

# The Middle East in World Politics: The Rise of Saudi Arabia

Steve Yetiv

Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 1995

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs15\\_01art04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs15_01art04)

[See table of contents](#)

---

## Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

## ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

## Cite this article

Yetiv, S. (1995). The Middle East in World Politics:: The Rise of Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 15(1), 60–73.

# **The Middle East in World Politics: The Rise of Saudi Arabia**

*by*  
*Steve Yetiv*

*Steve Yetiv* is an assistant professor of political science at Old Dominion University and a research affiliate at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies.

While the enduring issues of political union in Europe and political disunion in the former Soviet Union point to the traditional importance of these regions, analysts of world politics would be well advised to maintain a strong interest in the Persian Gulf region. Its geographic position as a bridgehead between three continents, its vital importance to the functioning of the global economy, and its potential volatility make it one of the more significant regions in world politics as we approach the turn of the century.

The Persian Gulf has seen more inter-state and low-intensity conflict in the past fifteen years than perhaps any other area in the world. The 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, the 1979-89 Soviet intervention in nearby Afghanistan, the nearly decade-long Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), and the 1990-91 Gulf crisis and war created dramatic consequences for the regional and international politics of this area.

This article focuses on how these conflicts affected one of the increasingly more important actors in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia. In particular, it argues that regional conflict put in motion short- and long-term effects that significantly elevated the power and position of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East from 1978-79 to 1994. The rise of Saudi power is not only important in and of itself, but has several broader implications for the regional and international politics of the region. They will be discussed in the conclusion after the argument of this article is developed.

The thesis that Saudi power has increased over time raises a prior and more general question. Since it is difficult to measure power in any clear-cut manner, how can one assess changes in Saudi power? This article aims to do so by tracing changes in five broad indicators of Saudi power: internal threats to Saudi security, external threats to Saudi security, Saudi military capability, the strength of US-Saudi relations, and Saudi economic vitality. These military, economic, and political indicators, examined in the body of this article, are intended to provide a composite picture of Saudi power.

## **THE DECREASE IN EXTERNAL THREATS TO SAUDI INTERESTS**

Power is commonly measured either in terms of the actual capabilities of an actor or in terms of the actor's ability to influence others or to bring about desired outcomes. But regardless of how one measures power in world politics, it is safe to say that a state which faces a higher level of threat from other states is less

powerful than one which faces a lower level of threat, all other things being equal. This is because real or perceived threats to a state usually decrease its leverage, place constraints on its foreign policy, and tie up its human and material resources. Thus, they reduce its ability to bring about desired outcomes. Employing this argument, it is fair to say that if threats to Saudi interests decreased from 1978-79 to 1994, then Saudi power increased. This section attempts to show why and how this was the case.

In 1978-79, the Saudis faced a number of external threats. First, the USSR substantially enhanced its influence in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and in Ethiopia, which the Saudis interpreted as a long-term communist design to encircle their country.<sup>1</sup> Second, Saudi Arabia was confronted with the rise of the Arab rejectionist front composed of hard-line Arab states such as Syria and Libya. These states pressured the Saudis into adopting a less moderate foreign policy and into distancing themselves from the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Third, although Saudi Arabia had been concerned with Iran's increasing military strength and regional ambition prior to the Iranian Revolution, it still shared with Iran an interest in preserving the status quo. Thus, Riyadh cooperated with Iran tacitly under the Nixon administration's "twin pillar"<sup>3</sup> policy. The Iranian Revolution, however, undermined this policy and put Saudi-Iranian relations on a downward path.

Fourth, to worsen matters, the fall of the Shah created an opportunity for Iraq's Saddam Hussein to assume the mantle of Gulf leadership. Iraq's influence over Saudi Arabia increased from 1978 to mid-late 1979,<sup>4</sup> which further limited Saudi action. Though the Saudis feared Iraq less than they did Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini, Iraq was still viewed by them as a military and political threat.

Ironically, the Afghanistan intervention, Iran-Iraq War, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, while increasing threats to Saudi interests in the short-term, decreased them over the long-term. Rather than being undermined by these events, which certainly was a possible outcome at the outset of these conflicts, the Saudi position on the whole was bolstered.

For its part, the Afghanistan intervention undermined Soviet policy in the Gulf, absorbed Moscow's human and material resources, and, thus decreased its ability to pressure the Saudis either directly or through its position in Ethiopia and the PDRY.<sup>5</sup> The failure of the intervention also moved Moscow toward a more accommodating foreign policy at both the global and regional levels. Indeed, from 1988 to 1992, Saudi-Soviet relations improved considerably, in part because of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the end of East-West rivalry, but also as a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In what would have been unthinkable heretofore, the Saudis even went so far as to invite Soviet forces into their kingdom during the Iraqi crisis in 1990.<sup>6</sup> While this was unsettling to some members of the America-led alliance against Iraq, and although Soviet forces did not take part in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Saudi Arabia did repeatedly express its appreciation for the Soviet political role during the crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Over the longer term, regional conflict also played a role in decreasing Iran's threat to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and many states outside the Persian Gulf feared an Iranian victory in the Iran-Iraq War, particularly after Iran's military victory in early 1986 at the strategic Faw Peninsula. But, in important ways, the war weakened and helped moderate Iran over the longer term.

First, although the war fueled the fires of Islamic fundamentalism from which Khomeini's regime gained much of its legitimacy, Iran's political and military failures during the war also gave moderate elements in Iran a chance to advance their political agenda. By 1987, Iran became more concerned with consolidating and protecting the revolution within its own borders than with exporting Islam.<sup>8</sup> If the war did unite Iranians behind the Ayatollah, it also betrayed the falsity of Khomeini's predictions of Iraqi defeat, and sowed the seeds of a more flexible Iranian foreign policy as evidenced, for instance, in Iran's effort to free Western hostages in Lebanon.

Second, by arousing fear and focusing attention on Iran's revolution, the war made it more difficult for Khomeini to spread Islamic fundamentalism without provoking considerable alarm. Had Iraq not attacked Iran in 1980, Iran could have spread Islamic fundamentalism in a non-military and less provocative fashion<sup>9</sup> behind the tacit threat of its feared military hand. The war forced Iran to play this hand and to deplete its military arsenal.

Third, the Iraqi crisis, while posing a serious threat to regional stability, also accelerated Iran's move toward a more moderate foreign policy. While the Iran-Iraq war devastated Iran economically and gave it sufficient incentive to assume a more accommodating stance toward its neighbors and the West, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait gave Iran's neighbors and the West more reason to value Iran's regional role. The invasion impressed upon the Saudis the importance of Iran's balancing role against Iraq, and gave Iran the opportunity to shore up its relations with Arab Gulf states, and to make the case that the real threat to the Gulf had always come from Iraq.

In the post-Iraqi crisis period, Iran called for vastly increased economic and political cooperation with the West and closer ties to Arab Gulf states.<sup>10</sup> This suggested, as did the waning of the Iranian revolution, that Iran could be in a position to play a more constructive regional role in the future. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, Iraq's continuing threat in the post-Gulf War period was added incentive for improving relations with Iran. Therefore, while both states remained competitive in the region, they also became more interested in some level of cooperation. It is not surprising then that Saudi-Iranian relations improved in the post-Gulf War period, despite the ongoing rivalry between the two states for influence in the Muslim world and over the politics of oil production and pricing. The improvement in relations was clearly evidenced by the major rise in diplomatic contacts and positive exchanges and interaction between the two states.

While conflict helped decrease over time the threat to Saudi Arabia from the Soviet Union and Iran, it also diminished the Iraqi threat. The Iran-Iraq War

produced a military imbalance of power between Iraq and Iran and left Iraq economically supine, which were probably factors in Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait. To be sure, the invasion created serious tensions in Saudi relations with Jordan, Yemen, Iraq and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which may continue to prove troublesome for Saudi Arabia in the future. However, it also knocked Iraq out as the last major external threat to Saudi interests, in at least the near term. Whether or not Iraq will regain its previous military position remains to be seen. But even if it does, the Saudis will have had much time to improve their strategic position relative to that of Iraq. This should place some constraints on Iraqi foreign policy, which did not exist prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and should make the Saudi position in the late 1990s more stable than it would have been otherwise.

The record suggests, then, that external threats to Saudi Arabia have diminished greatly since 1979. In the past, Saudi Arabia faced serious and at times simultaneous threats from Iran, Iraq and the USSR. By contrast, in the post-Gulf War period, Iran moderated its foreign policy, albeit still flexing its muscles on occasion; and Iraq, while still belligerent, was seriously weakened militarily. Moscow, for its part, was relegated virtually to the sidelines of the Persian Gulf political-security landscape, for the first time since the Shah was in power in Iran. While it continued to remain active politically, Russia was much less of a serious threat to Saudi interests than it had been before.

#### **THE DECREASE IN INTERNAL THREATS TO SAUDI SECURITY**

The United States as well as other actors that support the status quo in the Persian Gulf have been concerned not only with external threats to Saudi interests but also with the possibility that the Saudi regime would be overthrown by discontented internal elements. Indeed, the Reagan Doctrine was issued in part to emphasize America's commitment to protect Saudi stability against internal threats."

The Iranian Revolution initially increased the internal threat to Saudi stability, particularly from the Saudi Shiite Muslims, but the Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on the whole helped decrease it. The Iranian Revolution put forces in motion that bedeviled Saudi-Iranian relations. Saudi Arabia's monarchical form of government, pro-Western tilt, Sunni leadership, and conservative outlook clashed with Iran's post-revolutionary clerical rule, anti-Western bent, Shiite leadership, and revisionist foreign policy.

Two notable efforts were made to undermine Saudi authority in 1979. The first was the seizure of the Grand Mosque, Islam's holiest shrine at Mecca, by several hundred armed Muslim zealots in November 1979. With outside assistance, the Saudi National Guard successfully suppressed these zealots. But Saudi Arabia was concerned enough over the Mecca fallout to agree to a set of resolutions condemning America for its role at Camp David, in the hope that this would bolster its credentials in the Muslim world.<sup>12</sup> The Mecca incident further cast Saudi stability and its role as a pillar of Western security in the Persian Gulf into doubt.

Eight days after the seizure of the Grand Mosque, while the Saudi National Guard was still battling the zealots at Mecca, disturbances erupted in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich eastern province. They constituted the first political challenge posed by the Shiites to the Sunni Saudi regime and were viewed as serious enough by the royal family to prompt the dispatch of 20,000 troops to the area.<sup>11</sup>

Internal threats to the kingdom continued in the 1980s. In 1987, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca was disrupted by a riot touched off when Saudi security units moved in to stop a forbidden political demonstration by Iranian pilgrims in front of the Grand Mosque. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary,<sup>14</sup> Iran's President Hashemi Rafsanjani denied that it instigated the subversion, asserted that the Saudis were to blame, and called on Iranians as "the implementers of divine principles" to overthrow the Saudi royal family in revenge." This caused alarm across the Persian Gulf and in certain Western quarters.

Iran, which competed with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Islamic world, wanted to destabilize Saudi Arabia and challenge its rule over Islam's holy places. Later, Iran also wished to retaliate against the Saudi's American ally for reflagging Kuwaiti tankers during the latter stages of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>16</sup> However, it was the Mecca crisis that pushed the Saudis to sever relations with Iran and nearly put the two states in military conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, the crisis helped strengthen the Saudi position, because some Arab Gulf states, which otherwise were riding the fence between Iran and the Saudis,<sup>18</sup> moved closer to Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, it legitimized US-Saudi security cooperation, and pushed the Saudis to appease discontented internal elements. These actions, as well as the slow waning of the Iranian Revolution, help explain why internal threats to Saudi interests decreased from 1979 to 1994. Iran increasingly lost the ability and will to generate domestic instability in Saudi Arabia.

Desert Storm, for its part, produced countervailing effects on Saudi political stability. At one level it contributed to and helped generate movements, secular and religious, that challenged aspects of Saudi royal family rule. In December 1990, King Fahd received a "Secular Petition" from 43 religious and secular leaders, which was followed three months later by "The Religious Petition" from scores of top religious leaders.<sup>19</sup> The ultra-conservative religious forces expressed their strong concern over royal family corruption, nepotism, and monopoly control over decision making. For their part, liberal democratic forces pushed for democratic reforms.

At the same time, however, the royal family took measures to appease its critics. It issued the royal decrees, calling for a Consultative Council of commoners nominated by the King, adherence to the rule of law and an enlarged body of princes to select a new monarch. King Fahd linked these measures directly to the Persian Gulf war, and described them as a "kind of partnership between the grassroots and the leadership."<sup>20</sup> The debate over reforms was not particularly divisive; King Fahd was widely viewed as the legitimate arbiter. However, in some Saudi quarters, the reforms were perceived as devoid of content in that they did not "presage any political reform or bring any change to the method of government."<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, the royal measures fell far short of meaningful reform, and did not reflect any serious intention on the part of the regime to cede power. Nor did they represent a Saudi embrace of Western democracy or any variant thereof. Indeed, King Fahd stated that the "democratic systems prevailing in the world are systems which in their structure do not suit this region and our people," and that "the system of free election is not part of Islamic ideology."<sup>22</sup> However, pressures for political change continued to be felt, as reflected by the regime's decision in the winter of 1993 to disband what it viewed to be a nucleus of a reform-minded political party, and by the arrest in September 1994 of a group of Islamists who were pushing for radical reforms.

Nonetheless, the reforms did represent some modest concessions to Saudi democratic forces. While these forces had been pushing for more democratic institutions prior to the Iranian Revolution, their efforts gained momentum only after Iraq's eviction from Kuwait.<sup>23</sup> Conservative forces in the Kingdom also gained from the decrees. While the royal measures did not accommodate their desire for strict imposition of Islamic laws, they did accommodate their demands for greater decision making participation and for such things as regulations to eliminate corruption.<sup>24</sup> In this sense the reforms contributed to Saudi domestic stability by at least charting a potential path for more meaningful reform and by helping lower the level of domestic discontent. Political pressure for political reform will undoubtedly continue, but, unlike in the past, the Saudis need not be as concerned that such forces will have strong backing from Iran.

## **IMPROVEMENT IN US-SAUDI RELATIONS**

While Saudi power is related to Saudi military capability and to the level of internal and external threat that the Saudi regime faces, it is also fundamentally linked to the nature of US-Saudi relations. All other things being equal, the better these relations, the more powerful is the Saudi position. This is because American support enhances Riyadh's ability to bring about desirable foreign policy outcomes, and as the recent 1990-91 Gulf War demonstrated, may even be critical to Saudi survival as a sovereign state.

Whereas US-Saudi relations were stable throughout the early and mid-1970s, for a number of reasons they weakened in 1978-79. First, the Saudis opposed the US-sponsored Camp David accords. Washington had expected at least some Saudi support, but the anti-American regional pressures discussed earlier in the article raised the costs of association with Washington for Riyadh.

Second, the United States was viewed by Gulf states as unable to stop Soviet gains in the PDRY, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan and to prevent the Shah of Iran's downfall, and thus lost credibility in many quarters in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> Although some members of the Saudi family continued to stress that US-Saudi relations remained strong,<sup>26</sup> strains in US-Saudi relations were aggravated by a Saudi loss of confidence in the United States and by American doubts about Saudi stability in 1979, following the domestic challenges to Saudi rule.<sup>27</sup>

The Afghanistan intervention and the Iran-Iraq War clearly produced consequences which reversed this trend. The intervention in Muslim Afghanistan undermined Moscow's attempts to woo Saudi Arabia, which had previously appeared to have borne some fruit, and made Saudi Arabia more important strategically to Washington.<sup>28</sup> For its part, the Iran-Iraq War impeded Iran's efforts to undermine Saudi influence and made America strategically more important to Saudi Arabia. This dichotomy of mutual interests was the foundation on which US-Saudi relations improved throughout the 1980s. This improvement was unmistakable and had major implications for Saudi power.

In 1981, America sold Airborne Warning and Air Control System (AWACs) capability and other equipment to the Saudis in an air-defense enhancement package.<sup>29</sup> While America's interest in the AWACs sale, as implied by several US officials,<sup>30</sup> was related more to the Soviet threat, the Saudi interest in cooperating with America was motivated more by the Iranian threat. The AWACs sale enhanced US-Saudi trust and cooperation.

Other war-related developments also improved US-Saudi cooperation. The Saudis, for instance, built huge underground strategic facilities,<sup>31</sup> which were intended to support a massive American deployment in the event of a major Iranian or Soviet threat. Ironically, they were used not against Iran or Moscow but against Iraq in 1990. Thus, the Iranian threat had pushed Saudi Arabia to cooperate more closely with America in security areas. While this might have been expected, given the fact that America was protecting Saudi interests, the Saudis heretofore had succeeded in manipulating the American connection to suit their fluctuating security needs.<sup>32</sup> For its part, Washington also responded favorably to Saudi requests for American arms and military backup support against real and perceived threats from Iran.<sup>33</sup> Though problems in US-Saudi relations did not disappear, the cooperation catalyzed by the Iran-Iraq War contrasted starkly with the less than cooperative relations that existed prior to it.

The 1990-91 Gulf crisis motivated the highest level of US-Saudi cooperation to date. It made clear to the Saudis that their security ultimately rested with the United States. In this sense the Gulf crisis may very well have represented a culmination of a trend in Saudi foreign policy away from accommodation of anti-American regional actors and toward a more assertive defense policy in conjunction with American backing. While Saudi Arabia will continue to employ a mix of accommodation and assertion in its foreign policy, this mix will probably tend to lean more toward the latter approach, in which US-Saudi relations will figure prominently.

### **SAUDI MILITARY CAPABILITY ENHANCED**

The improvement in US-Saudi relations was accompanied by an enhancement of Saudi military capability. While in some regions of the world, military capability has become less important as an indicator of power, this is not true of the Persian Gulf, where the potential for the threat or use of force is higher than in most other regions.



Saudi military capability increased substantially from 1978-79 to 1994, in direct response to regional conflict. Although Riyadh was building its military even before the Iranian Revolution, regional conflict pushed it to accelerate and diversify this effort. Conflict also made the United States more willing to contribute to the development of Saudi capabilities. For example, Saudi acquisition of American AWACs capability and its development of major command, naval and defense facilities represented quantum leaps in military sophistication. Riyadh also developed its own armed forces and engaged in military maneuvers and cooperation with America and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.<sup>34</sup> Such efforts continued after Desert Storm, albeit at a slow pace, spurred by the failure of indigenous regional collective security efforts.

In the post-war period, Arab states sought to develop a form of collective security under the so-called Damascus Declaration. This declaration, issued on 6 March 1991, called for strategic collaboration between the GCC states, Egypt and Syria.<sup>35</sup> In exchange for security support in the form of Egyptian and Syrian military contingents permanently stationed in the Gulf region, the GCC states would provide much needed capital for the Syrian and Egyptian economies.

While initially successful, this collective security effort faced several major obstacles. The Gulf states thought that Egypt and Syria sought to get maximum remuneration for minimal military support, while Egypt and Syria believed that Gulf states wanted maximum security for minimal money. After initially supporting the security plan, the Saudis questioned the logic of hosting foreign forces on their soil. The last time the Egyptians were involved on the peninsula, in the 1960s, the Saudis had called on American forces to deter them from challenging Saudi interests. The Saudis also feared that Arab states might become involved in royal family politics, thus undermining the regime, and that added financial burdens would strain an already stretched budget. Egypt increasingly became annoyed with Saudi procrastination in implementing the accord, and by early May, decided to follow in Syria's footsteps by withdrawing its 40,000 troops from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.<sup>36</sup> That represented the death knell for the Damascus Declaration.

At the same time, efforts to develop a major joint GCC military force also proved problematic. The failure of such GCC efforts and of the Damascus Declaration pushed the Saudis to attempt to develop their own military forces through arms procurement, increases in army size, and military training exercises. The Gulf crisis clearly contributed to Saudi King Fahd's interest in purchasing billions of dollars of additional sophisticated weaponry, and in attempting to enlarge the Saudi army and to improve its combat readiness.<sup>37</sup> By June 1991, Riyadh aimed, for perhaps the first time, to supplement its sophisticated air-defense system with a mobile, large-scale army and took steps to increase the size of its military by 1992.<sup>38</sup>

While Saudi military efforts increased Saudi power to some extent, they must be kept in perspective. The Saudis still lacked the requisite skills and manpower to utilize effectively their large inventory of sophisticated weapons. In addition, the Saudi arms build-up has added to the regional arms race between Riyadh, Baghdad,

and Teheran. Although as history shows, Iran and Iraq would engage in an arms race regardless of Saudi military policy, the Saudi build-up adds to their interest in developing their capabilities. Finally, the Saudi build-up raises questions about Israeli security. Although the Middle East is flirting with some form of peace, Saudi military development and acquisition of sophisticated technology has been significant enough to complicate Israeli defense planning, and may prove troublesome in the future should the peace process fail.

Overall, however, an intelligent arms acquisition policy on the part of the Saudis, which in particular builds Riyadh's defensive capabilities but avoids degrading Israel's military edge, can benefit American and regional security. This is because it will strengthen Riyadh relative to Iran and Iraq, the two actors that pose the greatest threat to Persian Gulf stability. While efforts aimed at developing a large Saudi military force have been launched in the past without avail, the recent crisis and Saddam's continuing presence in Iraq might serve as a sufficient reminder of the importance of such efforts this time around.

#### WAR AND THE SAUDI ECONOMY

Prior to the Iran-Iraq War, the Saudi economic position was quite strong, despite the rigors of the modernization process. The Iran-Iraq War, however, imposed serious costs on Riyadh. The Saudis loaned Iraq billions of dollars to fend off the Iranians, loans which were not repaid. In addition, from 1983 to 1991, Saudi imports of goods and services exceeded the value of exports by approximately \$ 120 billion.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the Saudis ran eleven consecutive years of budget deficits from 1983 to 1994.<sup>40</sup>

However, while the Iran-Iraq War was costly, Desert Shield and Storm produced much more serious economic dislocation. Although King Fahd described the Saudi economic situation as stronger than ever in the post-Gulf War period,<sup>41</sup> the 1990-91 conflict imposed severe opportunity costs on the Saudis. While it is true that Saudi oil income in 1991 was over \$40 billion dollars due to windfall profits from increased prices and production related to the Gulf crisis, Saudi war expenses were estimated at \$60-70 billion.<sup>42</sup> Riyadh's financial woes were further exacerbated by a downturn in the global economy; budgetary problems even pushed the Saudis to stretch out payments for billions of dollars of American-made weapons.<sup>43</sup>

War, thus, weakened the Saudi economy and in this sense weakened Saudi power. However, it should be noted that the impact of war on the Saudi economy, while not insignificant, is unlikely to be long-term. The regime retained the ability to restore economic vitality through huge oil reserves, some of which were newly found, and through substantial foreign investments. In addition, Saudi foreign debt has not been particularly high. This allows the Saudis greater financial flexibility. Furthermore, as already noted, the Saudis offset some war costs by capitalizing on the increase in oil prices created by the UN-imposed economic embargo of Iraqi oil. In terms of power, Riyadh's main competitors in the region, Iraq and Iran, were far more seriously undermined economically. Given that "power" is largely a relative

concept, the impact of war on those economies is also important to bear in mind when assessing Saudi power.

### **SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY: CONFLICT AND CHANGE**

Developments in the 1980s, which were discussed earlier in this article, altered the nature of Saudi foreign and domestic policy and enhanced Saudi power. The Saudis became more adept at protecting and advancing their interests. This can be seen by examining changes in Saudi foreign policy over time.

Prior to the Iran-Iraq War, the Saudis tended to be cautious in foreign policy. On the whole, they preferred to accommodate regional and international aggressors rather than to oppose them. This strategy tended to make sense because in the period of 1978-79, the Saudis faced potentially serious internal and external threats, were weak militarily, had strained relations with the United States, and lacked significant experience in confronting adversaries. Thus, they were not in a position to assume an assertive foreign policy, or in other words, a policy based much more on challenging other actors than on accommodating them for purposes of meeting foreign policy goals. It was preferable for the Saudis to accommodate real or perceived adversaries in order to avoid conflict. However, as the Iran-Iraq War progressed into the 1980s and as the political-strategic landscape began to change, Riyadh became more assertive. In part, this was because US-Saudi relations began to improve and Iran and Iraq increasingly became bogged down in the Iran-Iraq War. Increased Saudi assertiveness was demonstrated in several cases.

Of all Muslim states, the Saudis and Iran took the strongest stance against Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan. Throughout the 1980s, Riyadh supported the Afghan rebels politically, economically and militarily, and, as already noted, refused to have meaningful relations with the USSR while it occupied Afghanistan.

The Saudis also exhibited increased assertiveness during the Iran-Iraq War. In 1984, with American AWACs support, the Saudis successfully protected their airspace against Iranian aircraft. In 1987, in a similarly bold move, Riyadh effectively deterred an Iranian naval attack on its offshore oilfields.<sup>44</sup> The Saudi response to the 1987 Mecca incident mentioned above also reflected an increasingly assertive policy. In the past, it would have been unimaginable for the Saudis to have taken such a strong political and military stance against Iran. In these cases, Saudi actions went well beyond self-defense and reflected increased confidence in challenging Iran.

In the economic realm as well, the Saudis challenged Iran on oil pricing and production. They argued that some OPEC states, such as Iran, were producing oil beyond their quota. This created serious friction in Saudi-Iranian relations, and underscored the fact that the Saudis were willing to take political risks to advance their views on political and economic issues.

The development of Saudi foreign policy in the 1980s had implications when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Saddam faced a more steadfast and experienced

opponent in Riyadh than he had in the past. Presented with the choice of appeasing Saddam and counting on him not to invade Saudi Arabia on the one hand, or confronting Saddam and inviting his wrath, Riyadh chose the latter course. Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan even went so far as to say that Saudi Arabia had "military technologies capable of destroying the Iraqi army," and that Iraq knew the Saudis had the "power, will and determination capable of deterring it."<sup>45</sup> Such a statement would not have been made in 1979.

The increase in Saudi power, position and confidence carried over into the post-Gulf War period. This could be seen in apparent Saudi attempts to dominate smaller Gulf states such as Qatar. It could also be seen in Riyadh's unfortunate and ill-fated support of an anti-democratic, fundamentalist wing of Yemen's Islamic political party, *al-isiyah*, in the Yemeni Civil War of 1994.

Riyadh also assumed a more active and visible role in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and pushed harder and more successfully to export conservative Saudi-style Islam. Prior to the 1990-91 Gulf crisis, for instance, Saudi-Egyptian relations remained shaky, despite the Iran-Iraq War, which had generated increased cooperation between the two states. The Gulf crisis proved a turning point in Saudi-Egyptian relations. It brought the two states together against Iraq and helped improve their relations. In the post-war period, Egypt became more inclined to pursue Saudi-style Islam. In part this resulted from bilateral relations forged during the Gulf crisis. But it also reflected the wish of Egypt's President, Hosni Mubarak, to appease rising fundamentalist pressures in Egypt and to benefit from Riyadh's dollar diplomacy. The upshot is that Egypt took a number of actions aimed at bringing it closer in line with Islamic precepts, including an espousal by Mubarak that Egypt adopt Islamic law.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The 1990-91 Gulf crisis underscored the importance of Saudi Arabia to the industrialized world. Because it directly controls approximately 25 percent of the world's oil, Saudi Arabia will continue to be a country of vital importance in Western strategic policy in the post-Cold War world.

The rise of Saudi power has important implications for the regional and international politics of the Persian Gulf. First, it suggests that Riyadh can play a bigger role in its future defense. This is because its military capability and its will to use it have increased, while the military capability of its regional competitors, and probably their will to use it, has decreased. But it is also because the Saudis have assumed a more visible and credible political profile in the region, despite the fact that they are resented by the less wealthy Arab states and are viewed in some quarters as American lackeys.

That Saudi Arabia can play a bigger role in its future defense does not, however, mean that it can handle a major military attack by either Iran or Iraq, or that the United States need not be involved in the region. The Saudis lack the skills, experience, and manpower for such a task and clearly remain dependent on the

United States for military support. But they can assume a greater role as part of a forward defense that can slow down regional aggressors and allow time for American reinforcement.

Second, if Saudi Arabia is a key to Western security in the Persian Gulf and if the Saudi position has improved relative to that of its competitors, then in this respect the Persian Gulf is more stable than it has been in some time. This is true despite the continuing presence of Saddam Hussein, the Kurdish problem, the gap in the Middle East between rich and poor and between democratic and monarchical forces, and the regional arms race. Observers who argue that these factors reflect increased disorder in the Middle East in the post-Desert Storm period miss the point. A simple comparative analysis shows that many of these problems have existed for some time. Thus, they do not in themselves reflect an increase in regional instability.

Third, the increase in Saudi power underscores just how costly the use of force was to Iraq and Iran. It not only hurt them in human and material terms, but also decreased their power relative to that of Saudi Arabia, a state which they sought to dominate politically. The rise of Saudi power represents an ongoing cost to Iraq and Iran because both actors remain interested in regional dominance. And a stronger Saudi Arabia is more likely to thwart their future regional ambitions than a weaker one.

On that note, the Saudis managed to emerge from regional conflict less damaged than the two countries which could most threaten them—Iraq and Iran. At a general level, this helps explain the rise of Saudi Arabia from 1978 to 1994. This is particularly true given that, in the Middle East more than in less conflictual regions, power is measured in relative terms. While absolute growth in power is important, which Saudi Arabia has shown, relative growth is much more critical. This is not only because the Saudis compete primarily with Iran and Iraq for influence in the Persian Gulf region, but also because in the Middle East a current ally can more easily become a future adversary than in most other regions of the world.

*Steve Yetiv* is an assistant professor of political science at Old Dominion University and a research affiliate at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies.

### Endnotes

1. For a good brief discussion of Saudi weakness during this period, see *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, no. 4 (1979-1980), pp. 736-37. Hereafter cited as *MECS*.
2. Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 238-39.
3. The two pillars were Iran and Israel. Saudi Arabia served as a third "silent partner." See John K. Cooley, *Payback: America's Long War in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1991), p. 7.
4. See *MECS*, no. 3 (1978-1979), p. 236.
5. See S.A. Yetiv, "Persian Gulf Security: A Bivariable Analysis." *Defense Analysis*, 6, no. 3 (September 1990), pp. 289-98.
6. *Riyadh Television Service*, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Near East and South Asia*, 18 September 1990, p. 21. Hereafter cited as *FBIS/NES*.

7. For instance, see *Jeddah UKAZ*, *FBIS/NES*, 26 September 1991. pp. 15-16.
8. See Gary Sick, "Iran's Quest for Superpower Status.\*" *Foreign Affairs*, 65, no. 4 (Spring 1987), p. 714.
9. In Khomeini's view, other Islamic peoples would overturn their own governments. Richard W. Cottam, "Revolutionary Iran and the War with Iraq," *Current History*, (January 1981), p. 9.
10. *FBIS/NES*, 23 December 1991. pp. 5-6; and *Tehran IRNA*, *FBIS/NES*. 2 June 1992. p. 49.
11. Lenore G. Martin. *The Unstable Gulf: Threats From Within* (Lexington. MA: Lexington. 1984), pp. 1. 32-33.
12. Safran. *Saudi Arabia*, pp. 358-59.
13. See US Senate, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations. *Security- Interests and Policy in Southwest Asia*, 96th Cong.. 2nd sess.. (6 February 1980), pp. 275-76. For a factual record of the Mecca crisis, see *MECS*, no. 4. (1979-80), pp. 682-88.
14. For this evidence, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the West: Strategic Relations and Military Realities* (Boulder. CO: Westview, 1988), pp. 370-71.
15. Iran's President Hashemi Rafsanjani quoted in John Kifner, "Iranian Officials Urge 'Uprooting\*' of Saudi Royalty." *New York Times*, 3 August 1987, p. A1.
16. On the link between the Haj and US reflagging, see Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), pp. 175-76.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
18. Warren Ritchey, "Iran Loses Ground in Efforts to Woo Small Arab Gulf States," *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 October 1987, p. 9.
19. The text of these letters appears in "Empty Reforms: Saudi Arabia's New Basic Laws," *Middle East Watch*, (May 1992), pp. 59-62.
20. See text of interview with King Fahd. in *London Al-Hawadith*, *FBIS/NES*. 14 February 1992, p. 22.
21. See interview with King Fahd. in *London AL-Quds Al-'Arabi*, *FBIS/NES*, 26 March 1992, pp. 9-10.
22. Cited in *Middle East Economic Survey*, 35, no. 27 (6 April 1992), p. C3.
23. On a letter to King Fahd outlining the democratic reforms sought, see *Amman AkhirKhabar*, *FBIS/NES*, 29 April 1991, p. 9.
24. For the text of the royal decrees, see "Empty Reforms."
25. *Kuwait Ar-Ra'yAl-Amm*, 9 January 1979, *FBIS*: Middle East and Africa, 12 January 1979, p. C1. Hereafter cited as *FBIS/MEA*. See also, *MECS*. no. 3 (1978-1979). p. 22. Even the Shah blamed Washington for his demise. Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985). p. 179. On America's loss of credibility, see *MECS*, no. 3(1978-1979), p. 751.
26. Saudi defense minister Prince Sultan insisted that US-Saudi relations remained strong. *Riyadh SNA*, *FBIS/ MEN A*. 30 May 1979, p. C2.
27. On Riyadh's lack of confidence in America, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984). pp. 260-61. Also, see *Middle East Economic Digest*, 9 March 1979, p. 13.
28. See S.A. Yetiv, "How the Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan Improved the U.S. Strategic Position in the Persian Gulf," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 17 (Summer 1990). pp. 62-81.
29. For a lengthy analysis of this package, see Cordesman, *The Gulf and the West*, chapt. 9.
30. For example, see Secretary of State Alexander Haig, "Saudi Security, Middle East Peace, and U.S. Interests," *Current Policy*, 323 (1 October 1981),"pp. 1-3.
31. See Scott Armstrong, "Saudis' AWACs Just a Beginning of a New Strategy," *Washington Post*, 1 November 1981.
32. Safran, *Saudi Arabia*, p. 412.
33. See Cordesman, *The Gulf and the West*, p. 276.

34. For details, see *Manama Wakh. FBIS/IMEA*, 7 February 1984. p. C1. Also, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Witness Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee. 101 st Cong., 2nd sess., (8 February 1990). p. 55.
35. The text of the Declaration appears in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 20 (Summer 1991), pp. 161-63.
36. Caryle Murphy, "Egypt's Pullout Signals Discord with Gulf." *Washington Post*, 11 May 1991, p. A18.
37. "Berlin Neues Deutschland." *FBIS/NES*. 27 February 1991, p. 1.
38. Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Gulf Nations Said to Be Committed to U.S. Alliance," *New York Times*, 25 October 1991. p. A9.
39. *International Financial Statistics Yearbook* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund. 1994). pp. 630-31.
40. *Ibid.*, (various issues).
41. Quoted in *Saudi Arabia: The Monthly Newsletter of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia* (Washington, DC: September 1992). p. 3.
42. David Ottaway. "Saudis Said to Owe \$64 Billion. Scrape to Meet Obligations." *Washington Post*, 3 April 1991, p. A25.
43. Christopher Whalen, "The Saudi Well Runs Dry," *Washington Post*, 29 August 1993, p. C2.
44. See Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, Report of Secretary of Defense, Frank C. Carlucci, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1989*, 100th Cong., 2nd sess., (February 1988), p. 263-64.
45. In *Riyadh Al-Riyad, FBIS/NES*, 11 September 1990. p. 21.
46. See Mamoun Fandy, "Egypt, Mubarak Bows to Saudi-Style Islam," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 August 1992, p. 19.