Mediation and Saudi Foreign Policy

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Abstract: Saudi Arabia has positioned itself among the primary mediators in some of the Middle East’s most intractable conflicts, having played mediatory central roles in Lebanon, Palestine, and in Arab-Israeli conflict. Compared with the mediation efforts of another frequent regional mediator, namely Qatar, Saudi mediation initiatives tend to be more institutionally grounded and are less personal in nature, and often involve less fanfare and are more discreet. At the same time, the Kingdom is not always readily identified with its satellite media network of Al Arabiya in the same way that Qatari foreign policy is perceived to be closely aligned with Al Jazeera coverage. Although such efforts have seldom resulted in successful resolution of conflicts among the disputants involved, the Kingdom has used mediation to successfully further its twin objectives of ensuring and furthering state and regime security, while also playing a central coordinating role in regional affairs. As such, Saudi Arabia is likely to continue to play a similar mediatory role in the foreseeable future.

Saudi Arabia is one of the world’s most strategically-located countries, housing Islam’s two holiest cities and sitting on top of the world’s largest proven oil deposits. Accordingly, the Kingdom’s foreign policy and international relations have been the subject of extensive study over the years. Saudi Arabia’s strategic importance has only grown in recent years given the chronic instability and tensions

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that have characterized the Middle East’s domestic as well as international politics. However, a persistent and prominent feature of Saudi foreign policy, namely the Kingdom’s frequent attempts at mediating some of the Middle East’s most intractable conflicts has not garnered much attention. Over the past several decades, the Saudis have taken on some of the most deeply entrenched conflicts in the Arab world and the larger Middle East and proposed bilateral, regional, and even international solutions of one kind or another. The success record of such mediation efforts is far from stellar; in fact, the Saudis have succeeded in very few of the mediation efforts in which they have embarked. Nevertheless, conflict mediation continues to be one of the most salient features of Saudi foreign policy.

This article explores three related questions that are central to Saudi conflict resolution efforts. First, what role does mediation and conflict resolution play in the overall formulation and conduct of Saudi foreign policy? In an effort to garner prestige and greater international legitimacy, practically all states, at one level or another, seek to mediate conflicts both small and large, especially in their own immediate region. But the Saudis have employed mediation both as a foreign policy tool and as an objective with a frequency seldom matched by other regional or even international actors. Why is this the case? The answer seems to be in Saudi Arabia’s self-ascribed role as a “regional coordinator,” by virtue of its position within the region, its need to ensure regime security, and its desire to be a key player in shaping the overall diplomatic profile of the Middle East region.

Second, the article explores the *modus operandi* of such mediation efforts. How do the Saudis go about mediating regional conflicts, and what means do they employ in proposing or bringing about solutions to regional conflicts? Qatar has also feverishly embarked on a number of high-profile conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East and parts of Africa. How do Saudi mediation efforts compare with, those of Qatar?

Finally, the article presents a balance sheet of Saudi mediation efforts, assessing the extent to which Saudi policymakers have met their actual objectives through presenting mediation proposals and sponsoring platforms. The Saudi record in this regard is somewhat mixed. The article will demonstrate that insofar as conflict resolution is concerned, the Saudis have not actually had great successes. But the *purpose* and *process* of mediation efforts are sometimes just as important as the

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outcome of such endeavors. In the case of Saudi Arabia, success in launching and taking part in mediation efforts cannot focus solely on the outcome of such undertakings in getting the disputants to settle their conflicts peacefully. Saudi Arabia views mediation as an integral tool in its foreign policy goals of maintaining an active involvement in regional issues, enhancing and deepening its influence among the different parties involved in national and cross-border disputes, and using foreign policy objectives and initiatives as a means of ensuring and perpetuating domestic political legitimacy for the state. Viewed in these terms—not necessarily as bringing about successful conflict resolution but instead furthering Saudi Arabia’s own, specifically-designed foreign policy objectives—the Kingdom’s mediation efforts have been indeed successful in meeting their goals.

In the Middle East, it should be noted, third party attempts at mediating conflicts have a long history. In fact, across the Middle East and especially in the Arab world there has been a long tradition of formal mediation and conflict resolution efforts dating back to the creation of the Arab League in March 1945. In much of the literature on the international relations of the Middle East, and more specifically on the Persian Gulf sub-region, it is often assumed that the GCC has had relative success in mediating cross-border conflicts since its inception in 1981—between Oman and Yemen, Bahrain and Qatar, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, this assumption is not substantiated. In fact, most of the mediation efforts that have resolved these conflicts, while “under the informal clout of the GCC,” have been due to the efforts of either Qatar or Saudi Arabia. In reality, neither the GCC nor even the Arab League has had much success in mediation and/or conflict resolution. There are various reasons for this failure by both the Arab League and the GCC to successfully and meaningfully mediate regional conflicts. Some of these mediation failures stem from the institutional weaknesses inherent in both entities as international organizations capable of instituting meaningful change or sponsoring mediation initiatives; the increasing ascendancy within the two organizations of personalities over institutions and established procedures; and, as a corollary, regional and national competition between the constituent member states and their leaders.

6 Ibid. p. 17.
7 Ibid.
8 See, Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen. “Designed to Fail or Failure to Design? The Origins and Legacy of the Arab League,” Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston, eds. Crafting Cooperation:
The innate weakness of the GCC and the Arab League has facilitated the creation of a regional environment that is conducive to Saudi Arabia initiating mediation efforts. Capitalizing on such a vacuum, at least up until Qatar started undertaking similar initiatives, as part of a broader menu of foreign policy tools, over the last several decades Saudi Arabia has sought to proactively and unilaterally mediate among regional disputants across the Arab world and the larger Middle East. A small sample of Saudi mediation efforts includes the following:

**September 1973**: Arab summit in Cairo, King Faisal mediates reconciliation among Egypt, Syria, and Jordan;

**November 1981**: vague Saudi mediation efforts diffuse tensions between Jordan and the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front (Libya, Syria, Algeria, South Yemen, and the PLO) that could have led to the eruption of Jordanian-Syrian hostilities;

**1985-1986**: Saudi mediation talks lead to the restoration of diplomatic ties between Jordan and Syria;

**1986**: Saudi mediation leads to a truce regarding the Bahraini claim to Zubarah on northwestern coast of Qatar and to Hawar islands south of Zubarah;

**January 1989**: the Reagan Administration rejects offer by Saudi Arabia to mediate between U.S. and Libya (before U.S. fighter planes shoot down Libyan jets);

**October 1989**: Taif Accord brings to an end the Lebanese civil war and lays the foundations for a post-conflict political order in the war-torn country;

**1991**: Saudi-led mediation efforts between Qatar and Bahrain continue;

**2002**: Prince Abdulla Peace Initiative aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict;

**November 2005**: King Abdullah mediates an understanding between the United States and Syria on the interrogation of top Syrian officials about the assassination of Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri;

October 2007: the Saudis invite top leaders of Somalia for mediation talks on the country;

February 2007: Mecca Accord, aims at fostering reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas; and,

2010: Saudi Arabia starts mediation between the Taliban and the Afghan government in February, but efforts halted by November when Taliban refuse to sever links with al Qaeda.

Saudi Foreign Policy Objectives

Saudi Arabia claims the mantle of Islamic leadership. It has used Mecca “as a tool of foreign policy” since 2006. But keenly sensitive to both international and domestic sources of legitimacy as keys to regime security, Saudi foreign policy has deemed to be cautious in character. This caution is reinforced by “an extraordinary cultural self-assurance and a heightened sense of insecurity based on being an insular people surrounded by enemies.” Such a “highly developed encirclement syndrome” has resulted in the merger of Saudi foreign and security policies from the very beginning of the Kingdom. Not surprisingly, regime and state survival has been the central goal of Saudi domestic and foreign policy. Additionally, Saudi foreign policy has been shaped by a strong conception by the Kingdom of its role as a regional superpower and hegemon and a bulwark of both regional and global stability. The Saudis have also historically ascribed to themselves, as a key element of their foreign policy “role conception,” a responsibility to look after the peace and well-being of Islam and Muslims worldwide.

At the same time, especially since the collapse of the monarchical state in Iran in 1979, Saudi foreign policy interests have been closely aligned with those of the United States on a wide range of significant issues, including containing “the Iranian threat,” maintaining the regional status quo, ensuring moderate Sunni dominance in

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12 Ibid. pp. 145-146.
14 According to Gerd Nonneman, other facets of Saudi role conception have included an absolute focus on state and dynastic survival; a pragmatic adaptation to the prevailing external threats and resources; viewing non-regional powers as potentially useful counterweights to perceived threats; and, at least within their own region, viewing international relations in terms of interpersonal relations and as a matter of “sheikhly exchange.” Nonneman. “Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy,” p. 339.
Lebanon, and pressuring OPEC for relatively lower oil prices. The combined results have made Saudi foreign policy generally pragmatic, with a keen eye to regime and state security; amenable to outside protectors while maintaining relative autonomy; eager to secure economic resources at home and abroad; and exhibiting concern for Islamic and Arab causes, especially in regards to Palestine.

No state, of course, is a unitary entity, and the Saudi state, like its counterparts everywhere else, is fragmented. In the Saudi case, this fragmentation runs along institutional, personal, and ideological lines. It tends to cluster around two poles that may be broadly categorized as moderates and hardliners—or advocates of Taqarub (rapprochement) and Tawhid (“monotheism”) respectively. Such deep fissures have multiple foreign policy consequences. Some observers have gone so far as to accuse Tawhidis of tacit support of al Qaeda and Jihadism. Nevertheless, despite what are often notable and significant policy and ideological differences among key decision makers at the highest levels of the state, the sum total of Saudi foreign policy has exhibited fairly consistent features over time.

Insofar as Saudi Middle East policy is concerned, the kingdom’s chief concerns have been maintaining regional security and political stability. In the fluid and all-too-often volatile politics of the Middle East, Saudi calculations have defined security and stability in the following terms:

- Supporting regional actors whose strategic objectives are aligned with those of the Kingdom and its Western allies;
- Protecting the seemingly vulnerable security of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf from internal and external threats without too much overreliance on America military protection;
- Countering Iranian influence and ambitions in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and closer to home in Bahrain and the rest of the Persian Gulf; and,
- Ensuring minimal inter-Arab conflicts and friction.

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18 Long and Maisel. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, p. 159.
20 As van Duijne and Aarts correctly point out, Saudi-Iranian relations have featured as much cooperation and careful dialogue as suspicion and mistrust. Rivalry has certainly not been the only characteristic of the relationship between the two regional powers. Joris van Duijne and Paul Aarts. “Saudi-Iranian Ties: Stocktaking and Look into the Future.” Durham University, School of Government and International Affairs, SGIA Research Working Paper Series, August 2008, p. 7.
In 2011, Saudi Arabia found itself pursuing an additional foreign and security policy objective, namely the containment, as much as possible, of the so-called Arab Spring, so that the outcome of the revolutions sweeping across the Arab world would not fundamentally alter the region’s domestic and international power balances.21

**Mediation and Saudi Foreign Policy**

To ensure that these foreign policy objectives and security concerns are addressed, the Kingdom has long pursued a diplomatic strategy across the Middle East—and especially in the Arab world—premised on proactive involvement, and coordination, in regional issues.22 Saudi Arabia has been involved in mediation efforts among different factions in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and in Palestine between Hamas and Fatah. In all these cases, it has tried to use its soft power and its significant financial resources to mediate conflicts.23 For Saudi leaders, mediation is the best strategy to address the Kingdom’s security concerns.24

Saudi mediation efforts are driven by several interrelated concerns: first, to balance various regional security options; and, second, to enhance both the international and the domestic legitimacy of the Kingdom’s leadership.25 Second, in their role as protectors of Islam’s holiest sites, and finally to mediate among members of the “Muslim family,” who are quarreling.26 For the Kingdom’s policymakers, actual success in such mediation efforts is ultimately less significant than the appearance of concern and proactive effort: “merely the posture sufficed, giving them credit for playing the mediating role, and gaining them the trust of the parties that were coordinated.”27

As such, Saudi Arabia has taken on some of the most pressing issues of the Middle East—chief among them the Arab-Israeli conflict, sectarian politics in Lebanon, Persian Gulf security, and the Iranian nuclear program—by trying to

22 Paradoxically, in a confidential interview with the author in Riyadh in July 2011, a senior Saudi diplomat disputed the assertion that the Kingdom has been consistently proactive in its diplomatic pursuits. “We often act only when prompted to do so, either out of security concerns, or if there is an Islamic incentive to do so.”
26 Confidential interview with a Saudi Foreign Ministry official, Riyadh, July 2011.
simultaneously engage multiple actors and stakeholders. In the process, the Kingdom has sought to play the role of regional coordinator or “ringleader” by forging as broad an inter-Arab consensus as possible. Throughout, it has also kept an eye on domestic constituents and issues, ensuring that its foreign policy pursuits do not jeopardize its political legitimacy at home.

Of the various mediation efforts in which the Saudis have been involved, three of the most significant ones exemplify key dynamics involved in their undertakings. These include: mediation and other similar efforts aimed at fostering reconciliation among the various sectarian factions in Lebanon; moving forward the Arab-Israeli conflict, and mediation designed to foster Palestinian unity between the Hamas and Fatah.

Lebanon. The Saudis have played a significant if not always successful mediating role in Lebanon, where, as one Lebanese observer commented, “Lebanese factions have become addicted to outside interference.” In their mediation initiatives, the Saudis have tried to maintain open lines of communication with all the various Lebanese factions, including Hezbollah, and to ensure that all groups have “a balance of interest so that every faction is obliged to make some concessions as a means of achieving some level of agreement.”

Historically, several factors have prompted the Saudi leadership to pay special attention to the Lebanese crisis and seek to resolve it. To begin with, the fractured republic’s chronic instability does not sit well with the Kingdom’s conservative default position with the latter worried about the possible spillover effects of the tensions in the former. The pervasiveness of commercial and familial ties between the Saudi royal family and prominent Lebanese Sunni elites is also an important consideration in Saudi policies toward Lebanon. Equally important is the possibility of continued Shi’a ascent in Lebanon, and, in Saudi calculations, a concomitant rise in Iranian influence. By and large, the Saudis have sought to enhance their influence over Lebanon through the country’s political elite, few of whom enjoy widespread popularity across the country’s fractious sects. At the same time, the Saudis have been cautious not to be drawn into the quicksand of Lebanese politics.

Saudi Arabia’s first major mediation effort in Lebanon is also considered one of its most significant accomplishments, especially within the Saudi foreign

30 Ibid. p. 115.
policy establishment. In September 1989, 62 surviving members of Lebanon’s 1972 Parliament met in Taif, Saudi Arabia, and sought to work out a formula for ending the Lebanese conflict. The Kingdom is said to have resorted to its considerable financial and political clout to convince the Lebanese and Syrian disputants to attend the negotiations in Taif. The meeting was preceded by an intensification of the conflict and Syria’s imposition of a naval blockade on Lebanon’s Christian ports, followed by renewed international attention and a stalemate in the fighting.

Insofar as the mediation that brought it about is concerned, two features of the Taif Accord are noteworthy. First, the Taif meeting, which followed three other similar efforts aimed at ending the conflict—the National Dialogue Committee meetings in 1975-76 and conferences in Geneva and Lausanne in 1983 and 1984 respectively—was the least representative of the gatherings. It was boycotted by the sitting interim prime minister and army commander, Michel Aoun. Second, the Saudis were careful to enlist the support of fellow Arab countries and to work within the Arab League, whose Assistant Secretary General, Lakhdar Brahimi, acted capably as one of the chief mediators among the Lebanese parliamentarians. The Saudi foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal, was also assisted in the negotiations by his counterparts from Morocco and Algeria.

After intense negotiations, a National Accord Document was signed, and later ratified by the Lebanese parliament, which featured three major points. The first concerned the issue of political reform, with the attendees agreeing to expand the number of deputies in the country’s parliament, with equal representation between Christians and Muslims. The deputies also agreed to elect a new president. By far the most contentious issue proved to be the presence of Syrian troops in the country, a matter of intense debate within the deputies themselves and among the Syrians and the Saudis. After much discussion, the agreement included compromise language that called on Syria to help the Lebanese state “impose its authority over all Lebanese territory” within two years and to also redeploy its troops to specified areas in Lebanon.

The Taif Accord has been criticized for not having gone far enough to guarantee Lebanese sovereignty vis-à-vis Syria and putting an end to Lebanon’s internecine sectarian conflict. Most observers in fact agree that the negotiations

33 Confidential interview with Saudi Foreign Ministry officials, Riyadh, July 2011.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid. p. 89. See also, Thompson. “Will Syria Have to Withdraw from Lebanon?” pp. 80-81.
“hardly represented a radical departure from previous attempts to reform the
Lebanese political system” and that “the accord effectively concedes the futility of
any serious attempt to expunge political sectarianism in Lebanon, at least for the
foreseeable future.” Nevertheless, as far as Saudi mediation is concerned, Taif
marked perhaps the most significant—and at least in the short run most
successful—effort by the Kingdom to mediate in the Lebanese conflict. In
subsequent years, heartened by what it considered a major accomplishment, the
Kingdom tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to bring about Taif-like agreements among
warring factions in Afghanistan and Somalia.

The Taif Accord was only one of a number of Saudi mediation efforts in
Lebanon. In the process, as demonstrated in the aftermath of the fallout from the
assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, in 2006-07 and again in 2010-
11, the Saudis have shown tremendous pragmatism by entering into direct
disputations with Iran in order to convince the Islamic Republic to pressure the
Lebanese Hezbollah to negotiate in Beirut. Aware of Iranian and Syrian influence
over Hezbollah, the Saudis sought to mediate the Lebanese conflict by involving
Iran and Syria in the mediation process. Not surprisingly, in its mediation efforts in
Lebanon, Saudi Arabia is keenly aware that any substantive progress toward solving
the republic’s problems would invariably have to involve Syria. At the same time,
the Saudis have a strong preference for avoiding any further Iranian involvement in
Lebanese affairs and would rather deal with Damascus than with Tehran.

“Lebanon’s problems are Arab problems,” one senior Saudi diplomat relayed in a
2011 interview in Riyadh, “and they should be solved by Arabs.”

Despite the expenditure of significant money and resources in Lebanon, the
Kingdom has experienced little success in bringing the country into its orbit. In
January 2011, for example, after intense mediation efforts by the Kingdom and Syria
failed to produce tangible results, a senior Saudi prince told the world that King
Abdullah was “pulling his hands out” of Lebanon and warned of a “dangerous”
situation there. In fact, given the complex interactions between internal and
external forces in Lebanon, and the pervasiveness of patronage and clientelist
networks extending from within the Lebanese system to Saudi competitors such as
Iran and Syria, Saudi Arabia cannot succeed alone in its mediation efforts in
Lebanon. This has resulted in the Saudis pragmatically cooperating with Iran and
Syria in these mediation efforts. Whether the Kingdom’s 2011 declaration of ending
its efforts at fostering mediation among Lebanese factions was a tactical retreat
aimed at spurring the Lebanese into action, or a genuine withdrawal, remains to be

41 Confidential interviews with a Saudi Foreign Ministry official, Riyadh, July 2011.
42 Ibid.
44 al-Dakhil. “Saudi mediation in Lebanon threatened by the collapse of sectarian balances,” p. 118.
seen. Given the long history of its involvement in regional affairs, it is doubtful Saudi Arabia would keep itself on the sidelines of Lebanese politics for long.

*Israel and the Palestinians: The 2002 “Peace Plan”*—Although Saudi Arabia initially did not oppose the Camp David Accord, the exclusion of most of the Arab parties to the conflict and President Anwar Sadat’s unilateral initiatives left the Saudis with little option but to oppose the plan. In 1981 Crown Prince Fahd offered an alternative, comprehensive peace plan, hailed as “extremely innovative and progressive” for its time. At its summit in Morocco, the Arab League adopted a slightly revised version the following year. Side-tracked by the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and by the major global realignment following the collapse of communism, the Saudis, not unlike much of the rest of the world, refrained from in-depth involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1994 the kingdom joined Egypt and Syria in signing the Alexandria Agreement calling on all Arab states to refrain from signing peace treaties with Israel without these three states’ consent.

By the early 2000s, it was no longer possible to ignore the Arab-Israeli conflict. In February 2002, Crown Prince Abdullah offered a new, comprehensive peace plan for the resolution of the conflict.

In an interview with Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, Crown Prince Abdullah proposed to Israel “full withdrawal from all the occupied territories, in accord with U.N. resolutions, including Jerusalem, for full normalization of relations.”

One month after the interview, in March 2002, in its Beirut summit the Arab League endorsed what came to be known as the Arab Peace Plan. Despite the considerable worldwide support and interest generated for the plan (and a coincidentally timed suicide bombing in Israel the day the plan was announced), both Israel and the United States rejected the plan. An Israeli spokesman, pointing to the plan’s call for the return of Palestinian refugees, called its acceptance tantamount to “the destruction of the state of Israel, and obviously we cannot agree.”

While consistent with the broader strategic objectives of the Kingdom, the timing of the 2002 Peace Initiative was, no doubt, influenced in large part by the negative worldwide attention Saudi Arabia was receiving in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals. After the 9/11 attacks, perceptions about Islam as a religion, Arabs in general, and

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46 Ibid. p. 419.
47 Ibid. p. 421.
Saudi Arabia were badly damaged across the Western world and especially in the United States. Within a week of the event, some 600 Saudi nationals left the United States. A whole host of books linking Islam and Saudi Arabia to terrorism hit the bookstands, and a number of think tanks and public policy organizations produced reports cataloguing the damaging nature of Western and American alliances with Saudi Arabia. In response, the Saudi government launched a carefully stage-managed public relations campaign to repair its image in the United States, running ads in popular American magazines (such as People) and hiring scores of public relations, consulting, and law firms to help craft a new image. By the first anniversary of 9/11, the Saudi government had spent an estimated $5 million for this purpose alone.

One Saudi strategy to repair their image was to emphasize their commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. “In a flash, Abdullah had transformed the discourse: Instead of focusing on Saudi involvement in terrorism, the Western press was now talking about Saudi peacemaking. This clever move shifted the onus on Israel.”

Nonetheless, reducing the Peace Plan to only a well-timed public relations stunt over-simplifies what was both a substantive proposal for moving forward the peace process as well as a rare accomplishment at getting the Arab League, including rejectionist states such as Libya, to endorse the plan at the Beirut summit. That the plan went beyond simply calling for “cessation of hostilities” and actually probed pathways to normalization of relations was considered a major—in fact, historic and courageous—step by the Saudi diplomats involved. But it wasn’t just the proposed plan that was a radical departure from the past; fostering consensus around it within the chronically fractious Arab League was in itself equally significant.

*Hammas and Fatah: The Mecca Accord.* On February 8, 2007, after two days of intense negotiations in Mecca, Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and senior leaders of the Hamas agreed to set aside their bitter rivalry and to form a Palestinian national unity government. The talks were held under the auspices of King Abdullah, resulting in what became known as the Mecca Accord, and saw an end—temporarily, as it turned out—to the friction that had marked Fatah-Hamas relations since the latter’s victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections held in January 2006. Hailed among Palestinian Arabs as a major step toward “ending [Palestinian] strife and strengthening fraternal ties,” the accord represented both a positive development in the deteriorating impasse in Palestinian politics and a major accomplishment for Saudi diplomacy.

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53 Ibid. p. 166.
55 Confidential interview with Saudi Foreign Ministry officials, Riyadh, July 2011.
The Saudis had pulled off an agreement despite concerted American pressure and efforts globally to keep Hamas—which the United States held to be untrustworthy and committed to violence and terrorism—isolated.\textsuperscript{57} The Bush Administration, in fact, is reported to have been taken by surprise by the Accord, and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice openly expressed her displeasure with it.\textsuperscript{58}

Given Hamas’s religious underpinnings, the city that gave the Mecca Accord its name was deliberately chosen. The Saudis assumed, correctly it seems, that inviting the Palestinian disputants to the holy city would be symbolically significant and would be more conducive to a positive mediation outcome.\textsuperscript{59} While difficult to point to a direct causal relationship between the location of the mediation efforts and their outcome, in this instance holding the talks in Mecca appears at least not to have hurt their chances and, perhaps, to have even added pressure on the disputants to want to reach an agreement.\textsuperscript{60}

In the end, the two sides came to an agreement that contained three main components: Hamas agreed to endorse the broad parameters of the on-going peace process, therefore accepting the 1967 borders separating Palestinian-Arab territories from Israel; Fatah endorsed the results of the 2006 elections and agreed to have Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh serve as the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority; and Fatah also agreed to initiate broad reforms to the Palestine Liberation Organization that would make it more representative of the new realities of Palestinian society.

Insofar as Saudi motives for sponsoring the Mecca Accord were concerned, three factors appear to have been significant in prompting the Kingdom to act when it did. These include a genuine desire to end Palestinian-on-Palestinian violence; an effort to lure Hamas out of the Iranian orbit as much as possible; and, concomitantly, to move the 2002 Arab Peace Plan forward by mollifying Hamas objections and moderating its stance through its inclusion in the national unity government.\textsuperscript{61} Back in 2002, under the auspices of the Arab League, the Palestinian Authority had endorsed the Arab Peace Plan. But the rupture with Hamas had fractured the Palestinian polity to the point of paralysis, making substantive progress on the Peace Plan all but impossible. Bringing Hamas into official PA fold would largely alleviate the one obstacle to the Peace Plan on the Arab side.

\textsuperscript{57} “Palestinian official says US to assess Hamas commitment to Mecca deal,” \textit{Al-Ayyam} (Ramallah), Feb. 10, 2007, pp. 1, 21.


\textsuperscript{59} Confidential interview with a Saudi Foreign Ministry official, Riyadh, July 2011.

\textsuperscript{60} In 2010, when the Saudis sought to mediate between the Taliban and the Afghan government, Mecca was again chosen as the location of the talks for similar reasons.

In the process, a rapprochement between the Kingdom and Hamas would be a welcome side-benefit. Earlier, Iran had hosted Haniyeh, who had visited Tehran on his first official visit abroad as prime minister, and Iran had given Hamas $120 million in aid while the Saudis had refused any financial assistance. Nevertheless, following Haniyeh’s visit to Tehran, the Saudi royal family had sent a private jet for him to travel to Riyadh for meetings with Saudi leaders. With the signing of the Mecca Accord, the Saudis promised the Palestinian Authority, in which Haniyeh remained as the prime minister, $1 billion in assistance.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one that will most likely not be solved without outside mediation. There is simply too much bad blood between the two sides, to allow them to come together to negotiate on their own. The Palestinians have long recognized this need for outside negotiators, a realization, no doubt, arising from their comparatively weaker bargaining position relative to the Israelis. Perhaps not surprisingly, outside mediation has not found the same enthusiasm among Israeli policymakers. In reality, given the historic depth of the conflict and its seeming intractability, coupled with America’s “special relationship” with Israel and pervasive organic links between the US and Israeli policymaking circles, the explicit endorsement of the United States is key to the success of any mediation effort. Met with deep skepticism and suspicion by both the United States and Israel from the very beginning, the Mecca Accord stood little chance of success before it even got off the ground.

The Mecca Accord highlights two features of Saudi mediation efforts. First, though initially reluctant to engage with Hamas, Haniyeh’s closeness with Iran, and the desire to deepen the Palestinians’ buy-in of the 2002 Peace Plan, prompted the Saudis to bring Hamas into their mediation efforts. Once again, Saudi pragmatism won the day.

A second related feature is the Saudi desire not to cede any diplomatic ground to Iran and to remain as the region’s undisputed diplomatic leader. Deeply distrustful of Hamas’s extremist ideology and politics, the Kingdom began making overtures to the organization only when it appeared that its leaders were inching closer to the Islamic Republic. Perceived threats to the Kingdom’s self-ascribed role as regional leader appear to be strong motivators for diplomatic activism.

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Saudi Mediation Efforts: A Balance Sheet

As noted above, Saudi Arabia’s success record in mediating conflicts between disputants has been mixed. In each case, the Saudi success was limited to bringing the disputants together, facilitating conditions for discussion and dialogue, and, in a number of instances, even succeeding in bringing the disputants to an initial agreement on the issues that separated them. But in these instances the Saudi success was ephemeral and at best temporary. The so-called Abdullah Peace Plan might have contributed to repairing the damaged Saudi image after 9/11, at least temporarily, but in helping resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict it has not gone anywhere.\[^{67}\] Lebanese factions remain as fracturized today as they were before Saudi mediation efforts began in earnest; and the Mecca Accord failed to meaningfully resolve deep-seated tensions and divisions between Hamas and the Fatah-led Palestinian National Authority in the long term.

The inability to translate mediation efforts into lasting conflict resolution is only one of the drawbacks associated with Saudi mediation politics. The late Israeli academic Joseph Kostiner highlighted two “anomalies” in Saudi mediation efforts. First, he argued, out of necessity the Saudis have had to compromise some of their own initiatives in order to suit a broad inter-Arab denominator. Second, Kostiner maintained, the Saudis have limited their role to initiating the process and then taking a side-role, therefore not engaging in the intricate details of the mediation process.\[^{68}\] Some have attributed this limited role to structural weaknesses inherent within Saudi foreign policy machinery. According to two observers, for example,

> The occasionally sluggish reaction of Riyadh to regional events is perhaps indicative of the weak capacity of the Saudi Foreign Ministry, which is severely limited by appointments made due to royal favour rather than merit. Saudi Arabia has been predominantly reactive in its approach to dealing with mounting insurgencies and a terrorist threat emanating from Yemen.\[^{69}\]

The first anomaly to which Kostiner pointed—the need for compromise—has actually brought a measure of pragmatism to Saudi foreign policy and has held in check some of the more doctrinaire members of the royal family in their

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\[^{67}\] In October 2010, Saudi Arabia endorsed the PNA’s decision to suspend negotiations with Israel, which had begun the previous May, and instead supported Palestinian efforts to get formal statehood recognition through the United Nations.


ideological pursuits across the region. In fact, as repeated examples of Saudi foreign policy endeavors demonstrate, pragmatism has been one of the consistent features of the Kingdom’s international relations.

The second anomaly—initiating the mediation process without in-depth follow-up—appears to be by design. By leaning their good offices, the Saudis pursue several simultaneous objectives. They remain involved in regional affairs and, as much as possible, maintain open lines of communication with disparate regional actors. This maintains the Kingdom’s role as a regional coordinator and helps in the pursuit of regional leadership position compared to traditional and new competitors—for example, Iran and Qatar respectively. Garnering positive press across the world, and enhancing the Kingdom’s international reputation as a bastion of reasoned diplomacy and a source of regional peace and stability, are of course equally important. At the same time, by eschewing long-term involvement in the disputes they take on, the Saudis avoid the potential pitfalls of being dragged into the conflicts themselves. This strategy also allows the Saudis to claim credit if their efforts succeed, but at the same time to distance themselves if their efforts are inconclusive.

Another complicating factor in Saudi mediation efforts is the role of the United States. In fact, Saudi relations with the United States cast a powerful shadow over the Kingdom’s attempts at mediating regional conflicts, as well as the broader range of Saudi foreign policy initiatives in general. For example, Prince Abdullah’s 2002 peace initiative is said to have been a direct result of the skepticism expressed by the Bush White House about the seriousness of earlier Saudi signals about peace between Arabs and Israelis. At the same time, the Mecca Accord met with the skepticism and outright resentment of the Bush administration, whose refusal to help the fledgling Palestinian Authority was perhaps largely responsible for the agreement’s eventual failure.

Nonetheless, during both the Obama and especially the Bush administrations, those Saudi mediation efforts aimed at enhancing regional stability and security have not succeeded modifying the U.S. “terrorist chasing” strategy. While the United States and Saudi Arabia have historically enjoyed extremely close diplomatic relations, and although the Kingdom has long aligned its foreign relations with broader American foreign and security interests, Saudi Arabia has on occasions displayed surprising independence from the United States. This display of diplomatic independence became especially pronounced in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, when, at times to the chagrin of the United States, Saudi

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Arabia embarked on a series of proactive diplomatic moves to contain the domestic and regional consequences of the rebellions erupting across the Arab world.\textsuperscript{74}

One way to better understand Saudi mediation is to compare it with similar efforts by Qatar, which has proactively engaged in a series of mediation efforts as well.\textsuperscript{75} There are four primary differences between Saudi and Qatari mediation efforts. The first difference has concerns the overall position of each country within the larger international system generally and the Middle East and Persian Gulf subsystems in particular. Qatar has maintained friendly relations with everyone and has often gone to great pains to portray itself as an objective actor without any preferences for anyone. Saudi Arabia’s position, however, is often clear either through the official declarations of policymakers and diplomats, or because of past experience. In its efforts to maintain warm and cordial relations with everyone, Qatar often finds it hard to pressure any one of the parties to obtain desired result; in other words, it has little leverage. Saudi Arabia, however, has leverage over both its ally and the party with whom it has less cordial relations. It has leverage over its ally by its ability to extract concessions, and it has leverage over the other party by dangling the prospects of warmer relations as incentive.

A second difference between Qatari and Saudi mediation efforts revolves around what may be called the “Al Jazeera factor.” Although Al Jazeera, with an estimated 39 percent viewership in 2010 as compared to Al Arabiya’s nine percent, is the most trusted and most widely watched news media outlet throughout the Arab world.\textsuperscript{76} It generally does not enjoy a similar popularity among Middle Eastern policymakers and political leaders. Justified or not, Al Jazeera is popularly seen in the Arab world as an instrument of Qatari foreign policy, much the same way that its much smaller competitor Al Arabiya is seen as an instrument of Saudi foreign policy. As a Palestinian diplomat put it, “Qatar supports Al Jazeera, and Al Jazeera supports Qatar.”\textsuperscript{77}

At least in the context of the intra-Palestinian conflict, the Fatah leadership does not consider Saudi motivations for mediation as suspect. The Saudis want Palestinian peace and have no other agenda, goes the general Fatah assumption.\textsuperscript{78} Qatari motives, however, as represented through Al Jazeera’s coverage and focus, are not seen as similarly benign. Al Jazeera is seen almost universally as an extension of and an instrument of Qatari foreign policy.\textsuperscript{79} At the same time, the network is perceived to be heavily biased in favor of Hamas and does not mind if Fatah is

\textsuperscript{74} Neil MacFarquhar. “Saudi Arabia Scrambles to Limit Region’s Upheaval,” \textit{The International Herald Tribune}, May 26, 2011, pp. 1, 4.
\textsuperscript{75} Kamrava. “Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy.”
\textsuperscript{76} Shibley Telhami. \textit{2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll} (Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland, 2010), p. 81.
\textsuperscript{77} Confidential interview at the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ramallah, June 2011.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
frequently portrayed in a negative light.\textsuperscript{80} Although difficult to prove empirically, this impression appears to hold valid especially across the Palestinian-controlled territories, and also among interested Israelis, certainly among Palestinian Authority policymakers and negotiators.\textsuperscript{81}

Third, there are significant differences in the manner in which Saudi Arabia and Qatar go about conducting mediation and conflict resolution efforts between disputants. The Qataris tend to be more public in their diplomatic efforts and go for big, noisy summits in flashy hotels and conference halls.\textsuperscript{82} While in some instances the Saudis also welcome publicity, in general they tend to prefer more subtle, behind-the-scenes diplomacy, which most disputants appear to prefer. Qatar’s brash diplomacy is not universally appreciated.

A fourth and related difference involves the \textit{modus operandi} each country employs in its mediation efforts. Qatari mediation efforts have been more personal in nature, often with the direct involvement of the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, or the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jabir, or one of the other prominent cabinet ministers.\textsuperscript{83} Saudi mediation has revolved less around personalities and has been more institutional in nature. Compared to Qatar, Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy establishment has greater institutional depth, which is a product of its longer history of engagement in international affairs and the larger size and more experienced diplomatic corps. Not surprisingly, whereas Qatari mediation often features the personal intervention of one or more of the emirate’s senior leaders, Saudi mediation efforts often take place through the provision of good offices. At least insofar as practical outcomes are concerned, neither method appears to have a quantitative advantage over the other. Nevertheless, the Saudi model appears to bring with it fewer risks of senior leaders losing face—or worse yet, legitimacy—if they were to fail in their negotiation and mediatory efforts.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Mediation has emerged as one of the central features of Saudi foreign policy over the last several decades. Despite a mixed record of success that consists mostly of short-term conciliation rather than longer-term conflict resolution, the Saudis have sought to play mediatory roles in some of the Middle East’s most intractable conflicts, the most notable of which are the Arab-Israeli quagmire and Lebanon’s confessional divisions. Clearly, while positive outcomes to mediation efforts would be an added bonus, the Saudi motivation to mediate is rooted in more instrumentalist purposes meant to ensure the Kingdom’s involvement, if not


\textsuperscript{81} This was relayed to the author in numerous conversations with Israeli and Palestinian informants in Tel Aviv, West and East Jerusalem, and Ramallah.

\textsuperscript{82} Kamrava. “Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy.”

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
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coordinating role, in regional affairs. By virtue of its size, history, resources, and geostrategic position, Saudi Arabia considers itself to be a pivotal player in Middle Eastern politics and even beyond. One of the means of ensuring its involvement and its centrality to regional developments is through mediation. That the Kingdom has considerable financial resources at its disposal, which have been used as an incentive to bring disputants to the negotiating table, has not been an insignificant feature of Saudi mediation efforts.

Successful mediation requires several key ingredients, chief among which are flexibility, in-depth knowledge of the issues at hand, and leverage over the disputants. In the three cases discussed here, the Saudis have possessed all three ingredients, and they have been largely successful at getting the disputants to the negotiating table. That such mediatory efforts have failed so far to resolve some of the Middle East’s most intractable conflicts is unlikely to prevent Saudi Arabia from engaging in similar efforts in the future. Clearly, in so doing the Kingdom is motivated by its own strategic and diplomatic interests both in its immediate vicinity and beyond. Regardless of the motives involved, in a region often marked by tensions and international crises, mediation efforts similar to those undertaken by Saudi Arabia offer a positive approach for de-escalating, if not altogether resolving, regional conflicts.