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HOW WOULD THE COLLAPSE OF THE SAUDI ARABIAN REGIME AFFECT REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE ARABIAN GULF?

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How Would the Collapse of the Saudi Arabian Regime Affect Regional Security in the Arabian Gulf?

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HOW WOULD THE COLLAPSE OF THE SAUDI ARABIAN REGIME AFFECT REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE ARABIAN GULF?

AIM

1. This service paper aims to provide an informative piece to the Commander of the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) on how the potential collapse of Saudi Arabia's Regime would affect regional security in the Middle East. Due to Saudi Arabia's place as the dominant regional power, it is expected that a weakening of its regime would be greatly detrimental to the peace and security in the region. This subject should be important to CJOC, and to the wider Canadian defence establishment, and allied nations because of established diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) relationships with Saudi Arabia.

INTRODUCTION

2. Great power competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has increased in recent years, and has manifested in numerous destabilizing incidents of proxy warfare in the region. Therefore, this subject was chosen because of the complexity and importance of the Middle East, and the immediacy of the situation which requires the sustained attention of Comd CJOC.

3. This will be accomplished by examining Saudi Arabia's myriad relationships. In particular, the relationship between the monarchy and the Saudi population, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States and other western nations, and the relationship between Saudi Arabia and its neighbouring states are specific to the ongoing proxy war with Iran. This analysis will show that a collapse or weakening of Saudi Arabia's regime would result in a power vacuum that Iran would certainly use to its advantage, and cause significant instability that would disadvantage western interests in the region. Western nations, including Canada that have deep economic and diplomatic ties in the Middle East, may lose access to the Middle East. This is of particular concern to the CAF, and allied militaries because the Middle East will continue to be strategically significant for the foreseeable future.

THE MONARCHY AND SAUDI ARABIAN SOCIETY

4. The rapid ascension of Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) from a fringe member of the Saudi royal family to becoming the Minister of Defence in 2015, then the Crown prince in 2017 should be of particular concern to CAF leadership. During this period, MBS has rapidly consolidated power and has carried out a sweeping campaign to modernize Saudi Arabia. MBS's purge, in which he ordered the arrest of hundreds of prominent Saudis in November 2017 on corruption charges likely won him the support of the younger generation of Saudis at the expense of alienating the old regime.¹ MBS's break from the traditional ways of ruling and the resulting shift in the balance of power

¹ Ben Hubbard. "MBS: The Rise of a Saudi Prince." New York Times Company. Mar 21, 2020.

could have tremendous effects on the stability of the regime, and for lasting peace and security in the region.

5. Since assuming leadership, MBS has articulated his “Vision 2030”, a bold plan to diversify Saudi Arabia’s economy away from oil, and privatize sectors of the Saudi economy. This move could potentially transform the country into an even greater economic power.² On one hand, MBS’s ambitious vision for the country could bring unprecedented economic growth. However, massive privatization could affect government subsidies that normal citizens enjoy, which may negatively impact long-term public support for the monarchy.

6. Power in Saudi Arabia has traditionally been maintained through a symbiotic relationship between the royal house of Saud, and the highly conservative Wahhabi clerics. In general, the clerics have endorsed the legitimacy of the royal family. In turn, the monarchy has allowed the clerics to impose their especially orthodox interpretation of Islam within Saudi Arabia. Since assuming power, MBS has upset this delicate balance by enacting a series of social reforms which have undermined the traditional authority of the clerics. For example, mosques have been ordered to reduce the volume of loudspeakers used to play calls to prayer by two-thirds. A religious leader that criticized this decision through an article was swiftly arrested, and his social media presence was deactivated. In addition, shops and restaurants are now allowed to remain open during calls to prayer, meaning that these businesses no longer have to close five times per day.³

7. MBS has further broken away from the clerics’ hard-line interpretation of Islam by reducing the powers of the religious police, granting women the right to drive, desegregating restaurants by gender, and revising textbooks that espouse radical Islamic views. These actions have reduced the influence of the Wahhabi clerics. Traditionally clerics have been empowered to impose strict rules of conduct that affect the daily lives of Saudis and influence the practice of Islam abroad.⁴ In addition, these liberalizing reforms appear to be designed to diminish the established authority of the clerics and garner popular support from younger Saudis. However, MBS has ordered the arrests of liberal and hard-line religious critics alike. Therefore, it is evident that MBS’s primary intent is to remove all challenges to his authority. The long-term effect of MBS alienating the Wahhabi clerics remains to be seen.

RELATIONS BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND WESTERN ALLIES

8. Diplomatic relations between the US and Saudi Arabia were established in 1942 after the discovery of Saudi oil. In 1944, the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) was founded, and both parties signed the “Quincy Agreement in 1945” in which the US provided military support, arms, equipment and training to Saudi Arabia, in

² *Ibid*

³ Sarah Dadouch. 2021. "Saudi Crown Prince Seeks to Diminish Clerics' Influence." *The Washington Post*, Aug 04.

⁴ *Ibid*

exchange for access to the world's largest oil producer. These agreements made the US and Saudi Arabia very close allies, particularly during the Cold War period. Diplomatic relations became even stronger during the First Gulf War in which over 700,000 troops entered Saudi Arabia, and hundreds of US warplanes were staged during OPERATION DESERT SHIELD.⁵

9. Given that the US and Saudi Arabia share deeply established economic, and military interests, diplomatic relations are mutually beneficial to both countries despite their vastly different cultures. While diplomacy between MBS and the Trump administration was strong, it is important to note that Saudi-US relations are now strained under the Biden administration. White House officials have shifted contact away from the powerful Crown Prince, to King Salman. Additionally, the US has released a report accusing MBS of ordering the assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and imposed a visa ban on 76 Saudis accused of threatening MBS's critics overseas. Most importantly, the US withdrew its support for Saudi military operations against the Houthi rebels in Yemen and paused the sale of high precision weapons to Saudi Arabia. Despite strong diplomatic measures, White House staff understood that they could not directly sanction MBS with criminal charges, or asset freezes because it would cause severe damage to relations with Saudi Arabia, and weaken US national interests in countering Iran.⁶

10. French President Emmanuel Macron carried out a planned visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2021 despite calls for him to cancel the visit. Macron responded that Saudi Arabia is an indispensable partner in the Middle East. For France, diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia are vital for promoting peace in Lebanon, a former French colony. Although support for the current regime is incompatible with French culture, Macron recognized that peace in the region cannot be achieved without forging strong diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the absence of a strong Saudi regime would certainly jeopardize French interests in the Middle East. In spite of harsh criticism, Macron met with MBS, who was accused of ordering the assassination of the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi. Macron also noted that other world leaders recently visited Saudi Arabia, most notably during the G20 summit in 2020.⁷

11. Like other western nations, Canada has significant economic interests in Saudi Arabia. In April 2020, Canada lifted its freeze on arms exports to Saudi Arabia, which totalled USD 1.05 billion in 2020. The deal was originally reached by the Harper government but was ultimately finalized by the Trudeau government. Arms exports also include a USD 12 billion contract for Canadian-made Light Armoured Vehicles.⁸ Despite

⁵ Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche, and Yahia H. Zoubir. 2007. "The US-Saudi Relationship and the Iraq War: The Dialectics of a Dependent Alliance." *Journal of Third World Studies* 24 (1) (Spring 2007): 109-110.

⁶ The American Journal of International Law. "Biden Administration Launches Reset in Relations with Saudi Arabia, Withdraws Support for Saudi-Led War in Yemen." *The American Journal of International Law* 115, no. 3 (2021): 545-549.

⁷ CE Noticias Financieras. "France/Saudi Arabia - Macron Defends His Visit to Saudi Arabia on Grounds of Regional Stability." *CE Noticias Financieras*, Dec 03, 2021

⁸ Asian News Monitor. "Canada/Saudi Arabia: Report: Canada Violating Int'l Law by Selling Arms to Saudis." 2021. *Asia News Monitor*, Aug 13.

the recent diplomatic fallout between Canada and Saudi Arabia, and reports that Canadian weapons could be used against Yemeni citizens, the importance of this arms deal was so great that the Trudeau government was unable or unwilling to stop the deal. This is a clear indication of Canada's need to maintain a partnership with Saudi Arabia.

THE COLD WAR BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

12. The al-Saud tribe wrested control of the modern-day Saudi peninsula after the fall Ottoman Empire. Saudi Arabia ultimately gained recognition as a country in 1932. In Massive oil reserves were discovered in 1938, which instantly made the Saudi monarchy wealthy and globally influential.⁹ In contrast, Iran withstood a series of foreign invasions by the UK and Russia. In 1953 the US conspired to remove the popular Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh and installed the reigning Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1967, who enacted a campaign to westernize and secularize Iran.¹⁰ By the 1970s, the governments in Saudi Arabia and Iran were both backed by the US.

13. Ayatollah Khomeini led the Iranian revolution in 1979, in which the unpopular US-backed Shah of Iran was deposed. Iran opened diplomatic relations with Russia and began to promote revolution by backing Shia populations within the Middle East. This directly challenged Saudi Arabia's religious, and political supremacy in the region and permanently damaged relations with the US. In addition, Saudi Arabia feared that revolutionary fervour in Iran would undermine the legitimacy of its monarchy. In response, Saudi Arabia maintained its relationship with the US and allied itself with other Gulf monarchies by establishing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) 1981 to consolidate its power in the region.¹¹ For CAF leadership, it is important to note Saudi Arabia's indispensable role in maintaining regional stability as the leading country of the GCC, and in opposing Iran's anti-western sentiment.

14. Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the Iranian revolution have been marked with episodes of proxy warfare. One of the earliest manifestations of the proxy war occurred during Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980. Iraq's war effort was aided by Saudi Arabia because it was in their best interest to use Iraq as a "wall" between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This continued in 2003 following the US invasion of Iraq. After the fall of Saddam, groups of Sunni and Shia militias were backed by Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹² The level of proxy competition escalated and spread to the larger region as a result of the Arab Spring starting in 2010.

15. Although Bahrain is led by the Sunni Al-Khalifa royal family, the majority of its population are marginalized Shiites. When demonstrations broke out in Manama, Bahrain in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, Saudi and other forces from GCC nations carried out a military operation that brutally put down Shiite protestors, then placed checkpoints

⁹ Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche, and Yahia H. Zoubir. 2007. "The US-Saudi Relationship and the Iraq War: The Dialectics of a Dependent Alliance." *Journal of Third World Studies* 24 (1) (Spring 2007). 109

¹⁰ D. Parvaz. "Iran Revolution." Features Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, February 11, 2014.

¹¹ Valeri Modebadze. "The Battle for Regional Dominance Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 4, no. 3 (01, 2019). 67-68

¹² *Ibid*, 68

outside Shia neighbourhoods. At the same time, the Iranian revolutionary guard used the opportunity to stir up revolutionary sentiment.¹³ Ultimately, Shiite protestors failed to change the balance of power in Bahrain, explicitly because of Saudi-led military support. The Bahraini monarchy might have fallen during the Arab Spring without a strong Saudi regime. This is important to western powers because Bahrain is a hub for UK and US-led military operations in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. In particular, there are permanent UK and US naval bases in Manama, Bahrain which is critical for maintaining maritime access into the Arabian Gulf.¹⁴

16. The breakdown in diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar that began in 2017 shows the diplomatic strength of Saudi Arabia. In particular, Saudi Arabia and fellow GCC nations unanimously imposed a travel and trade ban on Qatar due to its ties with Iran. In addition, the coalition has demanded that Qatar cut-off diplomatic relations with Iran and shut cease operations of the state-funded Al-Jazeera network. Qatar denied allegations of supporting terrorism and has continued diplomatic relations with Iran.¹⁵ Although diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar resumed in 2021, it is evident that Saudi Arabia can and will impose its diplomatic might on another GCC nation to preserve its supremacy in the region.

17. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has intensified in Yemen. Saudi has backed the Sunni government led by President Abd Rabbu Mansur al-Hadi, while Iran has backed the Houthi rebels, which are a Shia minority group in Yemen. The situation has devolved into a major humanitarian crisis in which millions of Yemenis are suffering from starvation and disease.¹⁶ However, it is notable that the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels might have gained control of Yemen without a Saudi military intervention.

18. In Syria, Iran and Russia are supporting government forces led by Bashar al-Assad, while Saudi Arabia is backing opposition forces. Syria is geopolitically significant because it can connect the western countries to energy resources from the Middle East. In particular, European countries can significantly reduce their dependence on Russian oil and gas and diversify their sources by accessing Saudi oil and gas via Syria. Naturally, Russia wants to maintain its dominant position as Europe's main energy supplier, and al-Assad has blocked plans to construct a pipeline through Syria to supply European countries.¹⁷ Therefore, the absence of Saudi strong opposition in Syria could prolong Europe's dependence on Russian oil and gas indefinitely.

¹³ F. Rezaei. "Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Struggle for Regional Hegemony and Islamic Primacy". In: Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement. Middle East Today, 2019. 166-167

¹⁴ Simon Mabon. "The End of the Battle for Bahrain and the Securitization of Bahraini Shi'a." *The Middle East Journal* 73, no. 1 (Spring, 2019). 43

¹⁵ Valeri Modebadze. "The Battle for Regional Dominance Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 4, no. 3 (01, 2019): 68

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 69-70

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 68-69

CONCLUSION

19. There are significant consequences to a potential collapse or weakening of the Saudi regime. As the dominant regional power, Saudi Arabia plays a complex role in maintaining stability in the region. Should the Saudi regime fail, peace and security in the region would suffer, and western interests in the region would equally suffer. While western nations have vastly different values in comparison to Saudi Arabia, both sides share mutual goals. Therefore, western nations have a vested interest in Saudi Arabia maintaining its place as the dominant Middle Eastern power.

20. Saudi Arabia is undergoing rapid change under the leadership of MBS. Although MBS has presented a daring plan to modernize Saudi Arabia, his rapid consolidation of authority at the expense of established royals and Wahhabi clerics has upset the balance of power in Saudi Arabia, which may result in instability within the regime. Although relations between western nations and Saudi Arabia are currently strained, it is still necessary for western nations to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the Saudi royal family. The absence of a strong Saudi regime backed by western powers would certainly tip the balance of power in Iran's favour.

21. This analysis shows that stability in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East is perennially at risk. From a Canadian perspective, relations with the Saudi regime will continue to be important for the foreseeable future, and the CAF will sustain operations in the region. Therefore, CAF leadership must remain aware of developments within Saudi society, including changing dynamics between Saudi Arabia and its allies, and the ongoing status of its conflict with Iran.

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