

Saudi State Arabia's Struggle for a Post-Rentier Regional Order

Authors : Omair Anas

Abstract : The Persian Gulf has been in turmoil for a long time since the colonial administration has handed over the role to the small and weak kings and emirs who were assured of protection in return of many economic and security promises to them. The regional order, Saudi Arabia evolved was a rentier regional order secured by an expansion of rentier economy and taking responsibility for much of the expenses of the regional order on behalf of relatively poor countries. The two oil booms helped the Saudi state to expand the 'rentier order' driven stability and bring the countries like Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine under its tutelage. The disruptive misadventure, however, came with Iran's proclamation of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 which it wanted to be exported to its 'un-Islamic and American puppet' Arab neighbours. For Saudi Arabia, even the challenge presented by the socialist-nationalist Arab dictators like Gamal Abdul Nasser and Hafez Al-Assad was not that much threatening to the Saudi Arabia's then-defensive realism. In the Arab uprisings, the Gulf monarchies saw a wave of insecurity and Iran found it an opportune time to complete the revolutionary process it could not complete after 1979. An alliance of convenience and ideology between Iran and Islamist groups had the real potential to challenge both Saudi Arabia's own security and its leadership in the region. The disruptive threat appeared at a time when the Saudi state had already sensed an impending crisis originating from the shifts in the energy markets. Low energy prices, declining global demands, and huge investments in alternative energy resources required Saudi Arabia to rationalize its economy according to changing the global political economy. The domestic Saudi reforms remained gradual until the death of King Abdullah in 2015. What is happening now in the region, the Qatar crisis, the Lebanon crisis and the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has combined three immediate objectives, rationalising Saudi economy and most importantly, the resetting the Saudi royal power for Saudi Arabia's longest-serving future King Mohammad bin Salman. The Saudi King perhaps has no time to wait and watch the power vacuum appearing because of Iran's expansionist foreign policy. The Saudis appear to be employing an offensive realism by advancing a pro-active regional policy to counter Iran's threatening influence amid disappearing Western security from the region. As the Syrian civil war is coming to a compromised end with ceding much ground to Iran-controlled militias, Hezbollah and Al-Hashad, the Saudi state has lost much ground in these years and the threat from Iranian proxies is more than a reality, more clearly in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This paper attempts to analyse the changing Saudi behaviour in the region, which, the author understands, is shaped by an offensive-realist approach towards finding a favourable security environment for the Saudi-led regional order, a post-rentier order perhaps.

Keywords : terrorism, Saudi Arabia, Rentier State, gulf crisis

Conference Title : ICIRA 2018 : International Conference on International Relations and Affairs

Conference Location : Mumbai, India

Conference Dates : February 22-23, 2018