriented religious views than those of the Najd. The *ikhwan* had clashed with what they saw as infidels of the Hijaz at the time of the Saudi conquests in the 1920s, thus risking Ibn Saud's reputation both over his new territory and with his major external ally Britain.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the *ikhwan* posed a direct threat

<sup>7</sup> al-Rasheed (2002): 50

<sup>8</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 267

<sup>9</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 270, 276

to Ibn Saud as they disagreed with his adoption of the telegraph, ties with Britain, and taxation policies.<sup>10</sup>

The force of Saudi state-building simultaneously posed an internal threat of rebellion while stoking external threats from Britain as well as the Hashimites, who could use religion to rival Saudi claims over the Hijaz and throughout the Arabian peninsula.<sup>11</sup> In order to further his ability to use the *ikhwan* as a state-building, regime-legitimizing tool, 1926 Ibn Saud created the League of Public Morality in 1926.<sup>12</sup> He facilitated the Committee for the Encouragement of Virtue and Discrimination of Vice's dispersion into the Hijaz so as to inculcate the population with Wahhabism.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this move solidified the intrinsic social division of the Saudi kingdom. Whereas the Hijazis opposed this Wahhabi infiltration, the *ikhwan* refused to be consigned to a political tool once they had served their purpose as a force of religious and physical conquest of the Hijaz.<sup>14</sup> After failing to prevent the *ikhwan* from rebelling, Ibn Saud resorted to conquering them. But Ibn Saud's conquering of the *ikhwan* was not the end of domestic unrest in the early formation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century state, as the Hijazis were upset over both the Wahhabi infiltration by the *mutawwa* and *ikhwan* as well as the instability Saud's civil war with the *ikhwan* had caused. This would contrast

<sup>10</sup> al-Rasheed (2002): 65

<sup>11</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 235; Safran (1985): 41, 55

<sup>12</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 271

<sup>13</sup> Shaker (1972):123

<sup>14</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 271



with later periods of accommodations with the Wahhabi. King Faisal's 1960s reforms, while meant to centralize state control over the religious establishment and appeal to educated Hijazis, simultaneously expanded the platform of Wahhabism and various other Islamic schools both domestically and internationally.

Ibn Saud's disbanding of the *ikhwan* began the process of institutionalization and centralization of the al-Saud's control over its internal security apparatus and the Wahhabi religious establishment.<sup>15</sup> The forces of the disbanded *ikhwan* were integrated into what became the Saudi National Guard, originally known as the White Army.<sup>16</sup> This would come to be the most important element of the Saudi military and the one upon which the regime relied as the monarchy increasingly feared building up its traditional army in the wake of the Free Officers' coup in Egypt in 1952. Thus, the weakened, centralized remnants of the *ikhwan* ultimately became the basis for the key branch of the Saudi armed forces through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> This was only a partial solution to a more foundational problem of the regime's source of legitimacy. Still unresolved was the problematic nature of using religion to legitimate the monarchy. Furthermore, it reflected a broader division of Saudi society along regional lines, between a better educated, more urban population with broader interpretations of

<sup>15</sup> Safran (1985): 49

<sup>16</sup> Abir (1988): 21

<sup>17</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 341

Islam in the Hijazi region home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and the more rural, Bedouin region of Najd from where Wahhabism emanated.<sup>18</sup> The Hijaz contained social and economic elements already more conducive to a centralized state, including remnants of an army left behind by the previous Hashimite rulers. Home to the cities of Mecca and Medina, incorporation of the Hijaz has always been key to the al-Saud's claims to religiously derived political authority. Yet, so long as the al-Saud would stake its claims to rule, it required a strong internal security apparatus and religious legitimacy.

### **Opposition to the regime in the Arab nationalist period**

Before tracing the nature of domestic threats in the 1950s and 1960s, I provide here a short regional contextualization of Arab nationalist period. Arab nationalism can be traced back to literary movements among Arab societies within the Ottoman Levant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the Ottoman Empire came to be economically overshadowed by the emerging Western capitalist system.<sup>19</sup> The British and French mandate system that took control over Arab states after World War I further entrenched in the region a pan-Arab identity centered on anti-colonialism, and, with the rise of the United Arab Republic, revolutionary

<sup>18</sup> Shaker (1972): 122

<sup>19</sup> Gelvin (1999): 74

socialism.<sup>20</sup> In 1952, a group of military officers in Egypt staged a coup against the British-backed monarchy, bringing independence to the country after centuries of British and Ottoman imperialisms. One of the leading generals, Gamal abd'l Nasser quickly rose to power as president, and assumed the role as a regional figurehead for Arab independence from foreign powers.<sup>21</sup> This included a disdain for the region's monarchies that had been created and sustained with British assistance. The Egyptian Radio station *Sawt al-Arab* broadcast revolutionary propaganda throughout the region, and was influential in the 1958 military coup that overthrew the Hashimite monarchy in Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

In response to the domestic and regional threats at the time, the Saudi monarchy prioritized its own stability above all else. The threats stemming from Nasserist-inspired nationalist opposition were significant in terms of their demands, but well known to the regime and seemingly manageable due to their being limited to small, mostly elite, sections of the population. These included increasingly better-educated groups in the Hijaz and the Eastern Province that were historically at odds with Wahhabism, and in the case of the Shi'a, particularly marginalized socially. Additionally, there were tribes in the Saudi heartland of Najd as well as the region of Asir who had never fully resigned themselves to the al-Saud's rule, and were thereby attracted to leftist resistance. In

<sup>20</sup> Kerr (1967): 7

<sup>21</sup> Kerr (1967): 8

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Sir John Jenkins, August 15, 2018, Kent, England

the Eastern Province, marginalized Shi'a and foreign Arabs from Yemen, Egypt, and Palestine working for Aramco had become increasingly aware of their socioeconomic exploitation at the hands of a Saudi alliance with private Western contractors.<sup>23</sup>

Better educated than their Najdi counterparts, and with greater access to and control of the media, there were a number of Hijazi elites who were more attracted to Arab nationalism's modernization discourse and to Nasser than was the rest of the kingdom.<sup>24</sup> Hijazi opposition was mostly characterized by an emerging middle class comprised of educated business elites whose criticisms of the monarchy were relatively moderate. By themselves, they posed little potential for overthrowing the monarchy.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, a faction of young princes, led by Prince Talal and his full brothers, came to represent them. Known as the Free Princes, their main objective was pushing for a constitutional monarchy and a closer association with the socially progressive tenets of Arab nationalism. As I explain in the sections on the Saud-Faisal struggle as well as on Faisal's co-optation strategies, the Free Princes oscillated sides as they attempted to push for political reform. At one point defecting to Beirut and then joining alongside

<sup>23</sup> Abir (1988): 75

<sup>24</sup> Abir (1988): 75

See also: Abir (1988), 89; al-Orabi al-Harithi(1983): 133. The press began to dismiss nationalist and Egyptian journalists in 1961, and Faisal centralized state control over the media officially in 1962 with the creation of the Ministry of Information, but prior to this, the Hijazis had a closer relationship with, and influence on the Saudi media

<sup>25</sup> Abir (1988): 76, 96

Nasserist groups in Cairo, they eventually reconciled with the rest of the Saudi monarchy.<sup>26</sup>

A more militant organization that formed in 1954, the National Reform Front (NRF), renamed the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1957, posed a potentially more menacing threat to the regime. Founded by the leaders of the 1953 Aramco strike, the NLF included Hijazis as well as some Najdis in addition to military officers and the Aramco workers and Palestinian Arab Nationalists of the Eastern Province.<sup>27</sup> Distributing pamphlets to try to gain mass support in the Eastern Province, the Hijaz, and in Riyadh, the NRF still lacked widespread mass support within the kingdom.<sup>28</sup> If anything, what it further revealed was the regime's troublesome relationship with more educated groups, including foreign Arabs, and the military. In 1955, fifteen army officers linked to the NRF were arrested for protests demanding pay raises, and it is thought that they were further spurred on by aversion to Saud's decision to allocate more funds to the National Guard over the army.<sup>29</sup>

1956, Nasir Said led Aramco workers in the Eastern Province in another nationalist strike, this time more political in nature than the primarily economic emphasis of the last. It was provoked by Aramco's concessions to private

<sup>26</sup> Abir (1988): 76, 96; Vassiliev (1998): 368; al-Rasheed (2002): 110

<sup>27</sup> Abir (1988): 75

<sup>28</sup> Abir (1988): 75; Vassiliev (1998): 361

<sup>29</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 155

contractors as well as King Saud's pronounced support for a future US military base in Dharan.<sup>30</sup> Initially having been imprisoned for his leading role in the Aramco Workers' Committee strike of 1953, the best-known Saudi opposition leader from 1953-1970s, Nasir Said was released that same year. Fomenting more unrest in Al-Hasa in 1956, Said escaped a death sentence by fleeing to Syria, where he formed the Nasserist Union of the Peoples of the Arabian Peninsula (UPAP) in 1958.<sup>31</sup> Said moved to Cairo, where through radio broadcasts and pamphlets, he began calling for the Saudi people to overthrow the monarchy. Despite the continued role of the NLF and its offshoots in subversive activities promoting revolution in Saudi Arabia into the 1960s, support for such movements among the Saudi population was largely limited to the Aramco workforce and foreign Arabs, namely Yemenis and Palestinians.<sup>32</sup>

### **Initial responses: repression**

At this time, the Saudi military was still in its infancy, as the regime had not formed a modern conventional army since having disbanded the tribal *ikhwan* militias in the 1930s. Because of the wave of nationalist military coups sweeping the region in the 1950s, the Saudi regime was reluctant to build up a conventional

<sup>30</sup> Abir (1988): 79

<sup>31</sup> Abir (1988): 76

<sup>32</sup> Abir (1988): 76

army. Thus, dealing with one source of potential domestic nationalist threat, the military itself, prevented the regime from effectively eliminating those stemming from the emerging elites in the Hijaz and the Eastern Province. While King Saud may have used the National Guard to crush these threats, this tribal force formed from the *ikhwan* remained weak and divisive security bodies, a matter that would not be fully addressed until Faisal sought more external help in modernizing the National Guard in the mid-1960s. In 1954, King Saud issued a royal decree prohibiting strikes and demonstrations, stationed new National Guard units in the Eastern Province, and formed the Directorate General of Broadcasting, Press, and Publications to tighten control on the media in the Hijaz.<sup>33</sup> King Saud also built up the Royal Guard, but by 1955 saw the similar dangers in this as existed in the regular army: as an elite-led force, the Royal Guard was headed by educated elites and princes attracted to Nasserism. Saud shifted to building up the National Guard by the mid-1950s, as this was comprised of Bedouin tribes deemed more loyal than the nationalist-sympathizing elites leading the Royal Guard and the army.<sup>34</sup> This move, however, only provoked elites connected to the regular army and princes connected to the Royal Guard.

Writing at the turn of the century, Saudi academic and dissident Madawi al-Rasheed put it this way, “Nasir Said, along with nationalist-sympathizing elites

<sup>33</sup> Abir (1988): 78

<sup>34</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 154

like Abdullah Tariqi and Prince Talal, remained scattered voices that nonetheless made King Saud's reign the most uncertain period in modern Saudi history."<sup>35</sup> The internal threats to the kingdom were inseparable from foreign threats, which continued to grow, meaning appeasement of Nasser could not continue.<sup>36</sup> This became all the more important given a succession crisis that emerged at this time within the royal family. The regime's response to this succession crisis was shaped by the recognition of the best way to deal with regional Arab nationalist threats. In turn, a more resilient monarchy was able to avoid destabilizing, aggressive actions abroad. Before moving to explaining how Faisal built the state in response to major regional threats, I will trace the role the regime's response to supporting him over King Saud ultimately had in shaping the strength of the Saudi system.

### **The Saud-Faisal Struggle: regime development of dynasticism**

Just before he passed away in 1953, Ibn Saud had created the *majlis al-wukala* (Council of Ministers) as an administrative apparatus of the monarchy through which the next king would rule over the entire kingdom. It was a state bureaucracy that could expand government functions beyond the narrow scope of his personalist style of rule. The only region that contained ministries with

<sup>35</sup> Al-Rasheed (2002): 113

<sup>36</sup> Abir (1988): 80



national jurisdiction was the Hijaz, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance were based.<sup>37</sup> Upon ascending to power, King Saud appointed Faisal, who had more governing experience from his position as viceroy of the Hijaz, to preside over the Council. By 1955, King Saud took advantage of regional insecurity in the hopes of consolidating a more individualistic monarchy without any significant checks on power by fellow senior princes. The discovery of an Egyptian plot to foment an overthrow of the Saudi monarchy, combined with the rise of conservative, anti-Egyptian forces in the region, afforded King Saud the ability to move the monarchy in his own direction.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, as it became apparent that King Saud was not only promoting his sons, but doing so at the expense of other top princes, the family quickly grew irritated with the king.<sup>39</sup> In his attempts to do away with checks on his authority, Saud had threatened the proportionally allocated authority of princes of different maternal lineages and, correspondingly, princely representation of different tribal and geographic regions.

As would play out until the official transfer of power to Faisal in 1964, Faisal tended to gain powers over the king any time the regime faced a crisis, domestic or foreign. Saud, on the other hand, would attempt to reassert power

<sup>37</sup> Huyette (1985): 59

<sup>38</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 58-59

<sup>39</sup> Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, March 17, 2018; Yizraeli (1997): 58; 786A.13/1-1961 Box 2068: Telegram from Embassy of Jidda to US Department of State, January 19, 1961

after Faisal had made progress on financial reforms and working to reduce tensions with Nasser.<sup>40</sup> Both brothers shared the same goal of wanting to retain absolute power of the monarchy, but Faisal's tactics were more sophisticated, prioritizing long-term stability of the regime as a part of his own strategy to consolidate power. Whereas Saud was seen as an incompetent and imprudent leader with the potential to exacerbate the kingdom's financial and political problems,<sup>41</sup> Faisal became known as a force for long-term stability, seeking to centralize the state through financial reforms, expanding education, and building major roadways.<sup>42</sup>

In February 1958, a former Syrian military leader reported that Saud had offered him two million pounds to assassinate Nasser.<sup>43</sup> Some dispute whether or not this was an Egyptian ploy to destabilize the Saudi monarchy or to facilitate the rise to power of a more favorable leader in Faisal.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of the precise nature of Saud's assassination attempt, the point is that there was a general agreement within the royal family that Faisal would be less reckless, and possibly from the Egyptian perspective and among the Free Princes, that Faisal would be

<sup>40</sup> Safran (1985): 90

<sup>41</sup> FRUS, 1958- 1960, Vol. XII: Special National Intelligence Estimate: The Outlook in Saudi Arabia and Consequences of Possible US Courses of Action, Washington, September 9, 1958: 735

<sup>42</sup> Abir (1988): 82; Yizraeli (1997): 138

<sup>43</sup> FRUS, 1958- 1960, Vol. XII: Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Rountree) to Secretary of State Dulles, Washington, March 14, 1958: 719; Interview with Sir John Jenkins, August 15, 2018, Kent, England, in which Sir John mentioned this incident as a factor indicative of growing Saudi tensions with Egypt

<sup>44</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 69-70

more sympathetic to Arab nationalism.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, it came at a time of increased push for reform of the regime. Saud's careless personal use of state finances had driven the state to the brink of financial collapse. The result was a royal consensus in transferring major governing powers to Faisal as prime minister as a means of staving off heightened conflict with Nasser as well as economic instability that could threaten to drive more support within the kingdom for revolutionary Arab nationalist movements.<sup>46</sup> Talal of the Free Princes as well as the slightly more senior Fahd both were influential in pushing for either curtailment of Saud's powers or outright abdication.<sup>47</sup> In a foreshadowing of what was to come later, the royal family came together, with the most senior prince, the king's uncle, Abdullah ibn Abd'l Rahman, leading the way towards a royal consensus in giving Faisal extensive powers as prime minister.<sup>48</sup> The decision reflected, among other things, a recognition within the regime that Saudi policy towards Egypt required care in order to prevent escalation of greater regional unrest. Furthermore, it revealed the extent to which the regional and domestic context of the Arab nationalist period shaped a cautious Saudi foreign policy, which in turn, ultimately strengthened the regime as a dynastic form of monarchy.

<sup>45</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 69-70

<sup>46</sup> FRUS US Relations with Saudi Arabia: Internal Saudi Reforms, 1958-60, Vol. XII: 719, 726

<sup>47</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 68-69; Vassiliev (1998): 355

<sup>48</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 70

Faisal had begun his premiership in 1958 with much-needed but unpopular financial reforms, implementing an IMF program of fiscal austerity and reigning in royal spending. Faisal, however, faced backlash from merchant communities and from nationalist admirers of Nasserism. At that time, King Saud had opportunistically reached out to the Arab nationalists to challenge an increasingly powerful, and in the eyes of fellow senior royals, more competent, Faisal. In 1959, Saud visited Nasser as part of a power play against Faisal. The king sought to consolidate support among the Free Princes, who were exasperated with Faisal's refusal to implement their progressive political reforms.<sup>49</sup> When Faisal and his conservative base of senior princes and the *ulema* rejected Talal's proposal for a constitutional monarchy in June 1960, Saud was positioned to have the upper hand when it came to utilizing Nasserist supporters as a political tool against Faisal. After a technical disagreement over Faisal's draft budget, Saud chose to take Faisal's subsequent written complaint as a formal resignation as prime minister. The Free Princes sided with the king, who reconsolidated his position for the next year by forming a pro-nationalist government with his son Muhammed ibn Saud as defense minister, Talal as finance minister, and maintaining the renowned nationalist Abdullah Tariqi as minister of petroleum and natural resources.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Shaker (1972): 179

<sup>50</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 358

By early 1961, however, senior princes were advocating for Saud to replace the Free Princes coalition with one led by Faisal. Eventually, after disagreements with the Free Princes over their progressive political views, Saud himself removed them from power. The fragility of the alliance between Saud and the Free Princes revealed the extent to which this was an alliance of convenience for both; the Free Princes saw Saud as easier to manipulate than Faisal, and Saud saw the Free Princes as a tool in his own struggle to retain power.<sup>51</sup> His restoration of Faisal to prime minister in November 1961 reflected the regime's tendency to favor stability of the monarchy over anything else. Reform was only attractive if it was to protect monarchical stability. Just as Faisal had rejected the Free Prince's requests for constitutional reforms in June, 1960, Saud proved his opposition to concrete reforms only six months after forming his strategic alliance with the Free Princes.<sup>52</sup> After the Free Princes' leader Talal spoke out against Faisal in a press conference in Beirut in August 1961, King Saud decided to remove Prince Talal from the government—another indication of royal unity being prioritized over any individual seen as promoting discord. Astutely gauging the turmoil between the newly re-empowered Saud and his ministers, Faisal and his supporters focused criticisms not on the king but on Talal and the reforms the Free Princes were pushing.<sup>53</sup> Rather than antagonizing Saud when the

<sup>51</sup> Shaker (1972): 179-181; Huyette (1985): 70; Abir (1988): 86

<sup>52</sup> Shaker (1972): 179

<sup>53</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 360

king was in a compromised position, Faisal chose to rally a conservative coalition of senior princes and *ulema*, those within the regime with greater historical influence than that of the younger Free Princes.<sup>54</sup> In the meantime, Faisal was consolidating support that would ultimately press for replacing Saud, with both his own powers and, correspondingly, a resilient regime, in mind. When Saud left for medical treatment abroad in November 1961, he left the government in the hands of Faisal. Upon his return in March, 1962, Saud and Faisal reached a formal compromise of power sharing.<sup>55</sup>

Under pressure from senior princes and the *ulema* in the wake of the threat from revolution in Yemen, Saud once again appointed Faisal as prime minister, as well as of minister of foreign affairs in October, 1962.<sup>56</sup> It was like a repeat of the regime's initial push to reduce Saud's powers in 1958: a foreign crisis brought a sense of urgency requiring a more competent leader. In the meantime, Faisal gave off the appearance, to the Free Princes as well as to Egypt, that he was changing in a reformist direction, "thanks to the revolution in Yemen, to progressive forces (like Prince Talal), and thanks to the advice of President Kennedy."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Vassiliev (1998): 359

<sup>55</sup> 786a.00/3-1862, Box 2068: US State Department, Telegram from Embassy in Jidda to US Secretary of State, March, 19, 1962

<sup>56</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 364

<sup>57</sup> 786a.11/12-1162, Box 2068: Telegram from Beirut to the US Department of State, December 11, 1962

For two more years, Saud remained nominally king. The final bout of struggle began in March 1964, when Saud barricaded himself in his palace, deploying the Royal Guard around it. Faisal responded by surrounding the Royal Guard with the National Guard. No one but Saud's own sons came to Saud's defense. The princes met and decided to remove all authority from Saud, leaving him with no authority. The regime's response was similar to its forced removal of powers of King Saud in 1958, in the wake of his assassination attempt of Nasser—the only difference being that in 1964 Saud attempted to fight back with the Royal Guard.<sup>58</sup> That October, around 100 princes and 65 *ulema* gathered at the house of the grand mufti. On November 2, the Council of Ministers (*majlis al-wukala*) approved the *ulema*'s fatwa declaring Faisal king. The council also approved a letter signed by the entire royal family swearing allegiance to Faisal.<sup>59</sup> After initially protesting, Saud signed the abdication statement and swore allegiance to Faisal before leaving the country. Thus, the regime's gradual, methodical response to Saud's indiscretions and impulsive foreign policy reveals how dynastic rule came to form in response to a moment of regional and domestic instabilities. In the next section, I show what this looks like through the role Faisal played: how Faisal's policies as crown prince began to build the foundation for

<sup>58</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 367

<sup>59</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 367

the regime's stabilization, setting the groundwork not only for his time as king, but for the next several decades to come.

Faisal's ability to succeed Saud with almost universal regime support depended on his superior ability to stabilize the regime by balancing repression with strengthening support from different elites through co-optation and ideological legitimation, including a more calculated foreign policy. This came alongside Faisal's ongoing reforms of the monarchy, institutions of the state, and of the religious establishment. In the following two sections I highlight Faisal's centralization of state and religious institutions as a means of gaining power with ideological support.

### **Co-optation and the façade of reform**

The regime did not so much fear a full-scale revolution coming from a numerically very small-scale Hijazi bourgeoisie as see in them an opportunity through which to construct a new power base alongside the traditional and conservative coalition as the state developed. Faisal employed a 'carrot and stick' approach to those with moderate Arab nationalist sympathies among the new elites in the Hijaz.<sup>60</sup> Many of these new elites had been supporters of Faisal from the beginning, only to grow discontented with his implementation of fiscal

<sup>60</sup> Abir (1988): 96



austerity measures in the late 1950s.<sup>61</sup> They had also played a role in pushing for better relations with Nasser, all the way up through the Egyptian-backed coup in Yemen in 1962.<sup>62</sup> Faisal's co-optation of many from this group, it seems, was the domestic side to his foreign policy approach: giving off the impression of embracing modernization at home as he used pan-Islamism to construct the Saudi state as a regional foil to Nasserism.

Thus, Faisal crafted a diverse coalition within the Council of Ministers. Although the Council was mostly members of the al-Saud, Faisal's focus on appointing highly educated individuals meant bringing in elites outside the royal family. His employment of technocrats was another iteration of his balancing those pushing for economic modernization with the conservative goal of preserving the regime's power.<sup>63</sup> Most notably, he removed the Nasserist sympathizer Abdullah Tariqi from his post as Minister of Petroleum. A Western-educated Najdi, Tariqi had initially been a Faisal appointee back when Faisal had been pushing for appeasement with Nasser.<sup>64</sup> Faisal replaced Tariqi with the Meccan-born Zaki Yamani, one of the new Hijazi elites. Other educated members of the merchant elite class included Ahmed Jamjoom as Commerce Minister, and Omar Saqqaf as Deputy Foreign Minister. Faisal was able to

<sup>61</sup> Abir (1988): 82

<sup>62</sup> Abir (1988): 92

<sup>63</sup> Saif (2016)

<sup>64</sup> Huyette (1985): 68

balance the more educated and progressive bourgeoisie, mostly from the more developed Hijaz, with the more conservative and traditionally religious. By appointing the Wahhabi 'alim Shaykh Hasan Al al-Shaykh as Education Minister, Faisal strategically appealed to the conservative religious establishment.<sup>65</sup> It reflected Faisal's goal of maintaining the ruling monarchy's authority over the kingdom in an era of major domestic and regional changes.<sup>66</sup>

Faisal's implementation of his Ten Point Reform program in November, 1962 further revealed his co-optation approach towards the liberal elites and middle class traders and their royal representatives, the Free Princes. It was opportunistic in several key ways. First, was the timing: it was announced just after the Egyptian-backed coup had overthrown the Yemeni monarchy, and so it was an ideal moment for Faisal to appear the assertive Saudi leader. At that same time, Talal had just announced the creation of the Arab National Liberation Front (ANLF), calling for the abolition of slavery, a democratic regime, and unity of Arab nations against imperialist pacts and military bases.<sup>67</sup> Faisal was thus able to frame himself as a responsive, 'evolutionary' reformer in a moment of revolutionary changes sweeping the region. He was thereby able to depict himself as a stabilizing figure but also one willing to engage in change; many of Talal's

<sup>65</sup> Huyette (1985): 71

<sup>66</sup> Shaker: 346

<sup>67</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 368

demands came to be reflected in the Ten Point program.<sup>68</sup> As Nasser's propaganda against Saudi Arabia became increasingly hostile in the wake of Syrian secession from the UAR in 1961, hostility between Egypt and the kingdom grew.<sup>69</sup> Within a year, the Free Princes had withdrawn their support for Nasserism and returned to the kingdom from Cairo and Beirut.<sup>70</sup> In addition to appealing to moderate nationalists and the Free Princes, Faisal's moderately reformist discourse was centered on combining modernization with Islam. By allowing the two to reinforce one another, the regime was able to give off the façade of progressive change whilst in reality reinforcing the political status quo of Saudi monarchical rule.

Last but not least in the motivation for a regime that appeared to balance different interests, and to show that it was pushing in a more responsive, evolutionary direction, was the goal of security support from the US. Immediately after returning home from meeting with Kennedy in the wake of the coup in Yemen, Faisal announced his Ten Point Reform program, a promise to reform the country as per the US's advice. Riedel has described Faisal's announcement of the reforms as a unique instance of US pressure for the kingdom to change in order to stabilize itself, followed by immediate Saudi responsiveness.<sup>71</sup> More

<sup>68</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 368

<sup>69</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 361

<sup>70</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 369

<sup>71</sup> Riedel (2018): 40

comprehensively, this was a recognition by Faisal of the ways in which modernizing appeals and political institutionalization could be combined with an expansion of Islam to solidify the regime's support from different coalitions of elites: the Hijazi merchant class and the more conservative tribal and Wahhabi religious leaders. Additionally, by appeasing the US, Faisal was assuring crucial external support necessary for militarily securing the state.

Faisal's Ten Point program promised the following:<sup>72</sup>

1. To promulgate a fundamental law that would allow for a National Consultative Assembly (*majlis al-shura al-watani*)
2. To regulate provincial government and provide for provincial councils.
3. To preserve the independence of the judiciary and create a Supreme Judicial Council and a Ministry of Justice.
4. Judicial Council will consist of 20 members comprised of lay jurists and *ulema*
5. To strengthen Islamic propaganda
6. To reform the committees of public morality
7. It proclaimed the government's support for social matters and education and pledged to control retail prices, establish scholarships for students,

<sup>72</sup> Shaker (1972): 241-242

- social security regulation, protect laborers from unemployment, and the provision of ‘innocent’ means of recreation for all citizens.
8. To regulate economic, commercial, and social development in order to attract capital for development
  9. To develop the country’s resources and economy. This included an extensive road program to link all parts and cities of the Kingdom, studying water resources and making water available for agricultural and drinking purposes, and to help protect and develop heavy and light industries.
  10. To announce the abolition of slavery.

The first reform, if implemented, would have been a groundbreaking step towards the potential of a constitutional monarchy. The *majlis al-shura* (Consultative Council) had initially been created as a local council for the city of Mecca in order to win over support of the Hijaz region at the time of Saudi conquest of this territory from 1924-1926. As Viceroy of the Hijaz, Faisal integrated Mecca’s *majlis al-shura* throughout the Hijaz in 1926.<sup>73</sup> This was a necessity for the al-Saud to control the Hijaz, which had a legacy of more

<sup>73</sup> De Gaury (1967):48; Central Decimal Files, 1960-64, Internal Politics of Saudi Arabia, RG 59, Box 2066, 786a: Embassy Jidda to Department of State, November 8, 1962 “Possibility that Crown Prince Faysal May Have Under Serious Consideration the Development of the Consultative Assembly”

advanced political structures than the rest of the Saudi kingdom.<sup>74</sup> Yet, for all his promises in 1962, Faisal never created a national consultative council or constitution, nor did he enact any meaningful political reforms that would limit the powers of the ruling monarchy. Instead, he only took steps to further consolidate his powers by strengthening the monarchy. The idea of a national *majlis al-shura* remained an empty promise until 1993, when the monarchy realized the need to co-opt its burgeoning Islamist critics through further institutionalization.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, the overall discursive strategy, combining promises of evolutionary modernization alongside pan-Islamism was successful in maintaining the coalition of co-opted moderate nationalist sympathizers and the conservatively religious.

With co-optation and balancing among elites, repression became increasingly sustainable against revolutionary movements. This physical repression was materially aided by the growing US and British development of internal security forces.<sup>76</sup> Faisal declared martial law in January, 1963.<sup>77</sup> He then created the additional ministry of the Office of Information and instituted a press law in November 1963, which brought all papers under direct state control.<sup>78</sup>

Widespread arrests of Yemeni and Shiite workers were carried out in the southern

<sup>74</sup> Shaker (1972): 306

<sup>75</sup> Abir (1988): 94

<sup>76</sup> Abir (1988): 96-97

<sup>77</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 366

<sup>78</sup> Abir (1988): 89

region of Asir and the Eastern Province. Additional anti-strike laws with lengthier prison sentences were implemented. Particularly in the Eastern Province, rioting and bombing incidents continued.<sup>79</sup> Yet, by the mid-1960s, the co-opted Free Princes helped bring about the disintegration of the Arab National Liberation Front (ANLF) that they had initially helped to form in Cairo.<sup>80</sup> Having re-merged with Nasir Said's revolutionary UPAP, leftist revolutionaries mostly operating from abroad remained the key internal threat to the regime throughout the 1960s. A few clandestine cells existed in the kingdom, but, with no meaningful support remaining among elites, these threats, substantive as they were, were eventually rooted out and crushed. In March, 1967, 17 'saboteurs' allegedly sent from Yemen were beheaded in Riyadh and over 600 Yemenis were expelled from Saudi Arabia.<sup>81</sup>

Here I have shown how Faisal consolidated power and strengthened the regime during an unstable period. He did so by building up key sources of ideational legitimacy and through combining co-optation with repression. The Ten Point program exemplified how carefully and astutely Faisal balanced disparate, even outright conflicting, sources of the regime's support as he strengthened both internal and external means of legitimizing the monarchy. In addition to being the key source of ideational legitimacy, Faisal's repeated

<sup>79</sup> Abir (1988): 98

<sup>80</sup> Abir (1988): 96

<sup>81</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 370

references to religion, provided a means of usefully vague descriptions to plans for social and political development.<sup>82</sup> By referring to the regime's goal of keeping the state in line with Shari'a, the regime's reforms were open to one's interpretation of what exactly 'Islam's lofty goals' are.<sup>83</sup> The sanctioning of these reforms by the *ulema* was all the more useful given Faisal's further institutionalization of the religious establishment into the regime. Within this context, Saudi Arabia expanded its own image of Islamic leadership as a counter to secular Arab Nationalism, but in a way that did not openly conflict with the Arab cause. Its strategy was more about strengthening its own ideology as a superior alternative to Arab nationalism than simply undermining Arab nationalism. In fact, by drawing upon an Islamic component of its identity, Saudi leadership was able to frame secular elements of Nasser's Arabism as Western and foreign to the Arab world. Paradoxically enough, the Western-backed monarchy would ultimately build a timely defense of its identity by discursively positioning itself against imperialism, and for Arab nationalism. It was sure to do this through a discourse on Arab and Islamic identities as intertwined and interchangeable.

<sup>82</sup> De Gaury (1967): 148

<sup>83</sup> De Gaury (1967): 149



### **Pan-Islamism: the utility of a counter-ideology**

Here I turn to the role of ideological legitimacy, which interlinks with Faisal's foreign policy. Faisal's implementation of the Ten Point program was the domestic side to his regional policy: a pan-Islamic approach that included the use of Nasser's enemies, the Muslim Brothers, to reform society in a way simultaneously compatible with modernization and Islam.<sup>84</sup> Part of the Ten Point program announced in November, 1962, was a law to 'perfect the judiciary,' including creation of a Judicial Council of Jurists and *ulema*. The creation of new judicial ministries and regulations were Faisal's way of centralizing the monarchy's control over different regions and of religious authorities. During the 1960s, one of the greater institutional focuses was on asserting political control over religious authorities in a more comprehensive manner than had Ibn Saud in the 1930s. This included restricting the authority of the Committee of Public Morality in order to appeal to growing educated segments of the public, particularly in the Hijaz. Faisal removed from power *ulema* staunchly opposed to reform that the expanded *majlis al-shura* would promote, such as girls' education, opening of movie theaters, and alluding to an eventual creation of a Basic Law

<sup>84</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018 in which he noted that Faisal was well-known to have benefitted from the Brotherhood. Khashoggi went on to highlight the role of Muslim Brotherhood religious scholars to 'ease the views' of Wahhabi religious leaders such as Ibn Ibrahim and Ibn Baz, when it came to accepting modernization, including on labor laws and scientific discovery. He provided an example he remembered from childhood watching a Muslim Brotherhood preacher explain on television with an Apollo model how a rocket would go to the moon. Additionally, he said these leaders, from the Muslim Brotherhood mostly from Egypt and Iraq, played a role in encouraging the introduction of formal education for girls.

that would supposedly expand citizens' rights vis-à-vis the state.<sup>85</sup> By institutionalizing the religious establishment horizontally in a style similar to the structure of the royal family, Faisal ensured that no single cleric would have power to challenge the regime. Ultimately, the *ulema* became subservient to the monarchy.<sup>86</sup> With these changes, the Saudi regime became better equipped to legitimize itself to domestic and regional audiences alike.

Yet, Faisal's consolidation of control over the religious authorities was not meant to reduce the *ulema's* powers by merely bureaucratizing them, as was common in other Muslim countries at the time. Instead, Faisal sought to decentralize religious authority so as to more effectively use this crucial tool for the regime's legitimacy.<sup>87</sup> In reality, he expanded the religious establishment's role over society. In his Ten Point promise to establish a judiciary council, Faisal compromised with the *ulema* by creating the Institute for the Issue of Religio-Legal Opinions and the Supervision of Religious Affairs and the Higher Council of Qadis. With these measures, Faisal further consolidated the monarchy's control over the religious establishment while appealing to key elites. He appealed to the new business elites who were weary of an overly zealous religious policing of society. As for the old elites—tribal leaders of different provinces linked to the al-Saud as well as senior princes—they supported Faisal's Ten Point program

<sup>85</sup> Abir (1988): 23

<sup>86</sup> Mouline (2015): 54

<sup>87</sup> Mouline (2015): 56

because they realized the imperative of stabilizing the regime. He did so by creating new institutions that ultimately strengthened the regime through expanding its potential to use religion in self-serving ways. At the same time, Faisal's talk of economic development strongly appealed to the rising middle class of the Hijaz and elsewhere: those attracted to the discourse of modernization but well off enough to be weary of Nasserism's revolutionary appeal.<sup>88</sup>

Largely overlooked in the account of the Saudi regime's savvy use of religion in the Nasserist period was the embrace of Islam outside the traditional Saudi Hanbali Wahhabism.<sup>89</sup> Saudi Arabia took in Muslim Brotherhood members and other Islamists fleeing Egypt and Iraq in the 1960s as part of its ideological strategy to counter secular revolutionary threats to the monarchy. This was a functional necessity within the kingdom, as there were few qualified Saudi teachers for Faisal's vastly expanded educational apparatus. Many of those employed with teaching the Wahhabi-approved curriculum were Muslim Brotherhood members from Egypt. Under Faisal, official Saudi Islam in tandem with the Muslim Brotherhood together oversaw the institutionalization of the modern Saudi state.<sup>90</sup> With the help of better educated, and more socially

<sup>88</sup> Abir (1988): 95

<sup>89</sup> Jamal Khashoggi "By blaming 1979 for Saudi Arabia's problems, the crown prince is peddling revisionist history," *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2018  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/03/by-blaming-1979-for-saudi-arabias-problems-the-crown-prince-is-peddling-revisionist-history/?utm\\_term=.85ad3ce05fb1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/03/by-blaming-1979-for-saudi-arabias-problems-the-crown-prince-is-peddling-revisionist-history/?utm_term=.85ad3ce05fb1)

<sup>90</sup> Riedel (2018): 47

progressive Muslim Brotherhood members from Egypt, Faisal implemented policies that the Wahhabi *ulema* previously saw as too foreign or Western.<sup>91</sup> This was instrumental in getting the conservative Wahhabi *ulema* to accede to such changes as Faisal's wife's initiative for girls' education so long as the curriculum was Islamic.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, the *ulema*'s initial aversion to any use of the television was done away with as they realized it brought a new opportunity as a platform for preaching.<sup>93</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood's increased presence in the kingdom thus provided a bridge between Faisal's desire to modernize the country socially and economically and the ultra-conservative Wahhabis.<sup>94</sup>

Faisal's approach to building the religious establishment was thus similar to his overall regime strategy: balancing different voices to maximize the ways in which these coalitions would practically and ideologically centralize the monarchy's powers. Faisal's success, domestically and regionally, in countering Nasserism was in his pan-Islamic approach that was broadly inclusive of Islam. In the long run, however, this left the regime in a difficult place between on the one hand embracing a more pluralist role of religion in politics and the continued use of Wahhabism as a narrow ideological tool for the state on the other. As I show in Chapter 4, the more conservative strain embodied in Wahhabism continued to

<sup>91</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018

<sup>92</sup> Abir (1988): 38

<sup>93</sup> Beling (1980): 140

<sup>94</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018

pose problems, with backlash over Faisal's modernization contributing to his assassination. Although the regime handed over more social control to the religious establishment, this eventually gave way to further evolution of Islamist critique of not only social policies, but the political system itself. In short, incorporation of a diverse set of Islamic leaderships would only serve to check political authority of the monarchy in the long run. State identity and the relationship between the monarchy and the people was ultimately shrouded under the guise of Islamically legitimated regime, which remained open to competing interpretations and understandings of what this ultimately meant for the political system.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the Saudi monarchy institutionalized in the 1950s and 1960s in response to regional and domestic threats. A government crisis of succession began between the founder's sons in 1958, as the regime was in the midst of dealing with major fiscal problems and a region increasingly characterized by revolutionary anti-monarchical sentiment. There is no doubt that Faisal sought power, and he was ruthless against dissent when it was effective, as it so often was. But, so unlike the situation today, he strengthened the regime to combat foreign and revolutionary threats from within, gaining support from

fellow elites in the process. He engaged in co-optation, both discursively and in his relations with fellow royals and key coalitions of elites outside the monarchy. Alongside this, he effectively charmed Western supporters, and was sure to consolidate support from US and British allies in the same way he carefully built a domestic coalition. As the next chapter will show through the 1962-67 conflict in Yemen, this made for cautious national security policy, particularly when it came to the use of direct military force.

### **CHAPTER 3: SAUDI RESPONSE TO NASSERISM: INDIRECT AGGRESSION BALANCED WITH A REINFORCEMENT OF IDEOLOGY AND FOREIGN SUPPORT**

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Saudi-Egyptian relations were characterized by major oscillations between alliance and hostile rivalry. The Saudi relationship to Egypt and to Arab nationalism, however, would only become more complicated, with the peak of tension coming with Nasser's invasion of Yemen after helping to support a coup against the monarchy there. Why did Faisal hesitate to more directly confront Nasser when Egypt invaded Yemen? Nasser's anti-monarchical and secular ideology posed a major threat to Saudi Arabia, one made quite clear with the Egyptian-backed coup against the Yemeni Imamate. To make matters worse, this coincided with the Saudi kingdom's first internal succession crisis, between King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal. Rather than using direct military confrontation as a means of consolidating support at home amidst domestic uncertainties, Faisal responded carefully by first taking steps to ensure the monarchy's stability and avoiding open displays of provocation. The domestic response encompassed the deepening of state institutions and their ideological expansion abroad. This institutionalization towards a collective role in regime decision-making inhibited provocative or impulsive foreign policy. It included consultation not just within the monarchy, but also with its two key sources of support and legitimacy: the religious

establishment and the US. Such deliberative policymaking was the case even in the face of one of the largest acts of military aggression by one Arab state against another, as Egypt invaded Yemen and directly threatened Saudi Arabia militarily, both externally and internally.

The first section of this chapter begins with an overview of the regional politics in the 1950s and 1960s, centered on Egypt's leading role in promoting Arab nationalism. I explain how, while Nasserism presented a severe challenge to Saudi Arabia, it was ontologically surmountable in part because of the fluidity between Arab nationalism and Islamic sources of identity. I then go on to trace the Saudi discourse appeasing Nasserism from the 1950s to the months after the outbreak of the conflict in Yemen in September, 1962. I use this section to show that even as secular Arab nationalism directly challenged conservative, religious Saudi monarchy, the regime was not ontologically threatened. So long as the Saudi regime could still lay claim to Islamic legitimacy, a rival ideology was a surmountable threat. The second part of the chapter uses the case of limited Saudi intervention in Yemen in response to Nasser's invasion to show the caution the monarchy exercised in its foreign policy. In the final section, I make the case that the main source of exacerbated conflict and Saudi provocations of Egypt stemmed from Faisal's continuation of the state-building process in response to the Nasserist threat, which included, in addition to strengthening an ideology as a counter to Nasserism, building up military forces from external support. As such,



Saudi Arabia played a role in intensifying the conflict only once it had begun to establish a means of ideologically and materially countering the threat, thereby further building the Saudi state's legitimacy. This included further consolidating another form of support crucial to the monarchy's internal security: a closer alliance with the US. This was linked to the Saudi construction of Nasserism as a disingenuous form of Arabism, as associated with Communism and backed by the Soviet Union. Just as the development of pan-Islamism was a means to legitimacy based on an ideological counter to secular Arab nationalism, support from the West, justified as a response to Soviet influence, became an increasingly central pillar to Saudi regime resilience, and was likewise developed at the time. It was an overall moment of transition for the regime, as it shaped its own legitimacy in response to the threat of Nasserism. Yet, this external support also prevented the Saudis from having to directly confront Nasser. When the Arab-Israeli war in June, 1967, renewed a regional sense of solidarity through a common enemy and a common cause, it quickly brought an end to Saudi-Egyptian conflict. For the long run, though, a Saudi identity rooted in its own nationalism, beyond anything in contradistinction to the threats of the time, was put off indefinitely as the regime settled on a vague sense of Islamic legitimacy. The ensuing strengthening of its reliance upon Islamic identity and external support only prolonged questions over regime legitimacy. The Saudis would not again be confronted on such a scale with questions of national identity and regime legitimacy until 2011, after which,

in the absence of such ideologies, the choices of regime survival would be bleaker.

### **Arab nationalism**

As explained in the previous chapter, Egyptian President Gamal abd'l Nasser came to be the regional figurehead of the revolutionary ideology known as Arab nationalism. As part of Arab nationalism's anti-colonial agenda, Nasser promoted a foreign policy of 'positive neutrality' defined by non-alignment towards the West as well as the Soviet camp.<sup>1</sup> It included opportunistic manipulations of the Western-Soviet competition for influence in the postcolonial world, and so it involved receiving aid from both groups of superpowers. This approach of positive neutrality was adopted by most other Arab states at the time as well, leaving room for accusations by each of being insincerely committed to independence from the West or from the Soviets.<sup>2</sup> With the emergence of a new regime in 1952, Egypt began to aggressively promote Arab nationalism as a regional project, eventually a justification for military expansion. Given the revolutionary momentum that had successfully toppled the Egyptian and Iraqi monarchies, by 1958, the Saudis felt existentially threatened.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the

<sup>1</sup> Cremeans (1963): 14

<sup>2</sup> Cremeans (1963): 15

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Sir John Jenkins, August 15, 2018, Kent, England

identity of the Saudi state, in perpetual flux at the time, came to be strengthened through their complicated rivalry with Egypt.

The Hashimite monarchies of Jordan (and Iraq until 1958) were Saudi Arabia's greatest rivals throughout the 1950s because of their historic and religious claims to the Saudi region of the Hijaz, home to Mecca and Medina.<sup>4</sup> Upon this backdrop, King Saud was the first Arab head of state to visit Cairo after the Free Officers' coup that overthrew the British-backed monarchy in July 1952.<sup>5</sup> Although the Saudi monarchy had historically been supported by the British, looming rivalry with the Hashimites as well as the Arab and Islamic cause of Palestine brought the Saudis and Egyptians into a rapprochement, even with the historic revolution that brought Nasser to power.

The Saudis joined alongside Nasser to delegitimize the next major Western initiative for a regional alliance. The Baghdad Pact, which sought inclusion of Turkey and Pakistan, was premised not upon Arab solidarity but on Iraq's hesitations towards an exclusively Arab identity given its large Kurdish population. Still under Hashimite monarchical rule, Iraq was concerned with retaining good relations with Britain, which became a signatory to the Baghdad Pact in the hopes it could maintain influence in the region through its mandate over Iraq. Syria and Egypt, both revolutionary republican regimes with Arab

<sup>4</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 348

<sup>5</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 350

nationalist identities centered on the creation of secular and modern political systems distinct from the West and from the Soviet Union, came together to form the United Arab Republic in 1958. Saudi Arabia at that time chose to ally with Egypt and Syria. Longstanding rivalry with the Hashimites in Iraq overrode any innate monarchical-republican divisions or even religious-secular divides. This created the impetus for a Saudi-Egyptian-Syrian-Yemeni alliance centered on Arab identity and opposed to the West.<sup>6</sup> Islamic and Arab identities were constructed to fit a narrative of anti-imperialism, one that would again become useful as official Saudi rhetoric fell short of differentiating itself from Arab nationalism during the height of its conflict with Nasser in the 1960s.

Although there was a strong British role in sustaining monarchical regimes, having supported Saudi efforts to consolidate control over the Hijaz in the 1920s, the Saudis joined Egypt and Syria in a counter-alliance to the Baghdad Pact in 1955. A key tenet of Arab nationalism was independence from both the capitalist West and Communist Soviet Union. Like nationalist leaders throughout the post-colonial world that came together at the Bandung Conference in 1955, Nasser proclaimed to be part of the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>7</sup> This was characterized by a sense of independence from all foreign powers, whether Western or Soviet. Despite the fundamental differences among monarchical and

<sup>6</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 350

<sup>7</sup> Library of Congress, Interview with Ambassador Hart (1989): 50

republican, religiously legitimated and secular governments, there was nonetheless at the very least a discursive façade given to the notion of a common Arab identity, which was in turn linked to a broader postcolonial, non-aligned identity.

### **Discursive flexibilities and Saudi foreign policy**

Into the 1960s, King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal followed the Arab nationalist discourse centered on independence from Western powers. Given that the external ‘Other’ for Arab nationalist discourse was foreign interference by non-Arab superpowers, territorial integrity was important.<sup>8</sup> As crown prince and prime minister, Faisal in particular was known for an aversity to hostility towards Arab nationalism and even to Nasser. In a US State Department telegram, Ambassador Heath described a conversation with Faisal as an “unadulterated Nasserian exposition of the situation in the Near East.”<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal felt deeply threatened by any revolution overthrowing a fellow monarchy, even if, as in the case of the Hashimites, it was a rival being toppled. The Saudi military was kept divided and shuffled into

<sup>8</sup> FRUS: US Relations with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Internal Reforms, State Department Vol. XII, 1958-60, p. 731

<sup>9</sup> FRUS: US Relations with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Internal Reforms, State Department Vol. XII, 1958-60, p. 730

disparate parts of the kingdom during the July 1958 Iraqi coup.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, the Saudi leadership immediately publicly recognized the new republic, and Faisal continued with his rhetorical support for Nasser.<sup>11</sup> Describing the Iraqi revolution as a popular revolt, Faisal stated that revolutions could not occur where the government acted in light of the welfare of the people.<sup>12</sup> In a speech to the Council of Ministers formed under the new leadership of the crown prince in November, 1962, Faisal referred to the Saudi people as the ‘true Arab nationalists.’<sup>13</sup> In response to an August, 1958 interview posing to Faisal what the chief cause of tension in the region was, the crown prince’s response was that the “root of all evil [is] Imperialism.”<sup>14</sup> His accusations of Iraqi and Jordanian interference in Lebanon in 1958<sup>15</sup> were quite similar to the later disavowal of Nasser’s encroachment onto fellow Arab states’ sovereignty. At this time Faisal repeatedly stated that intervention into Arab states risked instability, and countered US claims of Syrian intervention in Lebanon by describing the Syrian

<sup>10</sup> Alyami (1977): 124

<sup>11</sup> FRUS: US Relations with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Internal Reforms, State Department Vol. XII, 1958-60 Telegram From the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to US Department of State (Jidda, July 25, 1958): 732

<sup>12</sup> FRUS: US Relations with Saudi Arabia; Internal Saudi Reforms, 1958-1960, Vol XXII, 732

<sup>13</sup> De Gaury (1967): 153

<sup>14</sup> De Gaury (1966): 97

<sup>15</sup> FRUS: US Relations with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Internal Reforms, State Department Vol. XII, 1958-60, p. 731

military role as unofficial and that the “formal dispatch of troops was problematic”.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, those who intervened in fellow Arab states’ sovereignty were in violation of the postcolonial principle of non-alignment because they could be depicted as acting in the interests of one of the two major foreign powers of the time. Both Saud and Faisal used this as a convenient way to verbally attack Nasser while, in a sense, supporting key tenets of Nasserism. Saudi Arabia accused Nasser both of being an agent of the US and of the Soviet Union, which fit in with an Arab nationalist discourse against imperialism, Zionism, and Communism.<sup>17</sup> An article from the Saudi press went so far as to explain Nasser’s “theatrics to show he is the enemy of imperialism...his altercations with Krushchev and attacking America,” were necessary only “because he was in fact an agent of America.”<sup>18</sup> Another way in which it competed with the republican regimes’ use of Arab nationalism was the Saudi leadership’s reference to the Palestinians’ plight as a source of regional and national identity. An article in the Saudi press in 1962 described Nasser’s propaganda as “barking against the Arabs and the Arabs alone,” and went on to question why he had not ordered part of his

<sup>16</sup> FRUS: US Relations with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Internal Reforms, State Department Vol. XII, 1958-60, p. 731

<sup>17</sup> Long (1980): 179 in Beling

<sup>18</sup> Translated into English and published in FBIS: Daily Report. Saudi Press, Radio Rap Abd An-Nasir: Mecca Domestic Service in Arabic, June 18, 1962 “The Rabid Trumpets of Abd-an Nasir Nasser Have Not Been Able to Defend Two Serious Charges Against Him,” Abdullah Muhammad as-Siddiqi *An-Nadwah*

“...colossal fleet to block the Aqaba Gulf entrance and prevent Israeli ships from passing in to Egyptian waters.”<sup>19</sup> In an August 1962 speech, King Saud condemned Egypt for essentially acting as an imperialist force that threatened Arab unity. He accused Nasser of implementing policies beneficial to the Israelis.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Saudis deflected attention from their own alliance with Western states by taking any opportunity they could to undermine Nasser’s commitment to Arab nationalism.

Even amidst growing threats from revolutionary Egypt and peaking tensions between Saudi leadership and Nasser, Saudi statements avoided attacking Arab nationalism, instead focusing critique on Nasser’s own ties to foreign imperialist powers.<sup>21</sup> While Arab nationalism was rooted in a common language and region not confined to any religion, Islamic identity was inextricably linked to this, becoming even more so with the region’s domination by Europeans, and the loss of Palestinian territory.

This identification of the Saudi nation alongside a cause with which Nasser was most closely associated was indicative of Faisal’s foreign policy response to the Egyptian-backed coup in Yemen. In a speech as prime minister in

<sup>19</sup> Translated into English and published in FBIS: Daily Report. Israeli Occupation of Aqaba Denounced, Mecca Domestic Service in Arabic, April 30, 1962 “‘How they sold the Aqaba Gulf to the Jews,” Muhammad Ahmad Baatil *An-Nadwah*

<sup>20</sup> Translated into English and published in FBIS: Daily Report. “Saud Condemns UAR Imperialist Policy,” Mecca Domestic Service in Arabic, August 8, 1962

<sup>21</sup> In an email exchange with Dr. Joseph Kechichian on August 3, 2018, Kechichian actually referred to Nasser as pro-Western in the views of the Saudis, as links to the West and the Soviet Union were indistinguishable



1963, after having committed more strongly to supporting the pro-Imamate Royalist forces in Yemen, Faisal contrasted the international outcry over the reported deaths of two Israelis alongside international silence over the killing of “hundreds of thousands of Yemenis.”<sup>22</sup> Several aspects of this part of his speech are noteworthy in terms of the Saudi construction of threat in relation to the Arab nationalist discourse. First is the use of the passive tense that avoids any direct reference to Egypt in the segment on the deaths of Yemenis. The only ones implicated by name in aggression and neglect over Arab deaths are Israel and the United Nations, and, indirectly, the US and Europe by implication of their support to Israel. Second is the naming of Syria as the Arab state [unfairly] accused in the Israelis’ deaths, depicted by Faisal as an Arab state defending itself in the wake of Israeli aggression. In doing so, his speech continued to avoid direct attacks on Nasser or Egypt while positioning Saudi Arabia as a state that stood for the humanity of Arabs through a supportive reference to a [secular nationalist] state that had recently split with Egypt, in Syria’s 1961 secession from the United Arab Republic. The statement was thus defensive of Syria—and by extension, the broader Arab nation—rather than directly hostile towards Nasser or Egypt in Faisal’s proximate references to Yemenis killed by Egyptian aggression. Thus, by implicating Israel as a regional aggressor, Syria as a state acting in self-defense,

<sup>22</sup> De Gaury (1967): 175

and Yemenis as overlooked victims, Faisal's speech adhered to a pro-Arab nationalist discourse that conveyed a sense of overall Arab brotherhood and victimhood. Refraining from combative references to any fellow Arab state, Faisal's one mention of 'Egyptian aggression,' was in his description of his explanation to a UN official why Saudi Arabia could not remove its [defensive] arms from the demilitarized zone.<sup>23</sup>

The Saudis thus effectively used their Islamic source of legitimacy as one interchangeable with the Arab nationalist cause, as tensions with Nasser continued to grow after 1956.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, this counter-ideology was pitted against socialism and Communism. In 1961, King Saud helped non-Saudi Islamists from Egypt and Iraq in founding the Islamic University of Medina, which was characterized as a counter to the 'socialist' Egyptian al-Azhar.<sup>25</sup> In May 1962, before the outbreak of the war in Yemen, Crown Prince Faisal sponsored a conference dedicated to fighting 'radicalism, socialism, and secularism' in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and establishing the creation of the World Muslim League with permanent headquarters in Mecca.<sup>26</sup> This was Saudi Arabia's counter-ideology to Nasser's secular Arab nationalism. Faisal's pan-Islamism emphasized three points: Islamic unity, combating Communism, and

<sup>23</sup> De Gaury (1967): 173

<sup>24</sup> Gelvin (1999): 83

<sup>25</sup> Abir (1988): 88; Located in Egypt, al-Azhar is one of the oldest, most renowned centers of Islamic scholarship in the world

<sup>26</sup> Sindi in Long (1980): 186

strengthening Arabs and Muslims in the struggle against Israel.<sup>27</sup> After Egypt's intervention in Yemen, Faisal expanded the World Muslim League into a more politically oriented body, seeking to go further in expanding pan-Islamism to confront Nasser.

This section has shown some of the ways in which the Saudis were able to handle, with careful constructions, a threat that was, both ideologically and materially, existential. The reason Nasser was existentially threatening but ultimately useful to Saudi Arabia was that his aggressive exportation of revolutionary Arab nationalism forced the monarchy to clearly establish for the region and for the purposes of its own national identity what its ideological claims to rule were. Crown Prince Faisal led the way in doing this through establishing the counter-ideology of pan-Islamism, which emphasized the threat of Communism. Furthermore, open displays of Egyptian aggression against fellow Arab states, made possible by its own purchasing of weapons from the Soviets, had the potential to harm its image as anti-imperialist and a source of Arab unity. I now turn to how the Saudi response to Egyptian intervention in Yemen further demonstrates the seriousness of the threat posed by Nasser, and why a relatively cautious foreign policy was part of the strategy to surviving this threat.

<sup>27</sup> Sindi in Long (1980): 189

### **The utility in a cautious foreign policy**

To respond with overt aggression would have risked undermining the basis of Faisal's support as the future king, as the one more rational and calculated than his brother Saud. It would 1. Reinforce any image of Saudi Arabia as reactionary and allied with the West at a time during which it sought to do just that 2. Undermine its construction of the threat to the region and to its own people as that of non-Arab enemies: Israel, the West, and the Soviet Union ('Zionism, imperialism, and Communism'<sup>28</sup>) 3. Reveal as incompatible its own regime type with what leaders of the era had successfully crafted into a popularly respected ideology of [secular] republican Arab nationalism 4. Prevent it from successfully critiquing Nasser as the one who was undermining the territorial sovereignty of fellow Arab states 5. Undermine its own attempt to portray itself as an Arab leader through its discourse on the duality of Arab and Islamic identities.

Responding overtly with military force would threaten to reveal the duplicity of Saudi policy, preventing it from adequately addressing internal threats while ultimately exacerbating the regional one of Nasserism. By emphasizing the problematic nature of Nasser's military adventurism into Yemen, Saudi leadership was able to portray itself as more faithful to postcolonial states' policies of non-interference in one another's affairs.

<sup>28</sup> Long (1980): 179

### **Coup in Yemen**

The Yemeni Imamate was a religiously legitimated Zaydi Shi'a monarchy that had ruled northern Yemen since Ottoman times. Despite religious differences and previous border disputes, the Saudis had agreed to respect their boundaries with Yemen and maintained friendly relations with the Imamate since their treaty of Taif in 1934. The Yemeni Imamate was, like most other Arab states at the time, open to alliances as a security strategy. To protect his monarchy from revolution, Imam Ahmed had joined the United Arab States, essentially a symbolic union of northern Yemen to the United Arab Republic (Egypt and Syria).<sup>29</sup> Still reeling from the UAR's breakup in 1961 and finding the timing of intra-royal turmoil in Saudi Arabia opportune, Nasser orchestrated a coup in Yemen by backing Yemeni republicans loyal to Egypt. On September 5, 1962, Colonel Abdullah al-Sallal led a group of Free Officer-inspired military officers in overthrowing the Yemeni monarch, Imam Muhammad al-Badr. Al-Badr's reign over north Yemen had lasted only one week, having just gained power after the death of his father, Imam Ahmed.

Egyptians had been involved in the Yemeni coup from the start, having orchestrated the small group of officers led by Yemeni Colonel Abdullah al-Sallal in coopting a group of preexisting republican-oriented revolutionaries. While a

<sup>29</sup> Sindi in Beling (1980): 185

Yemeni republican movement had been inspired by secular Arab nationalism, the leadership of the indigenous movement (Mohsin al Aini, Ahmed Numan, later to become Prime Minister in pro-Western YAR gov't independent of Egypt) was separate from that of the Egyptian-backed officers who ultimately took the reigns in initiating and leading the coup against the new Imam Muhammad al-Badr. In fact, the initial Yemeni revolutionaries, more concerned with outcomes in Yemeni government than ideology or regional leadership, had welcomed the coming to power of the new Imam.<sup>30</sup> As Crown Prince, Muhammad al-Badr had indicated early on an orientation towards republican-inspired reform of the Yemeni monarchy and even a moderated admiration of Nasser. Acting as de facto king while his father Imam Ahmed was ill between April-August 1959, Crown Prince Muhammad al-Badr had taken the opportunity to implement Egyptian-inspired reforms. This included pay raises and free medical care for soldiers, as well as accepting the establishment of an Egyptian Military Mission in Yemen.<sup>31</sup> Because of this, the Free Yemenis initially in favor of overturning the monarchy and establishing a republic had hoped to wait and see what the new Imam al-Badr would implement before launching what they realized could be a counterproductive coup. They saw potential in peaceful reform and transition towards a republican model of government.

<sup>30</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 52

<sup>31</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 60

Although he allowed the Egyptian Military Mission to remain, Imam Ahmed reduced its presence considerably. After refusing to host an Arab League delegation in 1961, Imam Ahmed and Nasser increasingly came to exchange harsh words, and Egyptian-Yemeni hostilities escalated rapidly. Saudi-Egyptian relations declined considerably starting in 1958, after it was exposed that year that King Saud had paid to have Nasser assassinated.<sup>32</sup> Nasser's sense of insecurity after Syrian withdrawal from the United Arab Republic earlier that same year made for an even tenser situation. Nasser moved to further consolidate Egyptian leadership of the Free Yemenis, reaching out to support their faction in Aden and appointing Egyptian-born al-Baidani in charge of the Yemeni faction in Cairo. It would seem as though the reforms and pro-Egyptian elements within the Imamate, particularly of Crown Prince Muhammad, were just enough to further facilitate revolutionary sentiment in Yemen without adequately satisfying it. Just days after coming to power after his father's death, the Imam Muhammad al-Badr was ousted and Colonel al-Sallal and the Free Yemenis took charge through Egyptian support.

Thus, the Yemeni 'revolution' was more of a foreign, Egyptian-led plot, than it was an indigenous Yemeni movement or even an Arab nationalist movement in the true sense of a shared regional goal. The initial Saudi goal of

<sup>32</sup> al-Rasheed (2002): 116

restoring the new Imam Muhammad al-Badr to power was more out of desire for returning the status quo than any attachment to this particular Yemeni leader. At the same time, the fact that Saudi leadership was for restoring a reformist and former admirer of Nasser to power in Yemen indicates just how complex and oversimplified the categories of monarchist, reformist, and Arab nationalist could be at this time. Nasser had so successfully co-opted the discourse of Arab nationalism that he had managed to oust a sympathizer within the Yemeni Imamate and install in Yemen a more explicitly Egyptian leadership. This, all as Saudi leadership simultaneously vied for the return of the reformist Imam Muhammad al-Badr to Yemen while openly proclaiming support for the regional Arab nationalist cause up through the end of 1963.<sup>33</sup> Western and Israeli colonialism had made for pan-Arabism as the regional identity of the time, and strategic domestic calculations of Arab leader—monarchs and republicans alike—did well in recognizing and on some level, adopting this rhetoric so as to stave off accusations of being complicit in imperialist domination of the Arab region.

<sup>33</sup> There was a shift in the Saudi position regarding the Imamate with the 1965 Jidda Agreement, in which the Saudis were explicitly open to an option other than returning the Imamate to power



### **Saudi Response**

King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal both made statements explicitly opposing Arab intervention in Yemen. An official statement coordinated by Saud and Faisal on November 17, 1962, stated:

“The Saudi government calls on all nations, especially Arab nations, to refrain from intervening in Yemen and to permit the Yemenis to determine for themselves how to be governed.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet, the family remained divided. This included a wavering by King Saud himself, who was reported several times to have actually been pushing for military intervention, despite fears of this triggering a coup in Saudi Arabia.<sup>35</sup> The Saudi royal family had been split from the start of the coup over how to respond to the Yemeni coup and whether or not to recognize the new Yemeni Arab Republic (YAR). By early October, King Saud had begun sending money, arms, ammunition and training assistance to Yemeni Royalists whom he had allowed to form bases in the border areas of Qizan and Najran.<sup>36</sup> Upon hearing that the Imam was still alive, the regime increased its assistance to the Royalists. Many of the princes thought Saud’s desire to strengthen the military and willingness to intervene in Yemen despite the risks stemmed from his desire to bolster his own

<sup>34</sup> Central Decimal Files, 1960-64, Internal Politics of Saudi Arabia, RG 59, Box 2068: 786a.11/11-1762: Telegram from Embassy in Jidda to US Department of State, “Observance of the Ninth Anniversary of the Accession of King Saud,” November 27, 1962.

<sup>35</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 160

<sup>36</sup> O’Ballance (1971): 86

personal powers over the rest of the royal family.<sup>37</sup> Although the regime was increasingly weary of Nasser's projections of revolutionary Arab nationalism, they sought to avoid at all costs provoking confrontation with Nasser.<sup>38</sup>

On the one hand were those in favor of recognition and explicitly opposed to intervention: the Free Princes led by Prince Talal, who saw this as an opportunity to push for reforms in a republican direction within Saudi Arabia itself. Although royals themselves, they claimed support from larger elements of Saudi society, including, for example, a petition put forth by commoners to recognize the YAR.<sup>39</sup> On the other side were those such as Amir Khalid ibn Abd al-Aziz, who, as head of the National Guard, deployed troops along the Saudi-Yemeni border in Jizan and Najran.<sup>40</sup> The UK and Jordan, the two major regional and international Saudi allies at that point, were also covertly supplying arms and financial assistance to the Royalists starting in October, 1962.

The Saudi regime recognized the potential of internal unrest from too much of a military role in Yemen.<sup>41</sup> On October 2, Saudi pilots carrying aid to the Royalist base in Najran defected to Cairo, followed by three additional Saudi air force defections over the course of six days. On October 4, 1962, Deputy Foreign Minister Saqqaf expressed how distraught he was over the prospect of

<sup>37</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 164

<sup>38</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 162; Gause (1990)

<sup>39</sup> Gause (1990): 62

<sup>40</sup> Halliday (1975): 70

<sup>41</sup> Safran (1985): 94-95

intervention in Yemen provoking revolution in Saudi Arabia. King Saud, he said, should have remained neutral on the conflict in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia was in desperate need of evolutionary reforms to prevent revolutionary upheaval.<sup>42</sup> In light of Saud's decision to support a military role in Yemen, Colonel Hazim Sulayman, Commander of the Saudi army in Taif, described Saud as a 'crazy king' for having made the decision to attack republican forces in Yemen.<sup>43</sup> After the army and National Guard troops had been stationed at the border, Colonel Sulayman noted widespread discontent in and outside the army. He warned of the likelihood of revolution if Saudis launched a full-scale attack on Yemen.<sup>44</sup> Unconvinced of Saud's leadership regarding a Saudi military role in Yemen and the corresponding threat of Saudi military defections, the royal family pushed Saud to hand over most government authority to Faisal at the start of November.<sup>45</sup>

Recognizing the limitations and problems in confronting Nasser's forces, Crown Prince Faisal rejected the idea of any direct military role, even initially refusing aerial aid to the Royalists.<sup>46</sup> He realized that a direct military

<sup>42</sup> Central Decimal Files, 1960-63, Internal Politics of Saudi Arabia, RG 59, Box: 686a.86h: Department of State Telegram No 240, Ambassador Hart to Secretary of State, Jidda, October 4, 1962

<sup>43</sup> Central Decimal Files, 1960-63, Internal Politics of Saudi Arabia, RG 59, Box 1387: 686a.86h/10-2562: Department of State, Embtel 296, Nicholas G. Thacher to Secretary of State, Embassy Jidda, October 25, 1962

<sup>44</sup> Central Decimal Files, 1960-63, Internal Politics of Saudi Arabia, RG 59, Box 1387: 686a.86h/10-1662: Department of State, Telegram No 296, Jidda, October 17, 1962

<sup>45</sup> Gause (1990): 61

<sup>46</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 160

confrontation would only further provoke the potential of an Egyptian invasion.<sup>47</sup> Upon hearing of the coup during his visits to the UN and to Washington, in September, 1962, Faisal proclaimed that it was a domestic Yemeni matter, invoking a policy of Saudi neutrality.<sup>48</sup> This was part of the careful middle ground between foreign Western support on the one hand and Arab independence on the other, expressing a policy of neutralism and non-alignment.<sup>49</sup> Faisal was keen to avoid direct Saudi military intervention for fear of more air force defections and further reprisals from Egypt, even vetoing a call for the formation of a Royalist air force to be based in Saudi Arabia.<sup>50</sup> Instead, he focused on a three-part strategy of indirect military support via tribal proxies and other Royalist forces in Yemen, growing closer with the US to develop and modernize the security forces, and securing the country internally through talk of reforms and a focus on modernizing the internal security apparatus.<sup>51</sup>

Given that Arab nationalist-inspired military coups in Egypt, Iraq, and Yemen were the primary means of monarchical collapse in the 1950s and 1960s, the Saudi monarchy was extremely distrustful of its own army. Instead, it chose to rely upon the tribal remnants of the *ikhwan* militia developed for the purposes of internal security: the National Guard. Yet, the military efficacy of these more

<sup>47</sup> Gause (1990): 61

<sup>48</sup> Badeeb (1986), 51

<sup>49</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 177

<sup>50</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 160

<sup>51</sup> Safran (1985): 96-97

trusted forces was no match for the Egyptian army. As prime minister from 1958 to 1961, Faisal had decreased overall defense expenditures up through the end of 1961 and openly appeased Nasser's foreign policy.<sup>52</sup> Although Faisal built up the National Guard after the start of the Yemen conflict, he had initially been weary of relying too heavily on them because he wanted to promote formation of a centralized, modern state, and he saw the National Guard as too tribal in origin.<sup>53</sup> Relatedly, the crown prince had to be careful to look to his traditional base of support in the Hijaz, where much of the regime's conventional army had originated under Hashimite rule.<sup>54</sup> Seeing the National Guard as unworthy rivals for state resources, the rest of the military was averse to the regime's support for the National Guard.<sup>55</sup> As Nasserism resonated in the Hijaz, the regime realized not only the external risks of provoking conflict with Egypt, but also how outright confrontation with nationalism could turn away from his government the more secular-oriented groups in favor of the modernization discourse of Nasserism.

<sup>52</sup> Abir (1988): 84

<sup>53</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 156—this is the only reference that mentions Faisal wanting to reduce the National Guard as a disagreement with Saud—otherwise it is emphasized how the regime trusted this more than the regular army and how Faisal built this up in wake of Yemen war, but this does make sense. If Faisal feared undue antagonizing of elites in and outside the royal family, then avoiding buildup of the National Guard fits into this. As Yizraeli notes on p. 155, members of the regular army (mostly remnants from the Hijazi army that got conquered in the 1920s) and the Royal Guard were better educated compared with Bedouin National Guard, and so the former had leaders attracted to Nasserism. As such, they were angered over the regime's allotment of more funds to the National Guard. If return trip to archives is necessary, will look for: US Consulate in Dharan, 786A.00/4-2458

<sup>54</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 150

<sup>55</sup> Yizraeli (1997): 154

Thus, it was not merely coincidental that Saudi repression of nationalist threats in the 1950s were combined with a foreign policy of appeasement towards Nasser and his promotion of pan-Arabism.<sup>56</sup> Stoking conflict with Nasser would only have worsened the internal threats from nationalists and the Saudi army while leaving the Saudis vulnerable to invasion. Once Faisal had uncontested control over the Saudi state, he went about using the Nasserist threat as a means of not only building Saudi state identity, but also consolidating external support from the US, which would prove to be a crucial pillar to Saudi stability. This is an important point of difference with the present conflict in Yemen, which was initiated before Crown Prince Muhammad gained full powers, and without first establishing precise guarantees of US support.<sup>57</sup>

After Egyptian aerial attacks on Saudi territory at the start of the Yemen war, Saudi Arabia broke ties with Egypt on November 6, 1962. On November 4, 1962, Egyptian planes had bombed Saudi villages along the border near Najran. More bombings in Qizan, Saudi Arabia, continued on November 10<sup>th</sup>, but no Saudi civilian casualties were incurred and little material damage was done.<sup>58</sup> At this time, Faisal dismissed from his cabinet the six princes supportive of

<sup>56</sup> Abir (1988): 78

<sup>57</sup> Dexter Filkins, "A Saudi Princes Quest to Remake the Middle East," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>

<sup>58</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 88

recognizing the new YAR regime.<sup>59</sup> Egyptian aircraft carried out additional bombings of Najran on December 30 and January 1.<sup>60</sup> To add to potential sources of Saudi concern, on December 19, 1962, the US officially recognized the YAR, and one day later, the UN General Assembly voted in favor of giving the Yemeni seat to the Republican delegation.<sup>61</sup> Faisal announced a national mobilization of Saudi resources against the YAR, followed by an increase in Egyptian aggression in spring 1963. Egyptian attacks on Saudi territory in March resulted in the deaths of 36 patients in the Abha hospital.<sup>62</sup> After Egypt's successful 'Ramadan Offensive' launched in February, 1963, Saudi Arabia increased its aid to the Royalists. This also came just after President Kennedy had sent a letter to Faisal assuring him of the US's commitment to protect Saudi Arabia. Most of this Saudi aid was in the form of bribes to buy tribal loyalties; it did not include any direct Saudi military presence.<sup>63</sup>

Soon after this, the US pushed for a UN-mediated plan for a ceasefire.<sup>64</sup> On April 29, 1963, the UN announced the approval of a disengagement plan between Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the YAR, known as the Bunker Agreement.<sup>65</sup> The terms were that the Egyptians would remove their forces from Yemen and

<sup>59</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 87

<sup>60</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 94

<sup>61</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 96

<sup>62</sup> Badeeb (1986): 52

<sup>63</sup> Gause (1990): 62

<sup>64</sup> LBJ Library: Department of State during the LBJ Administration, Nov 1963- Jan 1969, Vol I Administrative History. Chapter II, Yemen, p. 3

<sup>65</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 102

Saudi Arabia would stop aiding the Royalists. The deal was sweetened for Saudi Arabia with US promises of protection from future Egyptian airstrikes.<sup>66</sup> US support for the Saudis came in the form of aerial protection in Operation Hard Surface, implemented beginning July 1963 and going to January, 1964. In March, 1964, UN Secretary General Thant reported that Saudi Arabia had fulfilled its part of the Bunker accord by ceasing aid to the Royalist side; the UAR, on the other hand, had increased its activity in Yemen.<sup>67</sup> The immediate reason for the failure of this agreement was that the Saudis did not consult the Royalists, who refused to accept the terms and chose to continue their military operations.<sup>68</sup> The Saudi decision to accept the terms and significantly reduce all support to the Royalists was indicative of the kingdom prioritizing the removal of an Egyptian presence in Yemen over the Royalist objective of reinstating the Imamate.<sup>69</sup>

Here I have shown how Faisal's confidence in responding to Nasser as the conflict continued seems to have been encouraged by the role of Western superpowers. On the one hand, I have shown how the initial response was cautious, and predicated on avoiding confrontation while also seeking defensive support from the US. This reflected the understanding that careful use of external support to strengthen Saudi security from external threats would also stymie the

<sup>66</sup> Library of Congress Interview with Ambassador Hart (1989): 125

<sup>67</sup> Gause (1990): 63

<sup>68</sup> Gause (1990): 63

<sup>69</sup> Gause (1990): 71



threat of revolution from within. Colonel Sulayman had expressed to US officials multiple times that the loyalty of the National Guard, the Royal Guard, the army, and the air force to the king were very low. One reason for their discontent was their lack of proper training and equipment, but a major factor inhibiting greater revolt among Saudi forces was uncertainty of how the US might respond.<sup>70</sup>

Faisal's response was thus to strengthen the Saudi armed forces with the help of the US, as well as taking any measures necessary to further reassure the US's support to the regime in the wake of both internal and external threats.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, however, Faisal continued to remain openly averse to a direct military role, and continued to employ language centered on non-interference. When asked in an interview with correspondent Salim Habaqi for the Beirut newspaper *al-Haya* hours after assuming the throne in November, 1964, what a settlement in Yemen would look like, Faisal reiterated the point that "the problem, whether in Yemen or elsewhere, cannot be solved except by the will of the people of the country concerned." He concluded that same interview with a reaffirmation of Saudi membership in the Arab nation and Saudi devotion to the Arab cause.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Central Decimal Files, 1960-63, Internal Politics of Saudi Arabia, RG 59, Box 1387: 686a.86h/10-1662: Department of State, Telegram No 296, Jidda, October 17, 1962 686a.86h/10-2562: Department of State: Memorandum of Conversation with Colonel Hazim Sulayman, Embassy, Jidda, October 25, 1962.; Central Decimal Files, 686a.86h, Box 1387, Department of State, Jidda, October 9, 1962, Telegram No 266,

<sup>71</sup> Abir (1988): 97; Riedel (2018): 40

<sup>72</sup> De Gaury (1966): 137-138

If Saud had been quick to use military force without weighing the consequences and considering how to minimize risks, Faisal showed decisiveness in a more nuanced, indirectly confrontational approach. Whereas the rest of the regime had been weary of Saud's rash decision to intervene despite the risks, Faisal carefully considered the need to secure internally from revolution while also avoiding a direct military confrontation. This included support from the US. Despite previously viewing Faisal's Arab nationalist leanings with skepticism, the US came to support Faisal for the same reasons as those within the regime: his potential to stabilize the kingdom through regime consensus and calculated foreign policy.<sup>73</sup> During their meeting in October, 1962, amidst the start of the Yemen crisis, President Kennedy successfully convinced Faisal of the need to put through a reform program, and Faisal's decision to implement his Ten Point program was with the understanding that he would get US security guarantees in return.<sup>74</sup> After the US formally recognized the YAR, in December Kennedy continued to give written reassurances to Faisal of the US's support for protection against threats to Saudi sovereignty.<sup>75</sup> In a letter on February 27, 1963, Kennedy informed Faisal of the US's willingness to temporarily place an air defense

<sup>73</sup> Halliday (1975): 67; Yizraeli (1997), 176, 182; Riedel (2018), 33

<sup>74</sup> Riedel (2018): 40

<sup>75</sup> LBJ Library: Department of State during the LBJ Administration, Nov 1963- Jan 1969, Vol I Administrative History. Chapter II, Yemen, p. 3

squadron to defend against Egyptian air attacks, and authorized assistance to build up Saudi Arabia's own air defense capabilities.<sup>76</sup>

The Bunker Agreement and the accompanying US Operation Hard Surface expired in January, 1964. Fighting in Yemen continued, and there was no evidence to show that Egypt had withdrawn troops. Sources are conflicted on whether or not the Saudis had withdrawn aid to the Royalists, but it seems that they had made at least some effort to do so.<sup>77</sup> In March, 1964, UN Secretary General Thant reported that Saudi Arabia had fulfilled its part of the Bunker accord by ceasing aid to the Royalist side; the UAR, on the other hand, had increased its military activity in Yemen.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, domestic tensions flared again in Saudi Arabia in March, as King Saud forced Faisal to resign as prime minister, prompting the final bout of royal rivalry that would end only with Saud's abdication in November, 1964.<sup>79</sup> Saud's removal of Faisal from his ministerial post at this time may have set back the potential for meaningful negotiations with Nasser, as it prevented Faisal from meeting with Nasser until September.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> LBJ Library: Department of State during the LBJ Administration, Nov 1963- Jan 1969, Vol I Administrative History. Chapter II, Yemen, p. 3

<sup>77</sup> Gause (1990): O'Ballance (1971), 114

<sup>78</sup> Gause (1990): 63

<sup>79</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 367

<sup>80</sup> Safran (1985): 102

Nonetheless, by the end of summer, 1964, the prospects of a compromise were looking better in terms of Saudi and Egyptian roles. In July, Egypt had substituted its puppet regime led by al-Sallal with a more moderate government, led by Ahmed Numan from the original indigenous Yemeni republican movement.<sup>81</sup> As for Faisal's attitude to Egypt, he responded to an interview in August, 1964, that touched on Saudi-Egyptian relations with an emphasis on his desire to 'cultivate a friendly relationship that recognized and accepted the differences between the two regimes.'<sup>82</sup> In the same interview, Faisal showed confidence as he spoke of modernization and development, situating these within the need for gradual, 'evolutionary reforms'. Faisal and Nasser met for the first time in September, 1964, in Alexandria. There, Faisal and Nasser embraced and addressed one another as brothers.<sup>83</sup> They met a second time one month later, in Erkowit, Sudan. Regardless of the role either side played in the breakdown of talks in Erkowit, Sudan, in October, 1964, it is important to point out how Faisal and Nasser dealt with one another in public. There was a real emphasis towards displaying reconciliation, even if would soon break down again.

<sup>81</sup> State Department Files, Records Relating to the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, 1952-1975, RG 59, Yemen 1964-1971, Box 12

<sup>82</sup> Shaker (1972): 249

<sup>83</sup> "The Alexandria Duet," Time, September 25, 1964 84 (13): 46

<http://search.ebscohost.com.libproxy.temple.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=54216406&site=ehost-live&scope=site&authtype=uid&user=ebony&password=lewis>

### **The emboldening effects of foreign support...and of foreign withdrawal**

Although Faisal's appeasing stance towards Nasserism shifted with the Egyptian-backed coup in Yemen, he nonetheless held true to a policy of avoiding outright confrontation with Egypt. In this final section, I show how the escalation of conflict seems to have been driven by increased foreign support on both sides. This was a critical moment of Saudi military development, primarily carried out by the US. This demonstrates two points related back to the argument: Saudi insistence on getting US support before escalating conflict reveals a sense of careful avoidance of potentially devastating military confrontation even in moments of intensified hostilities. Secondly, once that support was assured, the main source of exacerbated conflict and Saudi provocations of Egypt stemmed from Faisal's continuation of the state-building process, which by 1965, was characterized materially by expanding a US security role and ideologically with a pan-Islamic counter-ideology to Arab nationalism. The result was a greater buildup of Saudi military, but one that would continue to remain highly dependent upon the US for its security.<sup>84</sup> Faisal was thus working towards consolidating the regime's support in new ways, including from external powers, while also keeping in mind the potential for internal threats. Reliance on foreign military

<sup>84</sup> Halliday (1975): 72

support was part of his overall strategy to stabilize the regime, which included an indirect Saudi military presence in Yemen.

On the one hand, the failure of the next planned meeting to take place in November, 1964, was a matter of the Royalists loyal to the Imam and republicans loyal to al-Sallal refusing to agree to any compromise, which then prompted President Numan and the moderates in the YAR to resign in December.<sup>85</sup> This certainly played a role, but it is important to note that November, 1964 was the culmination of the Saud-Faisal struggle, a conflict that had affected Saudi policy in Yemen throughout the entirety of the conflict thus far, but the effects of which remain imprecisely understood.<sup>86</sup> It was, after all, the Saudi-backed Royalists who broke the ceasefire at the Erkowit Conference in Sudan at the end of October. The Saudi motive in doing so has been attributed to the Saudis wanting to regain territory lost in the summer of 1964 to Egyptian advances.<sup>87</sup> Yet, perhaps the final, official removal of internal power struggles with Saud left King Faisal with a new confidence to assert himself in Yemen. While this is impossible to say for certain, what is clearer is that, when Saud remained king, Faisal's role as prime

<sup>85</sup> Gause (1990): 66

<sup>86</sup> Safran (1985): 103. Safran acknowledging the potential role of the Saud-Faisal struggle in the breaking of the ceasefire and failure to come to a major compromise in November, 1964, leaves open the possibility that, once officially king, Faisal takes Saudi policy in Yemen in a more aggressive direction. Noteworthy that he makes this allusion but does not specify how that rivalry may have affected it. This particular instance is speculation, but I go on to provide evidence that Saudi steps up its military role in Yemen after the end of 1964, which fits with the general argument that fears of internal instability kept Saudi foreign policy more cautious, but once Faisal felt he need not worry about internal rivalries, he is less constrained in his foreign military policy.

<sup>87</sup> Gause (1990): 65

minister and minister of foreign affairs were characterized by a cautious approach in responding to Nasser. Furthermore, within one year, both sides were drawing more support from foreign superpowers. In the following sections, I trace the domestic and regional conditions leading to worsening conflict in Yemen in 1965, and how that year ended with an escalation of foreign power support on both sides.

### **Republican and Royalist divisions and the Jidda Agreement**

Regardless of the primary cause that drove the Royalists and republicans back into conflict after the breakdown of compromise and failure to meet at Harad in November, 1964, the divisions between each state and its respective proxies began to pose problems. After the Saudis had broken the ceasefire, Egypt restored al-Sallal's hardliner regime. In April, 1965, one of the Yemeni moderate leaders who had resigned over the failure to reach a compromise at the end of 1964, al-Zubayri, was assassinated. In response to the threats of tribes upset over al-Zubayri's assassination to march on Sana'a, al-Sallal conceded by restoring Ahmed Numan to power.<sup>88</sup> The Royalists took advantage of this period of republican uncertainty to launch an offensive in early 1965. This resulted in continued divisions among republicans, between those willing to compromise

<sup>88</sup> Gause (1990): 66

with the Royalists and those insisting strictly upon a republican regime. Nasser, angered over President Numan's willingness to make deals with Saudi Arabia without Nasser's permission, put the Yemeni leader under house arrest.<sup>89</sup> Faisal took this opportunity to propose his own alternative to either a secular republican regime or a restoration of the Hamid al-Din Imamate. At the Taif conference in August, 1965, Faisal proposed an Islamic state in Yemen as an alternative to either a Royalist Imamate or a republican government. This led to divisions among the Royalists between those who no longer insisted upon a return of the Imamate and those who still demanded this.<sup>90</sup> The Royalist hardliners loyal to the Imam protested a Saudi plan to create a non-monarchical Islamic state, seeing the Saudis as abandoning the Royalist cause.

Divisions aside, Saudi Arabia was in a place of strength relative to Egypt by the end of summer 1965. In August, 1965, a war-weary Nasser decided to negotiate directly with the Saudis. This led to the Jidda Agreement, which called for a second attempt at a Harad conference in November.<sup>91</sup> Representative of the regional sense of 'Arab summitry' at the time, the Jidda Agreement reflected the peak of friendly relations between Faisal and Nasser.<sup>92</sup> Wanting to end the conflict, Nasser indicated his desire for a Yemeni regime free of his own puppet,

<sup>89</sup> Gause (1990): 67

<sup>90</sup> Gause (1990): 68; Safran (1985): 102; Kerr (1967): 150

<sup>91</sup> Gause (1990): 69

<sup>92</sup> Kerr (1967): 146



al-Sallal, and in favor of moderates he had previously disparaged for such attempts at compromise. He detained al-Sallal in Cairo in September, 1965.<sup>93</sup> Most indications were that Nasser was genuinely keen to come to an agreement and to end the fighting.<sup>94</sup> Many thought at the time that Nasser wished to wind down the intra-Arab conflict in Yemen to prepare for confrontation with Israel.<sup>95</sup> Yemeni leaders Numan and al-Iryani, however, saw Nasser as ‘negotiating away the republic.’<sup>96</sup> There was a disagreement on both sides on how much either was willing to compromise on the regime type of Yemen as either monarchical or republican. The Harad conference met in November, 1965, but failed to come to any agreement by its end in December. While it is difficult to place blame on one side, most sources indicate that the Yemeni republicans’ inflexibility over the form of government in Yemen was at least one major cause.<sup>97</sup>

### **The Pan-Islamic Conference**

With republican divisions stalling negotiations, Faisal decided to further expand his earlier Islamic initiative as a means of extending Arab nationalism to his own broader pan-Islamic project. Frustrated over the continued conflict in

<sup>93</sup> Gause (1990): 68

<sup>94</sup> Kerr (1967): 144

<sup>95</sup> O’Ballance (1971): 155

<sup>96</sup> Gause (1990): 69; Kerr (1967): 149

<sup>97</sup> Gause (1990): 69

Yemen after the breakdown of the Jidda Agreement, King Faisal sought to expand the World Muslim League into a more comprehensive political pact in December, 1965.<sup>98</sup> With his Islamic Conference, Faisal formed an alliance with nine Muslim countries, mostly conservative: Jordan, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia, and the revolutionary states of Guinea and Mali. It was a genuine attempt by Faisal to extend pan-Arabism to a broader postcolonial pan-Islamism, including but not limited to the Arab world and under the premise that Arabism was a part of pan-Islamism.<sup>99</sup> He even stated his desire for Nasser to join as a distinguished head of a major Muslim state.<sup>100</sup> This, Kerr states, seemed to have been a genuine reflection of Faisal's overall tendency against open intra-regional conflict, even if rhetorically; it showed a commitment of pan-Islamism to the anti-colonial cause.<sup>101</sup>

Nasser took this as an opportunity to increase his propaganda against Saudi Arabia, referring to the Islamic Conference as an imperialist tool of the West and conservative regimes in the region. Yet, these accusations came after Nasser's own embrace of foreign support. By August 1965, Nasser had reached out to the Soviets for more of their military support in Yemen, something he had previously kept to a minimum.<sup>102</sup> While the conference was taking place at Harad

<sup>98</sup> Sindi in Long (1980): 188

<sup>99</sup> Kerr (1967): 146; Safran (1985): 119

<sup>100</sup> Kerr (1967), 146

<sup>101</sup> Kerr (1967): 146

<sup>102</sup> Safran (1985): 120

in November 1965, an additional 6,000 Egyptian troops, aided with Soviet financial and military backing, landed in Yemen.<sup>103</sup> The Egyptians would not be alone, however, in increasing their external military support. On December 21, 1965, Saudi Arabia announced a \$400 million joint UK-US air defense pact.<sup>104</sup> The unprecedented British military export deal was spurred in part by competition with the US for contracts in Saudi Arabia, and thus was indicative of an expanding US military role in the kingdom.<sup>105</sup> The American role was an extension of the previously implemented Bunker Agreement, which had been limited to a peace brokering deal focused on incentivizing the Saudis to cease their aid to the Royalists. The joint UK-US deal in 1965 included US Hawk missiles, British 'Lightening' interceptors, and ground radar communications equipment.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, the British provided pilots from the RAF to Saudi Arabia while Saudi pilots were still being trained in the UK. Not only did Saudi Arabia have few pilots of its own, but it had been weary of using them given the defections to Egypt that had occurred at the start of the conflict in Yemen.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the Saudis substantially modernized and strengthened their military at this

<sup>103</sup> Safran (1985): 120

<sup>104</sup> LBJ Library: Department of State during the LBJ Administration, Nov 1963- Jan 1969, Vol I Administrative History. Chapter II, Yemen, p. 10

<sup>105</sup> Halliday (1975): 72

<sup>106</sup> LBJ Library: Department of State during the LBJ Administration, Nov 1963- Jan 1969, Vol I Administrative History. Chapter II, Yemen, p. 10

<sup>107</sup> Halliday (1975): 72

time, but this still precluded any direct or independent use of that military force abroad.

### **1966-1967: Heightened conflict**

By 1966, any signs of reduced Saudi-Egyptian conflict from the Jidda Agreement had dissipated. In February, there was spiraling animosity on both sides characterized by an Egyptian military resurgence throughout Yemen into the south as well as of foreign-inspired domestic threats to the Saudi regime.<sup>108</sup> Not only was Nasser aggravated by the Islamic Conference, but on February 20, a British announcement of its withdrawal from Aden provided Nasser with an opportunity to expand his forces into southern Yemen. Two days later, Nasser gave one of his most vitriolic speeches against Saudi Arabia, tearing up the Jidda Agreement and describing Faisal's Islamic Conference as a tool of imperialism.<sup>109</sup> He reiterated warnings given in December 1965 that if the Royalists renewed the war, the republicans would fight back.<sup>110</sup> In March, Egypt launched its biggest military offensive of its campaign in Yemen, known as the "Long Breath" plan. This included concentrating troops in the republican-held cities of Sana'a, Hodeida, and Taiz, and resuming Egyptian attacks on Royalist targets. The

<sup>108</sup> O'Ballance (1971): 155

<sup>109</sup> Safran (1985): 121; Halliday (1975): 79

<sup>110</sup> Gause (1990): 70

Egyptians replaced the Yemeni republican leadership once again with their puppet leader, al-Sallal.

Once again, Saudi Arabia was on the defensive, and in need of further security reassurances. In the meanwhile, internal threats to the kingdom had reached a new peak, but by this time the US military support was able to help the Saudi security forces successfully crush them.<sup>111</sup> This included thirty bomb explosions between November 1966 and February 1967 resulting in destruction to a major oil pipeline, US military headquarters at the Zahrat ash-Sharq Hotel in Riyadh, the public security building in Dammam, and part of the biggest Saudi airbase at Khamis Mishayt near the Yemeni border.<sup>112</sup> In March, 1967, Jidda Radio described these as actions taken by “Egyptian-trained Yemenis wanting to make Saudis renounce Mohammed and follow Lenin.”<sup>113</sup> Additionally, with Egyptian approval, the YAR government was renewing claims to the Saudi southern provinces of Najran, Jizan, and Asir. The Saudis were thus at their most threatened, both externally and internally, from Nasser and from revolutionaries potentially linked to Yemen.

Faisal responded with increased attention to spreading his pan-Islamic initiative and by seeking further US reassurances of military defense. In June 1966, Faisal visited President Johnson in the US to ask for more guarantees of

<sup>111</sup> Safran (1985): 122

<sup>112</sup> Halliday (1975): 79

<sup>113</sup> Halliday (1975): 79

protection for Saudi territorial integrity. On the ground in Yemen, Faisal maintained his aversion to direct Saudi confrontation with the Egyptians, the potential for which reached its peak from 1966 to the first half of 1967. Faisal not only cut the Royalist subsidy, but angered the loyalists to the Imamate by encouraging dissident republican shaykhs to cooperate with a Yemeni tribal movement known as the Third Force, which the Saudis had already been actively encouraging as part of a broader anti-Egyptian front in North Yemen.<sup>114</sup> Although many of the Royalists led by relatives of Imam al-Badr pushed for an offensive, Gause notes that Faisal's approval was uncertain, whereas Safran describes Faisal as, out of dire necessity given the circumstances, making amends with the Royalist forces with whom he had broken over their refusal to Faisal's compromise agreements that would leave out a future for the Imamate. But none of this was a match for 60,000 Egyptian troops, aided by the Soviet Union and with no British presence remaining in southern Yemen to prevent Nasser's Soviet-backed forces to grow.<sup>115</sup>

Fortunately for the Saudis, there was one remaining source for potential rapprochement with Egypt: Egyptian defeat at the hands of a common enemy. Nasser's devastating defeat to the Israeli military in June, 1967, not only ended the conflict, but put Egypt in a position in which it needed Saudi Arabia's help.

<sup>114</sup> Gause (1990): 67, 71

<sup>115</sup> Sindi (1980):189; Safran (1985):119, 122

Saudi Arabia offered aid to Egypt on the condition of complete Egyptian withdrawal from Yemen.<sup>116</sup> By 1970, Saudi Arabia recognized the new republic in Yemen, contingent upon accommodation of its Royalist clients, which by then excluded the Hamid al-Din family.<sup>117</sup> A sense of renewed regional solidarity between Saudi Arabia and Egypt was returned, but with a Saudi-led pan-Islamic identity to replace the defeated Egyptian Arab nationalism.

### **Conclusion**

Through examples from Saudi approaches towards the conflict itself and statements from Saudi leadership at the time, I have demonstrated three points in this chapter. Nasser presented an existential threat to Saudi Arabia, but one that was nonetheless surmountable through a counter-ideological response. That is, Arab nationalism challenged Saudi regime legitimacy with an opposite ideology which, in turn, provided Faisal the impetus for further developing the Saudi state's own claims to rule. Arab nationalism offered a clearly different ideology, but the Saudis took this threat and turned it into a flexible difference against which they defined themselves. They did so while claiming to be the true leaders

<sup>116</sup> Gause (1990): 71

<sup>117</sup> Gause (1990): 75

of an Arab identity. Because the Saudi response was couched in an alternative claim to a sense of regional solidarity, it made for a foreign policy centered on flexibly constructed difference. Furthermore, the counter-ideology was powerful because it was derived from Saudi state identity as the regional leader of Islamic authority. As the previous chapter showed, the quest for domestic legitimacy and a development of the regime's own mechanisms in the 1950s and 1960s were central to the ways in which Saudi leadership responded to Nasserism—and vice versa.

This chapter has provided evidence for the dissertation's overarching argument: Saudi foreign policy reflects the fluctuations of national identity in response to domestic and regional instabilities, incentivizing it to use aggression in the absence of anything to define itself. In this case, the aggression was limited and reactive, as ideology did not require more than this. At the same time, Faisal's development of a close relationship with the US was another way in which the regime strengthened its sources of stability. Once assured, it emboldened a more aggressive, but still indirect, response to the conflict in Yemen. Threats to the regime's identity, however, were not permanently dealt with. The ability for the regime to legitimate itself as an Islamic foil to Nasserism was, for the long-run, an ill-defined strategy domestically. Additionally, this source of legitimacy clashed at times with Saudi Arabia's close relationship with the West, making reliance on the US an infeasible source of long-term resilience. King Faisal's assassination in



1975 and the Islamist leader Juhayman's storming of the Grand Mosque of Mecca in 1979 revealed once again how internally destabilizing the regime's use of religion can paradoxically be, as during the Ikhwan rebellion in 1927. The regime's response: furthering the ideological use of conservative Wahhabism and Salafism, was again a temporary means of reconciling national identity and challenges to the political system, ultimately worsening its problems in the long run. Yet, it is not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that shifting regional and domestic politics would offer a new point of crisis against which the regime could (re) define itself. More and more since the 1990s, the regime has struggled with an increasingly active public, which begins to bring into greater light the question of what it means to be a Saudi citizen. As I will show in the next two chapters, this cannot be so easily repressed or co-opted away with claims to an Islamic ideological legitimacy, as was done with the Nasserist challenge.

#### CHAPTER 4: FROM CO-OPTATION TO AGGRESSIVE LEGITIMATION: THE EVOLUTION OF SAUDI REGIME SURVIVAL STRATEGIES SINCE 2011

Saudi Arabia's shift to an assertive foreign policy has been widely attributed to Prince Muhammad bin Salman, inaugurated as Defense Minister in early 2015 and as crown prince in a palace coup in 2017. More recently, the crown prince has led a wide crackdown on activists, clerics, intellectuals, and even fellow members of the royal family.<sup>1</sup> Yet, both of these trends have their origins not with the current crown prince but in 2011, during the Arab Spring.<sup>2</sup> That year marked a turning point towards a more aggressive foreign policy for the Saudi regime as it led troops to quash protests in neighboring Bahrain. Since the shift to a new leadership in 2015, this assertiveness has increased substantially, most notably including a massive military campaign in Yemen. The purpose of this chapter is to show that the foreign policy shift is not simply a product of a new leader's personality, but the culmination of changes within the kingdom itself, which facilitated the rise of a more reckless leadership. I argue that the regime's framing of threats since 2011 provided the aggressive and repressive

<sup>1</sup> "How Mohammad bin Salman has transformed Saudi Arabia," Rosie Bsbeer, *The Nation*, May 21, 2018. <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-mohammed-bin-salman-has-transformed-saudi-arabia/>

<sup>2</sup> "A king's hypocrisy," Editorial Board, *Washington Post*, February 13, 2012. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-kings-hypocrisy/2012/02/13/gIQA71wxBR\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.62b634b43744](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-kings-hypocrisy/2012/02/13/gIQA71wxBR_story.html?utm_term=.62b634b43744); "The truth about Saudi King Abdullah's Human Rights Record," Adam Coogle, HRW, January 23, 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/23/truth-about-saudi-king-abdullahs-human-rights-record>

platform upon which a more personalist style of leadership began to consolidate its power in 2015. Thus, the Saudi regime's turn away from its historically carefully calibrated ways of holding power at home and abroad stems from the new leadership's manipulation of the climate of instability wrought by the Arab Spring.<sup>3</sup>

As covered in Chapter 1, legitimacy, repression, and co-optation are the major pillars of stability for authoritarian regimes.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the brute physical coercion that characterizes repression, co-optation is the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors to the regime.<sup>5</sup> Closed authoritarian regimes are the most likely to rely upon identity-based claims to legitimacy, such as ideology.<sup>6</sup> In lieu of economic development and where identity is lacking, political stability is itself used as a means to legitimate a regime's performance by states that can easily depict their neighbors as war-torn or otherwise politically unstable.<sup>7</sup> Having historically relied upon co-optation of Islamist groups, Arab regimes have in recent decades begotten more challenges than benefits from this strategy.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, such groups themselves pose threats to the status quo.<sup>9</sup> As Islamist groups outside the state have become broader and grown in strength as well as in

<sup>3</sup> Colgan (2013): 225

<sup>4</sup> Gerschewski (2013)

<sup>5</sup> Gerschewski (2013): 22

<sup>6</sup> von Soest Grauvogel (2017):298

<sup>7</sup> von Soest and Grauvogel (2017): 298; Bunce and Wolchik (2010)

<sup>8</sup> Cavatorta (2007): 189

<sup>9</sup> Schlumberger (2010) 248

their demands for more accountable governments, religion has become a source of weakness, rather than resilience, for authoritarian regimes in the region.<sup>10</sup> Since the Arab Spring, a number of states have used this political framing of democratic and Islamist movements as chaotic in order to defend their regimes' otherwise deteriorating forms of economic performance and identity-based legitimacy claims.<sup>11</sup> This chapter seeks to illustrate how ideological challenges have led to a lack of 'infrastructural power', i.e. the Saudi regime's justification to rule. The ensuing emphasis of a new Saudi nationalism not only coincided with the regime's use of diversionary conflict abroad, but has likewise brought about an increase in the use of physical repression at home.

This chapter will proceed in three parts. Part one historically situates the rise of Islamist challenges to the monarchy in the post-Nasserist era with a brief overview of the events of 1979. It then traces the relationship between the Saudi regime and what becomes an alternative religious establishment throughout the 1990s, which I categorize as one similar to a hegemonic regime with a simulated opposition. Part two includes the regime's responses to this emerging opposition pre-Arab Spring, showing these as successful through a combination of

<sup>10</sup> Schlumberger (2010): 247

<sup>11</sup> Thomas L. Friedman. "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last," *New York Times*, November 23, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>; "Saudi vows new Islamic alliance 'will wipe terrorists from the earth'" *Middle East Eye*. November 27, 2017 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-vows-new-islamic-alliance-will-wipe-terrorists-earth-1772349636>

repression, co-optation, and limited reforms between 1990 and 2010. Part three begins with the shifting nature of the opposition around the time of the Arab Spring in 2011. I then show how the nature of the regional ideational challenges to the regime provoked a different response from the last time a regional crisis coincided with domestic ones. This stems from the fact that discursive challenges to the Saudi regime do not only compete with the regime's identity. Unlike the 'foreign' ideology that Nasserism embodied, these discursive challenges overlap with the regime's identity, thereby rendering its infrastructural power ineffectual. Additionally, the more fluid nature of ideational challenges makes them more difficult to counter: the evolution of Islamist opposition towards a more inclusive, broader set of movements that transcend the societal divisions along liberal and conservative Islamist lines.<sup>12</sup>

I end part three by showing how the extreme repression seen since 2017 can be traced back to 2011. I leave the power transition itself for the following chapter on the decision to intervene in Yemen in 2015. In doing so, I aim to show that the repression is a reflection of a longer-term trend. Its exacerbation in 2017 stems from the new leadership staking its legitimacy through force rather than ideology or co-optation, as such an approach became useful in the post-2011 context. The point of part three is to illustrate the extreme repression that has

<sup>12</sup> Lacroix (2011); Lacroix (2014); al-Rasheed (2015)

come about as the regime is in the process of recalibrating perceived threats to its stability brought to the surface during the Arab Spring.

### **1979: Islamists' social criticisms**

As Chapter 2 explained, King Faisal expanded the regime's use of Islam as a tool of the state. Not only were they ideological enforcers of the regime's Wahhabi source of legitimacy, but usefully constructed excuses for the regime to avoid any reforms in the way of curtailing the family's authority. The most prominent of these 'weak' *ulema* was Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz, who was put on the Council of Committee of Senior Ulema and in charge of the Permanent Committee for Research and Fatwas.<sup>13</sup> The peak oil revenues of the 1970s allowed the otherwise *politically* weakened *ulema* to promote Islam broadly throughout Saudi society.<sup>14</sup>

Different Islamist factions outside the state's Council of Senior Scholars could be broadly divided into the Sahwa and the Wahhabi exclusivists. While different Islamist groups debated the role of religion in the state, none politically challenged the al-Saud's right to rule. Significantly more educated than the indigenous Wahhabi religious establishment of Saudi Arabia, the Muslim

<sup>13</sup> Lacroix (2011): 75

<sup>14</sup> Lacroix (2011): 76

Brotherhood members who took refuge in the kingdom from abroad in the 1960s and '70s had come to form the basis of Saudi educational institutions.<sup>15</sup> During this time, the Sahwa, a merging of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi traditions, thrived alongside competing forms of Islamism, including stricter, more conservative Wahhabi 'exclusivists'. Wahhabi exclusivists rejected the political activism with which the Muslim Brotherhood was associated. Leading the exclusivists, sometimes referred to as rejectionists because of their opposition to anything outside strict Wahhabism, was Nasir al-Din al-Albani. His followers, known as the Ahl al-Hadith, challenged the official state religious establishment's legitimacy by calling for greater *ijtihad* (opening up of religious interpretations), but ultimately upholding the same spirit of Wahhabism.<sup>16</sup> The Ahl al-Hadith were less opposed to the government and its official Wahhabi establishment than they were to the Sahwa, which to them represented the impure and politically active Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is thus important to note that the Ahl al-Hadith was theologically opposed to any form of political opposition and thereby inherently obedient to the Saudi state.<sup>17</sup>

The JSM's opposition to the regime was rooted in social demands, and driven by socioeconomic challenges of the rapid modernization King Fahd pushed in tandem with close Western alliances. In short, modernization and closer ties

<sup>15</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018; Hossam Tammam (2010)

<sup>16</sup> Lacroix (2011): 86

<sup>17</sup> Lacroix (2011): 86; Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, July 26, 2018

with the US coincided with increased inequality, as growing wealth did not keep up with rapid urbanization. Even as many Saudis benefitted from increased oil revenue, the regime was seen as prioritizing its relations with the West over retaining its own cultural values, and so any poverty led to animosity against modernization.<sup>18</sup> Inspired by the teachings of Nasir al-Din al-Albani and the leading official Saudi scholars Grand Mufti Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh and Abd al Aziz bin Baz, a small group of Islamist students in Medina's poorer neighborhoods called for a purification of Wahhabism and an alternative to existing forms of Islamic activism.<sup>19</sup> What came to be the Ahl al-Hadith lacked the Sahwa's institutional development and incorporation within the regime. Their contention was not with the Saudi leadership so much as the economic modernization efforts begun under King Faisal and the growth of foreign non-Salafi Islamist groups, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jama'at al-Tabligh.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to criticizing the two Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna for what they saw as heterodox positions, the Ahl al-Hadith saw itself as filling in the shortcomings of the Saudi state religious police.<sup>21</sup> After the regime cracked down on the Ahl al-Hadith's overzealous

<sup>18</sup> Abir (1988): 144

<sup>19</sup> Hegghammer and Lacroix (2007): 106

<sup>20</sup> Hegghammer and Lacroix (2007): 106

<sup>21</sup> Lacroix (2011): 89



puritanical vigilantism in Medina, its leaders decided to use its informal connections with the senior *ulema* to create a more institutionalized connection to the official religious establishment. Led by Juhayman al-Utaybi and supported by Ibn Baz, members of the Ahl al-Hadith created the Al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM).<sup>22</sup> The JSM splintered into a more establishment *ulema*-led minority on the one hand and younger majority critical of the regime led by Juhayman al-Utaybi.

Juhayman began circulating a narrow ideological message against the regime's official religious establishment.<sup>23</sup> Although he was careful to avoid excommunicating specific leaders of the government and or a leading 'alim like Ibn Baz, Juhayman questioned the regime's legitimacy in religious terms. In his most political letter, Juhayman accused the Saudi regime of "making religion a means to guarantee their worldly interests, putting an end to jihad, paying allegiance to the Christians (America) and bringing over Muslims evil and corruption." After Juhayman led 300 followers in storming the Grand Mosque of Mecca, the regime responded with an even greater expansion of the powers of the religious establishment over society than it had during the Nasserist years.<sup>24</sup> The regime further empowered the social role of its own religious leaders in order to appease those inspired by the JSM in 1979.

<sup>22</sup> Lacroix (2011): 91

<sup>23</sup> Lacroix (2011): 95

<sup>24</sup> Hegghammer and Lacroix (2007): 113

By giving the religious establishment a larger role in policing the social mores of the kingdom, the monarchy was making a deal with the *ulema* to avoid another incident like 1979. Yet, it was not those Wahhabi exclusivists linked to the JSM that gained from the state's further overtures to the religious establishment, but the more institutionally integrated elites of the Sahwa movement. A diverse movement itself, what characterized the Sahwa was its emphasis on political activity. Unlike the Wahhabi exclusivists of the JSM, the Sahwa did not limit its concerns to social issues.

### **Expanding ideational legitimacy: Saudi- Sahwa relations pre-2011**

The relationship between the regime and the Sahwa can be broken down into four periods. Only the fourth stage has been characterized by physical repression alone. The first, covered in Chapter 2, was King Faisal's incorporation of the Muslim Brotherhood exiles from Nasser's Egypt into the Saudi state apparatus in the 1960s. The second was in their calls for regime change in the wake of the Gulf War in the early 1990s. The third was their release from prison and the Ministry of Interior's efforts to co-opt them to ideologically combat Al Qaeda.<sup>25</sup> The fourth stage is that of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, in which

<sup>25</sup> Lacroix (2011): 240

the state has not only reverted to repression, but implemented an increasingly graver form without any signs of co-optation.<sup>26</sup> This chapter covers the three most recent stages. The co-optation stage from 1999 to the early 2000s illustrates state-Sahwa relations with the tension during the Gulf War. The emergence of an opposition linked to the regime's own ideology, followed by an even broader oppositional discourse, would be more difficult for the regime to contain through institutionalized divisions and cosmetic reforms. I show how the combined repression and co-optation that followed was a successful strategy, and may have continued as such if not for the overlapping crises of the Arab Spring and succession after 2011.

During the 1991 Gulf War there was for the first time an identifiable split between the official state *ulema* and an unofficial religious establishment of independent Islamist scholars and intellectuals. Unlike previous challenges to the monarchy posed by Islamists, the 1990s opposition movement was characterized by explicit calls for *political* change. After Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August, 1990,<sup>27</sup> the Saudi Senior Council of Scholar's leading *'alim* Ibn Baz drafted a fatwa in August, 1990, condoning the stationing of US troops in Saudi Arabia to protect the kingdom from Iraq.<sup>28</sup> In response, what had been considered

<sup>26</sup> "Saudi Arabia turns against political Islam" *The Economist*, June 23, 2018

<sup>27</sup> Pascal Menoret, "Repression and Protest in Saudi Arabia," Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief no. 1 (2016): 2

<sup>28</sup> Mouline (2014): 244

an alternative religious establishment emerged as an opposition religious establishment. Known as the Sahwa movement, it included Sheikhs Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali. These *ulema* embodied a merging of Saudi Salafi tradition and the politically activist stance of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>29</sup> Working alongside the Sahwi *ulema* were Islamist intellectuals, six of whom came to form an activist group known as the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), headed by Muhammad al-Massari and Saad al-Fagih. Arguing that the religious judiciary of the state, the Council of Senior Scholars, was in abrogation of its Islamic duties by failing to provide any checks on the political authority of the monarchy, the opposition *ulema* and intellectuals issued their own Islamic legal decrees (fatwas) to challenge those of the official state Wahhabi establishment. Their ‘Letter of Demands’ included calls for a “representative *majlis al-shura*, protection of rights of the individual and society, and a foreign policy removed from alliances contrary to God’s law.”<sup>30</sup>

While the Sahwa movement is commonly referred to as the Islamist opposition, this can be confusing in the context of a state that has historically allowed no political opposition. Because of the regime’s need for Islamic leaders to legitimate itself—something it intentionally expanded in dealing with the Arab nationalist threat of the 1960s—the Islamist opposition that emerged in the 1990s

<sup>29</sup> Lacroix (2011): 155

<sup>30</sup> Lacroix (2011): 182

can be considered a defection from within the regime. The state's Council of Senior Scholars realized they could not condemn the Islamists' actions altogether, given the way in which they situated their demands within Islamic discourse and the support of leading members of the religious establishment. They responded with an official fatwa in June 1991, but only by condemning the Sahwa's method of openly distributing the petition.<sup>31</sup> After the Sahwa made it public, the regime's *ulema* declared it an act of *fitna* (sowing discord) and by stating that Islam forbade membership in any religious or political party.<sup>32</sup> Having one-upped the regime, in 1992 the Sahwa put forth a bolder petition, the 'Memorandum of Advice', which went further in its demands and represented a broader contingent of Islamist opposition. Once again the opposition was able to maneuver the official *ulema* into signing the petition.<sup>33</sup>

### **Co-optation and family divisions**

The regime's responses to the demands of the reformists in the early 1990s were exemplified by a combination of co-optation, minimal reforms, and repression.<sup>34</sup> King Fahd initiated open dialogue with the opposition *ulema* and

<sup>31</sup> Lacroix (2011): 184

<sup>32</sup> Mouline (2014): 248

<sup>33</sup> Lacroix (2011): 187

<sup>34</sup> Kechichian (2001): 57

intellectuals of the *Sahwa* in the hopes of containing threats. In March 1992, Fahd implemented the long-awaited Basic Law, followed by the *majlis al-shura* (Consultative Council) in 1993, promises the monarchy had put off on implementing since the inception of the first reforms under Faisal in 1962.<sup>35</sup> While these were arguably no more than cosmetic reforms in the sense that these institutions would be comprised of appointed, not publicly elected, officials, they were nonetheless important in that they indicated the king's intentions to diffuse political unrest through co-optation and limited dialogue, rather than solely through repression.<sup>36</sup>

As explained in Chapter 2, the royal family rallied behind Faisal during the dual crises of succession and Nasserism in the 1960s. Centralizing power and ruling with an iron fist over opposition movements, Faisal was nonetheless known for his skill in co-opting and balancing the different branches of the regime, such as the Sudairis and the Jiluwis, as well as the religious establishment.<sup>37</sup> The different approaches of the Sudairis and the Jiluwis towards social modernization, political reform, and foreign policy balanced Saudi policy between rapid modernization on the one hand and preservation of traditional sources of power

<sup>35</sup> Kechichian (2013): 169

<sup>36</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, June 11, 2018; Basheer Nafi "In Mohammed bin Salman's kingdom, Saudis will see what despotism is really like," *Middle East Eye*, December 26, 2017 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/mohammed-bin-salmans-kingdom-saudis-will-see-what-despotism-really>

<sup>37</sup> Abir (1988): 138

on the other. Since the time of Faisal, power had become institutionalized as different princely factions had come to head the different ministries.<sup>38</sup> A clearly identifiable split between the Sudairis and the Jiluwi branch with which Abdullah was associated emerged after Faisal's death. It continued to play a role in ruling family politics up through Abdullah's reign. Whereas the Jiluwis were aligned more with Arab Nationalists in their aversion to reliance on Western allies and emphasis on economic development, the Sudairis tended to be closely associated with modernization but arguably even more opposed to political reform than others in the regime. Thus, the more factionalized rule and consolidation of formal institutions that progressed after Faisal's death carried on his legacy of balancing the different constituencies among Saudi elites in and outside the royal family. In this way, Faisal can be characterized as a founding father figure of the modern Saudi state, with his successors carrying out his balancing through the different branches that had united behind Faisal in the tumultuous 1960s.

The limits to which these rivalries' threatened instability was similar to the Saud- Faisal struggle, with the family uniting during times of crisis. In fact, the royal divisions became a strategy for Saudi stability in itself, with the different branches of the family appealing to various factions of society in the way Faisal had: the tribes, the merchant class, and the *ulema*.<sup>39</sup> Princes Nayef and Ahmed of

<sup>38</sup> Email exchange with Joseph Kechichian, August 3, 2018; Herb (1999): 99

<sup>39</sup> Basheer Nafi "In Mohammed bin Salman's kingdom, Saudis will see what despotism is really like," *Middle East Eye*, December 26, 2017

the Sudairi branch, for example, headed the Interior Ministry from its founding up until Nayef's death in 2012, followed by Nayef's son Muhammad bin Nayef.<sup>40</sup> Abdullah and his sons headed the National Guard from the time of its formation in the 1960s until 2017. With the emergence of opposition from the informal religious establishment in the 1990s, royal rivalries helped to prevent a unified opposition movement, as the leading princes took a good-cop, bad-cop approach in neutralizing threats from the Sahwa movement.<sup>41</sup>

#### **Simulated opposition: co-optation of the Sahwa and the 'fake liberals'**

Contrary to assumptions on the political motives and religious views of the JSM that was responsible for the takeover of the Grand Mosque in 1979, such opposition before the Gulf War refrained from political critique of the regime. The JSM's socially-oriented critiques were thus dealt with by expanding the role of clerical power over society. Unlike the JSM that led the 1979 incident, questioning the regime's religious devotion and social mores was not an end in itself for the Sahwa. Instead, the overriding message of the Islamist clerics and intellectuals opposing the regime during the Gulf War was that the *political* system of the regime was illegitimate, and that a different political system was the

<sup>40</sup> Abir (1988): 135

<sup>41</sup> Lacroix (2011): 261



cure to the regime's acts of infidelity. The demands of many involved in the Sahwa movement were for a greater role of conservative Salafism in society. At the same time, they thought that this, as well as foreign policy changes, could be implemented through political changes in a more popularly representative system: a *shura* (consultative) council, more debate among religious scholars outside the few state-sanctioned *ulema*, and an independent judiciary.<sup>42</sup> Below I explain how from the 1990s up through 2011, the monarchy successfully dealt with these challenges through enhancing its methods of a modified simulated pluralism. By employing secular-minded 'liberal' critics of the Sahwa, into the state-run media, it was not difficult for the monarchy to depict such challenges as calling for a state with fewer social freedoms and more political chaos.

Saudi Arabia's use of ideological, as well as performance-based legitimacy is intertwined with its method of co-optation. In a sense, the Saudi monarchy's method of co-optation, including competing factions of the family, served a similar role to *simulated* opposition in hegemonic authoritarian regimes.<sup>43</sup> As in a hegemonic regime with parties that serve no function but to simulate electoral competition, the royal family's factions and the co-opted opposition groups have served as a simulated opposition. Unlike in the typically

<sup>42</sup> Basheer Nafi "Is Mohammed bin Salman rewriting Saudi Arabia's history? *Middle East Eye* November 7, 2017," <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/mohammed-bin-salman-rewriting-saudi-arabias-history>

<sup>43</sup> Maerz (2018)

defined hegemonic regime, there is no use of parties or elections in Saudi Arabia. Like most closed regimes, Saudi Arabia pits extreme ends of opposition against one another in a divide and conquer strategy: religious hardliners and manufactured 'liberals' that oppose one another on social views. Yet, both the religious establishment and the 'fake liberals' ultimately serve to ideologically legitimate the monarchy by pushing the shared notion that a popularly elected, democratic government is not in the interest of the Saudi people. Thus, just as parties provide legitimacy through feigned electoral competition in hegemonic regimes, the Saudi monarchy provides legitimacy through mimicking ideological competition. In reality, there is no room for debate provided for political competition or opening, only for competing social views. This includes its own religious establishment, a semi-co-opted alternative religious establishment, and 'fake liberals' whose support for the monarchy is rooted in the narrative that the monarchy keeps religious leadership in check. The different factions of princes have catered to opposing ends of this simulated opposition. This simulated ideological competition, in turn, has further provided performance-based legitimacy for the monarchy by allowing it to appear as a source of political stability.

Thus, from 1999 to 2011, the Sahwa, as an alternative religious establishment, could be considered a semi co-opted part of the regime. This did not mean tensions did not exist. Rather, the regime was able to use this alternative

religious establishment to give off the façade of ideological pluralism, which included various praise and criticism for Sahwa leaders depending upon the ideological needs of the regime at a given time. In 1999, the regime released from prison the three leading *ulema* of the Sahwa—Salman al-Awdah, Safar al-Hawali, and Nasser al-Omar—with no trial or charges.<sup>44</sup> After September 11, 2001, however parts of the regime supported more public efforts to de-legitimize radical Islamists, and in the process temporarily moved against the Sahwa. Leading members of the regime distanced themselves from public efforts to co-opt the Sahwa. The monarchy and its official *ulema* intentionally conflated the Sahwi *ulema* with the violent radicalism of Al Qaeda, most notably in a speech Interior Minister Prince Nayef gave on what he described as the betrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, the regime still had a useful place for Islamist opposition, and much of the criticism against the monarchy were channeled through those technically outside the monarchy: the official pro-state clerics and secular critics. In this way, the regime manufactured criticism against opposition. At this time, the regime pushed for the development of what have been described as ‘fake liberals’ through its news media: secular-oriented criticism of Islamists and general praise of the monarchy and state-sanctioned *ulema* as the bastions of moderation. This

<sup>44</sup> Alshamsi (2011): 140

<sup>45</sup> al-Rasheed (2007): 78

was exemplified through the creation of such Saudi-owned outlets as Al-Arabiya News, as the alternative to Al Jazeera's free-flowing criticism of autocracies. By promoting criticism of Islamist opposition movements while simultaneously allowing those Islamists to focus on social issues like gender, the regime achieved two goals at once.<sup>46</sup> It gave off the façade of open debate on political issues being allowed, and it also kept society divided. In reality it was state-backed media and semi-co-opted opposition *ulema* debating issues meant to distract the public: particularly with issues of gender and relations with the West, leaving larger questions on political authority untouched.<sup>47</sup>

This simulation of pluralism again took on greater importance after major terrorist attacks in the kingdom in 2003. The shift worked both ways: as the regime opened up, the Sahwa leaders grew less confrontational and more willing to work as reformists alongside the regime; in turn, this proved to the al-Saud that they were not always a threat, but often a useful tool against those seeking to violently challenge the monarchy.<sup>48</sup> In 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah set about establishing a forum for comprehensive state-society dialogue focused on national unity and social and religious tolerance. Many of the prominent Sunni Islamists who had led the opposition in the early 1990s came together alongside Shi'a and liberals in a truly diverse dialogue. They saw real potential in the KACND as a

<sup>46</sup> al-Rasheed (2007): 90

<sup>47</sup> Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, November 14, 2018

<sup>48</sup> Alshamsi (2011): 152

gradual facilitator of a truly democratic system in the kingdom.<sup>49</sup> Members of the Sahwa were seen as a ‘cornerstone’ of such reforms.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, none of the members of the official Wahhabi establishment were invited, and in this way the KACND could be seen as an effort to marginalize the role of the Wahhabi establishment on the state while also allowing a forum for different religious leaders, Sunni and Shi’a alike, and liberals, to come together.<sup>51</sup> As dissident Madawi al-Rasheed noted, this was the first forum to ever engage Saudis of all backgrounds.<sup>52</sup> The forum was nonetheless understood as mere window dressing and rhetoric.<sup>53</sup> It may have allowed for participants’ diversity in religious and social backgrounds, but was yet another way of fending off political reform through social reform. So long as the absolute political authority of the monarchy was not in question, extending greater social tolerance to religious minorities and women allowed the regime to appear reformist while seeking to combat the ideological dangers of Wahhabism gone awry, as witnessed in Al Qaeda’s rise. The shift to alliance with critics of Islamists would be further consolidated after 2015, but in a more absolutist way, increasingly forgoing any imitations or facades of social pluralism.

<sup>49</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, June 11, 2018

<sup>50</sup> “Saudi monarch leading ‘silent revolution’ against hardline scholars,” Al Quds Al-Arabi, Translated by MidEast Wire, October 2009: <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=32161>

<sup>51</sup> Thompson (2014): 65

<sup>52</sup> Thompson (2014): 61

<sup>53</sup> “No, King Abdullah was not a ‘reformer’” Hala Aldosari. *Foreign Policy*, January 30, 2015. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/30/no-king-abdullah-was-not-a-reformer/>

### **Evolution of reformists and mild opposition**

In the following sections, I trace the regime's reversal from co-optation alongside ideological legitimation in response to the Arab Spring. This stems from a growing crisis in legitimacy Saudi Arabia has faced from post-ideological and Islamist challenges. While Saudi Arabia escaped the mass revolutions experienced in a number of other Arab states, the regime perceived significant discursive oppositional threats to its ideology. This undermined the hegemonic authoritarian model of simulated pluralism it had developed to combat Islamist revolutionary threats in the 1990s. The discursive threat came not from violent domestic threats or calls for revolution in the kingdom. Rather, it came from the nature of the growing post-ideological oppositional discourse,<sup>54</sup> made all the more threatening by the electoral victories over longstanding authoritarian allies in Egypt and Tunisia. I begin by briefly tracing the evolution of grassroots post-ideological oppositional discourse in Saudi Arabia. I show the domestic and regional reasons for why this tame opposition evokes a sense of insecurity for the Saudi regime greater not only than of the threats in the 1990s, but than the Nasserist era.

In contrast to the 1990s, in 2011 the Sahwa and other Sunni activists inside the kingdom were careful to frame their requests through non-

<sup>54</sup> al-Zo'by and Baskan

confrontational advice, rather than revolutionary calls for regime change.<sup>55</sup> This did not make them any less challenging to the regime, as activists seemed to reach a new degree of breadth in their calls for major democratic reforms. The most significant step may have been the third petition, ‘Toward a State of Rights and Institutions.’<sup>56</sup> Led by a diverse group of Islamists, the demands were essentially the same as those made by the nationalists in their petitions in the early 2000s: an elected parliament with full legislative powers, the independence of the judiciary, greater freedom to establish civil society organizations, guarantees of freedom of expression, and the release of political prisoners.<sup>57</sup> Unlike previous petitions, this one avoided any reference to a constitutional monarchy. Its demands were, nonetheless, essentially just that: an elected parliament and a prime minister with powers distinct from the king. The list of signatories included a diverse group of Saudi intellectuals representing more groups than had ever come together in the kingdom’s history.<sup>58</sup> It included the ‘Islamoliberals’ such as Abdullah al-Maliki, Muhammad al-Ahmari, and Judge Suleiman al-Rushoudi, liberals, prominent Shi’a, and the popular Sahwa *‘alim* Sheikh Salman al-Awdah.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Phone interview with Adam Coogle, HRW, September 11, 2018

<sup>56</sup> Lacroix (2014): 9

<sup>57</sup> Gause (2011): 9

<sup>58</sup> Lacroix (2014): 10

<sup>59</sup> Lacroix (2014): 10; al-Rasheed (2015): 37

Activism within the kingdom in 2011 was neither a regional import into Saudi Arabia from the outside nor new to 2011. An emerging ‘Islam liberal’<sup>60</sup> trend had formed into a new group that embodied an increasingly broad ideological challenge to the regime. In 2009, Abdullah al-Hamid, one of the original members of the Islamist CDLR founded the *Jamiyyat al-Huquq al-Siyasiyya wa al-Madaniyya* (HASM), known in English as the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights (ACPRA).<sup>61</sup> Led by an Islamist who had increasingly adopted internationalist rhetoric on universal human rights and embraced non-Islamist members, HASM exemplified the way in which Saudi Islamist opposition mutated over time.<sup>62</sup> Demanding constitutional reform and protection of human rights beyond the government-constrained National Dialogue, HASM was the first NGO to be formed in Saudi Arabia with no royal patron. Although suspicious from the start, the regime made no moves against HASM or its members until after 2011, after which it did everything it could to crush the movement.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Lacroix’s term; Madawi al-Rasheed (2015) problematizes the application of Western-based terms in *Muted Modernists*, but nonetheless makes similar points

<sup>61</sup> al-Rasheed (2015), 63

<sup>62</sup> al-Rasheed (2015)

<sup>63</sup> Lacroix (2014): 6; Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, March 7, 2018



### **Reversing co-optation and ending the façade of reform**

As unobtrusive as the opposition was within the kingdom at the time, the regional component to the Arab Spring magnified the regime's perception of domestic threat from any such reformist opposition to an unprecedented degree. Elections in Tunisia and Egypt revealed, more than anything, the potential power of revolution bringing democracy. In response to my posing whether Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood posed an ideational threat to the Saudi regime since the Arab Spring, Khashoggi emphasized the way in which ideology mattered the most was through the threat of revolution that would bring electoral democracy. He said that the Saudis were:

“pursuing a government like the Emirati model, in which there is no ideology, but where a strong government prevails over the people. The Saudi government thought during the Arab Spring ‘If democracy prevailed in Egypt, the Saudi people would say ‘hey, we like that. We want to have elections...’ and that is why [the Saudi and Emirati governments] brought down the system in Egypt.’”<sup>64</sup>

The leading role of Islamists in both elections proved not only that Islamic alternatives to the Saudi system existed, but that Islamic legitimacy could coincide with mass elections. The election of an Islamist government in the largest Arab country in 2012 produced a fundamental ideological fear for the Saudis: unlike the revolutionary calls of the Sahwa during the Gulf War or the

<sup>64</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018; it is also useful to note here that Khashoggi initially shied away from saying it was about ideology, given the Muslim Brotherhood's historical support for the Saudi government and, something he mentioned several times, that the perception of threat stemmed from revolution, and that Muhammad bin Salman has no ideological agenda.

wave of jihadist violence in the early 2000s, the election of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt revealed a means of electorally based Islamic legitimacy uprooting a decades-old US-backed government. The narrative of Islamists as violent and the assumption Western allies would not allow elected Islamist governments were at once proven wrong. At the same time, the coalition between Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda Party and two secular parties revealed the possibility of what could occur if a similar such alliance came to form among the kingdom's own constitutional reformists and electoral Islamists. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions elicited strong support from the influential and widely popular *Sahwi ulema*. Although most of these co-opted *ulema* qualified this by stating such political changes were not suitable to the Saudi kingdom, the notable exceptions of Salman al-Awdah and the so-called 'Islamo-liberal' activist group HASM provoked the Saudi regime into their suppression.

Rumors were widespread that the Saudis had fueled the growing discontent among Egyptians against President Muhammad Morsi. One week after Morsi's government was overthrown in a military coup in July, 2013, the Saudis put together an aid package that included \$5 billion from the kingdom, \$3 billion from the UAE, and \$4 billion from Kuwait.<sup>65</sup> In response, Saudi Islamists circulated another petition, this one specifically dealing with the extensive Saudi

<sup>65</sup> Riedel (2018): 164

economic support to the new military regime.<sup>66</sup> As the opposition in the kingdom took inspiration from the Arab Spring, the Islamists in particular only gained further impetus as the Muslim Brotherhood government elected in Egypt in 2011 was overthrown in a military coup in the summer of 2013.<sup>67</sup> The opposition spurred by the Saudi-led counter-revolution in Egypt included some of the otherwise most loyal members of the Saudi regime's semi-official *ulema*: not only the reform-minded, but such hardliner *ulema* as Muhsin al-Awaji and Muhammad al-Arifi who had been reliable in opposing political dissent aimed at the monarchy. They had additionally been faithful supporters of the Saudi government's sectarian narrative and scapegoating of Shi'a for regional unrest.<sup>68</sup>

In January, 2014, a number of Sahwi *ulema* issued a document criticizing the Egyptian Salafi party that had supported the military coup. This was the first open condemnation by Saudi Islamists of any Salafi party that had been created in the region since the Arab Spring.<sup>69</sup> It was significant because it exemplified the strengthening of the divide between electoral Islamists and Salafis who ardently opposed any role of Islam in political challenges to authoritarian regimes in the region. The Saudi regime's co-optation of the Sahwa since 1999 was becoming seemingly unsustainable as an authoritarian bargain. Given this, and the dangers

<sup>66</sup> al-Rasheed (2015): 38

<sup>67</sup> al-Rasheed (2015): 4, 92

<sup>68</sup> "They are not our brothers: hate speech by Saudi officials," Adam Coogle, HRW (September 2017): 37-39

<sup>69</sup> Lacroix (2014): 26

wrought by Sunni Islamist electoral victories in Tunisia and Egypt, the Saudis would need to further extend their sectarian approach to counter-revolution.

### **Buying stability, through sectarian frames**

Materially speaking, Saudi Arabia weathered the unrest of 2011 through buying its stability.<sup>70</sup> King Abdullah immediately responded with decrees in February and March that amounted to \$130 billion in spending on citizens over several years. This included a one-time bonus equivalent to two months' salary for government employees, military personnel, and retirees with the largest private-sector employers following suit; the introduction of unemployment benefits; an increase in the minimum wage for the vast majority of Saudis in the workforce who are employed by the state or parastatal enterprises; a continuation of the 5% inflation allowance to state salaries; and the creation of more than sixty thousand new public sector jobs.<sup>71</sup> The way in which the threat was framed, however, was never economic, but as external, and security- based.

Initially, the regime's construction of the Arab Spring as a security threat to the kingdom was heavily framed through a sectarian narrative. Anti-Shi'ism,

<sup>70</sup> Riedel (2018)

<sup>71</sup> Gause (2011): 6

and conflation of Shi'a unrest with Iran, was used to frame domestic unrest.<sup>72</sup> This card had become increasingly salient for Sunni states in the region to play ever since Iraq's political dominance by Shi'a post-Saddam had invoked the Sunni monarchies' fear of a regional 'Shi'a crescent.'<sup>73</sup> The only calls for outright protest coming from Sunni groups were from the newly created Umma Party and the London-based Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA). Together, they called for Saudis to take to the streets to protest in a 'Day of Rage' on March 11, 2011.<sup>74</sup> The Shi'a opposition called for something similar, and this allowed the regime a convenient narrative to prevent the protests from ever taking off. By framing the planned 'Day of Rage' as an Iranian plot, the Saudi regime successfully discouraged any Saudis from actually demonstrating, as protestors would be seen as acting on behalf of the Shi'a minority and, ultimately, Iran.<sup>75</sup>

The Saudi regime took the sectarian counter-revolutionary tactic to a new level when King Abdullah led troops under the Gulf Cooperation Council into Bahrain to quell protests. The Saudis were eager to aid the Sunni al-Khalifa monarchy to crush a mostly Shi'a-led opposition of peaceful protestors under the

<sup>72</sup> Lacroix (2014): 5

<sup>73</sup> "Tehran: Political contradictions and fictive peace," Al-Watan, Saudi Arabia, August 19, 2015, trans. Mideast Wire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=58229>

<sup>74</sup> Lacroix (2011): 51

<sup>75</sup> al-Rasheed (2011): 520

false guise of stopping Iranian expansion in the region.<sup>76</sup> Protests had been called for on February 14, 2011 in Bahrain with the demand that constitutional reform promised by the ruling monarchy in 2001 be implemented. Two major groups were involved in this effort: the reformist Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society and, more narrowly, the Haq movement. Unlike Al-Wefaq, which held about 45% representation in parliament as of 2010, the Haq movement refused to participate in politics and demanded overthrow rather than reform of the regime.<sup>77</sup> These two movements previously had little coordination, making for little likelihood of meaningful reforms to the monarchical system. This changed, however, in February 2011 as Bahrainis found solidarity with the Tunisian and Egyptian protests that had sparked a wave of regional solidarity in demanding the fall of authoritarian governments. As in Egypt and Tunisia, the Bahraini protestors gained momentum and broader unity throughout their society as the regime responded rapidly with violent repression. The ruling al-Khalifa monarchy announced that military forces from fellow GCC states would enter Bahrain to help implement what the regime and its allies deemed a ‘state of national safety,’ to last three months.<sup>78</sup> Realizing the perils of repression contributing to further mobilization across Bahrain, the monarchy chose to frame the uprisings not only

<sup>76</sup> “The military intervention that the world forgot,” Amy Austin Holmes, Al Jazeera, March 29, 2014 <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/3/bahrain-uprisinginterventionsaudiaraabiaemirates.html>

<sup>77</sup> Kinninmont (2012): 3

<sup>78</sup> Kinninmont (2012): 5

as a foreign Iranian-led plot, but one great enough to warrant international help from the Saudis.<sup>79</sup>

This was an unprecedented show of Saudi military force, and it symbolized a new level of sectarian and Iranian-framed scapegoating as a tactic of repression.<sup>80</sup> By crafting a narrative that protestors in the kingdom and its allies were tied to the Shi'a and by extension, Iran, the Saudi regime achieved two goals. One was delegitimizing any of the Shi'a opposition.<sup>81</sup> The other was, through this foreign display of aggression against Shi'a, the regime sought to reclaim a source of alignment with its unofficial *ulema*. With the exception of Salman al-Awdah, the leading Sahwi *ulema* declared their support for the Saudi-led GCC military intervention against the protests in Bahrain. Unlike Bahrain, the Shi'a represent a minority within the Saudi kingdom. Its sectarian tactics were an attempt to continue to keep any opposition in the kingdom divided and to ensure the different groups within the Sunni majority remained supportive of the monarchy.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, in its typical schizophrenic narrative, the regime appealed to so-called liberals by simultaneously demonizing the sectarianism of the very Sunni Islamists whose anti-Shi'ism proved so useful.<sup>83</sup> Divide and rule

<sup>79</sup> According to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 150,000 Bahrainis took to the streets on February 22, 2011. By these (likely conservative estimates), one out of every ten Bahrainis participated.

<sup>80</sup> Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," Chatham House, June 2012

<sup>81</sup> al-Rasheed (2015): 52

<sup>82</sup> al-Rasheed (2015): 52

<sup>83</sup> al-Rasheed (2011): 520

had proved once again to be an optimal internal strategy for the regime. Yet, the fallout of the Arab Spring was far from over. Not only would the sectarian narrative secure the Saudi regime, but the aggressive display of Saudi power under the guise of countering Iranian threats would itself become an increasingly central source of legitimacy for the new Saudi leadership.

As Saudi activists expressed open support for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt which brought to power democratically elected Islamists, King Abdullah dropped any semblance of reform or façade thereof towards the politically minded in Saudi Arabia. Salman al-Awdah's television shows on the state-run MBC channel were banned, and at one point, Deputy Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayef warned al-Awdah that the king was likely going to arrest him.<sup>84</sup> Muhammad bin Nayef's quiet warning to Salman al-Awdah indicated that King Abdullah's suppression of the popular cleric may have been symbolic, and regardless, both Abdullah and bin Nayef were aware they needed to tread carefully. "King Abdullah was much more careful and he saw my father as the most popular person outside state institutions, so the late King did not want to reach the point of no return with my father."<sup>85</sup> In 2014, King Abdullah designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, an unprecedented

<sup>84</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, June 11, 2018

<sup>85</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, June 11, 2018



move despite the tense legacy of both co-optation and repression of the group.<sup>86</sup> At that time Muhammad bin Nayef reassured those linked to the group they need not fear the regime.<sup>87</sup> It was, as with the suppression of al-Awdah's preaching, meant to send a public message of intolerance of any activism linked to support for elections. Symbolic or not, these moves were linked to a larger trajectory of public repression of activism. Islamist activism of any kind would be linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, which in turn would be linked to terrorism.<sup>88</sup>

Under King Abdullah, the Saudi regime's responses to the Arab Spring were not limited to the symbolic. The Ministry of Interior, headed by Prince Nayef, was expanded as the regime stepped up its repression, sanctioned through a series of counter-terrorism laws. In 2011, a counter-terrorism law was established, which is characterized by vaguely defining terrorism as any opposition, peaceful or violent. It vastly increased the limits on free speech and assembly, criminalizing, among other things, anything that may threaten the legitimacy or stability of the state, including insulting the monarch. It denies the right for a fair trial and representation, expanding the jurisdiction of the Specialized Criminal Court created in 2008.<sup>89</sup> Additional counter-terrorism laws

<sup>86</sup> "Saudi Arabia declares Muslim Brotherhood 'terrorist group'" BBC News, March 7, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26487092>

<sup>87</sup> Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, November 14, 2018

<sup>88</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, October 10, 2018

<sup>89</sup> "Saudi Arabia's Draft Counterterrorism Law a Setback for Human Rights," HRW, August 2, 2011. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/08/02/saudi-arabias-draft-counterterrorism-law-setback-human-rights>

were implemented in 2014 around the same time King Abdullah designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. The Arab Spring had triggered a turning point, in which what was previously “competition between the Brotherhood and regime-backed Salafis...had turned into outright war with the Brotherhood.”<sup>90</sup> At the same time, any critic of the regime since then has been painted as a member of the Brotherhood, regardless of their actual religious affiliation. These broad moves against Sunni Islamists came on the heels of a new level of sectarian repression and anti-Shi’a discourse. Rather than implementing a simple sectarian narrative, the regime required a broader one against political Islam, with which Shi’a and the Muslim Brotherhood would both be conflated. The only way in which threats have been flexibly constructed is to exaggerate the level of threats, and the foreign connections of internal threats. Such exaggeration and conflation of threats can be contrasted with the discursive co-optation of Arab nationalist and Nasserist threats in the 1960s.

<sup>90</sup> “Saudi Arabia declares Muslim Brotherhood ‘terrorist group’” BBC News, March 7, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26487092>; Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018

### **The new leadership: Replacing infrastructural power with more force**

Here I show how this growing shift away from co-optation since the Arab Spring has been further hastened through the process of success. In stark contrast with the regime's ideological buffering that Faisal carefully constructed in the wake of the 1960s challenges, the responses to the Arab Spring have hastened a deconstruction of the regime's infrastructural power. Whereas the regime during Faisal's time offset brutal repression with co-optation and ideology, the regime's use of ideological legitimation since the Arab Spring has been more limited. Having crushed any mobilized public opposition within the kingdom since 2011, the regime has resorted to new measures of targeting high-profile individuals expressing criticism not only within, but beyond its borders.<sup>91</sup>

In this section I trace the ways in which the new crown prince has exacerbated the intensified repression campaign spurred by the Arab Spring in 2011. Unlike the co-optation and the (at least feigned) appearance of political reform that characterized responses to domestic protest in the 1990s and early 2000s, the new leadership has consolidated its rule through an iron-fist. This has been as much about the new face of power itself than a shift in leadership. It has led to a greater focus on repressing moderates and elites. It has not been about eliminating dissent, an attribute that has been a constant of the Saudi regime, but

<sup>91</sup> Phone interview with Dr. Hala Aldosari, June 11, 2018

about signaling this repression through targeting high profile critics and their family members, regardless of where they live or how nuanced their challenges to the regime. If anything, the more moderate and reformist the demands, the more aggressive the response by the new leader<sup>92</sup>—a stark contrast with the nature of the revolutionary opposition faced in the 1960s.

In 2011, Defense Minister Prince Sultan, second in line for the throne, passed away. One year later, having just become second in line himself, Interior Minister Prince Nayef died. The timing of these consecutive deaths of top leadership could not have been worse: Prince Nayef passed away in June 2012, one week before the historic elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt. Following Nayef's death, there was a scramble for power that ultimately led to the breakdown of the order that had been in place from the end of the last palace coup in 1964 up through Abdullah's reign. While it was known that Governor of Riyadh and Crown Prince Salman was certain to be the next king, the uncertainty around the next crown prince and heir to the already aging Salman had never been greater. The result was a new situation in which, rather than the competing familial factions, it was 'every man for himself.' From this

<sup>92</sup> Rula Jebreal, speaking on bin Salman's increasing repression of peaceful and moderate dissent in Saudi Arabia at "The New Face of Saudi Arabia: Has Anything Changed? Panel on Saudi Arabia, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 9, 2018, Washington DC

chaotic situation, upon becoming king in 2015, Salman would be well positioned to put his own son Muhammad bin Salman into the direct line for the throne.<sup>93</sup>

Family rivalries and disputes over succession are nothing new to the Saudis. Yet, the events leading up to and including Muhammad bin Salman's ascendance to crown prince in June 2017 were unlike any other transfer of power. This was not, as with the 1964 coup, a product of regime consensus. Before this formally took place in June 2017, a number of steps were taken in which the king sidelined challengers to bin Salman. The signs of this unusual power struggle were apparent since early 2015, just after King Salman had become king. In January, 2015, the new king put his son Muhammad bin Salman in charge of economic affairs and defense, an unprecedentedly rapid consolidation of power for a prince, and unheard of for one as inexperienced as bin Salman.<sup>94</sup> Approval for bin Salman's appointment as defense minister in 2015 was not a unanimous decision in the *hay'at al-bay'ah* (Allegiance Council), the royal body for dealing with succession uncertainties that King Abdullah had created back in 2007.<sup>95</sup> Shortly after this, in April 2015, King Salman disbanded Muhammad bin Nayef's personal court, merging it with the court of the king so as to prevent Muhammad bin Nayef from maintaining any independent support in the way that top princes

<sup>93</sup> Phone interview with Abdulaziz al-Hussan, July 13, 2018

<sup>94</sup> Riedel (2018): 170

<sup>95</sup> "Saudi foreign policy under Salman: same goal, different threat perceptions," Ebrahim Deen, *Open Democracy*, February 20, 2017 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/ebrahim-deen/saudi-foreign-policy-under-salman-same-goal-different-threat-perceptions>

typically do.<sup>96</sup> Immediately after this power change in April, 2015, King Salman began arresting hundreds of citizens: journalists, bureaucrats, religious scholars, and activists.<sup>97</sup> Keeping these moves quiet, it was meant to be a means of preemptively silencing anyone who might speak out against unpopular decisions the regime would be making.

Unlike Crown Prince Faisal, however, Muhammad bin Salman's rapid ascendance to power was not at the urging of anyone, save for the king himself, and the one being replaced was not widely considered incompetent, as King Saud had been. At least three princes, likely more, voted against the confirmation for Muhammad bin Salman to become crown prince on June 21, 2017, in the *hay'at al-bay'ah* (Allegiance Council).<sup>98</sup> On the one hand, the fact that there was not more resistance is unusual, given Muhammad bin Nayef's longstanding experience and respect among senior royals as well as key foreign allies. At the same time, the open rejection by three members was, at the very least, an unusual disdain by senior princes for the outcome of a consensus-based decision.<sup>99</sup> Even by conservative estimates—that is, assuming there were not additional members who were too frightened to cast a dissenting vote—the fact that there were three

<sup>96</sup> "Addiction and intrigue: inside the Saudi palace coup," Reuters, July 19, 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-palace-coup/addiction-and-intrigue-inside-the-saudi-palace-coup-idUSKBN1A41IS>; "Saudi palace coup: the sequel," David Hearst, Middle East Monitor, April 26, 2017 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170426-saudi-palace-coup-the-sequel/>

<sup>97</sup> Bsheer (2018)

<sup>98</sup> Mallat (2018)

<sup>99</sup> Skype interview with Chibli Mallat, June 19, 2018

out of 34 dissenting votes was an unprecedented stand against a successor.<sup>100</sup>

There were additional signs of disjuncture between the ultimate outcome favoring bin Salman and the way in which the amendment was carried out on June 21, 2017. First was the incongruency between the stated rule against king and crown prince being father and son and what the reality was, with King Salman's son becoming crown prince. Second was the poorly written Arabic, something extremely unusual for a Saudi court document, which indicates either the rushed manner in which it was carried out, or perhaps an underlying signal meant to undermine the legitimacy of the amendment.<sup>101</sup>

This was not an exact mirror of the Saud-Faisal struggle for a number of key reasons. For one, Muhammad bin Nayef was neither king, as Saud had been, nor was he necessarily destined to be, given the fact he and bin Salman were part of an unprecedentedly large generation of potential contenders for the throne. On the other hand, even before being put in direct line for the throne as crown prince in 2015, there were a number of reasons to expect Muhammad bin Nayef to become the first member of the third generation to lead the kingdom. It is this record of domestic and foreign policy successes, a combination of pragmatic and constructed traditional legitimacy, that Muhammad bin Nayef's reputation is one historically comparable to someone like former King Faisal, and therefore an

<sup>100</sup> Skype interview with Chibli Mallat, June 19, 2018

<sup>101</sup> Skype interview with Chibli Mallat, June 19, 2018

expected top contender for the throne. Indeed, as Interior Minister, Muhammad bin Nayef came to be a leading figure in helping King Abdullah weather the storms of the Arab Spring in a similar manner to his role in handling the unrest of the 1990s. This was through a combination of repression and co-optation. Because of the co-optation of Sahwa members, he was able to help shore up the regime's ideological legitimacy through the appearance of strong support from different religious scholars. In the words of Abdullah Alaoudh, "Muhammad bin Nayef appealed to a broader sense of Islamic tradition as a source of unifying legitimacy. He courted scholars outside the narrow confines of the state's religious establishment, leading the co-optation efforts of Sahwa members after their release from prison in 1999."<sup>102</sup> In this way, he was reminiscent of Faisal's pan-Islamic approach to combating Nasserism.

Just as Faisal had, as crown prince, been careful to avoid undue provocation against Arab nationalist sympathizers while simultaneously employing a combination of hard repression and co-optation, Muhammad bin Nayef helped continue to work behind the scenes to maintain previous co-optation efforts while also overseeing the Ministry of Interior's repression of dissent during the Arab uprisings. In other words, Muhammad bin Nayef oversaw intense repression, but balanced this with co-optation and ideology in the way that

<sup>102</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, July 26, 2018



previous leaders of the kingdom have done to effectively stabilize the regime. As for his approach to foreign policy, Muhammad bin Nayef was in line with Saudi tradition. He was known for a particularly hostile stance towards Iran, but he was opposed to militarily confrontational policies.<sup>103</sup> When it came to rolling back Iranian influence, his priorities were more centered on Syria. Muhammad bin Nayef was known to have not been in favor of the intervention in Yemen.<sup>104</sup>

In sum, as Interior Minister, Muhammad bin Nayef had been known for his proximity to the religious establishment, his successes in decimating Al Qaeda, and his role in initiating a rapprochement with the Sahwa leaders, his cautious foreign policy, and overall an effective leader through his balancing of repression with co-optation.<sup>105</sup> Dubbed the ‘prince of counter-terrorism,’ he had substantial support within the regime and was an American favorite.<sup>106</sup> In contrast, Muhammad bin Salman has wrought an image as a rapid reformer amidst needed change from the old ways of maintaining power. While his critics point to the unprecedented degree of repression he has brought, Muhammad bin Salman has nonetheless been able to position himself as a foil to the old guard,

<sup>103</sup> Partrick (2018)

<sup>104</sup> “Mujtahed detonates surprise: Al-Watan was not hacked, Ben Nayef’s statements... “true”” Al-Alam, June 3, 2016 Translated by Mideastwire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=60826>; Neil Partrick. “Saudi Arabia’s Yemen Gambit,” October 1, 2015, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Sada*, October 1, 2015 <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/61475>

<sup>105</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, July 26, 2018

<sup>106</sup> “The prince of counter-terrorism,” Bruce Riedel, Brookings, September 29, 2015 <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2015/the-prince-of-counterterrorism.html>

while bringing an effective new strategy to the monarchy's iron-fisted rule. Only time will tell whether this is in the long-term effective, but for the time being, Muhammad bin Salman has consolidated his power through imploding the regime's norms in his style of repression. As I will show in the final sections of this chapter, high-intensity repression increased unabated after 2017. As part of an exacerbation of a trend begun in 2011, by 2017 there was no longer any use of co-optation to offset the breadth of repression. This was characterized by its intensity in the employment of physical coercion against those who had previously been detained only temporarily, and even against those who had been in favor of many of the regime's policies.<sup>107</sup>

As discussed earlier, King Abdullah's efforts to reign in the religious establishment stemmed from the threat of violent movements against the regime and its Western allies. King Salman and Prince Muhammad bin Salman have accelerated this process, but without the periodic co-optation that the regime has historically employed towards peaceful Islamist movements. Muhammad bin Salman has done so under the narrative of returning the kingdom 'back to a moderate Islam, pre-1979'. This is a misleading narrative, but one that has thus far been successful in the dual goals of centralizing power and scapegoating the problems of religiously-justified social repression onto Islamists separate from the

<sup>107</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018, in which Khashoggi referred to Muhammad bin Salman's moves against princes and other elites who had expressed support for his proposed economic and social reforms

regime. In 2016, King Salman moved to curb the powers of the religious police, and a number of clerics have been detained.<sup>108</sup> Relegating the religious police's authority to that of the civil police does not mean less repression, but is merely a sign of the centralization of power that has characterized the reign of King Salman and Muhammad bin Salman. Furthermore, while reigning in Islamist actors outside the state's official religious establishment, bin Salman continues to remain close with the ultraconservative Salafists that comprise its official Wahhabi establishment.<sup>109</sup> This is in fact a legacy of King Abdullah's 2010 decree giving the Council of Senior Scholars a monopoly on issuing public fatwas.<sup>110</sup> This has not led to a reduction in either anti-women or anti-Shi'a vitriol coming out of the religious establishment. One of the leading clerics on the Council of Senior Scholars, Sheikh Salih al-Fawzan, has consistently made inflammatory remarks against the Shi'a and publicly condemned women's rights,

<sup>108</sup> "Saudi Arabia Moves to Curb its Feared Religious Police," Sewell Chan, *The New York Times*, April 15, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/16/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-moves-to-curb-its-feared-religious-police.html>

<sup>109</sup> "Salafi Mission Calls into Question Saudi Concept of Moderation," James Dorsey, January 15, 2018, Lobe Log. <https://lobelog.com/salafi-mission-calls-into-question-saudi-concept-of-moderation/>

<sup>110</sup> "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia," Abdullah Alaoudh, Sada, Carnegie, April 3, 2018 <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75971>

including their right to drive.<sup>111</sup> Muhammad bin Salman remains close with Sheikh al-Fawzan, who the crown prince has described as a ‘father figure’ to him.<sup>112</sup>

Once the Arab uprisings had subsided and Saudi Arabia had enacted a regional counter-revolutionary strategy, why did the regime not revert back to co-opting the Sahwa as it had in 1999? Given their growing significance as an ideological source of legitimacy, and thereby part of the regime’s infrastructural power, co-optation would have been the most rational move for the monarchy to avoid aggravating more opposition.<sup>113</sup> Their discourse since then had, after all, become more moderate and less revolutionary.<sup>114</sup> Again, this makes sense in the context of the centralization of power of the new leadership and the accompanying aggressive nationalism. The arrests of scholars and Sahwa clerics, including Salman al-Awdah, Ali al-Omari, and Awad al-Qarni, in September, 2017, were touted as part of the regime’s campaign against radical Islam. There are two major problems with this narrative. The first is that some of the leading figures arrested in September, 2017 had been pushing for greater rights of individuals, including of women and religious minorities, in what ought to

<sup>111</sup> “Salafi Mission Calls into Question Saudi Concept of Moderation,” James Dorsey, January 15, 2018, Lobe Log. <https://lobelog.com/salafi-mission-calls-into-question-saudi-concept-of-moderation/>; “State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia,” Abdullah Alaoudh, Sada, Carnegie, April 3, 2018 <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75971>

<sup>112</sup> Text exchange with Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, July 11, 2018; note that the video Alaoudh shared with me showing bin Salman visiting al-Fawzan’s house has since been taken down from Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoaRaaHGqJw>

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London

<sup>114</sup> Lacroix (2014): 6

constitute a ‘moderate Islam’.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, they had been quite careful to shy away from open criticism of the regime, framing their views as reform-minded rather than revolutionary or even as opposed to the monarchy and the new crown prince.<sup>116</sup> Salman al-Awdah had been co-opted by the regime since 1999 as a moderate in the regime’s ideological battle against Al Qaeda. He, along with the other members of the Sahwa, had supported King Abdullah’s National Dialogue Conference from 2003-2008.<sup>117</sup> Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, previously arrested in October, 2014 was known for his views against sectarianism, and calls to end discrimination against the Shi’a minority in Saudi Arabia.<sup>118</sup> Ali al-Omari has been an outspoken advocate for women’s rights. He and al-Awdah have both been sentenced to death, on charges of terrorism.<sup>119</sup>

As part of the ‘new, moderate Islam’ the regime claims to be putting an end to sectarianism and repression of the Shi’a.<sup>120</sup> In addition to jailing moderate

<sup>115</sup> “Jamal Khashoggi to DW: It is hard for Saudi Arabia to disown Wahhabism,” Deutsche Welle Arabic, October 25, 2017, Translated by Mideastwire

<https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=65164>

<sup>116</sup> “Saudi Arabia’s detained scholars: guilty or victims?” Al-Quds al-Arabi, September 26, 2017.

Translated by MidEastWire <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=64844>

<sup>117</sup> “Saudi monarch leading ‘silent revolution’ against hardline scholars,” Al Quds Al-Arabi,

Translated by Mideastwire,” October 2009 : [https://www.mideastwire-](https://www.mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=32161)

[com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=32161](https://www.mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=32161); Jones (2005): 7

<sup>118</sup> “Saudi officials arrest Sunni cleric,” Albawaba News, October 19, 2014

<https://www.albawaba.com/news/saudi-officials-arrest-sunni-cleric-613805>

<sup>119</sup> “Saudi Arabia seeks death penalty for cleric Ali al-Omari,” *Middle East Eye* September 5, 2018

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-sentences-moderate-cleric-ali-al-omari-death-992200830>

<sup>120</sup> “Shias are doing better in Saudi Arabia, as long as they don’t cross the crown prince,” *The Economist*, August 30, 2018; “Saudi nationalism raises hopes of greater Shia inclusion,” Kristan Smith Diwan, Arab Gulf States Institute, May 3, 2018 <https://agsiw.org/saudi-nationalism-raises-hopes-greater-inclusion-shias/>

Sunnis and retaining hardline sectarian clerics in the state's official religious establishment, however, the new nationalism has been no more lenient to Shi'a activists, and has only continued the increased sectarian rhetoric since 2011. Record levels of executions against Shi'a has continued unabated since the leadership changes in 2015 and 2017.<sup>121</sup> In response to armed Shi'a oppositionists, the regime has responded with collective punishment against an entire town. In July 2017, the regime leveled the Shi'a town of Awamiyya, demolishing homes and killing over a dozen people, including at least one child.<sup>122</sup> Awamiyya was home to peaceful Shi'a opposition leaders, including the cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr who had been executed in 2011, as well as armed opposition. The move has been described as cultural destruction of the Shi'a and their sites of worship in the town, and it has resulted in the majority of residents fleeing. Finally, in September, 2018, Israa al-Ghomgham, a nonviolent Shi'a activist, was sentenced to death and accused of being an Iranian agent.<sup>123</sup> She is the first Saudi female activist to be sentenced to death. Such is the product of the new Saudi nationalism, which has only increased its use of foreign scapegoating opposition of all kinds.

<sup>121</sup> "Saudi Arabia: death penalty used as political weapon against Shi'a as executions spike across country," Amnesty International, July 12, 2017

<sup>122</sup> "Saudi Arabia: Security Forces Seal off Eastern Town," Human Rights Watch, August 13, 2017

<sup>123</sup> "Saudi Arabia seeks its first death penalty against a female human rights activist," The Telegraph, August 22, 2018

### **Broadening of repression**

Increased repression has not only been characterized by a reversal of co-optation strategies over Islamist activists and more extensive sectarian rhetoric. Over the last ten years, the overall numbers of those detained has gone from several hundred to the thousands.<sup>124</sup> The new crown prince has hastened this process rapidly, arresting liberal and Islamist activists in the name of stability, moderate clerics in the name of ‘moderate Islam’, and fellow royals and business elites in the name of fighting corruption.<sup>125</sup> Deploying a similar discourse to that framing the arrests of moderate reformist Islamists, arrested in September 2017, the imprisoned women’s rights activists have been labeled ‘traitors’ and accused of “suspicious communications with foreign sides with the aim of rocking the kingdom’s stability, security, peace and national unity.”<sup>126</sup>

In addition to the increased scope of repression, the new leadership has employed more draconian measures in the scale of physical repression, in a manner extremely disproportionate to what it deems the crimes of the accused. While this was somewhat less surprising against the Shi’a activists, the increased

<sup>124</sup> Mason Hubbard, “The New Face of Saudi Arabia: Has Anything Changed? Panel on Saudi Arabia, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 9, 2018, Washington DC [https://twitter.com/NewFace\\_KSA/status/1049676114308882438](https://twitter.com/NewFace_KSA/status/1049676114308882438)

<sup>125</sup> “Saudi Arabia Seeks Death Penalty in Trial of Outspoken Cleric,” Ben Hubbard, NYT, September 4, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-salman-al-awda.html>

<sup>126</sup> “Bin Salman and the arrests: ‘reform’ my way and under my orders,” Al-Akhbar, May 21, 2018, Translated by MidEastWire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=66800>

incidences of torture and death sentences against those previously deemed too popular or sacrosanct to publicly demean has been unprecedented. Princes detained in November 2017 were tortured. A number of widely popular Sahwa clerics have been sentenced to death, including not only the reformist Salman al-Awdah, but those like Awad al-Qarni who had consistently publicly praised the regime and even openly attacked opposition activists in defense of the regime. In sentencing to death a popular reformist Sunni cleric like Salman al-Awdah with a history of close links to the regime, bin Salman has done the previously unthinkable: the opposite of the historic tendency towards co-optation.<sup>127</sup> The arrest of princes and clerics has been a direct defacement of the regime's pillars of legitimacy: the al-Saud and Islamic authority. More recently, at least thirteen female activists have been detained since May, 2018. As with the others arrested, their criticism of the regime had been careful, contained, and combined with praise for newly proposed reforms. Many had focused their push for expansion of women's rights on requesting the regime to lift the religiously-sanctioned ban on women driving. Their imprisonment, followed by torture and proposed death sentences, began just one month before the much-anticipated lifting of the female driving ban in June, 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London



It may seem puzzling that the diverse set of ‘dissidents’ bin Salman has targeted includes so many who had expressed support for the new crown prince’s social and economic initiatives.<sup>128</sup> As an absolute monarchy, the regime need not have genuine support, but the leader requires simply the *appearance* of mass support, as a means of commanding a public obedience to compensate for a lack of traditional legitimacy. Because of the different nature of challenges to the monarchy, the new leadership has deemed it useful to undermine traditional power structures; this abolition of ideology is itself a new, if temporary, type of legitimacy. When asked why Muhammad bin Salman perceives Islamist threats in the way that he does, Khashoggi responded:

“I think he is confused, as he has broken with any form of Islam—no Brotherhood, no Salafi, no Wahhabi—but has not yet found what his relationship with Islam is. He is like Henry VIII after he broke with Rome, but before forming the Church of England. He has rejected any form of Islam outside the narrow state-sanctioned Council of Senior scholars... but this is not over yet...he is in transition...”

As with the rest of his repression campaign, there is a prophylactic aspect to it: many of the princes detained had actually already pledged support to him.<sup>129</sup> It was as much about signaling a message of non-traditional power to project an image of a new form of nationalist legitimacy, while preempting potential elite

<sup>128</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018; “Arrests of Saudi rights activists point to the limitations of change,” Deborah Amos, NPR, May 22, 2018 <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/05/22/613040254/arrests-of-saudi-womens-rights-activists-point-to-the-limits-of-change>

<sup>129</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018; “I know Jamal Khashoggi personally and I fear for his safety,” Bill Law, Al Jazeera, October 4, 2018

opposition to this rapid change.<sup>130</sup> The arrest of princes and clerics has been a direct defacement of the regime's pillars of legitimacy: the al-Saud and Islamic authority, reoriented in favor of King Salman and the crown prince. At the same time, the mutually draconian measures employed against both the Sahwi *ulema* and feminist activists shows that the regime is not seeking to replace one ideology with another. The 'return to a moderate Islam' narrative is not only historically inconsistent, but misleading in that the regime is not demolishing Wahhabism for the sake of a more reformist or diverse Islamic presence, for which many of the imprisoned Sahwi *ulema* had pushed. Nor is it for the sake of anything resembling political liberalism. In this way, the regime has dealt with the Arab Spring and its fallout through a survival strategy opposite that of the approach towards Nasserism. It has been through the breakdown of ideology rather than the strengthening of one. In turn, repression is no more brutal than in the 1960s, but far more disproportionate in measure and broad in its application. And, by itself this repression is not sustainable.

<sup>130</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018; Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, March 17, 2018

## Conclusion

Rather than understanding the new crown prince as an isolated variable driving change in Saudi Arabia, it is important to contextualize his rise and situate him as a product of increasingly broad ideational threats, enabled by a critical moment in succession incomparable to any since 1962. In short, the Saudis saw the Arab Spring as a repeat of the last time it faced a formative moment in succession alongside regional challenges. It was, “Nasser on steroids, but with God.”<sup>131</sup> The atmosphere of heightened repression and aggression in the wake of the Arab Spring’s uncertainty was a crucial component through which Muhammad bin Salman could begin to consolidate power in 2015. What was temporarily a potential threat from mass-based ideational challenges sweeping the region, was transformed into an opportunity for a new leader to grab power in Saudi Arabia. Rather than balancing through co-optation, the new leadership has consolidated its authority through a more confrontational foreign policy, a trend begun during the Arab Spring. At the same time, there has increasingly been blanket, highly visible repression of not only activism, but independent thought of any kind. This is not simply about the personality of a new crown prince, but the moment of time in which he happened to come to power. In the following chapter, I show the effects of the regime’s recalibration of its legitimacy through foreign

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Sir John Jenkins, August 15, 2018, Kent, England

policy. There I will show how the 2015 intervention in Yemen reflects the regime's opportunistic manipulation of the sense of insecurity it has faced since the Arab Spring.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONSTRUCTING LEGITIMACY THROUGH EXTERNAL THREAT: THE 2015 INTERVENTION IN YEMEN**

In the previous chapter I specified how latent ideational threats triggered by the Arab uprisings have manifested themselves in Saudi Arabia domestically, showing some of the domestic and foreign policy implications this has had. For this, I drew from works on authoritarian legitimation strategies, with attention to ideology<sup>1</sup>. Ideology is more important to closed authoritarian regimes because such regimes seek something close to total control over their citizens. At the same time, it is a weakness, and can be turned against the regime when it falls short of fulfilling its own mission and it is exposed as hypocritical. In this chapter, I extend the foreign policy component to explaining the main case of the contemporary period: the Saudi decision to intervene in Yemen in 2015. The literature on diversionary war is inconclusive as to the role that domestic regime type has. As a function of this, it is not settled what role the ideational relationship between the regime and people, (i.e. ideological legitimacy) plays in why and how a regime chooses to use conflict abroad as a means of establishing or reinforcing its legitimacy. These works can be more usefully linked to diversionary causes of war with the incorporation of the ontological security literature. That is, a certain regime's shift to a proclivity for diversionary conflict

<sup>1</sup> von Soest and Grauvogel (2017); Gerschewski (2013)

is linked both to its potential underlying ideological shortcomings and the emergence of ontological threats.

In this chapter I show two main points: 1) how the sources of insecurity in Chapter 4 result in an aggressive approach to foreign policy beginning in 2011, and 2) how manipulation of the regime's sense of ontological insecurity facilitates changes in leadership beginning in 2015, ultimately exacerbating an earlier trend. I divide the chapter into three parts. Part one deals with situating past Saudi policy to Yemen broadly, and to the Houthis specifically, as what Stig Stenslie refers to as a 'not too strong, not too weak' approach.<sup>2</sup> I provide an overview of Saudi threat perception from Iran, followed by a brief overview of the background on the Houthis as a militant movement from 2004-2010. I then detail the Saudi role in the Yemeni revolution in 2011. I show how the Saudi response to the uprisings in Yemen through the GCC Initiative and National Dialogue was initially generally consistent with their historic approach of mediated intervention focused on keeping Yemen divided. Combined with the larger turmoil of regional events in 2011, the Saudi response to Yemen in 2011 exacerbated the instability far beyond their ideal 'not too weak, not too strong' approach.

In the remaining two parts of the chapter, I trace the break in this policy of indirect Saudi action 'keeping Yemen weak and divided,' to the first direct

<sup>2</sup> Stenslie (2013): 1

military intervention since 1934. Through examination of Saudi discourse as well as Saudi actions in Yemen, part two shows how the 2015 intervention in Yemen represents a break with previous Saudi foreign policy. Finally, part three brings the chapter back to domestic politics, by situating the rise of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman within the context of an insecurely legitimated Saudi regime since the Arab Spring.

I argue that the Saudi regime's construction of the Houthis as posing an existential threat to Saudi Arabia is a product of the Saudi regime's new survival strategy post-Arab Spring. That is, the new Saudi leadership has staked claims to rule without the 'infrastructural power'<sup>3</sup> provided by an identity-based ideology, and has, in its place, chosen to stake Saudi regime legitimacy primarily through a foreign policy characterized by securitization. The Houthis are but one example of non-existential threats or sources of tension for the Saudis, which, only after 2015, become treated as existential. It is this construction of the threat from Yemen, rather than an objective external security threat, that explains the Saudi decision to intervene. I go on to explain how the drastic shift that ensued in 2015 was not a sudden break due simply to a new leadership. Rather, it was as much about the mutation of Saudi regime survival strategies triggered by heightened domestic-regional threat perceptions in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

<sup>3</sup> Lai and Slater (2006)

### **Saudi response to the Yemeni spring in historical context**

From its inception, Saudi policy towards Yemen has been based on the objective of protecting Saudi status as the leader of the Islamic world. As explained in Chapter 2, the early period of state-building in the 1920s included military expansion into Yemen, taking from the Yemeni Imamate the provinces of Asir, Jizan, and Najran. The impetus had been the Yemeni Imam's annexation of Asir while the Saudis were preoccupied with an internal rebellion from the recently conquered Hijazis, the site of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Just south of the Hijaz, Asir was a crucial southern buffer for the Saudis' control over Mecca and Medina. Given the centrality of the Hijaz, the ensuing war with the northern Yemeni Imamate was thus as much linked to Saudi territorial security as maintaining its source of Islamic legitimacy. It ended in the 1934 Treaty of Taif. On his deathbed in 1953, King Abd al-Aziz had allegedly advised his two sons Faisal, who had led the Yemen campaign in the early 1930s, and Saud, to keep Yemen weak.<sup>4</sup> It is as important to understand Saudi national security vis-à-vis Yemen with this background: a general view of weakness by design, and perceived threats triggered not from a Shi'a presence, nor even, as I show below, from the Houthi insurgents, but from a united Yemen on the one hand and legitimacy challenges within Saudi Arabia on the other.

<sup>4</sup> Stenslie (2013): 1



As I explained in Chapters 2 and 3, as great as the Nasserist threat was to the Saudis, its potential was somewhat ontologically limited in challenging Saudi Islamic legitimacy in the way the conflicts over the territories south of the Hijaz did in the 1930s. Instead, it offered a useful ideological opposite, one against which the Saudis could flexibly position themselves as necessary. Since then, the Saudis have sought to keep Yemen from presenting a united, powerful southern neighbor. This has included Saudi alliances with those otherwise seemingly most antithetical forces to Saudi interests. In the 1994 Yemeni civil war, only four years after unification, the Saudis backed the Communist YSP because its goal was a divided Yemen, in opposition to the Islamist Islah pushing for a united Yemen. It was a logical strategy for the Saudis, as it meant keeping Yemen weak enough to remain under Saudi influence, as an Islamist-led united Yemen would have posed a formidable ideological threat to the Saudi regime.<sup>5</sup> In contexts in which such Islamists groups have lacked the strength to dominate Yemen, however, they have been supported by the Saudis as a means of perpetuating Saudi influence.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London

### **Situating the Rise of the Houthis**

The Houthi movement traces the origins of their marginalization to the fall of the Zaydi Imamate in 1962, but the focus of their grievances have been against the increasing economic and political discrimination under President Ali Abdullah Saleh (r. 1990-2012).<sup>6</sup> Bader al-Deen al-Houthi was among the Zaydi clerics who established the Youth Union (BY) dedicated to reviving Zaydi doctrine in 1986. After resigning from parliament in 1997, his son Hussein al-Houthi formed a militia as an offshoot of the revivalist BY, which we now know as the Houthis. Since 2004, as a rebel militia operating from northern Yemen, the Houthis have been in on and off conflict with the Yemeni government.

Although nominally a Zaydi himself, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime consistently neglected economic development and political representation of the predominantly Zaydi areas of Sa'ada province in northern Yemen. Saleh's reputation of marginalizing the Zaydis was further exacerbated by the regime's support of Salafism through its post-1990s unification alliance with the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, the Islah Party, as well as close ties with Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> While Saudi Arabia spent years infiltrating Yemen with Salafism, politics in Yemen became far more complex than simply a Saleh-Saudi-Salafi alliance against Zaydis. After the 1991 Gulf War, for example, the Saudis

<sup>6</sup> Salmoni et. al, RAND (2010)

<sup>7</sup> Salmoni et. al, RAND (2010): 5

expressed considerable distrust of Saleh, his allies in Islah, and Sunni Islamists across the region generally who had refused to support the Saudis' efforts in assisting the Americans against Saddam's invasion of Kuwait.

Saleh's regime fought six wars with the Houthis between 2004 and 2010. Well before this, beginning in the 1990s, the Yemeni government regularly described the Houthis as Iranian proxies, accusing them of receiving their weapons and direct military support from Iran. The Yemeni government cited Houthi visits to Iran and to Libya to claim they were backed by the Iranians as well as by Muammar Gaddafi.<sup>8</sup> Western diplomats regularly rejected these claims as baseless, and many analysts understood this as an attempt by the Yemeni government to attract sympathy from the US and Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> If the Saudis were convinced of the Yemeni government's attempts to internationalize the local conflict with the Houthis, they did not show that they found this to be their primary problem in Yemen. In fact, up through 2013, Saudi Arabia's main concern of potential foreign influence in Yemen was that of Qatar,<sup>10</sup> which had been leading the dialogue for negotiations in 2007, before the outbreak of the sixth Sa'ada war. The Saudis and Qataris had backed opposite sides in the 1994 civil war, with the Saudis opposing the Islah ever since the Islah, along with

<sup>8</sup> Salmoni, RAND (2010): 181

<sup>9</sup> Hill (2017): 194

<sup>10</sup> Phone interview with researcher and political analyst working on Yemen, March 28, 2017; al-Muslimi (2013)

others linked to the Muslim Brotherhood around the region, had refused to condemn Saddam Hussein's 1990 military intervention in Kuwait.<sup>11</sup> As for Yemeni links to Iran, Saleh had had his own extensive relations with Tehran before the outbreak of the Sa'ada wars in 2004.<sup>12</sup>

In August, 2009, President Saleh announced Operation Scorched Earth, beginning the sixth Sa'ada war. For the first time, direct fighting broke out between Houthis and Saudi armed forces on the border in October, 2009, when the Houthis killed a Saudi border guard. The Saudis responded by deploying air and ground troops to the border, an unprecedented direct military response to Yemeni conflict.<sup>13</sup> Leading the effort, Prince Khaled bin Sultan announced that the Saudi forces had purged the Saudi side of the mountains on the southern border, but they would not cross the Yemeni frontier. By the end of the year, over one hundred Saudis had died, many of friendly fire. King Abdullah expressed deep disappointment with the Saudi military's competency, but there had never been any consideration of a full-scale invasion.<sup>14</sup> By February, 2010, the fighting ended as a result of Abd al-Malik al-Houthi's agreement to withdraw from Saudi territory and his entrance into a ceasefire with the Yemeni government.

<sup>11</sup> al-Muslimi (2013)

<sup>12</sup> Hill (2017): 288

<sup>13</sup> Hill (2017): 195

<sup>14</sup> Hill (2017): 195

### **Houthi capabilities in the lead up to war**

The Houthis were widely understood during the Sa'ada wars from 2004-2010 as a less-than-significant military threat to the Saudis, even when the two broke out into conflict during the sixth war in 2009. Houthi supporters were numbered, and external assistance was limited.<sup>15</sup> Similarly perhaps to not wanting to provoke Nasserites in the 1960s, Saudi Arabia avoided a full military intervention into Yemeni territory when Houthis killed Saudi border guards in 2009 in retaliation for the Saudi role in backing the Yemeni government's war against the Houthis. Yet, even those who admit the limits on the previous, brief Saudi military clash with the Houthis, the Houthi takeover of the capital city of Sana'a in September 2014 has been cited as a sign of an increasingly powerful Houthi militia. Its ability to take Sana'a was clearly, Saudi Arabia now claims, enabled by substantial external military support. This understanding of the Houthis' rise to power in 2014 is puzzling not only because the Iranians explicitly told the Houthis at that time that they did not condone a move on the capital, but also because the Saudis did nothing to prevent it from happening. Instead, they waited another six months before intervening.

The threat the Saudi state perceived from the Houthis cannot be understood in isolation from the regional context of 2011. The Houthis are not

<sup>15</sup> Fakude (2015)

distinctively threatening to the Saudis because of their Shi'a identity or their links to Iran. As former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir John Jenkins, put it:

“The Saudis did not fear the Houthis because they were sent by the Iranians, but because they were out of control. It did not matter who they were, so long as they were in Saudi's backyard; the Saudis would not tolerate this from any group.”<sup>16</sup>

The reality is that the greatest asset the Iranians, and even more so, Hezbollah, has provided to the Houthis is media propaganda. This discourse the Iranians have helped to internationalize, of the Houthis as an oppressed group taking up arms to resist an illegitimate government, is strikingly similar to that of Hezbollah. It was thus politically opportune for Iran, in the context of the 2011 Arab uprisings and their aftermath, to speak out in favor of the Houthis and to exaggerate its role there so as to construct itself as the state representative of revolutionary groups opposing Western-backed regimes in the region.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of the Houthis' motivations as well as any material assistance they have received in shaping conditions on the ground in the leadup to their takeover of Sana'a, the most significant factors were 1. The failure of the National Dialogue to end their marginalization 2. Saudi marginalization of the Houthis' enemies the Islah, who would have been the most capable potential ally of the Saudis in stopping the Houthis, and 3. Weapons the Houthis acquired in the Sa'ada wars against President Saleh from 2004-2010 as well as, later support

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Sir John Jenkins, August 15, 2018, Kent, England

<sup>17</sup> Baron, Alhariri and Biswell (2017)

from Saleh when he turned in their favor after 2012.<sup>18</sup> Even since the start of the March, 2015 Saudi intervention, decisions made by the Houthis and the conflict in Yemen continues to be driven by local causes. Prior to 2015, a majority of the weapons and support the Houthis had were actually those they had acquired through years of war against President Saleh.<sup>19</sup> In many cases, these were American-made weapons, sold to the Saleh government as part of US-Yemeni government deals in the war on terror aimed at combating AQAP. Indeed, it was not Iran, but ex-President Saleh's troops who helped lead the Houthis to victory over Sana'a in 2014. Their source of growing strength was the same Saleh who had been constructing the Houthis as Iranian proxies for years, a narrative of which the US had been highly skeptical.<sup>20</sup>

Saudi alliances and enemies in Yemen have been defined more by their fluidity than anything else. The most significant backer of the Houthis in the post-Arab Spring period was Saleh, with whom, it seems, the Saudis might have brokered a deal with in March 2015.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, the GCC Initiative gave immunity to Saleh and his supporters, widely seen by many Yemenis as a fundamental flaw in the post-2011 resolution of Yemeni revolution.<sup>22</sup> At that

<sup>18</sup> Transfeld (2017)

<sup>19</sup> Phone interview with political analyst working on Yemen, March 28, 2017; Juneau (2016): 652

<sup>20</sup> Salmoni et. al, RAND (2010)

<sup>21</sup> Thembisa Fakude "Operation Decisive Storm: Reshuffling Regional Order," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Position Papers, April 6, 2015

<sup>22</sup> Prasow, HRW (2019)

time, they had also been refusing to support the Islah, which had become staunchly critical of Saleh at least since the early 2000s.<sup>23</sup> Why did the Saudis not work harder to broker such a deal with the former president back in 2014 or 2015, while simultaneously marginalizing other groups that were vehemently opposed to both the Salehs and the Houthis, before allowing the Houthis to gain further and further ground? On March 23, 2015, Saleh's son Ahmed extended an offer to the Saudis in which he would agree to rejoin the Saudi side against the Houthis along with thousands of troops, in exchange for immunity for him and his father and an unfreezing of their assets.<sup>24</sup> Clearly rejecting this offer, the Saudis went ahead with the launch of their air campaign on Yemen, Operation Decisive Storm, on March 25, 2015.

### **Ideological threat from Iran in context**

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is generally considered to be the source of tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Before this, sectarianism played little role in the two countries' relations with one another, as well as in their general foreign policies. After the fall of the shah, the Saudis feared the Iranians not so much

<sup>23</sup> Transfeld (2015): 153

<sup>24</sup> Thembisa Fakude "Operation Decisive Storm: Reshuffling Regional Order," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Position Papers, April 6, 2015



because of their ability to stoke revolution among the Saudi Shi'a minority, which comprises only about 15% of the Saudi population. Rather, Iran posed a threat because the Islamic Republic that was formed in 1979 positions its identity and foreign policy not strictly as a Shi'a one, but one that claims to represent Muslims everywhere, and in particular those suffering under the legacies of colonial repression. In this sense, it is pan-Islamic and revolutionary in the way that Nasserism was. In some ways, it may be considered to have been more threatening to Saudi Arabia than secular Arab Nationalism, as Iran did not offer a useful foil to the Saudi religious basis of legitimacy in the form of a secular republicanism. Instead, it threatened to offer a rivaled version of Saudi Arabia's own source of regional identity and domestic legitimacy: pan-Islamism.<sup>25</sup>

While 1979 triggered a fundamental change in Saudi projection of its identity abroad, it was, as with the Nasserist threat, one for which Saudi Arabia had a readily available means of constructing a counter-narrative. The pan-Islamism it had embraced in the 1960s was narrowed into a strict pro-Sunni sectarianism. Having always relied upon ultraconservative Wahhabism, discrimination against the Shi'a and other religious minorities was nothing new to the kingdom's policies. In terms of foreign rivals, few countries but Iran had Shi'a-dominant governments and populations. Saudi Arabia had thus been able to

<sup>25</sup> Darwich (2016)

continue to project ideological power abroad as the leader of the Muslim world, merely depicting Shi'a as heretical minorities, and the Islamic Republic and the Lebanese Hezbollah as illegitimate revolutionaries. The Iranian Revolution was threatening for its use of pan-Islam, but ultimately a manageable threat, as it was nonetheless a Shi'a regime with a Shi'a population.

Thus, when the Saudi regime speaks today of bringing Saudi Arabia 'back to a moderate Islam,' implicit in this is the idea that before 1979, Saudi Arabia was not intolerant of minorities and enforcing of regressive views on, for example, women's rights. Furthermore, in order to go back to this (re)constructed past, it must now become more socially inclusive and religiously pluralist, particularly towards the Shi'a minority. Despite making changes to the role of the Saudi religious establishment, however, the regime and its top *ulema* have, if anything, only drastically increased their hostile rhetoric towards and physical repression of the Shi'a minority. They have done so under the guise that Shi'a activists protesting their political repression and social marginalization are agents of Iran.<sup>26</sup>

As explained in the last chapter, the Saudi regime's ontological security was threatened more so than ever before in the wake of the Arab region's 2011

<sup>26</sup> Coogler, HRW (2017); "The Saudi king opted for physically eliminating his opponents," Al-Akhbar, March 16, 2016, translated by Mideastwire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=60038>; "The minorities in Saudi Arabia: the crisis of the relation with the regime," Al-Akhbar, February 9, 2016, translated by Mideastwire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=59713>

uprisings. Saudi Arabia sought to lead the Sunni states in increasing its use of anti-Shi'a sentiment and scapegoating of activism as a Shi'a, and thereby Iranian-led phenomenon. This ensued most overtly in the Saudi-led GCC intervention against Shi'a protestors in Bahrain in 2011. This exacerbation of vitriolic rhetoric towards the Shi'a can be traced back to US's military intervention in Iraq in 2003. Yet, it took on a new level beginning in 2011, best exemplified by the intervention in Bahrain and corresponding increases in physical repression of the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia.<sup>27</sup> This is linked to a similar underlying concern that the Egyptian revolution represented: the potential for breakdown of authoritarian regimes in the region from the bottom-up on the one hand and the weakening of US support for Arab authoritarianism on the other end.

In other words, Iran had already become a scapegoat, even before the implementation of the ground-breaking Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal between the US and Iran in 2015. This stems from a combination of factors preceding talks between the US and Iran on the deal, including real: Iranian dominance and extensive military involvement in Iraq since 2003 as well as distorted or exaggerated: the false premise that Iran is behind Shi'a minority groups' protests anywhere in the Gulf based on the logic the Iranians could gain strategically from the downfall of fellow Sunni and/or US-backed dictators.

<sup>27</sup> Nuruzzaman (2013): 367; Matthiesen (2013)

Before covering the Saudi construction of threats from Yemen as rooted in an Iranian presence, I contextualize Saudi approaches to Yemen during the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011.

### **Arab Spring in Yemen**

The 2011 Yemeni revolution was, as with others in the region, driven by local causes, with different groups uniting to demand President Saleh step down. Beginning on January 15, 2011, student and other civil society activists took to the streets in the capital, Sana'a and in cities throughout the country, including Taiz, Aden, and al-Mukalla. The largest of the youth movements formed an umbrella group, the Civil Coalition of Revolutionary Youth.<sup>28</sup> They called for dismantlement of Saleh's regime, ending of corruption, constitutional reform, and decentralization. While the official opposition, the Joint Meetings Party, hesitated to participate, the youth movements were joined by the Southern Hiraq movement and the northern Houthi movement. The southerners had long been marginalized since unification in the 1990s despite the resources of southern Yemen being essential to the state. Hiraq chose to put aside secessionist demands to align with northern groups in ousting Saleh. On November 23, 2011, President Saleh agreed

<sup>28</sup> Durac (2012): 165

to a GCC-led effort to transfer power to his vice president, Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi. As I show below, the ensuing failure of the Yemeni National Dialogue was built into its design. As an initiative aimed at defusing the situation of mass unrest and protest of the 2011 uprisings, its main goal was to ensure from that stability was restored from the top-down. A democratic system lending agency to Yemenis was against Saudi wishes, as it always had been, and the National Dialogue and its outcome were no exception<sup>29</sup>.

The response to revolution in Yemen has misleadingly been described as a ‘pacted’ transition.<sup>30</sup> While this accurately describes the transition in the sense of it including multiple parties agreeing to a peaceful transfer of power, this reference misleadingly implies the outcome of a democratic government. Regardless of the nature of the government resulting from the transition, the process itself was undemocratic. The GCC Initiative ensured equal representation of the two major elite groups in Yemen: ousted President Saleh’s former party, the General People’s Congress (GPC), now nominally led by Saleh’s former Vice President Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and the opposition embodied in the Joint Meetings Party (JMP).<sup>31</sup> Yet, both sides have been known for their shifting

<sup>29</sup> Hanshaw (2017): 4

<sup>30</sup> Transfeld (2016):151; The reference to ‘pacted’ transition elicits democratization theorists Linz and Stepan’s concept of organized, national groups compromising to form a new government. But implicit in this reference to works on democratic transitions is that the result would be a democratic government, which was neither the full intention nor the outcome of the Yemen transition, despite the rhetoric elicited in the GCC Initiative on human and women’s rights (more on this below).

<sup>31</sup> GCC Initiative (2011) Agreement on the implementation mechanism for the transition

loyalties, with alliances being shuttled between these two. The GPC was split between hardliners loyal to Saleh and those in favor of Hadi and legitimized by the GCC Initiative to rule.<sup>32</sup> The JMP consisted of the powerful Ahmar family, General Ali Mohsin, and the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, (known as the reform party, Islah), all of whom had been off and on rivals of Saleh in the past, but were united in opposing him after the 2011 uprisings. Elite divisions included the split between supporters of Saleh and of Ali Mohsin. The GCC Initiative not only failed in unifying the military, but ultimately worked to undermine a potential element of representation of the Yemeni people, at the top as well as, more crucially, from the bottom.<sup>33</sup>

The GCC Initiative and the National Dialogue Conference it created ultimately broke down because they failed as the democratic agreements they claimed to be. It was not only a matter of elite divisions between the Joint Meetings Party and the General People's Congress, but because of how both abandoned the masses who had taken to the streets in the first place to protest their lack of adequate representation. From the top: the first component of the GCC Initiative was internal security reform, which amounted to a removal from

process in Yemen in accordance with the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), November, (Translated) [http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE\\_111205\\_Agreement%20on%20the%20implementation%20mechanism%20for%20the%20transition.pdf](http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE_111205_Agreement%20on%20the%20implementation%20mechanism%20for%20the%20transition.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Transfeld (2016): 159

<sup>33</sup> al-Madhaji (2016)

the military of any of Saleh's supporters. As a part of the internationally-supported GCC Initiative, military reform was supported by the UN Special Advisor on Yemen Jamal Benomar.<sup>34</sup> One result of these reforms was to isolate the staunch Saleh loyalist 'hawks' wing of the GPC from other elites, including the Islah, Ahmar family, and some of its supporters in the Hashid tribe. As the Ahmar and the Islah and their tribal alliances fought with the Houthis, the conditions were conducive for an [seemingly paradoxical] alliance between the Houthis and the Saleh loyalists.<sup>35</sup> Second was the National Dialogue Conference between the GPC and JMP, the latter claiming to represent the opposition, including the different groups who had taken to the street in the first place. Although claiming to derive 'popular legitimacy' from ties to the street, the JMP failed to meaningfully represent any of their views or to implement any of the major demands—southern grievances (the Hirak movement), returning land, apologizing for the 2004-2010 Sa'ada wars, addressing ongoing demands of the disillusioned in Sa'ada. Before I move to explaining the Saudi perception of threat after the National Dialogue Conference and the conditions leading up to their intervention in 2015, I provide a brief background on the Houthis.

With the National Dialogue in 2011 limited to the voices of rival elites, and little incentive on either side to represent aggrieved groups, the Houthis

<sup>34</sup> Transfeld (2014): 4

<sup>35</sup> Transfeld (2014): 3

opportunistically formed an alliance with former President Saleh and his loyalists, in opposition to Vice President Hadi and the opposition umbrella known as the Joint Meetings Party (JMP). As if the GCC Initiative had not done enough to sow elite divisions while keeping the marginalized out of power, broader Saudi responses to the Arab Spring made the situation ripe for a strengthened Saleh-Houthi alliance. When King Abdullah declared the Muslim Brotherhood and the Yemeni Islah terrorists in 2014, this Saudi distancing from the Islamist Islah Party further weakened the position of the JMP, and this ultimately strengthened the Houthis. The Saudis were willing to allow the Houthis to gain strength if it was at the expense of the Islah coming to power over a unified Yemen. The way King Abdullah saw it, the Houthis were the only ones capable of keeping the power of Islah and their powerful allies the Ahmar family in check, and were thereby seen not through the lens as Iranian proxies set on attacking the kingdom, but as tools for co-optation in the Saudi bid to keep Yemen divided and under Saudi influence. Furthermore, before the Houthis had overtaken the capital Sana'a, the Saudis' primary concern in the context of the Arab uprisings and Yemeni revolution was with an Islamist group like Islah that could claim electoral legitimacy, gaining control over a united Yemen.<sup>36</sup> The greatest threat Yemen

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London



could pose to the Saudis would be a unified state on its border run by democratically elected Islamists.

Thus, the Saudis saw the Houthis as the best hope in stopping the revolutionary contagion from forming into a democratic and united Yemen, the Saudis turned a blind eye to their amassing of power and even implemented policies that strengthened their hand.<sup>37</sup> In an interview with former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine, Bodine emphasized how much the Saudis have always had an ‘imposter syndrome’ over their Islamic legitimacy, and that any other state with a rival claim to Islamic authority for political legitimacy, existentially threatened the Saudis. When asked whether she thought it was true that the Saudis had indeed given support to the Houthis between 2011 and 2014, as two Saudi activists had told me, Bodine expressed this was ‘highly probable’ given their primary objective in keeping Yemen divided and undemocratic.<sup>38</sup>

As for the new ‘legitimate’ president of Yemen, as the Saudis have consistently labeled him since 2012, President Hadi had not initially viewed military intervention against the Houthis as a solution. From 2012 to 2014, Hadi was preoccupied with the failings of the National Dialogue Conference and

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1 May 6, 2018, London; Email exchange with former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine, in which Bodine expressed it is highly probable the Saudis would support the Houthis as part of an effort to keep Yemen divided and thereby easier to control. Similarly but with a more specific argument, Saudi activist 1 emphasized the Saudi fear of “contagion of the spring time peoples... the Saudis saw the Houthis as the most capable actors in Yemen to prevent this from spreading”

concerned with divisions in the military. He sought dialogue, but government mediation with the Houthis broke down as fighting continued between Islah and the Houthis.<sup>39</sup> With Saudi marginalization of the Islah having weakened the JMP, Hadi was left with few domestic allies just as Saleh was forming an alliance of convenience with the increasingly powerful Houthis. By September 2014, the Houthis were able to take the capital, Sana'a. Following this, the Houthi-Saleh coalition moved on to overtaking other parts of the country. This was all well within historic Saudi policy towards Yemen, to lend support to those otherwise considered its enemies.<sup>40</sup> In early 2015, Saudi policy began to diverge from its historic approach.

### **“Shoot first, aim later”**

If Saudi responses to Yemen seemed to be as usual in 2011, how can we account for the undeniable change seen in the March 2015 intervention in Yemen?<sup>41</sup> How is the 2015 intervention linked to other signs of foreign policy shifts, outside of Yemen, that occurred in 2011? On the one hand, as explained above, the Houthis had been inadvertently strengthened by the Saudi decisions

<sup>39</sup> Transfeld (2016): 162

<sup>40</sup> Stenslie (2013)

<sup>41</sup> Nazer (2016)

made in 2011. At the same time, it is likely that some sort of military response would have been carried out under King Abdullah, and was in the works ever since the Houthi takeover of the Yemeni capital in September 2014.<sup>42</sup> Despite this, several have expressed disbelief that King Abdullah would have launched an intervention like that begun on March 25, 2015. Former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine has said that King Abdullah and others in the royal family would not have gone in.

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman began his bid for power amidst two overlapping moments of change within the kingdom. All he needed was something upon which to stake his claims to rule. As I described in the previous chapter, this opportunity born of regime insecurity stemmed from the Arab uprisings. Upon the backdrop of the regional upheaval sparked by the Arab Spring, bin Salman had a set of tools through which he could build a basis of support. Muhammad bin Salman sought to compensate for a lack of royal support for his bid for power by constructing an image of himself as a leader with mass support. Muhammad bin Salman was keenly aware of just how successful King Abdullah's military intervention into Bahrain in early 2011 to quell mass protests for democracy had been as a means of garnering popular momentum<sup>43</sup> in Saudi Arabia for the regime as a force for internal stability and protector against the

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Michael Stephens, May 3, 2018, London

<sup>43</sup> Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, March 17, 2018

Iranian threat. He had this in mind when he chose to take advantage of the crisis in Yemen by positioning himself as the leader of the kingdom's largest military intervention since the 1930s. In doing so, his hope was that he would be able to signal to potential challengers in the regime that he had mass popularity. Despite this sometimes supposedly backfiring in terms of senior royal support for bin Salman,<sup>44</sup> he has nonetheless continued to be successful in consolidating power through showing he has support of fellow Saudi millennials, who comprise an overwhelming majority of the population. In the words of one Saudi elite insider close to the regime, "MBS has his finger on the pulse of the youth; he has 'street cred'."<sup>45</sup>

In interviews, former US ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine and a notable Saudi activist both emphasized that Muhammad bin Salman's primary motivation to intervene was to rally public support. Describing historical Saudi intervention in Yemen as "backing everyone and anyone to keep the pot bubbling—never boiling, never less than a simmer," Bodine went on to list as the first point of difference with past approaches is that the 2015 intervention was about "MBS establishing credibility to be king, with his father's support—the

<sup>44</sup> Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, March 17, 2018; See conclusion for more examples of foreign aggression

<sup>45</sup> Interview with anonymous Saudi national, May 31, 2018

rallying of publics through foreign wars is a tried and true tactic.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the

Saudi activist described Muhammad bin Salman as:

“...much less qualified than anyone else, but smart enough to realize this, so his intervention was a way of overcoming this (lack of legitimacy) by appealing to the public. He was astute enough to pick up on how much everyone hated Iran and that this was an increasing trend, and so decided to use this as a way of uniting and rallying the population behind him through the intervention in Yemen...Although there is never a need for the regime to concern itself with what the public wants or to fear the public, Prince Muhammad’s appeal for popular support would be a means to consolidate the support he needed from the rest of the regime in order to gain power.”<sup>47</sup>

In the post-Arab Spring context, the war offered a point of unity and praise for the Saudi government along the lines of curtailing Iran, even among prominent elites and popular figures otherwise sympathetic to regional movements for greater popular representation. Indeed, the war in Yemen was initially very popular, including among those who later became critical of the seemingly unhinged aggression being deployed there as well as within the kingdom. Just months before penning a column on the need to end the war in Yemen, and subsequent murder, the self-exiled Jamal Khashoggi responded to a question on aggressive Saudi foreign policy by asserting that “Saudi Arabia needed to become more assertive...it needed to stand up to Iran.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the

<sup>46</sup> Email exchange with former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine, May 15, 2018

<sup>47</sup> Phone interview with Saudi activist 1, March 17, 2018

<sup>48</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018: By this point, Khashoggi was increasingly openly critical of the crown prince, and opposed to the way in which the war and foreign policy broadly was being carried out. Yet, he stood by his earlier position that Saudi Arabia needed to be more assertive, particularly towards Iran

widely popular cleric and enthusiast for democratic representation since the Arab uprisings, Salman al-Awdah, offered strong and sectarian-tinged praise and religious justification for the intervention in 2015.<sup>49</sup> Unlike most other clerics, al-Awdah had avoided anti-Shi'a tropes during the Arab uprisings, and had fallen short of praising the Saudi intervention in Bahrain. Both he and Khashoggi were, albeit in varying ways, in favor of more representative governments and saw hope in the Arab uprisings. The fact that they were supportive of the Saudi intervention from the beginning reveals the broadly unifying powers of a war.

In playing off of these popular sentiments against Iran, the regime was able to divert the focus of blame for regional and domestic problems away from itself. The ability of Muhammad bin Salman to launch his bid for power through the appeals of combating the common enemy of Iran thus embodies a larger regime response to the monarchy's fragility in the wake of the Arab Spring. He has not been the cause of these shifts. It is important to recall that King Abdullah, having been known in many instances over the last several decades of seeking rapprochement with Iran, was the one who intervened to crush peaceful Shi'a protestors in Bahrain whom the Saudis and al-Khalifa portrayed as an Iranian-backed menace. Coming onto the scene when his father succeeded Abdullah in 2015, Muhammad bin Salman has opportunistically become a mechanism

<sup>49</sup> Matthiesen (2015): 8

reinforcing this aggressive shift. Key to this has been an intensified application of construction of regional instabilities as driven by hostile foreign actors, and in particular from Iran. Thus, through extending the post-2011 aggressive foreign policy turn, bin Salman has managed to turn this regime fragility into an asset for his own rise to power. As the newly appointed defense minister in early 2015, the intervention against the Houthis proved the perfect opportunity for him to showcase this.

On January 22, 2015, the Houthis officially consolidated power over the capital, Sana'a, over which they had gained control in September, 2014. Prime Minister Hadi resigned, and fled to the southern city of Aden. Two months later, the Houthis descended on Aden. Hadi fled to Riyadh, where he appealed for help in stopping the Houthis. The Saudis have been keen to emphasize their role in leading a UN-sanctioned international coalition, including the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Morocco, and Pakistan, to intervene in Yemen. Yet, these states were informed of the Saudi air campaign only days before it began on March 25, 2015. Jordan and Egypt were not a part of the decision to intervene, and the GCC states had not completed preparations for the intervention in time when the Saudi air campaign began.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Fakude (2015): 4; Partrick (2016)

The usual attention to planning with advice from senior princes and deference to the US was pushed aside with this personal domestic concern prioritized.<sup>51</sup> In response to the ways in which the intervention diverged from previous policy, a Saudi activist told me:

“Even if King Abdullah had gone in, it would not have been like this; he would have spent more time consulting tactically with the Americans and taking advice from those with experience... There was no strategy, and the Americans were informed, but not asked permission as in the past, which was *very* unusual. Advice from senior royals was likewise ignored. Muhammad bin Salman was told by those with more experience that you could get no shock effect as he intended with an air war in Yemen, because the whole strategy of a shock effect is to destroy sophisticated infrastructure, which Yemen did not even have to begin with. The sensible alternative strategy would have been to coordinate with ground forces, but he chose not to do this, instead to rush in (and in the end relying on Emirati ground forces with whom he did not sufficiently coordinate.)”<sup>52</sup>

It is important to note that the rushed launch of the intervention, and refusal to gain greater reassurance through US permission does not preclude the fact that the Saudis needed, and continue to require, logistical military support from the US. Just as there was an assumption the US would end up providing needed support, it was believed other regional forces would be unified behind Saudi Arabia’s goals. The policies of the other leading intervening state, the UAE, however, have diverged since at least as far back as summer 2015, when at one point the Emiratis declared their mission accomplished after ‘liberating’ the

<sup>51</sup> Dexter Filkins, “A Saudi Princes Quest to Remake the Middle East,” *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London



southern city of Aden.<sup>53</sup> While the Emiratis possess a superior, better trained military than the Saudis, there has not, from the very beginning, been productive coordination to produce a more effective air campaign against the Houthis.<sup>54</sup> Instead, the Emiratis have increasingly pursued their own imperialistic goals of controlling southern Yemen.<sup>55</sup>

Saudi Arabia's claim that UN Resolution 2216 legitimates its military intervention is, at best, the same level of justification the US had in using its UN resolutions from the 1991 Gulf war to legitimate its intervention into Iraq in 2003. Nowhere in Resolution 2216, which Saudi Arabia submitted to the UN more than two weeks after the launch of Operation Decisive Storm, was there approval for the use of force. The closest it came to stating this was in allowing for a reevaluation of the potential for future debate and approval of use of force. Prior to the March 2015 intervention, the Houthis had not launched attacks into Saudi territory. Nonetheless, the Saudi response was, from the very beginning, disproportionate in the destruction it has waged on Yemen and on innocent Yemeni civilians in both military and economic terms.

As of August, 2018, 6,500 Yemeni civilians have been killed directly from military actions, and 10,000 wounded since the start of the 2015 intervention. The

<sup>53</sup> Email exchange with former Ambassador Barbara Bodine, October 9, 2017

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Saudi activist, May 6, 2018, London

<sup>55</sup> "Yemenis protest against UAE presence in Socotra," May 7, 2018  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/yemenis-protest-uae-presence-socotra-180507142606332.html>

total number of casualties from direct military causes is estimated to be over 60,000.<sup>56</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, “the primary cause of these deaths were airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition.”<sup>57</sup> After the first few months of the intervention, by August 2015, the Saudi-led coalition’s strategy had begun to shift from military and government targets to an increasingly economic warfare. This has included targeting of water, and transport infrastructure, food production and distribution, hospitals, schools, and livestock.<sup>58</sup> Hundreds of civilians, including children, have been killed in airstrikes targeting marketplaces, funerals, schools, weddings, and hospitals.<sup>59</sup> To add to this devastating, directly imposed economic warfare, in 2016, the Saudi-backed Yemeni government closed off the country through periodic blockades and moving the central bank of Yemen to Aden, leading to the cessation of salaries of government employees outside of coalition control. Altogether, this siege warfare has culminated in over 85,000 civilian deaths from starvation alone by the end of 2018.<sup>60</sup> Although the role of Emirati

<sup>56</sup> “Yemen War death toll now exceeds 60,000 according to latest ACLED data,” Report from ACLED, December 11, 2018 <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-war-death-toll-now-exceeds-60000-according-latest-acled-data>

<sup>57</sup> Prasow, HRW (2018)

<sup>58</sup> “The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial Bombardment and Food War” Martha Mundy, October 9, 2018, World Peace Foundation: 7

<sup>59</sup> “War Crimes Report on Yemen Accuses Saudi Arabia and UAE,” Nick Cumming-Bruce, *The New York Times* August 28, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/28/world/middleeast/un-yemen-war-crimes.html>

<sup>60</sup> This number is in addition to the roughly 7,000 civilian casualties of military attacks. Rick Noack. “85,000 children have starved to death during the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen,” *The Washington Post* November 21, 2018 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/11/21/children-have-starved-death-during-saudi-led-intervention-yemen-says-new-report/?utm\\_term=.521145923bc2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/11/21/children-have-starved-death-during-saudi-led-intervention-yemen-says-new-report/?utm_term=.521145923bc2)

ground troops, with generally more sophisticated and accurate military techniques, have increased their involvement, attacks on civilian areas have continued, with no sign of improvement, and a general refusal by the coalition to acknowledge there is a problem in strategy.<sup>61</sup> In the words of a Saudi diplomat responding to Professor Martha Mundy's question on threats of starvation, "Once we control them, we will feed them."<sup>62</sup>

None of this seems to have been particularly effective in weakening the Houthis, who have only continued to gain military power since the start of the intervention, including the ability to launch rockets into the Saudi capital, Riyadh. As of May, 2018, over 1,000 Saudi military deaths have been documented, a number that is said by many to be significantly smaller than the real toll on Saudi military personnel.<sup>63</sup> In November 2017, the Houthis launched missiles into the Saudi capital Riyadh. In response, the Saudi-led coalition imposed a total blockade on all borders of Yemen. Given the degree to which Yemenis rely on imported food, this has sparked a humanitarian crisis of starvation, in addition to the suffering caused from air attacks on civilians. After over one month, the coalition allowed the first vessel with humanitarian aid to enter on December 22,

<sup>61</sup> Prasow, HRW (2018)

<sup>62</sup> "The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial Bombardment and Food War" Martha Mundy, October 9, 2018, World Peace Foundation: 7

<sup>63</sup> "More than 1,000 Saudi troops killed in Yemen since war began," Al-Jazeera English, May 28, 2018 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/1-000-saudi-troops-killed-yemen-war-began-180528174808387.html>; Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London

2017.<sup>64</sup> Although the coalition announced in April 2018 its intention to reopen all ports, it launched an offensive on the key port of Hudaydah in June 2018, an action that the UN had warned could trigger a mass famine. Hudaydah has been one of the UN's largest concerns since the Saudi-led coalition's imposition of blockades in November, 2017, because as much as 80% of all food and humanitarian aid flows through this port. In response to accusations that its siege-warfare tactics have triggered economic collapse and a manmade famine, the Saudi coalition has only responded by citing Houthi missile attacks on the one hand and the Saudi role in providing humanitarian assistance to Yemen on the other. Yet, this assistance pales in comparison to the economic, humanitarian damage the coalition's blockade policies have caused.<sup>65</sup>

Beginning in late-November 2018, representatives of the Houthis and of the Saudi-led coalition agreed to talks led by UN envoy Martin Griffiths in Stockholm.<sup>66</sup> The hopefulness surrounding these talks has not been rooted in any possibility they will end the conflict, but rather, the fact that the mere willingness to consider diplomacy at this stage of no progress on anything over the last four years, and a rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis. In the weeks leading up to the

<sup>64</sup> Annual Report of the UN High Commissioner, August 17, 2018: "Technical assistance and capacity-building Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014"

<sup>65</sup> "The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War," Declan Walsh, *The New York Times*, October 26, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-war-yemen.html>

<sup>66</sup> "Yemen Peace Talks Begin with Agreement to Free 5,000 Prisoners," Declan Walsh, *The New York Times*, December 6, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/06/world/middleeast/yemen-peace-talks.html>

talks, the coalition launched a massive assault on the Houthi side near Hudaydah.<sup>67</sup> Since the truce in December 2018, the coalition has accused the Houthis of repeated violations, while the Houthis have described coalition forces as amassing on the edges of Hudaydah.<sup>68</sup>

### **Rationalizing aimless shooting: Saudi construction of the threat**

As I showed in Chapter 3, 2011 was not the first time in which the Saudis faced regional revolutionary upheaval targeting conservative monarchies like itself. If anything, the pan-Arab sense of regional solidarity at that time was a more cohesive transnational ideology than anything else the region has experienced since then. The Saudi response at the time, which defined itself in the decades that followed, was based on identifying itself as a counter to Nasserism. This more tangible rival against which it could identify itself, in turn, actually prevented the need for Saudi Arabia to provoke foreign hostilities. Even at the height of the Yemen war in 1964, Faisal and Nasser had addressed one another as brothers, publicly embracing two years into the conflict during talks in

<sup>67</sup> “Yemeni drama deepens with tens of thousands under siege in Hudaydah port,” *Asia News.it* November 6, 2018 <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Yemeni-drama-deepens-with-tens-of-thousands-under-siege-in-Hudaydah-port--45397.html>

<sup>68</sup> “Shaky truce in key Yemeni port of Hudaydah,” Lyse Doucet, BBC News, January 28, 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47033909>

Alexandria.<sup>69</sup> Regardless of the degree of Saudi-Egyptian tensions and a disastrous conflict in Yemen, there had been a tendency for the Saudis to present it as surmountable, with a potential for a sense of regional solidarity to subsume struggle with Egypt. In the words of former US Ambassador Bodine:

“Even in the wake of dire external and internal security threats in the 1960s, including the closest the Saudi state ever came to full-scale war prior to 2015, a general a sort of equilibrium of inter-Arab relations was nonetheless maintained throughout the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century.”<sup>70</sup>

In stark contrast to this, Saudi rhetoric towards Iran has been consistently Manichaeic since 2011. Not only has this been manifest in Saudi Arabia conflating the Houthis and Iranians with one another, but also in conflating both with groups with whom the two are sworn enemies. Saudi leadership could publicly acknowledge points of common ground, such as the fact that the Saudis have given significant financial support to Iranian militias fighting ISIS in Iraq, because, for all their differences, the Saudis and Iranians share a common enemy in ISIS. Instead, the standard, mantra has come to be that Iran is not only the paramount regional danger, but it seeks world domination. In what has become perhaps Muhammad bin Salman’s most globally publicized interview, the crown prince told Jeffrey Goldberg of the Atlantic that Saudi Arabia is fighting an ‘evil

<sup>69</sup> “The Alexandria Duet,” Time, September 25, 1964 84 (13): 46  
<http://search.ebscohost.com.libproxy.temple.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=54216406&site=ehost-live&scope=site&authtype=uid&user=ebony&password=lewis>

<sup>70</sup> Interview with former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine, January, 19, 2018, Washington, DC

triangle,' which consists of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sunni terror groups ISIS and Al Qaeda. It is interesting to note that he included the Houthis in this as inextricable from Iran, but seems to, at least initially, in the interview distinguish the Muslim Brotherhood from terror groups. Under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia had officially designated the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists in 2014. The dearth of any evidence linking the Brotherhood to violence against civilians as well as the fact that the Saudis currently support their Yemeni branch, may have necessitated this inconsistency in the Saudi discourse on terrorism. Nonetheless, bin Salman went on to explain to Goldberg that the Muslim Brothers are using democracy for a long-term goal of terrorism, and he implicates them as terrorists through the faulty logic, if not altogether factually incorrect statement, that all leaders of Al Qaeda and ISIS were at one time part of the Brotherhood. Finally the crown prince refused to explicitly state what defines the evil triangle or its existence, beyond its opposition to Saudi Arabia and its fellow 'moderate' Arab states:

“Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Yemen—all of these countries are defending the idea that independent nations should focus on their own interests, in building good relations on the foundation of UN principles. The evil triangle doesn't want to do that.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> “Saudi Crown Prince: ‘Iran’s Supreme Leader Makes Hitler Look Good’” Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018: 6

The current Saudi discourse regarding its national security differs from that of the 1960s Saudi leadership in what it lacks—an ideology, or counter-ideology, through which it may legitimate itself domestically and regionally. Like the 1960s, the period since 2011 has forced Saudi Arabia to define itself, but this time, it has come about because of the deterioration of its own ideological justification from within. One function of this has been for the regime to control a new Saudi nationalism by crafting a more aggressive, confrontational construction of foreign threats, in which it depicts itself as the ‘sovereign, legitimate’ state rightfully pursuing its own interests, juxtaposed with the transnationality of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda. This construction of the Houthis and Iran as both embodying ‘terrorism’ on the one hand, and the Saudi-led coalition as representing ‘legitimacy’ on the other has characterized the overall Saudi discourse on Yemen more than anything.<sup>72</sup> As the leading Saudi military spokesman for the intervention in Yemen from 2015 to 2018, General Ahmed Assiri put it in the intervention’s second week: “the Houthis and al-Qaeda [are] ‘both faces of the same coin...One of the goals of the mission is attacking all terror groups.’”<sup>73</sup> Variations of this designation of the ‘evil triangle’ have been constantly repeated in the Saudi press since 2015. Additionally, any attack by the

<sup>72</sup> Aryani (2015) <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32051/Saudi-Arabia-and-the-War-of-Legitimacy-in-Yemen>

<sup>73</sup> “For Saudi Arabia, struggles in Yemen have deep roots” Brian Murphy, *Washington Post* April 5, 2015



Houthi forces on the coalition, including Saudi and other coalition military forces and bases, are described as ‘terrorist attacks’ in the pro-government Saudi press.<sup>74</sup> Given this discourse, the Houthis are not just viewed as the opposing side in a war. The implication is that the Houthis are the only actors in this conflict employing senseless violence, as even their attacks on Saudi military bases are labeled ‘acts of terrorism.’

Thus, the Saudi state discourse is broadly one of painting itself as the upholder of ‘legitimacy’ and its enemies as the illegitimate, embodied in references to them as terrorists and to proxies of Iran. To pinpoint this to specific dates, I used Python to scrape, or collect in mass, tweets with any mention of Yemen from 26 separate Saudi-government or Saudi state-backed news accounts.<sup>75</sup> I began with January 2, 2012, going up through the date I collected them on, March 6, 2019, gathering a total of 14,183 tweets that mention Yemen in English from these pro-Saudi regime accounts. After converting into an Excel spreadsheet and ordering the tweets chronologically, I broke these into three separate text files based on the time periods of January 2, 2012 – January 23, 2015; January 24, 2015 – June 5, 2017; June 6, 2017 – March 6, 2019. I found

<sup>74</sup> “The Explosions are in Aden and the Target is the Kingdom,” *Al-Watan* September 7, 2015 Translated by Mideastwire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=58622>; “‘Yemen’s Houthi Militia Using Iranian-made drone aircraft’: Arab coalition” Lojien ben Gasseem *Arab News*, January 20, 2019 <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1438701/middle-east>;

<sup>75</sup> See appendix for list of Twitter accounts and all metadata

that in the first time period, there was only one mention of ‘legit’ i.e. legitimate, legitimacy, or illegitimate. In the second time period, there were 106 mentions, and in the final time period, 255. Because each time period is different in length, with different amounts of tweets (1917; 6863; 5403), I looked at proportions rather than simply the number of tweets. This shows 0.05%, 1.54%, and 4.7% of tweets, respectively, discussing any use of legitimacy/legitimate/illegitimacy for each time period. In comparing the first and third time periods, this shows a 9300% increase (See Table 1, below).

<b>Time period</b>	<b>Total# tweets</b>	<b># of ‘legit’</b>	<b>% of ‘legit’</b>	<b># of ‘Iran’</b>	<b>% of ‘Iran’</b>	<b># of ‘Qatar’</b>	<b>% of ‘Qatar’</b>
2012-15	1917	1	0.05%	38	1.98%	7	0.37%
2015-17	6863	106	1.54%	575	8.37%	34	0.5%
2017-19	5403	255	4.7%	659	12.10%	60	1.1%
<b>% Change</b>	--	--	<b>9300%</b>	--	<b>511%</b>		<b>170%</b>

**Table 1: Twitter data**

Additionally, for the sake of comprehensiveness in foreign policy discourse and as a useful comparison, I included tweet numbers and proportions of any mention of Qatar because it is another rival state with which Saudi Arabia has recently had increased tensions. The trend of ‘Qatar’ increased over time, like that of ‘Iran’ and ‘legitimacy/illegitimate’. Nonetheless, mentions of Qatar differed in two ways. The first is that there is a considerably smaller number of tweets about Qatar in discussions of Yemen in general. This is somewhat interesting to note given the fact that the Qatari role in Yemen up through around 2013 was a source of concern for the Saudis. In fact, according to some, it was more of a concern than the Iranian role.<sup>76</sup> There was less of an overall increase, and in particular less of an increase from the 2012-2015 period. As expected, the greatest increase was after June 5, 2017, when the Saudis, Emiratis, Bahrainis and Egyptians announced a blockade of Qatar. Nonetheless, when it comes to Yemen, the clearest example of increased discourse has been centered on Iran.

As for the relevance of Iran itself to this discourse, the Islamic Republic doubtlessly benefits from lending low-cost support to militias across the region and may be the state that is most consistently anti-status quo in the sense of status quo as defined by Western, and Saudi interests.<sup>77</sup> Yet, the publicity the Iranians

<sup>76</sup> Phone interview with researcher and political analyst working on Yemen, March 28, 2017

<sup>77</sup> Juneau (2016): 648

give to its support does not match reality, as their actual material support to the Houthis has been significantly less.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest, as the Saudis explicitly do, that Iran has ever sought, as Al Qaeda and ISIS do, to abolish nation-states and to create a caliphate or some sort of empire. As for the Muslim Brotherhood, its one offshoot well known for violence is a group born of local conditions and with primarily local aims. The Saudi regime has thus taken the real transnational, violent, terroristic aims of Al Qaeda and ISIS, and superimposed their identities onto other actors, which, while guilty of plenty, simply do not fit this bill. Beyond the factual stretching, what stands out here is the juxtaposition of sovereign states versus transnational groups seeking instability and violence for its own sake. Finally, Muhammad bin Salman compares Iran to Hitler, bringing the narrative on Iran back to one of not just regional, but world, domination. Global domination is a stated goal of a transnational terrorist network like ISIS, but it is an absurd allegation towards the Iranian state. Given that the crown prince has equated Iran with Al Qaeda, however, the accusation may come off to the misinformed observer, as feasible.

<sup>78</sup> Dr. Helen Lackner, 'Manufacture of a Proxy War,' speaking at "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Beyond Conflict and Co-existence?" London School of Economics, May 8, 2018

### **In search of an ideological role**

As revealed in his interview with *The Atlantic*, Muhammad bin Salman uses the discourse on fighting (predominantly Sunni, transnational) terrorism to isolate Iran when he could point to this as a potential source of unity. When he announced the plan for an Islamic anti-terror military coalition in December 2015 among 34 Muslim-majority states across the world, blatantly omitted were not only Iran, but Iraq and Syria, the two states most affected by ISIS's violence.<sup>79</sup> After describing to me the pan-Islamic approach Faisal championed in the 1960s, Khashoggi described Muhammad bin Salman's foreign policy approach to me as one that shows the prince is 'confused'. Khashoggi stated:

“Muhammad bin Salman wants to be leader of the Muslim world, and is very much bothered by those who compete with him for this. But he does not want to show this symbolically—to visit the refugee camps in Burma, to pray at the grand mosque in Brussels when he is in Europe... Muhammad bin Salman needs something to justify his rule, and as a Saudi leader, needs some way to justify his role as leader of the Muslim world, but he has not yet figured out his relationship to Islam.”<sup>80</sup>

The December 2015 announcement of a Muslim counter-terror military alliance might be thought of as the counterpart to Faisal's 1965 Pan-Islamic

<sup>79</sup> Oliver Miles, “Is Saudi Arabia's Anti-Terrorist Alliance Real?” *The Guardian* December 15, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/15/saudi-arabia-anti-terrorist-alliance-terrorism-muslim>

<sup>80</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018

Initiative, but with crucial distinctions shaped by the different domestic and regional contexts today. Faisal had created this largely symbolic political initiative as a means of ideologically superseding Nasser's secular pan-Arabism. It not only had clear points of opposition which included overlap with pan-Arabism: imperialism, Communism, and Zionism, but explicitly stood for something: Islamic-based unity across the Arab world and beyond. Saudi Arabia offered an ideological alternative to Nasserism for postcolonial identity in the Arab world.

### **Conclusion: Back to square one: order through chaos in Yemen**

The Saudis want out of their Yemeni quagmire, and the largest concern is in avoiding any public acknowledgment of a Saudi defeat, which would mean a loss for Muhammad bin Salman's signature foreign policy initiative, so key to his legitimacy as the kingdom's new de-facto leader. Whomever the Saudis end up supporting and whomever they end up keeping from power is not the concern; rather, the concern is maintaining the semblance of control. By the end of 2017, the Saudis had placed hopes in regaining influence through ex-President Saleh as he decided to break with the Houthis. Before this could play out, the Houthis killed Saleh in December 2017. Nonetheless, since then, the Saudi-led coalition

has allied with Saleh's nephew Tareq Saleh, and there have been rumors he may become the replacement for the 'legitimate' President Hadi.<sup>81</sup> This is largely understood as being pushed by the Emiratis in particular, but, as with the general fluidity of Saudi alliances in Yemen, the Saudi-Emirati alliance itself embodies a certain degree of competing interests as well as pragmatic willingness to shift policies as necessary.

The key takeaway here is that, over the last fourteen months, the best hope for a Saudi military defeat of the Houthis has been rooted in a re-alliance with the very forces, those of ex-President Saleh, that empowered the Houthis in late 2014 in the first place. When it comes to the historic Saudi willingness to align with, co-opt, and support different actors in Yemen to use for the Saudi mission of keeping the country under a degree of Saudi control, not much has changed. What has changed is the aggressive Saudi discourse on certain groups as representing existential threats warranting unprecedented measures. When it comes to use of force, the military intervention against the Houthis launched in 2015 is the greatest example of this. Yet, earlier roots of this can be seen in everything from the intervention to stop 'Iranian-backed' protestors in Bahrain in 2011 to the branding of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists in 2014. Both of these set the

<sup>81</sup> "One year on, Yemen's Saleh as divisive in death as he was in life," *Middle East Eye*, December 4, 2018 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/one-year-yemens-saleh-divisive-death-he-was-life-395327531>

stage, discursively, and quite literally in the case of sidelining Islah, materially speaking, for the Saudi intervention in Yemen in 2015.

Overall, Saudi policy towards Yemen continues to be shaped by its limited support to actors it would like to see remain weak and open to external manipulation. Although when he took the throne in January 2015, King Salman was initially seen as reversing King Abdullah's anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance, the Saudi distrust of the Muslim Brotherhood was too great. On the question of support to the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, former British Ambassador Sir John Jenkins told me:

“There was a lot of wishful thinking among people who wanted to believe KSA would offer the MB a way back. They wouldn't and didn't. Some of this was the overriding importance of Egypt. Some was historic distrust. Some was reaction to some Saudis supporting the Emirati MB. Some was [the influence of] MbZ.”<sup>82</sup> To put it even more bluntly: “the Arab Spring brought previous longtime tensions between the regime and the Brotherhood into outright war.”<sup>83</sup>

Current Saudi tolerance of Islah in Yemen is not a sign of King Salman or Muhammad bin Salman's turn of favor towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather, Saudi support to Islah today comes amidst a chaotic war in which the Houthis have actually become an increasingly powerful threat to the Saudis. Given this context, it makes sense that the Saudis would not need to fear an Islah gaining control of a unified, stable Yemen any time soon. The Islah, in other words, is not

<sup>82</sup> Email exchange with Sir John Jenkins, October 8, 2018

<sup>83</sup> Phone interview with Jamal Khashoggi, July 23, 2018



at the forefront of Saudi concerns in Yemen, as the Saudis currently have, as Sir John put it, “bigger fish to fry.”<sup>84</sup> So long as there were other actors with whom to contend, particularly stronger ones as the Houthis now are, Islah would be tolerated.

Just as Saudi constructions of threat and alliances in Yemen are fluid, there is further proof by the day that Iran itself was never an existential threat to the Saudis. In the immediate international outcry over the killing of Washington Post writer Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudis produced a list of counter-threats to the US, in response to the threats by some in the US government to impose sanctions on the kingdom for its role in murdering the former US resident. Among these counter-measures were Saudi threats to align more closely with Iran in place of the US, as reported by the advisor to the crown prince and general manager of the Saudi media outlet Al-Arabiya, Turki al-Dakhil.<sup>85</sup> If Iran were such an existential threat, it seems, this would not be an option on the table for the Saudis to willingly provide like that.

Saudi Arabia has moved towards compromise over Iran’s stance on other contentious issues in the region, most notably its willingness to accept the

<sup>84</sup> Email exchange with Sir John Jenkins, October 8, 2018

<sup>85</sup> “Riyadh 'could cozy-up to Iran' if US imposes sanctions over Khashoggi affair,” The New Arab, October 15, 2018 <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/10/15/riyadh-could-cozy-up-to-iran-if-us-imposes-sanctions>

persistence of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.<sup>86</sup> Saudi rhetoric on Iran generally speaking and on the Iranian role in Yemen, however, has remained as combative as ever. On May 3, 2017, Muhammad bin Salman said on Saudi television "We know that we are a target of the Iranian regime and we will not be waiting for the battle to come to Saudi Arabia. We will work for it to be there, in Iran." In August, 2017, as described in the previous chapter, bin Salman oversaw the complete leveling of the Saudi Shi'a town of Awamiyya, and since then, the female activist in Saudi Arabia, a peaceful Shi'a activist, has been sentenced to death. Additionally, the Saudi press has made a point since summer 2017 of referring to the Houthis not as a Shi'a group but more specifically, as an Iran-backed militia.<sup>87</sup> Thus, even as the regime claims to be enacting a more 'moderate Islam' that includes reduction in sectarian rhetoric, it continues to engage in aggressive discourse against Iran abroad and in brutal repression of Shi'a within the kingdom. This discourse in 'confronting Iran in Yemen' seem to be useful with little immediate cost to the Saudi regime. The economic and increasingly, international reputational fallout from the conflict is another story.

<sup>86</sup> Rai al-Youm "...Main headline of Saudi monarch's visit to Moscow, an agreement on Al-Assad's persistence..." October 5, 2017, Translated by Mideastwire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=64925>

<sup>87</sup> Conversation with Kristan Diwan, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, Washington, DC, May 23, 2018

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

“The period from 1979 to 2011 was in many ways a reaction to Arab nationalism. Faisal and his successors defined themselves against Nasser. I think what 2011 did was to make nationalism politically consequential again...it made the issue of governance unavoidable. MbZ, MbS, Sisi, they all want to control nationalism as they think their predecessors controlled Islamism for a time—but that won’t work.” *Sir John Jenkins, former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia*<sup>1</sup>

### Summary of the findings

This dissertation has examined how the quest to sustain domestic legitimacy in an authoritarian regime influences that regime’s foreign policy, through looking at why a particular regime employed varying levels of foreign aggression during two periods of regional and domestic instability. I have not created a generalizable theory, but have merely gone about explaining the change in Saudi foreign policy over time through bringing to light certain aspects underemphasized in alternative explanations. I have done so through building upon three sets of literatures: authoritarian domestic legitimation strategies, diversionary war, and ontological security. My hope is to have brought further insight to approaches that go beyond the lens of the international. In bringing in the role of the domestic, I have shown how an authoritarian regime’s aggression

<sup>1</sup> Email exchange with Sir John Jenkins on the development of nationalism in Saudi Arabia, February 16, 2019

abroad cannot simply be understood as a function of its being less domestically constrained and thereby inevitably more reckless. Rather, the foreign aggression is more likely during moments in which there has been deterioration of domestic legitimization strategies. This shows that it is not a resort of first choice necessarily in a closed authoritarian regime, but rather in part because domestic politics matters even in such a regime, that foreign policy might change as a result of domestic shifts.

My empirical focus has been on the two cases of Saudi regime survival strategies during two separate periods of regional revolutionary upheaval. The findings show that where the regime could enhance an ideological source of legitimacy in response to foreign and domestic threats, there was little use for constructing threats as existential, even if there was considerable reason for the regime to feel greatly threatened. As a result, foreign policy would be relatively constrained and cautious. In contrast, where that threat is too ontologically similar, forcing the regime to reconcile within itself rather than confront an enemy, the resulting construction of self is based on nationalism.

In the first case, the Saudis met the threat posed by revolutionary Arab nationalism by reinforcing their claims to domestic legitimacy through their own counter-ideology. Like Arab nationalism, their response of pan-Islamism was defined by a sense of regional solidarity. It was a flexibly constructed difference, as the Saudis used it at times to claim they were not the enemies of Arab

nationalism, and by extension, of Nasser. Their discourse towards Arab nationalism and towards Egypt was not strictly one of enmity. It fell short of direct confrontation even at the height of tensions during the conflict in Yemen, during which the Egyptian-backed Radio Yemen called to kill all members of the al-Saud without exception.<sup>2</sup> Instead of attacking Arab nationalism or even Egypt, Saudi discourse consistently targeted Communism and Zionism. Regardless of just how misleading and disingenuous this discourse was, it was nonetheless a point of common cause with the same ideology Egypt promoted: Arab nationalism. In turn, Nasser was not constructed as an unsurmountable threat or an unchangeable enemy, but rather, as one who had betrayed their common cause by selling out to socialism, to Communism, to foreign enemies like the Soviets, and—duplicitous as this was as being told by the Saudis, to the US and to the Israelis. By promoting a pan-Islamic alternative, the Saudis were constructing themselves in distinction from Nasser, but still retaining a degree of maneuverability so as to uphold the image of regional solidarity, whether it be in the name of the Arab cause or pan-Islam.

The second case explains the more aggressive Saudi military response to conflict in Yemen through a less flexibly constructed external threat. In this case, the nature of the threat to Saudi Arabia is somewhat more complicated, whereas

<sup>2</sup> Vassiliev (1998): 369

the construction is much simpler. Unlike the 1960s, there is no state actor overtly threatening to enact a revolution in the kingdom or to kill the Saudi royal family, nor is there an overt military intervention by a state rival into Yemen. Yet, the Houthi militias who take power, known for anti-Saudi views and previous military skirmishes, are not constructed flexibly in any way as were the Yemeni republicans or their Egyptian backers in the 1960s. Their Iranian allies, who, in complete contrast to the Egyptian role of the 1960s, advised the Houthis against overrunning the capital, have been depicted as the embodiment of evil, seeking world domination in a way that has made Hitler's atrocities in Europe appear small by comparison.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that non-state actors do not pose a potentially serious threat. Regardless: the Saudi military response has been disproportionate, while its discourse aimed at the Houthis, and in particular their external allies, exaggerated. In short, the second case is one in which the Saudis make no attempts, discursively or militarily, to construct any regional solidarity with rivals. Whereas in the 1960s the Egyptians were dealt with a counter-ideology and nuanced policy responses, the threats to the Saudis in the contemporary case are more complex.

There is no ideology against which they may position themselves, nor even a clear, single state enemy that is quite literally, at the gates, as in the 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> "Saudi Crown Prince: 'Iran's Supreme Leader Makes Hitler Look Good'" Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018: 9

Instead, the Saudis have been forced to reckon with their own failures in governance, and left with the question of whether they could potentially one day encounter a similar fate as that befallen to their allies Mubarak and Ben Ali in 2011. This lack of an ideology to contest from regional threats reflects the very nature of the primary threat they face: one of internal legitimacy. This challenge, of a fragily defined ruling ideology, has been growing for the Saudis for some time. What the Arab Spring brought into the open, across the region, was the idea that alternative forms of legitimacy exist beyond the binaries the Saudis had come to thrive upon since the death of Nasserism: either devotion to Islamic identity or democracy, the latter depicted as a foreign import—or, the one increasingly used since 2001: the choice of dictatorship or rule by religious extremists. The Saudi regime did not need to see mass protests or an imminent threat of revolution in the kingdom to find its domestic legitimacy under existential threat. What caused its perception of threat to become so great was to have its one ideological claim to rule challenged by an oppositional discourse<sup>4</sup> characterized by ontological similarity<sup>5</sup> to the Saudi regime as well as electoral politics of popular will. The demands of its opposition remained timid, yet they were enough within the regional context of the Arab uprisings to stoke existential ontological fear in the regime.

<sup>4</sup> al-Zo'by and Başkan

<sup>5</sup> Darwich (2016)

Thus, the greater internal threat perception has led to the constructed exacerbation of external threats. In turn, the inflexibly constructed external enemy, whether it be Iran, the Houthis, or other actors, has brought about a more aggressive Saudi military response in Yemen than in the past. This aggression did not start with the Yemen intervention, or end with it, but has steadily risen from the time of the intervention in Bahrain in 2011 to the blockade of Qatar in 2017. Just weeks before Prince Mohammed became crown prince on June 5, 2017, the Saudis began a new political campaign against their rival Qatar, accusing the fellow Wahhabi state of supporting terrorism and Iran. This was a continuation of the moves against all forms of political Islam, most notably embodied in the Muslim Brotherhood, that challenged the region's status quo authoritarianism. The Saudi regime's demonization of Islamist activists who called for reconciliation with Qatar was as much about the challenge such activists posed to the regime's legitimacy as it was with regional rivalry with Qatar.<sup>6</sup> The increased animosity between Saudi Arabia and Qatar was, after all, a function of Qatar's support for revolutionary Islamist movements, including democratic ones in Tunisia and Egypt, that threatened to upend the regional authoritarian status quo.<sup>7</sup> Thus, they were accused of ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which, according to

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Saudi activist 1, May 6, 2018, London; "What are the real reasons for arresting Sheikhs Al-Ouda and Al-Qarni...?" Rai al-Youm, September 11, 2017, Translated by MidEastWire <https://www.mideastwire.com/page/article.php?id=64714>

<sup>7</sup>"A very minor deal," Okaz, July 11, 2017. Translated by Mideastwire <https://www-mideastwire-com.libproxy.temple.edu/page/article.php?id=67169>



the Saudi government, is the primary source, of Islamic terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the validity of accusations against the Sahwa clerics as being linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, the reality is that the Muslim Brotherhood's branches in the Gulf have never been found responsible for acts of violence. Whereas activists from the Shi'a minority have always been labeled as agents of Iran, and Arab nationalists were at times conflated with Communism, this depiction of non-violent Sunni Islamists as foreign enemies of the state and as terrorists is truly unprecedented in Saudi Arabia.

It is important to note that all of these are exacerbated versions of previous policies towards the countries, with the Yemen intervention being the most concrete example in terms of use of force. Furthermore, the military intervention in Yemen is the only example with which there exists a historical comparison not only occurring before the Arab uprisings, but that is a distinct period of major regional unrest with domestic implications for the stability of the Saudi monarchy.

Alongside explaining the construction and shift over time in foreign policy through the lens of ontological security, the other component to my argument shows how this simultaneously manifests itself in Saudi domestic politics in both time periods. Much of the work on diversionary war has been inconclusive as to

<sup>8</sup> "Saudi Arabia 'detains' more preachers," Al Jazeera, September 13, 2017 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/saudi-arabia-detains-preachers-170912210153172.html>; "Saudi Prince, Asserting Power, Brings Clerics to Heel," Ben Hubbard, The New York Times, November 5, 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/05/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-wahhabism-salafism-mohammed-bin-salman.html>

whether it seems to be an alternative to domestic repression in democracies, or as a consequence of unconstrained dictators' aspirations to project their power internationally.<sup>9</sup> Here I have shown that it is not an alternative but an additional 'pillar of stability,'<sup>10</sup> and actually substitutes in the second case for declining use of ideological legitimacy and co-optation. It is thus used in addition to repression, when that repression is no longer being balanced with ideological legitimacy and co-optation.

Finally, the other key finding from these cases is that there is an interaction between these ontological insecurities and an incoming leadership's ability to capitalize on shifting threat perceptions to craft the regime's ideology, particularly important if that leader is aspiring to become king in a formative moment of succession. In a regime as closed and secretive as the Saudi monarchy, it is impossible for a researcher to determine all of the inner workings of the government. While knowing that would be useful, the scope of this dissertation has been on threat perception's impact on the regime, and in turn, the regime's foreign policy. Given that both cases occur amidst major transfers of power, respectively from the first to second and from the second to third generations of the family, they offer a look within the regime so as to more fully assess the effects of regime survival strategies in response to insecurities on the outcome of

<sup>9</sup> Gelpi (1997); Colgan (2013); Weeks (2014)

<sup>10</sup> Gerschewski (2013); Enterline and Gledistch (2000)

foreign policy (as well as, as summed up above, on repression and co-optation). What I have found through the comparison is that, just as discourse and rhetoric surrounding threats and foreign rivals can have real implications on the use of force, the style of royal power consolidation itself is shaped by the overarching context of threat construction. In each case, the Saudi crown prince at the time stakes his claims to the throne on foreign policy, and in particular to the issue of military intervention in Yemen. Crown Prince Faisal gained support as a leader with past experience in both military and political reform, as well as traditional legitimacy through close ties to the al-Shaykhs, and he was thereby deemed to be better equipped than his predecessor to deescalate tensions with Nasser and to prevent foreign policy crises from becoming legitimacy crises for the regime. The rest of the regime's weariness of foreign policy confrontations contributed to their favoring of Faisal, and in the process, a dynastic monarchy based on rule by coalitions and, in times of dire crisis, the formation of consensus.

In contrast, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has been able to, seemingly successfully, sideline a competitor: former Interior Minister and crown prince, Muhammad bin Nayef, who had extensive previous foreign policy as well as internal security experience, including successes in constructing traditional legitimacy with and co-optation of popular religious scholars. Lacking in previous achievements and sources of traditional legitimacy, bin Salman was nonetheless able to assert power more rapidly and aggressively than did Faisal in the 1960s.

He has done so through taking advantage of the hawkish, aggressive domestic and regional environment since the Arab Spring. Rather than building an ideationally robust ideological base and balancing repression with co-optation, bin Salman has built legitimacy through none other than aggressive nationalism. This nationalism seeks to maximize external threats by constructing them as materially existential, even when they are not.

By aggressive nationalism, I refer to Mansfield and Snyder's work on the relationship between regimes in transition and political leaders' manipulation of greater mass mobilization and mass association with the nation as a means of ensuring support for a new regime. Such close identification with the nation, and thereby support for leaders seeking to retain or gain power, is fostered through emphasis on foreign threats, and ultimately, war. Nationalism as a legitimating tool with the potential to grow beyond the scope of the regime's initial goals—building domestic support—has thus been shown to be more likely in states transitioning to democracy. By applying parts of Mansfield and Snyder's framework, I have shown that similar mechanisms may be at play in a Saudi regime in transition. Rather than democratizing (or undergoing democratic breakdown) it has, if anything, only increased the degree to which it is a politically closed system in which challenges and political expression of any kind are not tolerated. This stems from the absence of an identity beyond that which defines it from an external Other. In the process, this strategy has managed to

shore up domestic support primarily through exacerbating external threats, and by displaying extreme intolerance of anything but strict fealty within the kingdom.

We might thus understand the contemporary period characterized by aggressive Saudi foreign policy, which reflects a burgeoning Saudi nationalism, as a new period of state-formation. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Arab state leaders defined themselves against British and French colonialism as they enacted revolutions against the Western-backed regimes throughout the region. Even as intense intra-Arab rivalries broke out, the conservative and Western-supported Saudi monarchy defined itself in regional terms that overlapped with those of Arab nationalism: as Arab, pan-Islamic, anti-Zionist, and even as anti-Western. Increasingly since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the ideational and economic bases of Arab states have become weaker than ever before. The failures of the US invasion in Iraq marked the subsequent decline of the American era in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> In turn, there seems to have emerged a new period of Arab state-building, and along with it, nation-building and nationalism. Because the 1960s were characterized by a regionally-oriented, more inclusive nationalism positioned against non-regional Others, state ideologies and counter-ideologies were built upon more robust legitimating identities. The Arab Spring and the corresponding counterrevolutionary period has brought a new era of nationalism, but one that is

<sup>11</sup> Hazbun (2015): 61

much less clear in the source of national identity. On the one hand, populations are considerably more literate and educated than in the past. As authoritarian regimes seek to preserve and recalibrate their control over rapidly growing, more mobilized societies in flux, regimes have harnessed nationalism in its simplest, most readily available form: xenophobia and demonization of Others outside the nation. This choice has been all the more stark in the absence of a greater external Other beyond the region, as was the case in the immediate postcolonial era.

#### **Potential avenues and cases for future research**

My theory is one to explain Saudi foreign policy and how it has changed over time. Because of the distinct features of its source of ideological legitimacy, extending this to other Arab states, including fellow monarchies, could be potentially problematic. Nonetheless, what has been happening in Saudi Arabia and in Saudi foreign policy since 2011 bears a number of noteworthy similarities to rising nationalism and foreign aggression around the region, and more broadly, around the world. Perhaps the closest example for a comparison to a number of findings in the contemporary case of Saudi regime survival strategies is that of the United Arab Emirates, and, to a lesser extent, the kingdom of Qatar. Recent work by Courtney Freer and David Roberts has compared and contrasted the domestic sources of different approaches in the UAE and Qatar towards political Islam, and

in particular to the Muslim Brotherhood. Roberts has used these domestic comparisons to make sense of the divergent responses by these two Gulf states to the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia is generally excluded from such analyses because, in addition to greater difficulty in doing field work there, Saudi Arabia is understood as having a unique relationship to political Islam, and thus does not offer the clear points of contrast in its ideological legitimacy as a source of foreign policy difference as that between the UAE and Qatar. Yet, my work on Saudi Arabia offers interesting points of comparison and contrast to both these cases, which feeds back into the insights that both Freer and Roberts have brought to foreign policy trajectories of the UAE and Qatar.

Although the UAE does not have the same historic relationship in fostering Islamic identity at home and abroad as does Saudi Arabia, it nonetheless did initially allow institutional space for the Muslim Brotherhood from the 1970s up to, roughly, the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup> Qatar, officially Wahhabi like Saudi Arabia, has never had a formal institutional space for the Brotherhood, as Islamists did not feel the same need as in the UAE to demand formal political representation. This stems from both the material reality of Qatar, which, as a smaller and even wealthier state, does not have the issues with economic inequality that the UAE (or Saudi Arabia) does, as well as from the lack of the

<sup>12</sup> Freer (2017): 490

political marginalization that Islamists have, by contrast, faced in the UAE.<sup>13</sup> The UAE began to confront Islamists in the 1990s, first dissolving their role in education, and increasingly preventing them from having a social role of any kind. Qatar, on the other hand, allowed for their religious proselytization, and the state symbiotically coexisted with informal outlets for Islamists, becoming a haven for those marginalized in other states.<sup>14</sup> These institutional differences for political Islam set the stage for completely opposing responses by each of these Gulf states to the Arab Spring. The semi-institutionalization of Islamism into the Emirati state, as well as the greater material insecurity and inequalities of parts of the Emirates, offers interesting comparison to overlapping economic and ideological tensions in Saudi Arabia today. The informal, social role of Islamism in Qatar, combined with the state's discursive support to the Brotherhood domestically and internationally today, if anything, could offer comparison not with Saudi Arabia currently, but with Saudi use of Islamists in the past.

Thus, the UAE is experiencing a similar perception of threat from political Islam as Saudi Arabia, particularly since the Arab Spring albeit, without the same degree of historical closeness to Islam for ideological purposes as in the Saudi case. Indeed, the greater similarities in the Saudi and Emirati domestic approaches to political Islam since 2011 offers potentially fruitful ground for foreign policy

<sup>13</sup> Freer (2017): 488

<sup>14</sup> Roberts (2017): 558



comparisons. While there has been growing attention to the increasingly international interventionism of the UAE and Qatar in recent years, including both states' roles in backing competing militias in Libya, and Qatar's steadfast support for armed opposition to Assad,<sup>15</sup> the UAE has shown its greater use of a muscular nationalism in the leading military role it has increasingly come to play alongside Saudi Arabia in Yemen.<sup>16</sup> Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE has been constructing a national identity centered on a more aggressive foreign policy, which has likewise coincided with increased repression. Beyond the ideological focus of this dissertation, further research could focus more closely on the role of shifting political economies in both states, and how this shapes, and is shaped by, new constructions of nationalism.

Beyond accounting for historical differences, the other point to take into account through a Saudi-Emirati comparison is the role each of these states has had in shaping one another. Though this could make a comparison trickier, it raises one last issue that returns to the question of how ideological weakness in the Saudi case in particular may make the state vulnerable in ways that breed a more aggressive foreign policy. If Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed has had the influence on Saudi Arabia in the way many have speculated,

<sup>15</sup> Young (2013)

<sup>16</sup> Council on Foreign Relations "How the UAE Wields Power in Yemen," Zachary Laub interview of Neil Partrick June 22, 2018 <https://www.cfr.org/interview/how-uae-wields-power-yemen>

this would provide further evidence to support the argument that Saudi Arabia is vulnerable from ontological threats. As Roberts puts it: “leadership plays a pivotal role in the absolute monarchies of the Gulf, but leaders do not emerge from a vacuum.”<sup>17</sup> What I have argued when it comes to leadership is that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has taken advantage of a variable larger and more powerful than himself to craft as a tool for regime survival, and that is Saudi insecurity since the Arab Spring. Whether his personal ability to seize upon it has been furthered by an external ally (or rival, depending upon one’s interpretation), the outcome is the same. What needs to be further explored is the degree to which dynamics of insecurity and corresponding new opportunity through aggressive nationalism have parallels in the UAE, and why this is.

This dissertation has argued that the lack of a legitimating ideology has been a driver of its aggressive foreign policy shift. When it comes to examining the role of ideology and foreign aggression, previous work, as noted in the theory chapter’s literature review, has emphasized the role of ideology as facilitating aggression in certain cases. Jeff Colgan’s work on the aggression of revolutionary regimes with oil has examined the case of Libyan aggression, arguing that oil wealth enabled it, while Muammar Gaddafi’s revolutionary ideology motivated it. Aspects of my cases can contribute back to some of the theoretical insights made

<sup>17</sup> Roberts (2017): 550

by Colgan, with several caveats. One is that, if we understand Gadaffi's revolutionary ideology as part of an overall regional movement—pan-Arabism—in decline, or at least in transition to the more prominently defining role religion comes to play in regional identities after the 1967 Egyptian defeat and subsequent death of Nasser in 1970, then we might better situate Gadaffi's regime as one in search of its identity even throughout the period in which he consolidated his rule. This, in turn, can help explain the continuation of displays of nationalist-oriented foreign policy aggression by Muhammad bin Salman, even after he is understood as having consolidated power in the summer of 2017. Alternatively, it could be that Libya's aggressive foreign policy first emerged as Gadaffi was still consolidating power, and that that simply embedded it as part of the regime so long as it was economically feasible. That would be somewhat comparable to how Crown Prince Faisal set the stage for Saudi foreign policy to be more reactive and pragmatic, something that was sustained so long as it could afford checkbook diplomacy, or perhaps, as Muhammad bin Salman came to power using aggressive foreign policy, and continued to employ such tactics so long as they seemed the most politically successful option. Regardless, by including insights from these cases, we might further our understanding not only of the Libyan case, but in turn, find additional ways in which Colgan's work helps to illuminate the ongoing development of the Saudi regime as its foreign policy remains in flux.

The other question this raises is what the links between personalist regimes with a revolutionary ideology have with aggressive personalist regimes more broadly. As we have entered a period in which nationalism in all regime types seems to be on the rise, the same mechanisms at work in a revolutionary regime that breed foreign aggression—the establishment of a new source of ideological legitimacy as a new regime consolidates power—will be more broadly applicable than just in revolutionary regimes. Indeed, fewer regimes are revolutionary in the sense of uniting against the status quo or an imperialist foe, with even the Palestinian cause no longer being a source of unity in the Arab world. Nonetheless, Colgan and Weeks' work on the role of ideology is illuminating when we consider regional and global trends of rising nationalism. That is, as regimes undergo not transitions through revolutions, but recalibrations in the face of potentially greater mass mobilizations, they have been forced to craft new narratives on how to justify their rule. Examining such a case as Saudi Arabia in the wake of both the Nasserist period and the Arab Spring brings further insight to the role ideology may have in either facilitating or inhibiting the use of force abroad. In the former, Faisal adopted more of a ruling ideology, whereas in the latter, Muhammad bin Salman continues to seek out ways of legitimating himself, but has been left with no ground upon which to stand save for a nationalism centered on differentiation from foreign threats.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWS

I have conducted approximately 20 interviews, with an additional number of follow-ups for a few. Most of these were semi-structured, in which I began with a set of broad questions and from there allowed the conversation to evolve. In some cases, however, I began with a more specific question based on something the interviewee had already written, such as a news article, in order to get the interviewee to elaborate on their own findings or insight, or to link me with someone who might be able to do so. Some contacts I met initially, or after being in electronic contact, at academic or policy-related events on Saudi Arabia or Yemen. In other cases, I came across their work, and wherever I could find an email or phone number, reached out through email in the hopes of having a conversation by phone, or, where possible, in-person. At the end of this section of the appendix, I provide details about all interviews cited in this dissertation.

About half of the interviews were carried out over the phone, with many including several follow ups by phone, iMessage, or Whatsapp, or Telegram. For most, I took notes or used an audio recorder. Terms of the interview varied case by case. In some situations, it was mutually decided that it would be off the record, so as to be conducive to a setting in which they could speak freely. In these cases, I would get back in touch with the interviewee to ask permission on

anything specific I would use. Generally, this was something I have done regardless, of the nature of the interview before including it in the final draft. In a few cases in which interviewees did not want to be referenced, I did not use any audio recording, but took notes on paper or in a word document. If I ever took electronic notes for those not giving permission to be on the record, I did not include their full names.

I sought out interviewees who would either have expert knowledge, based on experience in analysis or in policymaking of Saudi foreign policy, its current and past interventions in Yemen the Saudi regime, and the nature of opposition within Saudi Arabia, as well as broad insight on either the Arab uprisings or the Nasserist period. Particularly useful for the historical comparison were those who were familiar with the Arab nationalist period and Saudi Arabia's perception of threats around the time of the war in Yemen from 1962 to 1967. I have spoken to several analysts on Yemen, one of whom referred me to Ambassador Bodine. After a long chain of email exchanges with former Ambassador Barbara Bodine, I met with her in her office at Georgetown. After meeting former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Sir John Jenkins at an event on Saudi Arabia and Iran at the London School of Economics, we met for an in-person interview in Kent, England, followed by further exchanges over email. On day-trips to Washington, DC, I visited several think tanks for events related to Saudi Arabia or Yemen. This included the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, where I

spoke informally with Saudi scholar Dr. Kristan Diwan. In London, I met with two analysts from the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, a think tank focused on security issues in the Middle East. One was Michael Stephens, who has extensive experience interviewing Saudi government insiders and co-authored a Whitehall Report on regional responses to the Iran nuclear deal. On my second visit to London, I met with former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Sir John Jenkins as well as Jane Kinninmont, previously deputy head and senior research fellow for Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

Given the restrictions in doing field work in Saudi Arabia on a topic of this nature, I attained direct Saudi perspectives by getting in touch with Saudi citizens living abroad. These interviewees have varied in their relationship to the state and to opposition movements, but a majority would be considered more oriented towards activism, if not outright, explicitly self-defined activists. It also included several tied to the Saudi government, although responses and follow-ups from such contacts tended to be very limited. The only one interviewed with ties to the government stopped responding to follow-ups. This was not a significant hindrance, however; while the dissertation is focused on state perceptions of threat, the availability of insight from Saudi media outlets tended to outweigh that given by opposition. Additionally, several Saudi nationals living abroad were

interested in talking, but explicitly opposed to anything they said being used in this dissertation.

Furthermore, it may be pertinent to note that, as far as it pertains to some interviewees now designated as opposition, these categories used to be more blurred, but have become increasingly stark since 2017—something I argue in my dissertation can be traced back to 2011. Abdullah Alaoudh, for example, is the son of Saudi activist Salman al-Awdah; since his father's imprisonment as well as that of many other peaceful activists in the last two years, Alaoudh has become increasingly vocal himself. Salman al-Awdah himself, one of the most famous and popular clerics in the kingdom, has been involved in varying types of activism since 1990, though at certain points before his imprisonment in September 2017 would have been considered an elite tied to the government. Somewhat likewise, Jamal Khashoggi was an elite insider, and once an advisor to Prince Turki al-Faisal, but one who was supportive of what the Arab uprisings represented for the region and potentially for Saudi Arabia. Additionally, I interviewed separately two different elite Saudi activists who both live in exile in London.

I went to Washington, DC, multiple times and to England twice. Nonetheless, for the sake of practicality in fitting others' schedules and my own time frame and budget, I carried out a number of phone interviews. While many of these were followed up with additional electronic exchanges or in person, this

was not possible in all cases. Where possible, I have obtained permission for using these phone interviews.

Abdulaziz al-Hussan, lawyer, former representative for members of the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights  
Phone interview July 13, 2018  
Additional follow-ups by text

Dr. Abdullah Alaoudh, Senior Fellow at the Prince Alwaleed bin Tala Center for Christian-Muslim Understanding and son of Salman al-Awdah  
Phone interview, May, 2018  
Additional follow ups by text  
Met in person, “The New Face of Saudi Arabia: has anything changed?”  
Carnegie, Washington, DC, October 9, 2018

Dr. Hala Aldosari, independent Saudi scholar, focused on gender  
Phone interview, June 11, 2018

Anonymous, Saudi activist 1  
Phone interview in March, 2018  
In-person interview, May 6, 2018, London  
Additional follow-ups by phone

Anonymous, Saudi activist 2  
In-person interview, August 21, 2018, London

Former US Ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine  
Initial exchanges through email, with in-person meeting on January 19, 2018  
Additional follow-ups through email

Former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir John Jenkins  
Initial contact in person at “Saudi Arabia and Iran: Beyond Conflict and Co-Existence?”, May 8, 2018, London School of Economics  
In-person interview, August 15, 2018, Kent, England  
Additional follow-ups through email

Jane Kinninmont, Head of Programmes, the Elders Foundation; Previously Deputy Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House  
In-person interview, August 16, 2018, London, England

Jamal Khashoggi, former Saudi journalist; writer for the Washington Post  
Initial contact through email  
Phone interview July 23, 2018

Chibli Mallat, Professor of Law and international lawyer  
Initial contact through email  
Skype interview, June 19, 2018  
Additional follow-up by email

Michael Stephens, Research Fellow at Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies; Head of RUSI Qatar  
Initial contact through email  
In-person interview, May 3, 2018, London  
Additional follow-ups by text

Adam Coogle, Middle East Researcher, Human Rights Watch  
Phone interview, September 11, 2018

Anonymous researcher and political analyst working on Yemen  
Phone conversation, March 28, 2017

Anonymous Saudi national  
In-person interview, May 31, 2018, location undisclosed

## APPENDIX B: TWITTER DATA

In a smaller version of this dataset from 2018, I got similar results. While that one only had 18 accounts, there were several additional accounts that I had hoped to include beyond the 26 in this updated collection that did not make it in. Twitter scraper can get overloaded when working with too much data, but nonetheless included 26 of the 31 accounts I searched for in March, 2019. I list those accounts here. The meta-data with which I worked to create Table 1 in Chapter 5 was too large to include in this document, but is available upon request.

1. @aalrashed
2. @FatimahSBaeshen
3. @faisaljabbas
4. @KhalilDewan
5. @halmustafa
6. @kbsalsaud
7. @Najahalosaimi
8. @\_ManuelAlmeida
9. @fanazer
10. @zzyzoom
11. @fekerksa\_en
12. @SalmanAldosary
13. @aawsat\_eng
14. @KSAMOFA
15. @AdelAljubeir
16. @SaudiEmbassyUSA
17. @AlArabiya\_Eng
18. @mohdsalj
19. @FaisalbinFarhan
20. @KSRelief\_EN
21. @CICSaudi
22. @arabiangcis
23. @ArabiaFdn
24. @arabnews
25. @gulf\_news
26. @TheNationalUAE