



# SAUDI ARABIA

CSSPR Country Study Series



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# Country Study – Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a country in the Middle East bordered by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba to the west and north-west, respectively, by Jordan and Iraq to the north, Kuwait to the northeast, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates to the east, Oman to the southeast, and Yemen to the south.<sup>1</sup>

## Geographic Contours

### 1. Terrain

The country sits on its own tectonic plate, the Arabian Plate, whose rifts on both eastern and western edges formed the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Kingdom covers nearly 80% of the Arabian Peninsula stretching a plateau that rises abruptly from the Red Sea till it dips into the Persian Gulf.<sup>2</sup> The land is host to an array of geographical terrain, including lowlands, arid deserts and mountainous steppes. The country is primarily categorized and famous for the Arabian Desert, the fifth largest in the world, which is further classified into three separate sand deserts (the An-Nafud, the Ad-Danha, the Rub-al-Khali) and two rocky highland deserts (the Najd Highlands and the Hejaz Mountain Ranges).

The most venerated region in Saudi Arabia, the western Hejaz region, includes the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Nearly 35% of the population lives in the Hejaz region.<sup>3</sup> The geographic center of the Kingdom is the Najd region while to the south of Najd lies one of the largest sand deserts in the world, the Rub al Khali. The eastern Arabian region, Al-Ahsa, is home to the country's rich oil fields. The south-western section, the lush green Tihamah, is the most fertile area in the Kingdom owing to the fact that the mountains collect greater moisture influenced by the jet streams carried by the monsoons from the Indian Ocean.

Nearly 1,300 islands (and smaller islets) are present along both coasts of the Kingdom with nearly 89% concentrated in the Red Sea and 11% in the Persian Gulf.<sup>4</sup> 1/5 of the world's oil shipping lanes pass through the incredibly narrow 21 mile wide Strait of Hormuz, a side of which is bordered by Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup> The Kingdom has no major river system, but it does have "Wadis" or seasonal riverbeds that are subject to seasonal climate changes. The alternative water resources are the historic Arabian oases speckled throughout the desert.

### 2. Climate

With few exceptions, the country is characterized by a desert climate with extreme heat during the day followed by an abrupt drop in temperature at night. Rainfall is erratic with considerable variation across the peninsula, especially between the coastal lands and the interior. The Asir region is subject to Indian Ocean monsoons, usually occurring between October and March. Temperatures in the coastal regions do not rise above 38°C, but the interior can go up to 54° C.<sup>6</sup> In the interior, winter temperature seldom drops below 0° C, but the almost total absence of humidity and the high wind-chill factor make for a bitterly-cold atmosphere.

## Historical Perception

### 1. Ancient

Saudi Arabia's history is one of tradition, upheavals, and transformation. The country owes much of its recent global prominence to modern economic realities, but its position as the birthplace of Islam - a religion practiced by 1.8 billion people - holds immense spiritual importance. Saudi Arabia jumped from herding camels to moving billions of dollars around in the world with electronic transfers in well over a century. Such economic changes brought in many social changes - so much so that the Kingdom became an exaggerated paradigm of possibilities for development in the global south.

The "Saudi" in Saudi Arabia refers to the House of Saud, the royal family whose eponym was Saud ibn Muhammad ibn Mughrin. Saud himself may not have made much territorial gains, but his son, Muhammad ibn Saud, conquered most of the Arabian Peninsula. His family and succeeding generations have carried on the name.

"Arabia" - or the Arabian Peninsula - is the geographic region whose inhabitants spoke Arabic even before the advent of Islam. These Arabic-speaking people were spread out across the peninsula and the Levant in Palestine, Iraq, and Syria. Christian Arab buffer states were established north of the peninsula between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. Muslim conquests spread out over the Arab world and the Arabic language became the region's dominant language. The country's geography - stretching from the eastern coastlines to the arid desert in the interior - has played a major part in Arabian history. Coastal people had more interaction with the rest of the world than those that lived in the desert, allowing for tradition to be a dominant force of cultural cohesion in the interior.

Ancient Arabia has been inhabited and governed by innumerable tribal units, forever splitting or confederating. Arabia is kaleidoscope of shifting allegiances, tribal alliances, and deeply-rooted traditions. Stone Age settlers relied on fish and shellfish to survive as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. Close proximity to the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates allowed the ancient Arabians to trade with these river-valley civilizations. The coastal people benefitted the most but trade flourished in the southwestern part of the peninsula as well. Frankincense and myrrh were the most sought after commodities from Arabia. Small kingdoms and city states flourished by around 1000 B.C. The most famous at the time was Saba, referred to as Sheba in Biblical texts. Greek writers like Eratosthenes (3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE) called it "Eudaimon Arabia" and Yemen was called Arabia Felix ("happy Arabia") by the Romans. According to Eratosthenes's writings, four major kingdoms are recorded in the annals of Arabian history during the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century: the Minaeans, Sabaeans, Qatabanians, and Hadramites.<sup>7</sup> Other than the coastal regions, the Hejaz and its caravan trade were the only way for trade to be conducted with the interior. The harsh climate of the peninsula exacerbated by the desert and mountainous terrain rendered the interior difficult to access for most. The people subsisted on oasis gardening and herding leaving the rest as nomadic or semi-nomadic. Once the people learned how to saddle camels with large loads for long treks, the interior Arabia finally began to benefit from some of the trade that had previously circumvented Arabia. Trans-Arabia trade resulted in the rise of city states that serviced the caravans, most prosperous of these being Palmyra in Syria and Petra in Jordan as they had closer access to the Mediterranean markets. Mecca became a religious center in Arabia, visited by Arab pilgrims from all over the peninsula. Paganism was the major religious practice in Arabia and various rituals were required to be performed in venerated places. Foremost of these was the pilgrimage, and the most

famous site was Mecca. The Arabs' increased involvement in trade allowed them to establish pseudo-diplomatic contact with the Romans and the Persians. After being drawn into the political affairs in the near East, both empires paid Arab tribes not only to protect their southern borders but also to harass the borders of their adversary. The camel caravans not only moved goods but ideas and beliefs as well. Many religions and beliefs found sway in Arabia, from the Sabaeans in southern Arabia to more established faiths like Hanifs, Christians, and Jews. According to Muslim tradition, Mecca, a city in the Hijaz region, was inhabited by the people of Jurhum. Early Greco-Latin sources trace them as living on the central west coast. Historical tradition says they were unified under Qusayy ibn Kilab, called al-Mujammi (the great unifier). He is credited with having brought together scattered Bedouin tribes into Mecca. They took over control of the west coast trade under a system of mercantile aristocracy, not unlike the Venetian Republic.

## 2. Early Islam

In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, the Quraysh - the noble clan of the confederation of the Hejaz controlling the sacred enclave (haram) of Mecca - contrived a chain of agreements with the northern and southern tribes that opened the highways of Arabia to commerce. Under Quraysh's aegis, caravans moved freely from the southern Yemen coast to Mecca and thence northward to Byzantium or eastward to Iraq. Additional agreements were made with Axum (Ehtiopia) and the African coast. Pacts were concluded with Byzantium, Persia and the rulers of Yemen, promoting commerce outside Arabia. The Quraysh as custodians of the Ka'bah held local preeminence and prestige.

By the time of the birth of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Mecca had established itself as a trading center. He belonged to the Quraysh tribe that comprised active traders with established alliances across the peninsula. They were very much the power brokers and facilitators of the status quo in Arabian society.

Families were classified in clans which, in turn, made up tribes with branch families. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) came from a respected clan, the sons of Hashim, but belonged to a weak family. Despite being born an orphan, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was provided with a close protector, his uncle Abu Talib, a senior of the Hashimite clan. This provided him with protection from aggressors when he initially began to preach, much to the hostility of the Meccan leadership.

When he began to preach for a new social and spiritual order, it was disturbing to the pagan and polytheist social elites. The new message criticized traditional Arab customs, most significant of which were the Meccans' polytheistic beliefs. In condemning the worship of idols, he threatened the centuries-old tradition of pilgrimage from which the Quraysh profited.

Though he continued receiving his uncle's protection, many of his followers didn't have powerful family connections, and those without them were freely harassed and attacked. Following his uncle's death in 619, however, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) felt obliged to leave and migrate from Mecca. This emigration or 'hijra' marks the starts of the Islamic calendar.

The Quraysh were unwilling to leave this matter to fate, and after various skirmishes and battles, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) returned to Mecca in 630, triumphantly, where he was accepted without resistance. Later, strongholds in At Taif and Khaybar surrendered after lengthy sieges. By 632, many of the peninsula's tribes had tied themselves to the Prophet through various treaties. After him came

the authority of the four great caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib. For the first thirty years, the caliphate of the growing Islamic empire was managed from Yathrib (which was later renamed Medina). After the conclusion of the apostasy wars, the Arab tribes united behind Islam and channeled their energies against the Persian and Roman Empires. Arab control was eventually established from modern-day Spain to Pakistan.

### 3. Middle Ages

Islam had moved away from the Fertile Crescent, one of the cradles of a civilization stretching from the southeastern Mediterranean coast to the Persian Gulf, into new outposts and political centers as far away as India, Morocco, Turkey, and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Intellectual vitality and vigor followed political power, with Baghdad as a shining beacon of culture and knowledge. Islamic civilization had moved away from the Hejaz. To satisfy the mandate of their new faith, Arabs left the peninsula with large population movements.

Mecca owing to its position as the destination for the pilgrimage maintained its spiritual focal point. Medina became the center for Quranic study, historical record, and Islamic legal discourse that later culminated with the codification of Islamic Law namely orthodox Sunni Islam with four schools of thought: the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, and Hanbali. The Hejaz region benefitted economically and culturally from extensive contact with other parts of the Muslim world. The arid eastern region, Najd, remained relatively isolated from trade and commerce. Surrounded on three sides by deserts and separated from the Hejaz by mountains, traders and pilgrimage traffic circumvented Najd by moving up the Red Sea towards Egypt.

The next phase of Islamic conquest is recognized under the Umayyads with their capital in Damascus while the holy cities became spiritual capitals only. They appointed governors over their areas of rule in regional centers in Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, and the Hejaz. Islam's unity was irrevocably split among the Sunni and Shia sects. After the Umayyads were overthrown in 750 by the Abbasids, political power and relevance moved to Baghdad and the political importance of Arabia in the Islamic world had declined further. Around the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century, Mecca came under the 1,000-year ascendancy of the Alid Sharifian families. Mecca became the capital of the Hejaz instead of Medina. Despite being subject to foreign overlords, the Sharifs exercised virtual independence. After the conclusion of the Abbasid-Fatimid struggle, the Sharifs recognized the Abbasids and Ayyubids.

In 1181, the French Crusader Knight Reynaud de Chatillon raided Arabia. He intended to attack Medina but switching his plan raided the red sea ports as far south as Bab el Mandeb.<sup>8</sup> Ayyubid's Saladin destroyed Reynaud's vessels and so ended the threat to Mecca. By the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Sharifs had conquered the Hejaz, extending their power southward to Halim, but when they sought support from Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, the Yememi Rasulids managed to dispute the over lordship of Mecca with the Egyptians.

After Baghdad fell to the Mongols in 1258, the pilgrim caravan from Iraq lost all political significance for the Hejaz. As Iraq declined, Egyptian influence increased and the Sharifs became steadily more dependent on the Mamluks of Egypt. During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Mamluks were the dominant power, maintaining a political agent in the Hejaz and a body of cavalry in Mecca. From the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the Mamluks took charge of the customs at Jeddah, allotting a portion of the revenue to the

ruling Pashas of the port. In 1517, the Ottoman Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt and proclaimed the Hejaz part of the Ottoman dominion. Sharif Barakat II of Mecca sent his son to negotiate at the Ottoman court and was confirmed as lord of the Holy Cities and Jeddah, subject to recognizing the Ottoman sultan as overlord. Selim's successor, Suleiman I the Magnificent, at the zenith of Ottoman power, munificently subsidized the Holy Cities, devoting large sums to new infrastructure.

The early 16<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the Portuguese entering the fray by penetrating the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Thought they could not occupy Aden, they managed to blockade all sea traffic of the Indian trade routes to Europe vis-à-vis the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, in effect, causing lasting damage to the economy of Muslim Middle Eastern countries. By 1536, the Ottomans had conquered another vestige of early Islamic power, Iraq. They could finally then operate the Persian Gulf against the Portuguese, who had by then controlled Bahrain, Muscat, and Hormuz - essentially running the Arabian coast. Seeking to curb Portuguese expansion, the Ottomans reached as far Al-Ḥasa by 1550. Ottoman help was essential in helping the local merchants to revive the spice trade, especially in pepper, but later their efforts were negated when the Banu Khalid tribal confederation expelled Ottoman forces in 1670. The Portuguese were able to maintain a hold in Muscat until 1649 but were eventually expelled from the Arabian Peninsula and much of the surrounding area by Imam Nasir of Oman, who was able to chase the Portuguese fleet on the Indian Ocean and defeat them along the East African coast. Oman became a bulwark against European machinations on the Arabian Peninsula and across Indian Ocean trade routes facilitating Arabian merchants and traders. Coastal Arabia was making contact with Christian European maritime nations including the French, English and Dutch. Yemen began trade with Western nations through the port city of Mocha in the 7<sup>th</sup> century where the Europeans later established trading stations or "factories". The two Holy Cities' power centers were shared under a terse but amicable struggle between the Ottoman governors and the locally autonomous Sharifs. The city of Mecca still had a significant role to play in the larger development of Islamic theology, even for Shiite followers, whereas the institution of pilgrimage helped to reinforce a common Muslim identity for many widespread communities - a phenomenon that is still prevalent today. The late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries saw civil war in Mecca between the Sharifian tribes and Ottoman officials, who, notwithstanding the virtual independence of the Sharifs, still dabbled in Hejaz politics. This conflict developed parallel to the rise of Wahhabism in central Najd. Wahhabism is an Islamic reform movement founded by Muḥammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, later adopted in 1744 by the Saudi family. Muḥammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was influenced by the writings of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>-century pietistic theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, who followed the strict Ḥanbala school of Islamic law.

British paramountcy and the wide-reaching influence of the East India Company began to reach the southern coastal regions while the interior was little concerned at first. Coastal Arabia was bustling with trade of dates, slaves, pearls, coffee and the pilgrimage. A series of agreements and power moves paved the way for British dominancy along the coasts of the Persian Gulf. The Ottomans still clung to the Hejaz as they had proclaimed themselves to be the custodians of the Holy Cities to the Muslim World. They, however, had little power outside their garrisons in those cities and along the pilgrim route. Wahhabism eventually became popular across the Najd to the point that, late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Wahhabis began raiding Iraq and then besieged Mecca, which they definitively conquered in 1806. The Saudi-Wahhabi cohort forced the Ottomans to urge Muhammad Ali, viceroy of Egypt, to drive the Wahhabis from the Holy Cities. Egyptian troops invaded Arabia, and after a bitter seven-year struggle the viceroy's forces recaptured Mecca and Medina.



#### 4. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century and World War 1

The second Saudi-Wahhabi kingdom was formed when a collateral Saudi branch revolted and captured Riyadh in 1824. Succession was followed by Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah Al Saud who led the Emirate of Najd whose overlord-ship was generally recognized in the Persian Gulf, while the Egyptians remained in the Hejaz. After Faisal died, his son's fratricidal ambitions left Ibn Rashid, ruler of Ḥa-il, to exploit the power vacuum and take Riyadh. He ruled northern Arabia until he died in 1897. The Saudis had lost the fertile Al-Ḥasa to the Ottoman Turks by 1871 and the family finally took refuge in nearby Kuwait. Ibn Rashid's son later became involved in a struggle for power against the Sheikh of Kuwait. The political strife allowed Ibn Saud (ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz II), to retake Riyadh in 1902 and establish the third Saudi kingdom. In two years marked by continuous skirmishes and raids, Ibn Saud had recovered much of the earlier Saudi territory. Ibn Saud built agricultural settlements colonized by groups called the Ikhwan in 1912 in an effort to bring the nomads under control.<sup>9</sup>

In hopes to regain and consolidate the gains of the first Saudi state of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn Saud sought to remove the Rashidis from their seat of power. Ibn Saud defeated a combined Ottoman and Rashidi force in 1904 but allowed the Ottomans to place garrisons in central Arabia for one year. Despite Ibn Rashid's continued struggle to reclaim territory from Ibn Saud, his death in 1906 allowed the latter to control all of central Arabia after securing Ottoman withdrawal from Al-Qasim later that year. Though he had ambitions to conquer all his whole ancestral realm, he was cautious enough to continue acknowledging Ottoman overlordship in name only to avoid conflict. Ibn Saud continued organizing tribal military forces in the following decade to muster greater Saudi strength.

The Ottoman Empire entered World War I with control of almost all western Arabia, and was supported in northern Arabia by the pro-Ottoman Rashidis. Eastern Arabia was under the control of the British, who were the then paramount in the Gulf after signing treaties with Arab Sheikdoms. Though the Saudis mostly fought in skirmishes with the Rashidis by and large, they remained inactive during the global conflict with Ibn Saud choosing to remain diplomatically quiescent. Sharif Ḥusayn ibn Ali of Mecca - under assurances of British support - revolted against the Ottomans in June 1916, taking Mecca but failing to capture Medina. In neighboring Yemen, Ottoman forces entered the Aden Protectorate, but the war ended in a stalemate.

Faisal and Abdullah, the two sons of Sharif Ḥusayn of Mecca galvanized the Hejazi tribes against Ottoman suzerainty and - with the assistance of British officers and supplies including the famous T.E. Lawrence - conquered Damascus in 1918. Faisal set up an Arab government there but was removed by the French two years later in 1920. Nonetheless he was later named King of Iraq while his brother, Abdullah, became Emir of Transjordan with British support.<sup>10</sup>

The Hejaz became the epicenter of heated rivalry between Ibn Saud and Sharif Husayn which broke into open war by 1919. Ibn Saud and his followers had won a decisive victory and would have held full control of the Hejaz if not for British pressure. As a result, Ibn Saud concentrated all his forces against Muḥammad ibn Ṭalal, the last Rashidi emir, and annexed the whole of northern Arabia specifically conquering all Shammar territory and capturing Ḥa'il in 1921. Meanwhile, the Grand Sharif refused to sign any treaty with Britain, mainly because of the Balfour Declaration, which approved a national home in Palestine for the Jews. The Wahhabis marched into the Hejaz in 1924, occupying Mecca without opposition. Ibn Saud then laid siege to Medina and Jeddah until Sharif Husayn abdicated and both cities surrendered to the Saudis. On January 8, 1926, Ibn Saud was proclaimed King of the Hejaz in the Great

Mosque of Mecca. By 1927, the British recognized Saudi sovereignty over the Najd and Hejaz regions under the Treaty of Jeddah.

In neighboring Yemen, Imam Yahya conquered the area after the Ottoman departure and enforced strict security measures. He refused to recognize the British-backed border between the Aden protectorate and Yemen. The British, later in the 1930s pacified and, to a limited degree, developed their protectorates. The history of the country as a sovereign, recognized Kingdom began on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1932, after the two dual kingdoms of the Najd and the Hejaz (who were previously administrated as separate units) were unified under the name of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by royal decree. This allowed for wider national identity among the people under the rule of the royal family effectively deterring Hejazi separatism. Though it did not join the ill-fated League of Nations, Saudi Arabia enjoyed full international recognition as an independent state.

Ibn Saud's followers now had to adjust to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Hejaz society, where Arabic tribes had previously struggled with centralized authority. In the postwar years, Saudi Arabia and Britain concluded agreements and treaties defining the frontiers with the British mandates of Jordan and Iraq (though most Saudi borders remained uncertain).

Saudi Arabia declared neutrality during World War II, later joining the United Nations as a founding member. Despite joining the Arab League, Saudi Arabia did not play a major role in the organization since conservative and religious elements within the Kingdom opposed cooperation with certain Arab states.

## 5. Post War Arabia

Though oil had been discovered before WWII, the Kingdom did not start exploiting the natural reserves until 1941.<sup>11</sup> Before discovering oil, state revenue depended on taxes, limited trade, custom duties, and the pilgrimage - all of which were impacted negatively by the Great Depression. By 1944, droves of foreign oil workers arrived in the country as the Kingdom itself lacked sufficient skilled workers and Aramco (the Arabian Oil Company) was established as a joint venture between the Saudi government and a number of American oil companies. The sudden influx of wealth brought along many cultural changes including rapid urbanization, rising xenophobia, due to the sudden arrival of large number of foreigners, and technological upgrading amongst the masses.<sup>12</sup>

Ibn Saud was succeeded by his eldest son, Saud while his second son, Faisal was declared heir apparent. The two brothers sparked intense rivalry among their followers in the royal family as the eldest was seen as the embodiment of a traditionalist approach while the younger represented modernization. Acquiring greater executive powers, Faisal was able to compel the royal family to collectively depose Saud and proclaim him King. He was seen as the symbol of modern governance as he established an efficient bureaucracy and developed ministries.

On the foreign affairs front, trouble was brewing since Oman and Saudi Arabia did not have a demarcated and mutually-recognized frontier. The oil rush in the Arabian Peninsula had made room for political expediency when it came to controlling possible oil fields. In 1952, the Kingdom's forces occupied the oasis of Al-Buraymi, which Britain felt belonged to the emirate of Abu Dhabi and Oman. Both Oman and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi enjoyed British protection which paved the way for this dispute

to be submitted to an arbitration tribunal at Geneva. Negotiations though were not successful and British-officered forces regained the oasis for the emirate of Abu Dhabi and Oman. Due to this episode and the Suez Crisis of 1956, Saudi Arabia broke off relations with Britain till 1963. Saudi Arabia helped found the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960.

## 6. King Faisal's and Khalid's Reigns

King Faisal was a staunch advocate against communist influence in the Arab and Muslim World, but, despite its stronger relations with the U.S, the Kingdom opposed U.S assistance to Israel. U.S support for Israel during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War compelled the Saudi-led Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries to organize a short-lived oil boycott.<sup>13</sup> Eventually the Kingdom was able to gain sole ownership and complete control of Aramco and, therefore, over their chief economic resource.

After King Faisal's assassination, he was succeeded by his half-brother Crown Prince Khalid in 1975. The new King's era was marked by continued rapid social and economic development, revolutionizing the educational and infrastructural system of the Kingdom. His reign saw Saudi Arabia join other Arab nations in severing diplomatic ties with Egypt after the former signed the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a cause of grave concern for the Saudi royal family, primarily due to the large Shiite minority in the Kingdom that supported the Revolution. The Kingdom faced its biggest threat for unrest and domestic violence during the Grand Mosque seizure of 1979, when extremist insurgents led by Juhayman al-Otaybi occupied Masjid al-Haram (the Great Mosque of Mecca) to protest against the Saudi monarchy. The siege lasted two weeks before Saudi Special Forces regained control of the mosque. The Grand Mosque seizure incident and the Iranian Revolution paved the way for a more conservative outlook and further empowerment among the ulema and religious clerics by the Saudi establishment.<sup>14</sup>

## 7. King Fahd's Reign

Crown Prince Fahd succeeded King Khalid after the latter's death in 1982. King Fahd focused on having stronger diplomatic relations with the U.S and Britain and increased the purchase of modern military equipment on priority. King Fahd's reign during the 1980s saw the Kingdom become the single largest oil producer in the world. Saudi Arabia had great influence in determining OPEC policy on oil production, in effect, having a great hold on regulating international oil prices. Despite rampant cultural changes in the wake of rising national revenue, political and administrative processes did not change. Real power was not in the hands of elite technocrats or bureaucrats but the Saudi royal family

Despite Saudi efforts at mediation, Iraq reasserted its earlier claim on Kuwait and invaded the country in 1990 starting the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991). Saudi Arabia denounced the invasion and gave refuge to the fleeing Kuwaiti government. Due to the fear of a possible Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom, breaking with tradition, invited Western countries, specifically the U.S., to send troops for its protection. Previously it was against tradition for a non-Muslim army to defend the holy cities but approbation from religious officials assuaged all doubts and apprehensions. A coalition of troops led by the U.S arrived to help negate the royal family's fears about Iraqi ambitions. Though the coalition drove out Iraq from Kuwait, the full weight and implications of western intervention brought into question the

governance capability of a royal family with an over-financed and incapable military. A sense of malaise gripped the country as the government upped its defense purchases and gave oil subsidies in exchange for military support. Oil production and oil prices were at an all-time high but the Saudi GDP per capita grew only marginally through the 1990s. The year 1992 saw the issuance of three important decrees: the Regions Statute, the Consultative Council Statute and the Basic Law of Government. These measures were not to introduce a more representative government but to formally reinforce the royal family's preferred model - a government by consultation. The 1990s saw a rise in Islamist opposition that threatened the legitimacy of the royal government and followed up by a crackdown of dissidents. The dissidents condemned the presence of non-Muslim countries' troops on Saudi soil which was seen as an affront to Muslim sentiments. In defending the Kingdom from Iraq, Saudi Arabia was indebted to the U.S. and its allies. The Kingdom repaid in the purchase of weapons and by supporting the U.S.-led peace process between the Palestinians and Israel. After the Iraq episode, Saudi Arabia turned its attention to curtailing Iran's alleged export of its revolutionary strand to Muslim states with large Shiite populations.

## 8. King Abdullah's Reign

King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995 that left his half-brother Abdullah, as the de-facto leader of the Kingdom. In a bid to assuage popular anti-western rhetoric, Abdullah focused on improving regional relations, especially with Iran. The September 11 attacks put the Kingdom on a hot seat in the international media as many Saudi citizens had participated in carrying out the terrorist attack. Saudi Arabia refused to participate or support the Iraq War, a stand seen by many western critics as an attempt by the royal family to placate the kingdom's Islamist radicals. Resultantly, it was agreed between the U.S. and Saudi officials to withdraw all U.S. military forces from the Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> Despite a thaw in animosity during the 1990s, regional events in the first decade of the new century opened political fixtures in the Middle East. King Abdullah ascended to the throne in a peaceful transition of power after King Fahd's death in 2005. He introduced economic reforms to promote privatization, foreign investment and deregulation along with greater political participation for the masses by holding the country's first municipal elections, based on adult male suffrage. He established an Allegiance Commission, a council of Saudi princes, to smooth out the choice of succession and transition of power. Women's rights made some ground as women were permitted to run for office and vote in municipal elections. The royal family successfully restrained all possible revolutionary change that had swept the Arab World in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011. In light of the civil unrest and conflict that developed in neighboring Yemen, Saudi Arabia led a coalition of military forces against the Houthi rebels in an effort to back President Hadi's government. This military intervention became a multi-year campaign that is being fought as of 2021, despite Washington ending its support for kinetic operations in that country.<sup>16</sup>

## 9. King Salman's Reign

In 2015, King Abdullah passed away leaving King Salman to ascend to the Saudi throne. To quell fears regarding the stability of accession, King Salman appointed his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef, the interior minister, as Crown Prince. Mohammad bin Nayef soon became eclipsed and later replaced by King Salman's own son, Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), who held many government positions. With King Salman support, MBS became the country's policymaker and enforcer. He pursued an aggressive

and active foreign policy campaign aimed at containing Iranian influence and establishing Saudi dominance in the region. His anti-Iran rhetoric came on the heels of President Trump's maximum pressure campaign against that country. He led the diplomatic and airspace blockade of Saudi Arabia and allies against Qatar in 2017. To curtail a possible fiscal crisis due to falling oil prices and the kingdom's sole reliance on petroleum resources, MBS introduced the Vision 2030 to diversify the Saudi economy. The extrajudicial murder and dismemberment of Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul caused a storm of controversy for MBS in particular and the royal family in general. He embarked on high profile visits to China, India, and Pakistan, to allay international criticism and reaffirm relations with international businesses.<sup>17</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic forced Saudi Arabia and fellow producer Russia to undertake austerity measures to make up for a drop in global demand of oil.<sup>18</sup>

## Society

### 1. Demography

Historically, the population was mostly nomadic or semi-nomadic, but the discovery of petroleum and the subsequent economic boom paved the way for more urbanization. As with most of the economic activities, the country's population is concentrated in a wide area across the middle of the peninsula, from Ad Dammam in the east, through Riyadh in the interior, to Mecca-Medina in the west near the Red Sea. The country has a population of 34.7 million with immigrants making up 38.3% of the total population.<sup>19</sup> Of the native population, 90% are Arabs and 10% Afro-Asians. Migrant working expatriates make up 32% of the Kingdom's population in which 26.3% of total migrants are Indians, 24.2% Pakistanis, 19.5% Bangladeshis, 19.3% Egyptians, and 15.3% Filipinos.<sup>20</sup>

### 2. Languages

The official language of the Kingdom is Arabic while English is formally taught as a compulsory second language in schools. Urdu, Hindi, and Filipino are spoken by migrant workers.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Social Structure

Saudi Arabia society was historically composed of nomads, townfolk, and villagers, all connected by a pervasive patrilineal kinship that holds to this day under a superimposing administration of the royal family at its center. Tribal identity and kinship through the extended family fosters strong close linkages. Villages have deeply rooted tribal affiliations amongst the villages as compared to those who live in the city. Those cities are not tribally organized, kinship affiliation still endures as local matters are dealt by local elites. Social stratification is organized more along the lines of lineage and occupation than just wealth.

#### 4. Religion

Despite a large number of multi-faithful expatriates, majority of the population is Muslim where nearly citizens are 85-90% Sunnis and 10-15% Shiites.<sup>22</sup>

#### 5. Education

Saudi Arabia has achieved universal access to education for a large and geographically dispersed school-age population. Despite these impressive gains in enrolment in the short span of a few decades, they are not matched by an equivalent progress in learning and skills. As a result, Saudi Arabia has stretched the capacity of educators and administrators to deliver and assure high-quality learning.

Policymakers in Saudi Arabia have constructed the goal of Vision 2030 to reduce the country's dependence on fossil fuels and create a diverse, dynamic economy. In their 13 programmes, one of the foremost objectives is the Human Capability Development Program (HCDP), which aims to improve the country's education system in order to create a highly-skilled and productive population that can meet the needs of a 21st century knowledge-based labour market.<sup>23</sup>

The education system in Saudi Arabia is primarily under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC). In 2020, expenditure on education accounted for 7.8% of the GDP, the second largest governmental spending in Saudi Arabia.<sup>24</sup> This investment has helped achieve tremendous success in expanding access to education, with present enrolment rates in primary and secondary education being nearly universal. Although the national education management structure is decentralised, decision-making authority is centralised within the Ministry of Education (MoE). This contributes to a lack of coherence in the oversight and support provided to schools.

Higher Education is steered by the Council of Higher Education and administered by the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE), which determines curricula, admissions criteria, admission quotas, and faculty appointments. Even private universities are tightly regulated by the government, resulting in an inflexible bureaucratic system that allows little institutional autonomy. The biggest challenges in Higher Education include: limitation of places, depletion of resources, and quality measures.

With Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has committed to an ambitious cross-sectoral reform agenda. The education system is at the forefront of the country's effort to diversify its economy. Focusing on developing human capital is crucial if Saudi Arabia is to transition to a balanced and sustainable economy that is less dependent on fossil fuels and public sector employment. While impressive progress has been made in achieving universal education access, significant additional improvements will be required if Saudi Arabia is to achieve its aim of developing a high-quality education system.

While Vision 2030 has aligned education actors around key objectives for the education sector, Saudi Arabia's overarching reform agenda has not yet been translated into a clear vision of quality schooling. The new school evaluation framework has the potential to address this gap and strengthen school accountability and support systems.

## 6. Health Care

The overarching, expansive tradition of centralization in Saudi Arabia is also embodied in its health care service. Given a high priority by the government in the past few decades, health services have improved in terms of quality, access, and quantity. The Ministry of Health (MOH) is the major provider and financier of health care services in Saudi Arabia, with a total of 244 hospitals (33277 beds) and 2037 Primary Health Care (PHC) institutions<sup>25</sup>. The MOH provides 60% of health services while the private sector provides 23% and other government health sectors provide 17%.<sup>26</sup> Saudi Arabian citizens have free access to all levels of public health care services available in the country, which is funded by the central government. Despite the multiplicity of health service providers, there is no coordination or clear communication channels among them, resulting in a waste of resources and duplication of effort.<sup>27</sup> Disease patterns in Saudi Arabia have seen a shift away from communicable diseases to chronic diseases which are becoming more prevalent in the country. The MOH expenditure per capita has increased substantially by 0.41% and more than 90% of the Ministry of Health budget allocated for infrastructure and development projects was spent on hospitals.<sup>28</sup> Low expenditure on primary health care centres has resulted in 80% of primary health care buildings being rented; as such they are not specifically designed to provide health care services and they lack the necessary structural features to provide primary care.<sup>29</sup>

The overall health of the population has improved in the Kingdom. Between 1983 and 2017, life expectancy has improved from 66 to 76.4 years; infant mortality rate per 1000 live births drastically declined from 52 to 12.58, and maternal mortality rate declined to 17 deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>30</sup> However, a number of issues pose challenges to the health care system, such as a shortage of Saudi health professionals, the health ministry's multiple roles, limited financial resources, changing patterns of disease, high demand resulting from free services, an absence of a national crisis management policy, poor accessibility to some health care facilities, lack of a national health information system, and the underutilization of the potential of electronic health strategies. These challenges are exacerbated by high costs of health care services, inequitable access, concerns about the quality and safety of care, a growing burden of chronic diseases, a less than effective electronic health system (eHealth), poor cooperation and coordination between other sectors of care, and a highly-centralized structure.

The government has developed and implemented a number of initiatives which include the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Health 2010-2020 to effectively tackle these challenges. These initiatives resulted in the replacement of seven ministers of health in almost two years - an indication of the serious administrative and practical difficulties in tackling these challenges in the health care system in the Kingdom.

## 7. Sports

The traditional sport of Saudi Arabia is camel racing because of the irreplaceable status it has amongst its people. In recent times, Soccer is the most popular sport among the youth while other sports such as cricket and basketball are also widely followed.<sup>31</sup>

## Government and Politics

### 1. Basic Law of Saudi Arabia and Absolute Monarchism

The Basic Law of Saudi Arabia - a constitution-like charter divided into 9 chapters and consisting of 83 articles - was adopted by royal decree in 1992.<sup>32</sup> The Basic Law is in accordance with the Wahhabi understanding of Sharia where the king must comply with the Islamic law while the Quran and the Sunnah are the Kingdom's constitution. No political parties or national elections are permitted in the Kingdom.

In the absence of political parties and national elections, politics in the Kingdom is carried out at two fronts: within the royal family of the House of Saud and between the royal family and the rest of Saudi society. Political participation first goes through the royal family with consultations from tribal sheikhs, ulema, and financially-affluent families.

The King combines all three functions: judicial, executive and legislative, and, as Prime Minister, he presides over the Council of Ministers, which comprises the first and second deputy prime ministers and other ministers. The Council of Ministers is in charge of administrative and executive matters regarding education, public health, economy, defense, domestic, and foreign policy. The King appoints the council's members and it exercises its jurisdiction through various separate agencies. The Basic Law called for the establishment of a quasi-legislative body occupied by technical experts, the Consultative Council, to draft legislation for approval from the King. Despite these formal institutional apparatuses, policy decisions are made through a consensus of opinion among the Saudi family elites.

### 2. Sharia Law

Saudi Arabia is divided into 13 administrative regions which are further divided into various districts.<sup>33</sup> These regions are governed by the House of Saud's appointed governors who reside over one or more municipal councils. Half the members of said council are elected while the rest are appointed by the governor. Together, the governor and the councils handle the functions of agriculture, health, finance, and education.

The Kingdom is governed under the principle of Sharī'ah law - Islamic law derived from the Quran and the Sunnah - where judgment is made under the Ḥanbali tradition of Islam and is the primary source of legislation. The promulgation of legislation and its implementation are often subject to tribal politics, court intrigue and political expediency. There are more than 300 Sharī'ah courts across the country.<sup>34</sup> The 21<sup>st</sup> century brought in new cases such as industrial accidents, intellectual property, corporate law, money laundering, and traffic violations which were not encompassed by traditional law. As such, instances such as these are handled according to royal decrees. In regard to energy and oil, the extensive proprietary rights of the Saudi state (and by extension the Saudi royal family) are a part of Saudi law. Avenues of appeal are established, but the monarch is the final court and the only dispenser of pardon.



## Economy

Saudi Arabia's economy has developed in parallel with the establishment, expansion, and consolidation of the Saudi state since its founding. The state was built and financed by oil revenues distributed through the institution of centralized bureaucracy. The changes have been so expansive and pervasive that very few vestiges of old Arabian life and economy survive unchanged. Before the discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula in the 1930s, economic activity was spread out across various regions. The Hejaz depended on subsistence agriculture, long-distance trade and pilgrimage services. In the eastern region, the hostile environment determined geographical separation of peoples because permanent habitation depended on the availability of water. This hampered travel and dissuaded any outsiders from entering the Saudi market. The establishment of the Kingdom and the discovery of oil in the Eastern Province are six years apart. The world was rebuilding after WWII and Saudi Arabia was a cheap and reliable source of oil needed for development. The Kingdom's location and its ginormous oil assets put it into the center of the West's strategic concerns. Eventually the steady stream of oil carriage became synonymous with global economic stability. The importance of oil to the West was repeatedly on display by numerous events such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Persian Gulf War. The Kingdom became a major oil-producing country that had significant excess capacity of crude oil production and thereby a strong influence on international oil supplies and prices. Oil towns started popping up in the Eastern Province while development work on oil fields allowed for better housing, more ports, concrete roads and water systems.<sup>35</sup> Black Gold helped to change this desert country into one of the top twenty economies in the world. Despite being one of the top 20 economies in the world, COVID-19 and lower oil production levels have weighed heavily on the economy. Medium-term recovery is dependent on global economic rebound while the prospects for successful diversification of the economic sector will be negated by significant capital spending cutbacks. The current GDP is expected to contract by 5.4% as oil production levels are kept around OPEC+ commitment.<sup>36</sup>

### 1. Agriculture

Historically, people in the Arabian Peninsula survived on subsistence farming and small-scale vegetable production. Oases were the main life line for the Arabic people in the interior while those in the south-western coastal strip benefitted from trade and fishing as well. Since the 1970s, the Kingdom's authorities have prioritized agricultural development whereby large areas of desert have been turned into agricultural fields. The Ministry of Agriculture is the primary agency responsible for implementing agricultural policy. The Saudi Arabian Agricultural Bank (SAAB) has been instrumental in handing out interest-free loans and subsidies. The Kingdom's cultivable area is estimated around 52.7 million ha, approximately 25% of the total area.<sup>37</sup> In over three decades, the Kingdom has achieved self-sufficiency in dairy products, certain flowers, poultry, eggs, fish, and wheat. Dates, once a staple of the Arabian diet, are now mainly grown for global humanitarian aid. In 2017, agriculture accounted for only 2.36% of the Kingdom's GDP.<sup>38</sup> Under their development plans, the government assists farmers in implementing capital intensive projects. The kingdom has the largest storage systems for wheat and flour with a storage capacity of more than 3.3 million metric ton.<sup>39</sup> Water is still an issue in the Kingdom and water conservation is driving the need for development programs. The Saudi government is setting

up initiatives to encourage alternative sustainable agricultural activities, such as greenhouse farming and implementing advance drip irrigation practices.<sup>40</sup>

## 2. Oil Industry

Saudi Arabia has the second most valuable natural resources in the world that collectively amount to USD 34.4 trillion, allowing it to become the largest exporter of petroleum in the world.<sup>41</sup> The Kingdom is an energy superpower with the second-largest proven petroleum reserves - discovered as of yet. Proven reserves are estimated to be 260 billion barrels, nearly one-quarter of world oil reserves.<sup>42</sup> The profits from petroleum extraction are the main drivers of Saudi budget and most of its GDP.

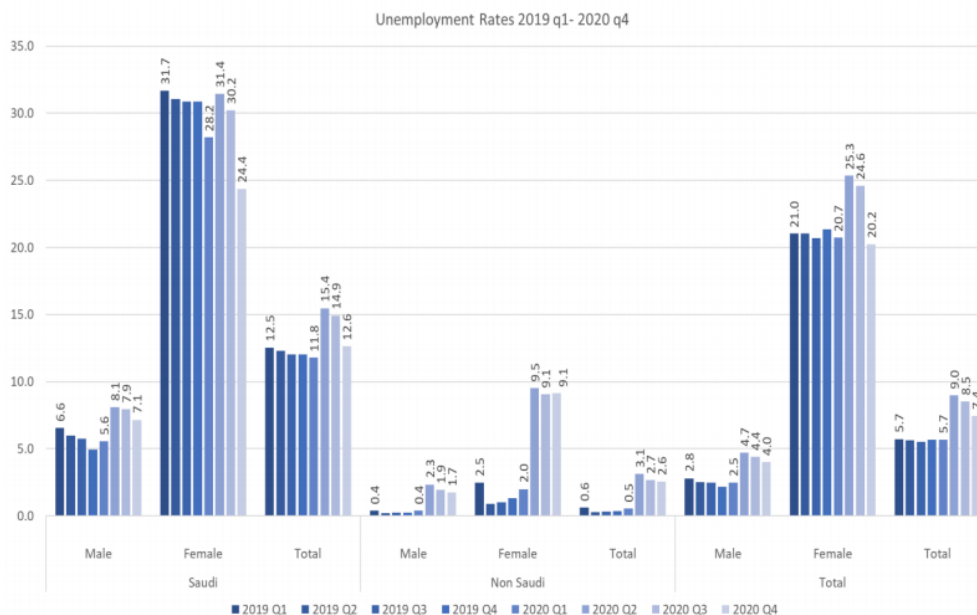
It possesses about 16% of the world's proven petroleum reserves, ranks as the largest exporter of petroleum, and plays a leading role in OPEC.<sup>43</sup> The petroleum sector accounts for roughly 87% of budget revenues, 42% of GDP, and 90% of export earnings.<sup>44</sup>

The evolution of the oil sector has been essential to the Kingdom's development path and is a key determinant of Saudi Foreign Policy. It is not a stable source of income given that prices fluctuate widely. It also does not serve the most when it comes to job creation for the local workforce as the energy industry is more capital-intensive than labor-intensive.

Within the OPEC, Saudi Arabia is the dominant producer while the others act as a competitive fringe. As the dominant producer, Saudi Arabia sets its outputs in anticipation of how the fringe states would react and maximize their profits according to demand. Saudi Arabia's oil sector has benefitted from a lack of internal political conflicts and international sanctions as compared to the OPEC's other members including Venezuela, Libya, Iraq and Iran. This allowed for heavy investment in its petroleum energy sector as well as integrating its upstream sector with refining and downstream assets, both in overseas and the Kingdom.

## 3. Human Resource Management

Most of the workforce in Saudi Arabia comprises international expats, but the level of unemployment among Saudi Arabians among women and youth is relatively high overall. Majority Saudi nationals gravitate towards public-sector employment as it is a source of greater job security, comprehensive benefits, and higher wages. The unemployment rate of the total population (Saudis and non-Saudis 15 years and above) decreased to 7.4% by late 2020 despite the economic burden of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>45</sup> Labor force participation rate of the total population (Saudis and non-Saudis 15 years and above) increased to 61.0% in 2020 mostly attributed to expat workers contribution.<sup>46</sup> Limited mobility is a major hurdle for unemployed nationals mostly attributed to a less-developed public transportation system.



Source: Estimated data from LFS - General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT),

[https://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/LM\\_Q4%202020%20%28Press%20release\\_EN%29\\_3.pdf](https://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/LM_Q4%202020%20%28Press%20release_EN%29_3.pdf)

## Defence & Security

The Saudi Arabian Armed Forces (SAAF) is the primary military force in the Kingdom and comprises the Royal Saudi Air Defense, the Royal Saudi Air Force, the Royal Saudi Navy, the Saudi Arabian Land Forces and the Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force. The King is the Commander-in-Chief, and formulates military policy in conjunction with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense.

The Kingdom also had additional military forces for internal security, including the Saudi Arabian Border Guards, the Saudi Royal Guard Regiment, and the Saudi Arabian National Guard. The country's primary intelligence service is the General Intelligence Presidency. The Presidency of State Security is a new security body that is an amalgam of domestic intelligence and counterterrorism services. Their main body is the Mabathith (General Investigation Directorate), the secret police agency responsible for domestic counter-intelligence and security. The Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) comprises Bedouin tribal elements loyal to the royal family and is responsible for guarding them against military coups and protecting the two holy cities.<sup>47</sup>

The Saudi military forces have about 225,000 active troops with 14,000 Naval Forces personnel, 75,000 Land Forces, 36,000 Air Force/Air Defense/Strategic Missile Forces and approximately 100,000 SANG personnel.<sup>48</sup> Saudi Arabia has the ninth largest defense budget in the world where military expenditures constitute 7% of the GDP.<sup>49</sup> The Kingdom is the world's largest arms importer with a mix of modern military systems from the U.S, France, and the U.K. The country does not enforce conscription, and women are allowed to join the military and serve as soldiers up to the rank of non-commissioned officers.

## Pakistan- Saudi Arabia Relations

### 1. Diplomatic Relations and Expat-Pakistani Labour

Pakistan has deep-rooted, brotherly, and religious ties with Saudi Arabia since 1947. The relationship is anchored in centuries- old commercial, cultural, and religious links between the two peoples. Islam and its two major tenants, the Holy Quran and Sunnah, play a significant role in the constitutional framework and jurisprudence of both countries. A Treaty of Friendship was signed as early as 1951 laying the basis for future cooperation.<sup>50</sup> Bilateral relations were buttressed over the next decades by a tradition of strong diplomatic, financial, and strategic assistance extended to each other when required. A unique synergy for development arose as numerous Pakistanis went to Saudi Arabia for employment. Saudi Arabia is home to a large number of expatriates including professional engineers, doctors, academics, bankers, businessmen, and trained construction workers and unskilled laborers. These expats play a premier role in developing infrastructure in the Kingdom. The large pool of workers is a great asset for the country.

A number of monuments bear testimony to the friendly history of both nations, such as the Faisal Mosque, named after King Faisal, the International Islamic University in Islamabad, established with a grant of US\$10 million from Saudi Arabia, and the city Faisalabad, renamed after King Faisal.

### 2. Trade and the Possible Pakistan–GCC Free Trade Agreement

Both countries have a long history of trade and collaboration dating back to the inception of Pakistan. They have exchanged numerous high-level delegations to expand bilateral trade and boost up economic activity. Though there is enthusiasm on both sides to improve the volume of trade, there hasn't been major improvements. At present, the trade volume between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia stands at US\$ 3.6 billion with imports from Saudi Arabia at US\$ 0.70 billion and exports to Saudi Arabia at US\$ 0.43 billion.<sup>51</sup> The share of Saudi Arabia in Pakistan's export is 2% while Pakistan's share in Saudi Arabia less than 1%.<sup>52</sup> This miniscule value is attributed mainly to unawareness, and a non-aggressive marketing campaign on the part of Pakistani exporters.<sup>53</sup>

Pakistan's major items of exports to Saudi Arabia are edible fruits, vegetables, fish products, tea, coffee, vinegar, spirits, beverages, textiles, meat and edible meat offal and cereals while the imports include fertilizers, organic chemicals, plastic goods, and petroleum products. Between the two nations, there is no bilateral or multilateral preferential or concessional trade agreement. The trade between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is conducted on the basis of MFN tariff rate applied to all members of WTO.

Impediments to trade include the Saudi standards related to packaging, health, and others as per the Saudi Arabian Standards Organization (SASO), gaining visas and opening of letter of credit at Saudi Banks. Around 1.9 million Pakistanis reside in Saudi Arabia who are contributing significantly to Saudi Arabia's economy and is the largest source of remittances for Pakistan.<sup>54</sup>

Despite recent strains on their relationship owing to the Kingdom and the Saudi-led OIC's somewhat restrained response to the Kashmir issue after the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A. Pakistan had to repay a Saudi loan of \$1bn, purportedly in response to Pakistan insisting that it be allowed to lead the OIC's support for Kashmir. The loan was part of a \$ 6.2Bn package announced by Saudi Arabia in November 2018, which included a total of \$3 billion in loans and an oil credit facility amounting to \$ 3.2Bn. However, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent visit to Saudi Arabia will help mend fences between the two nations, allay concerns, and, resultantly, improve relations. The Kingdom has reportedly opted not to withdraw the final tranche in its 2018 loan.<sup>55</sup>

During PM Khan's recent visit to the Kingdom, Islamabad and Riyadh reaffirmed the historical and fraternal nature of their ties, reviewed all facets of bilateral cooperation, and discussed regional and international issues of mutual interest. They two governments have reaffirmed their commitment to establishing the Saudi-Pakistan Supreme Coordination Council to facilitate bilateral cooperation.<sup>56</sup>

The GCC Ministerial Council agreed to consider the possibility of concluding a Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the GCC States and Pakistan in 2004. Two rounds of negotiations have been held so far to establish a free trade area. Negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) for trade liberalization between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will help open the door for Pak-GCC cooperation on account of Saudi Arabia being an integral part of the Gulf grouping.

Pakistan, under PM Khan, has tried to shift the conversation towards trade and investment. Two months after coming into power, he addressed the Future Investment Initiative Conference (FIIC) in Riyadh, giving an account of his government's bid to create an enabling environment for foreign investments, including those from Saudi Arabia.<sup>57</sup> In an historic visit to Pakistan in 2019, MBS announced investments to the tune of US\$20bn while saying that ties between the two countries will be based on investments that will be mutually-beneficial for both.<sup>58</sup> It is noteworthy that, in the joint statement released after PM Khan's recent visit to the Kingdom, both sides committed to exploring avenues for investments and trade, especially because Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aligns with Pakistan's avowed focus on tapping its geo-economics potential.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, a push for geo-economics would be greatly aided by robust economic relations between Islamabad and Riyadh, especially if the latter provides the former oil on deferred payment given that it will lower the immediate burden on Pakistan while giving breathing space to its under-recovery economy.

### **3. Training, Security, and the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)**

Military cooperation lies at the heart of historical and fraternal ties between the Kingdom and Pakistan. Defense cooperation was formalized by a 1967 accord and the dispatch of Pakistani military and air force trainers to Saudi Arabia. Pakistani fighter pilots protected the Kingdom from Yemeni incursions in 1969 while Pakistani engineers reportedly built Saudi fortifications along its border with Yemen.<sup>60</sup> Pakistani soldiers have been stationed in Saudi Arabia since the 1970s and the Pakistani military has given various kinds of training to Saudi soldiers and pilots.<sup>61</sup>

The security understanding between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was enhanced by the 1982 Protocol Agreement regarding the “Deputation of Pakistani Armed Personnel and Military Training” in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. This resulted in the deployment of nearly 15,000 Pakistani troops to the kingdom who remained there for the duration of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>62</sup> These deputation resulted in the Pakistani military apparatus fostering a unique military-to-military relation that has played a role in inter-governmental diplomacy. This interplay between the Saudi royalty and the civil-military elites in Pakistan has allowed for multi-faceted bilateral relationship. Long abated diplomatic fissures began to rise after the Pakistan’s parliament decided against the deployment of Pakistani forces to take part in the Saudi-led coalition’s military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen as part of Operation Decisive Storm in 2015. Anything other than a neutral stance would have offset Pakistan’s neutral stance on the Yemen conflict, jeopardizing Pakistan’s efforts to balance relations with the Kingdom and Iran.

Till 2016, Saudi Arabia was the largest importer of Pakistani arms including conventional weaponry and machinery.<sup>63</sup> Pakistan is one of 41 members at the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMAFT) which was launched by the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, in 2017. The coalition (IMAFT) was envisaged to serve as a platform for security cooperation, including provision of training, equipment and troops, and involvement of religious scholars for dealing with extremism. Former Pakistan army chief retired Gen Raheel Sharif, commands the IMAFT

More than 20 major public and over 100 private sector firms are engaged in manufacturing defense-related products in Pakistan.<sup>64</sup> While major defense products are manufactured by the armed forces-run Pakistan Ordnance Factories, Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, Heavy Industries Taxila, National Radio Telecommunication Corporation and Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works, the private sector firms produce small supportive equipment only

Pakistan Navy (PN) and Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF) have conducted numerous joint naval exercises including the Naseem Al Bahar XI in 2018, an advanced level maritime exercise involving almost all facets of naval forces.<sup>65</sup> The level of participation from both sides signifies the trust and mutual confidence which prevails between the two brotherly countries. The joint PN - RSNF Naval Exercise Naseem Al Bahr was aimed at enhancing interoperability and sharpening the tactical proficiency in Counter Piracy, Anti Air & Surface Warfare and Mine Countermeasure Warfare. Pakistani Army and the Saudi Royal Land Forces conducted joint-exercises in the northwestern region of the Kingdom namely Al-Saman 6.<sup>66</sup> In the recently-concluded, Pakistan-hosted 45-nation naval exercise, Aman-21, Saudi Arabia was an observer given the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, Saudi Arabia dubbed the exercise critical to maintaining regional peace and stability, highlighting the strength of the two countries’ naval cooperation.<sup>67</sup>

#### **4. Energy Relations and Prospects of a Climate Deal**

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had previously signed many deals for energy collaboration. In the power generation sector, Saudi Arabia was supporting Pakistan in the installation of a \$10 billion mega oil refinery in Gwadar and 500 megawatt renewable energy projects worth \$4.5 billion in Baluchistan.<sup>68</sup> Saudi Arabia’s Aramco is involved in downstream exploration activities and Pakistan is open to more

Saudi investment whether it is upstream, middle stream or downstream. Last year's strained Pak-Saudi bilateral relations have thawed out in the wake of Pakistan Prime Minister's three day visit to Saudi Arabia where the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia decided to invest another \$500 million to improve the energy sector in Pakistan.<sup>69</sup> However, recently, Saudi Arabia decided to shift the proposed \$10 billion oil refinery from Gwadar - the prized jewel of the CPEC initiative - to Karachi.<sup>70</sup> The port city may no longer figure into Saudi economic-strategic priorities as a mega-investment hub.

Saudi Arabia is also interested in green initiatives and has expressed interest in learning from Pakistan's green initiatives and replicating them in its own state.<sup>71</sup> Pakistan in return offered support to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's massive tree-planting project to promote afforestation.<sup>72</sup> Both states maintain close cooperation on climate-change issues at multilateral forums with Pakistan expressing keen interest in signing a climate to create "a meaningful and structured bilateral engagement [that] can help advance our shared vision".<sup>73</sup>

## 5. Aid-Exchange

Saudi Arabia has granted Pakistan with aid many times during its times of crises whether financially or in the form of oil, education, and mosque construction. History is a witness to Saudi Arabia's economic and social assistance during the 1965 and 1971 war, the 1998 nuclear tests, the 2005 earthquake, and the floods of 2010 and 2011.<sup>74</sup>

## Geopolitical Implications of Cooperation and Impending Geostrategic Contours

### 1. Pakistan at the Crossroads between New Power Centers and Old Status Quos (Turkey, Gulf States, Iran)

Pakistan had found it easier to maintain strategic balance between power blocs and alliances in the Cold War era, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Pakistan's long-held policy of nonpartisanship has become much more difficult to follow. The Muslim world is jarringly multipolar now, with economic and military powers in all corners. For 74 years since its inception and in spite of its security threats right across the border, Pakistan managed to uphold neutrality in desperately fraught times.

But the long-held status quo maintained by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states as the leaders of the Muslim world is now in question with Turkey, Iran, and Malaysia gaining heft. Though they share a unified outlook regarding the Muslim Ummah, deep rooted enmity, tension, and mistrust mar the prospect of cooperation. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states perceive a mounting threat from Iran, a country they claim launches and support proxy wars in Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and the Caucasus. The Syrian Civil War and Saudi Arabia's staunch opposition to the Bashar al-Assad regime has to be seen in the wider context of the Saudi-Iran rivalry.

Pakistan's relations with the Gulf countries are heavily determined by its ties with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, with the latter holding more sway. Historically, there have been many diplomatic highs. However, it could be argued that, Riyadh pressuring Pakistan to not attend the 2019 Kuala Lumpur Summit, coupled with a somewhat subdued response by the OIC to India's illegal actions in Kashmir, has brought to light the challenges and limits in these all-important relations. This dangling financial sword of Damocles over Islamabad makes it harder for it to play the down the middle in the Middle East. However, despite misgivings, the OIC has, until very recently, reaffirmed its support for Kashmir, calling out India for its brazen acts in the occupied territory.<sup>75</sup>

Pakistan has had to rely on Saudi investment to maintain its security and economic apparatus, something that has affected the balance of leverages between the two countries. This, among other factors, meant that Pakistan and Iran could not strengthen their ties. That said, Pakistan has lately taken steps to turn a page in its ties with Iran while also ensuring that it is not seen as the one involving itself in a zero-sum game in the Middle East

Pakistan only recently has up scaled its relationship with Turkey, by increasing interactions at the highest levels with a view to expanding the gambit of cooperation. Saudi Arabia has great interest in South Asia, including both India and Pakistan. Heavy Saudi investments in India, which are expected to increase, include infrastructure and oil projects as well as cooperation in counterterrorism efforts.<sup>76</sup> India's burgeoning relationship with Saudi Arabia may not go down well with Pakistan given that the latter's stakes in the former's success might convince it to turn a blind eye if things go south between the South Asian neighbors. That could also engender caution on part of the Kingdom when it comes to taking a definitive stand on any Indo-Pak matter, including Kashmir. Pakistan, with a view to diversifying its partners and establishing vibrant economic relations with countries across the political divides, has decided to take its ties with Turkey to the next level.

If GCC countries see a potential Malaysia-Turkey-Iran alliance as a strategic threat, Pakistan would have to carefully adhere to its foreign policy principle of non-partisanship and neutrality in the Muslim world lest Pakistan add more to its list of economic, sectarian, extremist, and security problems. PM Khan has tried to retune relations with the Kingdom, by making a highly- publicized visit in May 2021. But ongoing geostrategic realignments in the wake of President Biden's inauguration only allow Pakistan to remain pragmatic with its choices going forward.

Recent developments indicate that a greater reconciliation maybe at play among the countries in the Muslim world. PM Imran Khan's successful visit to the Kingdom helped articulate the enduring nature of Pak-Saudi relations, and interestingly, was immediately followed by the Turkish Foreign Minister's visit to Riyadh. Here, it is important to mention that, in 2019, PM Khan led a peace mission to facilitate dialogue between Riyadh and Tehran, for he feared that a war between the two would be disastrous for the region and beyond. Recently, it was revealed that Saudi-Iran talks are being held in a "conducive environment".<sup>77</sup>With Riyadh open to talking to Tehran, chances of dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Turkey cannot be dismissed outright. There are a number of reasons that make a dialogue process feasible. One, both Riyadh and Ankara do not enjoy the best of relations with Washington. While Riyadh-Washington relations have slightly plummeted ever since the coming into power of U.S. President Joe Biden, those between Ankara and Washington have nosedived over the years, especially due to the



war in Syria and the recent acknowledgement of the contested Armenian genocide by the U.S. With all this in mind, Saudi Arabia and Turkey could mull over reviewing their ties going forward. Pakistan has much to gain from good Saudi-Turk relations, for that will stave-off pressure on Pakistan to make hard choices. A reconciliation will reduce Pakistan's navigation woes while increasing space for it to advance its economic, military, and socio-cultural linkages with both capitals. However, all this would require deft, consistent diplomacy, not to mention continued political will from all stakeholders.

## 2. Saudi Arabia and the GCC's Subdued Support for Kashmir Post August 2019

Saudi Arabia has supported Pakistan's struggle for the Kashmir issue in the past but the Saudi-led bloc's restrained approach on the Kashmir issue swelled up into a major problem. Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, demanded that the Saudi officials call a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to discuss the Kashmir issue and place more pressure on India. If Saudi Arabia was unwilling to do so, the Pakistan would look elsewhere for regional support.<sup>78</sup> Many analysts construed it as Pakistan swaying away from the Gulf to maybe leaning toward Malaysia and Turkey.<sup>79</sup> However, Pakistani dispelled such an impression, arguing that ties with the Kingdom are strong.

Saudi Arabia, reportedly demanded cash-strapped Pakistan to urgently repay a \$3 billion loan. This, coupled with Pakistan's previous refusal to send troops as part of the Saudi-led coalition to Yemen back in 2015, Pakistan's willingness to partake in the 2019 Kuala Lumpur Summit, and Pakistan's positive and strengthening relationship with Iran, is a set of minefields both countries have navigated in the recent past.

Saudi Arabia's ties with India could become an on and off irritant in Pak-Saudi relations. Indian expats contribute the largest number of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia with 2.8 million Non-Resident Indians (26.3% of the migrant population) while Pakistan has 2.6 million (24.2% of the migrant population).<sup>80</sup> India is emerging as a vital trade partner for Gulf countries. It is because of relations grounded in trade and economics that both Saudi Arabia and its ally, the UAE, have not been as vociferous in their criticisms of India. Weeks after India annexed the even-otherwise occupied Kashmir, the UAE presented Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with its highest civilian award. India's trade with Saudi Arabia bilateral trade was around USD \$27 billion, while Pakistan-Saudi trade is at \$3.6 billion.<sup>81</sup> Under its Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia selected eight countries for forging strategic partnership including India. Indeed, Saudi Arabia sees India as a viable economic partner. This, as aforementioned, could, by virtue of raising Saudi stakes in India, put Riyadh in a quandary in a future Indo-Pak crisis. Islamabad and Riyadh will have to deal with this phenomenon in a very pragmatic manner going forward.

To possibly deter Iran's influence in South Asia - a diplomatic measure difficult to do in the case of Pakistan, who shares a physical border with Iran - the Kingdom has increased diplomatic and economic outreach to New Delhi. Only until after U.S. pressure forced India to stop Iranian oil imports altogether, India was the second largest oil importer from Tehran - a role Riyadh and the GCC immediately stepped into.<sup>82</sup> The Modi government, in turn, has sought to strengthen links with the Gulf, exemplified by heavy Saudi investment in infrastructure and oil projects in India (Saudi Aramco announced a \$44 billion deal

to build a giant refinery complex in India with three Indian firms), as well as cooperation in counterterrorism efforts.<sup>83</sup> This points to how New Delhi is becoming a part of Riyadh's strategic priorities in the region

India is expected to be the largest energy growth market in the world by this decade, providing financially affluent countries the opportunity to invest. One might expect that after establishing a long-term hold in India's energy future, the Kingdom can firmly isolate Iran from major export partners, at least as far as South Asia is concerned. Saudi Arabia may be willing to carefully trade off the losses in its soft power objectives in the short-term because of its relatively- muted response on Kashmir over developing its bilateral relations with India in the long-term. Both the Kingdom and UAE may intend to compensate for their subdued role on the Kashmir issue by offering to mediate between the two South Asian nuclear-powered neighbors. The UAE was reportedly instrumental in the recent ceasefire while Saudi Arabia served as a mediator during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis. But the level of their impact and role is still unclear as credible mediation involves walking a tightrope, something which both might not be able to do, if the push comes to shove. Mediatory efforts do give mediators a degree of goodwill, however, for them to be meaningful, credibility, leverage, and neutrality are important.

In a bid to make relations with Riyadh more sturdy and immune to external shocks, Islamabad will have to continue trying to supplement the security side of the equation with trade, investments, and connectivity. The gigantic China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides Saudi Arabia an ideal opportunity, to not only harness and support its Vision 2030 but also augment its relations with China, a country that is developing strategic relations with Iran.<sup>84</sup>

### 3. Middle East Cold War (Iran–Saudi Arabia Proxy Conflicts)

The rivalry between Arab countries and Iran - a modern day extension of the historical tensions between Arabs and Persian. The conflict is most exemplified by the acrimony between Saudi Arabia and post-revolution Iran, with each seeing itself as the bastion of the Muslim world. On the map, the Middle East Cold War also includes the GCC countries and their allies, namely Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, and Egypt.

The decades-long proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran traces back to the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The Revolution was carried out in the name of establishing an Islamic republic instead of monarchies and secular governments - a matter of concern for the region's Sunni-run Arab monarchies that had sizeable Shia populations. Prior to the revolution, both countries were part of U.S. President Nixon's "Twin Pillars" Policy for the Middle East.<sup>85</sup> Both monarchies were allied with the U.S. as bulwarks against Soviet influence during the Cold War. Intra-Arab strife was eventually eclipsed by the new Saudi-Arab rivalry once Ayatollah Khomeini's new theocratic government came into power. The new Iranian administration was perceived as a challenge to the legitimacy of the Al Saud dynasty and its authority as leaders of the Muslim World.

In the decades since, proxy conflicts between the two states have underpinned their rivalry. The Republic of Yemen for nearly a decade has been engulfed in violent conflicts in which many foreign states and several militant groups are parties. The conflict is traced back to the failure of peaceful

political transition in the wake of an Arab Spring that forced then President Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand over power to Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi in 2011. The political vacuum complicated by jihadist insurrections, separatist movements and rebellion allowed for a multitude of proxy actors to erupt violent conflict amongst themselves.<sup>86</sup>

Central governance in Yemen has eroded into fragmented power centers across the country. The conflict begs attention from the international community, not only on humanitarian grounds but also because the conflict could extend into destabilizing international shipping lanes in the Bab al Mandab strait. In 2014, the northern Ansar Allah/Houthi movement gained much ground to take over the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. By 2015, they marched to Aden on the Arabian Sea while President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, appealing for international intervention. Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition of its Arab allies that aimed to dislodge Iran-backed Houthi rebels and restore President Hadi's centralized administration. Despite being characterized as a binary conflict, there are a multitude of actors vying for power in the war-torn country. U.N efforts to broker a nation-wide ceasefire have not been successful owing mostly to Saudi and President Hadi's unwillingness to recognize Houthi authority in northern Yemen. The Trump Administration's decision to designate the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) only served to negate the U.N's effort for a ceasefire and resolution to the violence. Then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated that the Houthis were closely linked to Iran and that the designations were intended to uphold accountability for terrorism. An air or missile war has been conducted since then between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led coalition on behalf of the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG). Alleged Iranian knowledge transfer and military aid to the Houthis is the main cause of strife for Saudi Arabia which fears the proxy conflict pervading into their territory.<sup>87</sup>

The war in Yemen has resulted in the worst man-made humanitarian disaster in recent times with over 3.65 million Yemeni displaced.<sup>88</sup> Back in 2015, Saudi Arabia led airstrikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen who are backed by Iran. In an effort to emphasize the U.S peacemaking and humanitarian role, President Biden has made a number of changes to Washington's Yemen policy. President Biden announced in the initial months of his administration that the U.S intends to resolve the conflict in Yemen by: ending support for offensive operations including relevant arms sales, support Saudi Arabia in defending its territorial borders and appointing a special envoy to Yemen. His administration also lifted the Trump administration's terrorism designations of the Houthis.<sup>89</sup>

President Biden's declaration of ending armed offensive support for the Saudi-led coalition may be incentive enough to end the war but the road to recovery for the Yemeni people will be arduous. It is yet unclear what his defensive support to Saudi Arabia would entail and how it would impact Saudi-Iran relations. To appease the U.S, Saudi Arabia may adopt a moderate approach when it comes to Yemen in exchange for U.S defensive cooperation. But this may not be enough to change the course of Saudi-Iran proxy wars (between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia's Yemeni proxies) until their peace talks end successfully.

The following presents a chronology of the Middle Eastern version of the Cold War after the 1979 Revolution.

**1980-1988:**

Under apprehensions and pretense of a pervasive revolutionary wave that would threaten the region, Iraq invaded Iran in a war that would last eight years. Saudi Arabia remained publicly neutral, but Tehran fumed over Riyadh's reportedly support for Iraq during the war.<sup>90</sup>

**1981:**

Six Gulf States - Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia - group together and form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a security response to Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>91</sup>

**1987:**

In July 1987, 402 pilgrims - 275 of whom were Iranian - died during clashes in the holy city of Mecca. The reaction in Tehran was swift with protestors occupying the Saudi and Kuwait embassies. The relations reached a breaking point next year when King Fahd severed diplomatic relations in April 1988.<sup>92</sup>

**1991:**

Both states restore diplomatic ties.<sup>93</sup>

**1997:**

In a much-touted confidence-building measure, Crown Prince Abdullah visited Iran for the Organization of Islamic Conference summit in December, the highest-ranking Saudi official to do so since the Iranian Revolution.<sup>94</sup>

**1999:**

In a move to reduce tensions between the two states, the Iranian President Mohammad Khatami visited Saudi Arabia. He was the first leader to visit Saudi Arabia since the 1979 Revolution.<sup>95</sup>

**2003:**

Iran's nuclear energy program deepened Saudi fears about regional instability.<sup>96</sup>

**2005:**

After the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran opts for a more hardline stand on foreign policy and proxy conflicts ensue.

**2011:**

Violence and protests in Bahrain further aggravated tensions, when Shiites groups protested against the Saudi royal family. Saudi Arabia sent in troops to quell the protests but blamed Iran for inciting the unrest.<sup>97</sup>

U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks showed Saudi officials, including the King, pushing the U.S. to take a tough stance against Iran over its nuclear aspirations.<sup>98</sup>

The U.S accused Iran of plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S while Riyadh argued that the evidence of the said plot was overwhelming.<sup>99</sup>

### 2012:

A series of protests against anti-Shiite discrimination erupt in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province which Riyadh blames on Tehran.<sup>100</sup>

As the civil war erupted in Syria, Saudi Arabia accused Iran of being an "occupying power" while Iran accused the Kingdom of backing "terrorism".<sup>101</sup>

In light of the global sanctions stipulated against Iran, Saudi Arabia offered to offset the loss of Iranian oil sales to energy-deficient markets.

### 2015:

Hundreds of Iranians pilgrims were killed in a stampede during the annual hajj pilgrimage. Iran accused Saudi Arabia of mismanagement, and Saudi officials accused Iran of playing politics in the aftermath of the tragedy.<sup>102</sup>

Riyadh begins a bombing campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, a Zaydi Shiite movement that is purportedly supported by Iran.

A Yemeni hacking group, Yemen Cyber Army, allegedly hacked into the Saudi Foreign, Interior and Defense Ministries' website to release top secret information on the Saudi agenda in Iran which was later released on WikiLeaks. The leaks included Saudi propaganda to create political unrest with the help of social media, newspapers and opposition forces.<sup>103</sup>

### 2016:

After the Kingdom executed Nimr al Nimr - a Shiite cleric involved in the 2011 protests - in January 2016, protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran and ransacked it. Saudi Arabia resultantly ended all diplomatic ties with Iran.<sup>104</sup>

Both states fail to reach a deal over logistics and security regarding the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca inciting public outcry. Iranian pilgrims are allowed to perform Hajj the next year.<sup>105</sup>

### 2017:

President Trump visited Riyadh, where he signed a \$110 billion arms deal. In a joint statement, the U.S and Saudi Arabia "agreed on the need to contain Iran's malign interference in the internal affairs of other states, instigation of sectarian strife, support of terrorism and armed proxies, and efforts to destabilize the countries in the region."<sup>106</sup>

The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis begins. Egypt, Bahrain, UAE, and Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed trade and travel bans for its alleged support for terrorism. Among the Arab group's thirteen demands were shutting down diplomatic posts in Iran, expelling members of the IRGC and only conducting trade and commerce with Iran that complied with U.S. sanctions.

Iranian President Rouhani accused Saudi Arabia of supporting terrorists in Yemen and Syria, saying "Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and their support of terrorists in Yemen and Syria are main hurdles to improve ties between Tehran and Riyadh. Saudi Arabia should stop backing terrorists".<sup>107</sup>

Missiles fired at the Saudi capital by the Houthis led to Saudi Arabia charging Iran with an act of war. Iran denied any links to the attacks.<sup>108</sup>

#### **2018:**

Saudi Arabia supported a UN draft resolution by France, Britain, and the U.S that would condemn Iran for failing to stop Yemen's Houthi rebels from obtaining ballistic missiles.<sup>109</sup>

In an interview, Muhammad Bin Salman made it clear that Saudi Arabia would develop nuclear weapons if Iran does so. In a separate statement, he called for more economic and political pressure on Iran by the world powers to avoid direct military confrontations.<sup>110</sup>

Saudi Arabia supported President Trump's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA citing the move as a way to confront Iranian aggression in the region.

#### **2019:**

Drones attack on oil facilities of the state-controlled Saudi Aramco in eastern Saudi Arabia halts half the country's oil output and causes an unprecedented jump in crude prices. President Trump, upon Saudi Arabia's request deploys U.S troops to support the Kingdom's defence. Responsibility for the attack is claimed by the Houthi rebels, but Saudi Arabia and the U.S. blame Iran.<sup>111</sup>

#### **2021**

Iran-Saudi talks begin under a "conducive atmosphere" signaling a possible thawing of the rivalry if the talks in Vienna succeed.<sup>112</sup>

### **4. Implications of U.S. – Saudi Relations**

The new Biden administration - in a complete reversal of former president Donald Trump's policy - has withdrawn from extended diplomatic and military engagement with the Kingdom with President Biden announcing the end of US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen and a halt to arms sales.<sup>113</sup> As Riyadh recoils from the heat of disengagement, it might look far eastward to continue its strategic assignment in the region. A U.S shift in policy provides Pakistan and Saudi Arabia incentive and space to solidify their relations. Riyadh had already withdrawn \$2 billion out of a \$3 billion loan that it had extended to help Islamabad avoid a balance of payment crisis in 2018.<sup>114</sup> In a surprising move, suggesting a much sought after thaw in Pak-Saudi relations, Riyadh decided not to withdraw its remaining \$1 billion loan which had recently matured.<sup>115</sup>

With the shift in the Biden administration's Middle East policy causing Saudi Arabia and its allies to rethink and reorient, a hostile Washington could push Riyadh into China's camp. For Riyadh, the path

to Beijing could be streamlined by a friendly Islamabad given that Beijing and Islamabad are tightening their embrace. It was China, it must be emphasized, that bailed out the South Asian nation last year after Riyadh purportedly claimed back its money ahead of schedule.<sup>116</sup>

The precedent and grounds for a greater Saudi-Sino engagement already exists with the construction of a China-backed facility for extracting uranium yellowcake from uranium ore in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi civil nuclear program has been moving ahead with Chinese help since 2018. If completed, it may serve to distance Riyadh from Washington and spew concerns from Tel Aviv. Also, China is currently the biggest buyer of Saudi oil - a partnership that Saudi Arabia may want to offset over Chinese purchase of Iranian oil at discounted rates.

Amid a worldwide pandemic and eroding U.S. backing, China may present the best course of action for the Kingdom to revitalize the goals of its Vision 2030. With Pakistan continuing to act as a mediator, directly and indirectly, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, China could become a strategic leader in the Middle East, making things difficult for the U.S. who is a country that wants to reassert itself in the global arena.

## 5. Mohammad Bin Salman and Vision 2030

Before his father became King, few may have known of him as the charismatic prince of an Arabian Desert Kingdom, but upon his father's coronation in 2015, Muhammad Bin Salman became the face of a new Saudi Arabia, with his initial wave of reforms winning many plaudits from Western leaders.

One of the many sons of then Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, he served numerous state bodies before his father became King. In January 2015, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz died and Prince Salman acceded the throne and appointed Muhammad Bin Salman as Minister of Defence. One of his first acts was to launch the Saudi-led coalition military campaign in Yemen. His role and influence grew further after his appointment in April 2015 as deputy Crown Prince, Second Deputy Prime Minister and President of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs.

His ambitions as a policymaker became clear once he unveiled the Vision 2030, to diversify Saudi Arabian economy and end its overreliance on oil exports. The plan envisages increasing non-oil revenue to 1trn riyals by 2030. The plan also includes far-reaching social reforms, to include changing the education curriculum, increasing female workforce participation and investing in the entertainment sector. His reforms pushed forward social changes including tourism, sports events, and western-type entertainment and tackling the conservative religious establishment.<sup>117</sup>

His ascent to power has been characterized by a crackdown and detainment of rival clerics and intellectuals in order to consolidate his power under the pretense that they were a "threat to the security of the Kingdom". Despite his ambitions to modernize the Kingdom, large scale arrests deterred foreign investment. Later, incidents like the kidnapping and forced resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the brutal killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul tarnished his reputation in the media.<sup>118</sup>

The relentless focus of the Trump Administration served Saudi interests well enough to shift public focus to U.S-Saudi Arabia shared hostility towards a more assertive Iran. Muhammad Bin Salman's most ambitious venture is the Vision 2030, a strategic framework to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil by diversifying its economy in the fields of education, tourism, infrastructure and health. Underlying goals also include promoting a secular image of the Kingdom abroad and reinforcing investment activities. A renewed and modern focus on the Islamic faith and its people will accompany the broad vision.

As a resource-rich and strategically-located country, Saudi Arabia's position in regional and global politics is critical, to say the least. This, coupled with Pakistan's strategic, cultural, and religious ties and affinities with Saudi Arabia, makes it essential for both countries to further bolster their relations. Taking advantage of the well-entrenched, deep-rooted ties, both countries can recalibrate and expand their relations in a bid to elicit strategic gains in a rapidly-changing world. With the growing preponderance of geo-economics, both countries can dovetail their development agendas, to make their ties stronger than ever, something that will add to the little tally of the factors of peace and stability in their respective regions and beyond.



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