Book Review-II


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Sitting on the largest oil reserve, and being the largest oil producer and economy in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia’s role in maintaining regional peace and stability becomes decisive. The global powers such as the US, European countries, China and India also look upon Riyadh to undertake regional responsibilities and work towards stabilizing the region. Over the period, Saudi Arabia has evolved and tested some of the tools and approaches to handle international and intra-regional problems. Partially, this is shaped by its own national objectives and partially by its determination and ambition to play a role in global and regional affairs. However, most of the region experts believe that the Middle East will remain under turmoil till at least three issues remain at the helm; first, the region continues to be the top supplier of modern fuel and keep influencing the hydrocarbons driven lifestyle in the world; second, Israel-Palestine issue remains unsolved; and third, continuation of the non-representative government in the region. The present book under review offers a comprehensive canvass of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy, devoted to resolve some old, deep-rooted intra-regional problems, which are habitual of revisiting and converting the Middle East region into a potential global flashpoint with wider implications. The author Rene Riger, Chairman of the Middle East and International Affairs Research Group (MEIA Research), provides an in-depth insight into Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy endeavours, which tries to resolve these issues through ‘mediation’ than opting military or any other coercive means as usually deployed by other powers in the world nowadays. In fact, very few books on Saudi Arabia have dealt with so cogently and honestly about Riyadh’s genuine initiatives and motives to resolve international and intra-regional problems. Many a times, Riyadh’s attempt is seen with suspicion. This attitude is particularly dominant in Western media and intellectuals. The author herself has candidly acknowledged this paradox. Without shredding, he writes, ‘Whenever Saudi Arabia becomes active in foreign policy, the natural reaction of Western media, societies and parts of their political elites seems to be that of skepticism and cynical rejection’. Any Saudi international action is seen as another piece of the puzzle of the Kingdom’s alleged perfidious plan to ‘impose its fundamentalist Wahabi ideology on societies beyond its borders’. He continues that “whenever Saudi Arabia endeavoured to mediate in international and intra-national conflicts, Western observers inevitably questioned the Kingdom’s motivation and speculated on its true objectives”. The author has discussed four unresolved intra-regional issues in the book, which has perennially kept the region under turmoil and how Saudi Arabia has approached to resolve these problems. These four issues are dealt under four separate chapters: Israel-Palestine conflict; Makkah Agreement (2007); Taif Agreement (1989) and Saudi-GCC transition plan for Yemen in 2011. The author has divided the book into seven thematic chapters, including introduction and conclusion. The introduction provides a brief summary of all the chapters, which helps the reader to catch a glimpse of the book. Chapter II is exclusively devoted to explain the salient features of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy and its
approaches to handle and materialize policy objectives. The author has broken several myths prevalent against the ‘functioning’ and the ‘objectives’ of Saudi foreign policy, both at global and regional levels. Generally, people believe that Saudi foreign policy ignores or at least gives less attention to global and regional settings. This is inspired to achieve the objectives of regime survival and leadership claim in the Muslim world. This policy approach is determined and shaped by two elements, first, is ‘oil’, which the Al Saud family bargains for regime security; and second is the promotion of Wahabism, the hardline version of Islam, through which Saudi Arabia seeks to leverage its position in the region and strengthen its leadership claim in the Muslim world. The book dispels both the notions (modus operandi and objectives) and explains that “Saudi government does not take its foreign policy decisions in a political vacuum but within the boundaries of the international system”, rather it has evolved and matured under global and regional frameworks. It can also be satisfactorily analyzed and understood under Regional Security Complexes (RSC), which is ‘characterized by the relative intensity of security interdependence among a group of [geographically close states], and security indifference between that set and surrounding [state] (p.20). The author has also explained that Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy could also be understood under IR framework and has deployed several theoretical perspectives such as realism (p.8) and the models proposed by experts such as Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, including the famous Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), to analyze it. (p.10) Coming to the objectives of Saudi foreign policy, the author has succinctly explained that the Kingdom has some definite objectives to obtain. Central among these objectives are: (i) the preservation of regime stability and domestic calm; (ii) the defense of Saudi territory against outside aggression; (iii) the protection of Saudi sphere of influence on the Arabian Peninsula; and (iv) the preservation of the role as the leader of Muslim world (p.40). Based on the primary objectives, the Kingdom has also evolved some secondary objectives, which are derived from the core interests: (v) economic prosperity guaranteed through stability of both global oil market and oil export routes in the Kingdom’s sub-regional and regional 2 environment; (vi) the advocacy for the Arab and Muslim solidarity; (vii) the maintenance of close alliance with the US; (viii) and the containment and rollback of revolutionary Iran’s influence into the Gulf sub-region and in the Middle East at large. To materialize these objectives, especially amid perennially festering intra-regional problems, which is habitual of revisiting and disturbing the regional peace and stability, Saudi Arabia has evolved some cautious foreign policy tools and approaches. Given its strength and limitation, Saudi Arabia has evolved ‘mediation’ and ‘consensus’ as tools to resolve these intra-regional problems. Besides, Riyadh is also aware of the significance of external powers, especially the US and the Europe countries in maintaining the regional balance of power, particularly against Iran and its allies, ensuring the security of the oil routes, rolling Iran back to its fold as well as keeping potential fissiparous elements at bay from its domestic affairs. It is true that externally, Riyadh depends upon the US security umbrella but at the same time it cannot afford Washington’s mandates into its domestic affairs. The Al Saud family owes its longevity and survival to several domestic factors, including favours and backings of Ulema, powerful tribal chieftains, big business houses and western educated middle class known as technocrats. Their opinions and consensus are vital for Al Saud to remain popular in the country. The author has also dispelled another notion related to Saudi administration. He underlines that in the West, Saudi Arabia is viewed as a sharia-
compliant ruled by the draconian laws of the authoritarian regime. Whereas the reality is somewhat different. The Kingdom is ‘running on a social contract; it has established majlis, where people can sit together to discuss several public issues’. The Saudi population has also ‘opportunity to interact with the leadership and express their desire and criticism alike’. (p.40). He further dwells that there are ‘several elements of an active discussion culture in the Kingdom, not only tolerated but to a certain extent appreciated and even promoted by the regime. The way regime can feel the pulse of the people and identify their major objectives and grievances. This is quite contrary to the image that Saudi Arabia does not tolerate criticism, which is followed by draconian penalties by the regime’. (p.40). By doing this, the Kingdom tries to achieve and enhance one of its foreign policy objectives, i.e. preservation of regime and domestic calm. The author has discussed material capability, which is another tool of Saudi Arabia to obtain its foreign policy objectives. Material capability, according to the author, is ‘a composition of military, economic, and financial capabilities’. Military capability puts vital leverage on other states to adjust their behaviour, while ‘economic and financial capabilities influence the behaviour of other state and non-state actors by creating positive and negative incentives’. (p.27). Over the past decades, Saudi Arabia’s military capability due to huge defence spending, has significantly changed in both the terms, absolute and relative to other 3 regional countries (p.27), ...especially vis-à-vis Iran (p.33). But, it is still not enough to play a decisive role in influencing the behaviour of the regional states. For instance, Saudi Arabia’s artillery arsenal is not up to mark. While its air force has modern defence assets, at the same time it ‘faces considerable problems such as lack of overall readiness, poor aircrew and maintenance to aircraft rations’... (p.34). Therefore, the Kingdom is well aware of the limitations of its military capabilities especially in handling the intra-regional issues and ‘rolling Iran back’. (p.54). Nevertheless, it has used its economic and financial capabilities to achieve its objectives. The author also indicates that despite all these means, Saudi Arabia does not have any grand strategy to follow. Contrary to the objectives, its policies are largely reactive in nature and most of the time they are also characterized with adhocism. It has also not even cultivated any strategic alliances as such. Many times, its policies are also personalized, such as during King Fahd and King Faisal. Therefore, overall Saudi Arabia adopts an ‘omni-balancing strategy’, which is based on ‘mediation’ and usually avoids confrontation. Under these positive and negative perspectives, the author dwells upon the Third Chapter, which deals with Saudi response to the Arab-Israeli conflicts, which has ‘presented a particular challenge to Saudi Arabia’s external security and regime stability’. (p.71) The Kingdom faces a tough policy choice to balance its interest between its Arab-Islamic identity and resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Saudi leadership, in fact, is caught between ‘Arab-Islamic identity and its strategically vital, close relationship with the US, Israel’s staunchest ally and supporter’. Since the 1973 War, Riyadh has advocated for a peaceful solution to the problem and has faced tough situations to ally with its Arab counterparts such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan, who preferred military solution of the Arab-Israeli conflicts. At such occasions the Kingdom had to deal with the issue behind the ‘closed door’ and secured its interest. One such occasion cited by the author was the imposition of an oil embargo on the US in 1973. King Faisal instrumentalized the oil embargo but at the same time he did not want to weaken the US on Vietnam front by prolonging the embargo. So, he worked to end the embargo as soon as possible. However, the situation significantly eased Saudi Arabia, when Egypt signed Camp David treaty in 1979. Again
Riyadh opposed the Egyptian move and endorsed its expulsion from Arab League at Khartoum meeting, but Riyadh found a strong alibi to expedite its conflict resolution model, based on ‘peaceful resolution of the conflict’. Exploiting the opportunity, the Saudi King Fahd proposed the Fahd Peace Plan in 1981, which is known as the First Arab Peace Plan. Saudi Arabia did not leave this model and after 20 years once again it initiated a ‘holistic political solution’ of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This time in 2002 King Abdullah proposed the Arab Peace Initiative, which included a ten-point programme of resolving the conflicts. Though some analysts see the timing of the Arab Peace Initiative was to appease the US in order to dissolve its anger and win Israel as an ally to appease Washington against the 9/11 in which 15 Saudis were implicated. Riyadh avoided military solution of the conflict is evident from two more examples. One, whenever Israel took action against the Palestinian people on account of Hamas, Riyadh did not openly criticized Tel Aviv nor it stopped financial support to the Palestinian victims. Second, Saudi Arabia also backed the Fatah group instead of Hamas. Fatah avoided violence and preferred peaceful resolution of the conflict. The book also includes the US opinion about Saudi policy in resolving the conflict. in a letter the US side says, ‘growing fidaeens activities’ had push the Saudis to ‘adopt a caution policy of limited support for the Palestinian resistance movement’. (p.83). The author has also brought the dynamics of growing impact of communism over moderate Arab regimes such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and the two Yemens. This was also one of the reasons, which kept Saudi Arabia glued with the US. Although, King Faisal considered ‘Communism and Zionism are twin aspects of the same world-wide conspiracy’ and had warned the US that ‘Israel is playing a skillfully game of duplicity, pretending to be in a political alliance with the US, while being seen secretly in cahoots with the Soviet Union’, he tried to convince the US that its total support to Israel is pushing the Arab countries towards Soviet Union. The chapter has also analyzed various phases of the Palestinian movements, including the impact of Six Day War on the Arab-Israel peace processes, Arab national movement, Nasserism, pan-Arabism, and emergence of Fatah, ‘becoming the most influential Palestinian political faction, much of benefits of the Saudi leadership’ and the rise of Arab uprising in 2011. The author underlines that the ‘outbreak of the Arab uprising in 2011 has finally dropped on Riyadh’s priority list’ (130). The 2011 uprising has potentially affected the Sauri Arabia’s strategic position in the region. ‘Riyadh is highly concerned about the domestic instability in such states as Bahrain, Egypt and Lebanon and the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria, civil war in Yemen and strengthening of Muslim Brotherhood in the region as whole’ (p.131). In addition, the growing involvement with Iran further occupies All these new developments has forced Saudi Arabia to put the Arab-Israeli conflict at the backburner. Chapter IV deals with the efforts made by Saudi Arabia to materialize unity between the two factions of the Palestinian movement, Hamas and Fatah. Riyadh views the division between the two as a setback to the entire movement of Palestine liberation. Hence, it ‘attempted to mediate between the two conflicting parties, which were motivated by both the high value the Kingdom assigns to Arab consensus and the conviction that the realization of the rights of the Palestinian people requires Palestine solidarity’. After two-day negotiations in the city of Makkah in February 2007, two groups signed the Makkah Agreement and agreed to ‘cease violent clashes against one other and form a unity government’ (p.155). Unlike other Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria Qatar, Riyadh succeeded in bringing the two factions on the negotiation table. However, the author says,
that it proved only a temporary ‘drawn on hope in the bitter dispute between the Palestinian factions’. Besides current developments, the chapter also provides a detailed historical journey of both the factions. For instance, how the two groups came into being, what role Yasser Arafat played in pushing the Fatah group to political prominence; how Hamas came into being; what strategy it adopted to expand, transform and mutate itself from active political life to militancy and, later on, emerged as a democratic political force and formed government in Gaza. Hamas is the product of the first Muslim Brotherhood branch in Jerusalem in October 1945 and expanded and acquired its militant flavour of struggle against the Israeli occupation. By 1947, Hamas had opened its several branches in Haifa, Jaffa, Hebron and Gaza and membership also reached to around 20,000. Initially the group was heavily politicized and the charitable work was on the backseat. This group also cooperated with Christians, communists alike. From 1947, the group called for Jihad against British and the Zionists. However, in 1984, it started changing its activities. In late 1950, it started giving arms and arms training to its cadres and resorted to massive display of arms against the brutal Israeli occupation. Even it tried to establish a military cell before the outbreak of Intifada. But its violence against Israeli occupation escalated during the Intifada. During this time, Hamas largely concentrated on arms procurement as well as mobilizing and training its cadres in the use of arms and explosives. With its success, Hamas rejected several peace proposals, including the 1993 Oslo Accord and moved on the Iranian line, especially Iran witnessed the 1979 Revolution. The chapter also provides the undercurrent of the Saudi policy, whose aims are not only to bring both the factions on negation table and defang Hamas from violence but also how to alienate Iran from Hamas and Arab-Israeli conflicts, as well as segregate the group from the ideology of Muslim Brotherhood. This might be one of the reasons that the same Riyadh which tried hard to solemnize unity between the two groups during the Makkah agreement in 2007, gave a delayed and lukewarm response when Fatah and Hamas made the reconciliation deal and announced the formation of a unity government in 2014. However, the author also underlines that the 2011 uprising is also a potential factor which made Riyadh to give less emphasis on Arab-Israeli and focus more on the changing geo-strategic situation in the region. This might affect Saudi Arabia’s interest seriously. 6 Chapter V deals with the Taif Agreement, which was signed in the Saudi city of Taif on October 22, 1989 after ‘23 days of mediated negotiation’. The accord ended the 15 years of civil war in Lebanon. ‘To this day’, as the author mentions, ‘Saudi government officials take pride in the TAIF Agreement, the showpiece of their mediation policy’ (p.179). The task of solving the Lebanon civil war was assigned to Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Morocco in the Arab League Casablanca Summit. However, Riyadh played a key role in assembling the Lebanese parliamentarians from almost all the political and religious factions and developed a proposal that was later ‘accepted as the final agreement’. Besides resolving the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, the Saudi government, was genuinely interested in the restoration of political stability and independence in that country. With this accord, all the factions in Lebanon, including Shia and Sunni were empowered. Hence, the success of the Taif Agreement also dispelled the notion that Saudi Arabia works on sectarian agenda and tries to weaken Shia, while giving more preference and power to Sunnis. Chapter VI examines the Saudi Arabia’s new approach of ‘conflict mediator’ in Yemen, initiated in the spring of 2011. The chapter underlines that Riyadh has adopted two pronged policy to solve the political instability of Yemen. First, it sought the GCC
umbrella; and second, it became a party in Yemen conflicts since the beginning of the mediation process. These two features are a unique departure from its long-tested policy of sole mediation. Saudi Arabia sought the collective umbrella of GCC to propose and resolve the political crisis in Yemen. This is perhaps because of two reasons; first, Riyadh wanted to improve the chances of success of the peace plan; and second, it also seems intended to share the responsibility with the GCC member states. Political stability in Yemen, especially on its northern side, which borders the Saudi territory, is crucial to the Kingdom. Riyadh cannot afford to let pass the northern part of Yemen to Al Qaeda and inimical Houthis, who are seen as a proxy group of Iran. Iran is accused of expanding its hegemonic influence in Saudi suburbs through the rebel Houthis. These rebels are getting active support, arms, training and financial support from Iran. The author underlines, 'In early 2011, the Saudi leadership was particularly concerned that the northern Yemeni Houthi rebels as well as Al Qaeda and its affiliates would take advantage of the destabilization of the Yemeni central government and extend their zone of influence’. Hence, Riyadh pressed hard to restore peace in Yemen. For this, the Kingdom used tactics such as pressing the long-serving President Ali Abdullah Saleh to abdicate power and introducing a two-year transitional phase that provided an opportunity to Riyadh to install a consensual candidate, promote power-sharing and initiate a National Dialogue. The book also carries some limitations. For instance, the author is caught between opposite poles. On the one hand, he tried to dispel some popular negative notions associated with the Kingdom and regime, while on the other, he also kept some sympathy to the Western 7 interpretations of the Kingdom and its policies. Further, the book is published 2016. The author could have updated it with the latest trend in Saudi foreign policy objectives as well as the means to achieve those objectives. Since the young prince Muhammad Bin Salman came to the helm of the Kingdom’s affairs, Saudi Arabia’s traditional foreign policy tools have gone under tremendous transformation. The policies based on mediation, consensus, dealing with regional issues with caution and relying more on back door maneuvering, have now been replaced by open, direct and confrontation modes. The Kingdom is now building a long-term strategic alliance, developing stable regional policies and is now less hesitant to acknowledge its relations with those countries with whom Riyadh had not been comfortable. Commonality of interest now plays a key role in forging and enhancing bilateral relations in Saudi Arabia’s foreign relations. This is evident from Saudi Arabia’s policy towards Israel and the new administration in White House, which is openly sympathetic to Tel Aviv. Unlike the past, the Kingdom is now using its economic and financial capabilities in strengthening its military alliances. This is evident from the huge arms deal with the Trump administration and the formation of Arab coalition to defeat the inimical forces in Yemen and support to proxy groups in Lebanon, Syria and even in Iraq. This is a departure from the past approach of handling the intra-regional problems. In Palestine, the Kingdom is convincing Mahmood Abbas to resolve it. Saudi Arabia under the new Crown Prince has equally emphasized the domestic issues and has initiated reforms at multiple fronts, including economic (vision 2030), social (freedom to women), religious (moderate Islam) and externally allying with all common forces to roll back Iran and defeat its proxies. Saudi Arabia has also initiated its relations with Russia. This is evident from the visit of King Salman to Moscow, which is the first visit in the last 100 years of any reigning Saudi king to Russia. Nevertheless, the book is a valuable addition to bring out some of the least cherished
features of the Saudi foreign policy. Saudi Arabia is also a normal country, which tries to hedge its national interest by adopting and adjusting with the changing time and space.

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