

Chapter 14: Chapter exercises

Saudi Arabia as a regional power

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays an integral role in the balance of political, economic, and military power in the Middle East. The country is the birthplace of Islam, home to two of the religion's holiest cities (Mecca and Medina), and represents roughly a quarter of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the region. It is also home to the Middle East's largest stock market, is the world's leading petroleum power (with a quarter of the planet's productive capacity and the largest proven reserves in the region), and possesses a modern and effective military and security apparatus. The kingdom plays an important role in the decision-making processes of OPEC due to its large reserve capacity and influence over the other member states, specifically the Gulf economies (CIA 2009). This leverage is compounded by close economic, political, and military ties to the United States. As a result, the country is able to operate as an important power broker in the region that acts as a counterweight to the perceived threat emanating from Iran.

Following the Khomeini Revolution of 1979, Iran has strategically sought to export its values to the Shi'ite population centres scattered around the wider region and beyond. This trend has been particularly prevalent in countries with high Shia populations such as Lebanon (60% Shia), Iraq (65%), and Bahrain (70%) (Obaid, 2006). This 'Shi'ite Crescent' links Iran with Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, broadens the country's regional political and religious aspirations, and serves to bolster Iranian influence throughout the MENA area. Iran, with its political influence and emphasis on the spread of radicalized Islam throughout the region, is of major concern to both its neighbours and western governments.

According to Nisan (2007), although Saudi Arabia is the historical home of what is traditionally perceived to be a less radicalized form of Islam, it is also the political centre for inspiring, teaching, promoting, financing, and organizing a global jihad to Islamize the MENA region and the wider world. A combination of faith, finance, and a strong military, argues Nisan, constitutes a spiritual and material arsenal designed to overwhelm non-Muslim adversaries both within the region and further afield. A feigned support of western and predominantly American policy whilst advancing a long-term Islamic jihad agenda seems somewhat contradictory. The country's founding principle of Wahhabi Islamic doctrine is generally considered to embrace religious zealotry and a strong militant principle whilst public stonings, beheadings, and floggings are considered normal punishment for Islamic offenders. Moreover, the secretive and often harsh Committee to Prevent Vice and Promote Virtue represents a constant and intrusive feature of Saudi public life. All of these values, it would appear, are diametrically opposed to those of western liberalism and tolerance.

Whilst Iran has consistently sought to bolster its anti-western credentials and act as an opposing force to westernized liberalism in the region, Saudi Arabia has historically been identified as a strong and reliable partner to Washington in the area. In exchange for military support, the kingdom has developed into a major external investor in the American economic system. Yet the link between radicalized Islam and terrorism flowing from Saudi Arabia became apparent when it was revealed

that 15 of the total 19 terrorist operatives that carried out the 9/11 attacks in the United States were of Saudi origin, a factor that underlines the ongoing complexities of the US-Saudi relationship.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the toppling of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, the Saudi government is faced with a new threat. From within its borders, it is faced with political opposition, particularly from its Shi'ite minority. In a kingdom where political voice is severely lacking, there have been some moves to include women within the system. Regionally, the Arab Spring has forced Saudi Arabia to take on the leadership role for the Gulf monarchies—for instance, it has had to play the role of 'big brother' to the Bahraini royal family. This has reinforced the kingdom's power and position in the Gulf.

Most recently, the rise to power of the youthful and energetic Mohammed bin Salman has ushered in a new era in Saudi politics. On one hand, a set of social reforms has engendered support from sceptics of the traditionally conservative Kingdom. On the other hand, the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 has sparked global protest over the abuses of power and cult of personality of the new leader, even from long-standing friends in the US. A newly assertive foreign policy, with intervention in Yemen and confrontational policies vis-à-vis Qatar and Iran being the most prominent examples, adds to the uncertainty over the future direction of the region.

Briefly explain the influence of the Saudi Kingdom on the American economy.

Do you feel that the West and the United States are acting in a hypocritical manner in giving consistent support to Saudi Arabia whilst consistently chastising Iran?

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