Saudi Arabia Taking Small Steps to Improve its Relations With Its Neighbours

One of the least noted political movements of recent times has been the gradual reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. They recently held their fourth meeting this year in Baghdad, to almost no mention in the western media.

It is only one of several movements by Saudi Arabia to gradually moving away from the United States’ orbit. The United States still wields considerable influence in Saudi Arabia, with an estimated 17,000 US troops which remain in the country. It is one of the largest contingent of US troops anywhere in the Middle East, matched only by an estimated 13,000 each in Qatar and Kuwait.

The United States involvement in Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly related to that country’s prominent production of oil. If for example, Saudi Arabia was known for its production of peanuts it is highly unlikely that United States would have shown a remotely comparable interest. Notwithstanding the strong United States presence in the country, relations between the Saudi strong man Mohammad bin Salman and the Americans have not been good. Bin Salman recently (in 2020) visited the United States, the first such visit for a number of years.

Saudi Arabia has in recent years been steadily moving its oil interests away from United States, and that movement has been toward China. It is undoubtably China’s growing influence in Saudi Arabia that has led to bin Salman being invited to the White House. China is now Saudi Arabia’s largest customer for its oil.
There have been other indicators of Saudi Arabia’s closer links to China. For example, in July 2019 Saudi Arabia was one of 37 countries that signed a joint statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council defending China’s treatment of its Uighur population. The alleged ill-treatment of the Uighurs by China has been a favourite topic of the United States led alliance of western nations in the past year or so. This is despite the lack of any actual evidence of ill-treatment of the Uighur population by China. The allegations reached absurd proportions, claiming for example, the genocide of the Uighur population. In fact, the Uighurs population has been growing in size for several years, not least in recent years. When the rest of China was subject to the one child policy, the Uighurs were exempt from those restrictions.

A further indication of China’s ever-growing closer ties with Saudi Arabia is that the country recently assumed the status of a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (together with Egypt and Qatar). Together with the now nine permanent members of the SCO (and two associate members Sri Lanka and Turkey) the SCO is now by far the world’s largest trading block, accounting for more than 40% of the world’s population.

That Saudi Arabia should achieve such a status with the SCO is a hugely significant step. It marks the continuing move of the country away from United States influence. It has not stopped the United States media from continuing to foster the alleged threat Saudi Arabia faces from Iran. These allegations of any Iranians threat completely ignore the fact that Iran has never attacked Saudi Arabia, and neither is it ever likely to do so.

Saudi Arabia also upgraded its status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the full knowledge of Iran’s increased status within the organisation. It did not deter them from doing so. China is now Saudi Arabia’s largest trading partner, having assumed that status some years ago, replacing the United States in that role.

The significance of those trends should not be underestimated. Saudi Arabia has had a long relationship with the United States and while the relationship has not always been an easy one the significance of United States relationship could never be underestimated. That relationship has lasted more than three quarters of a century. From the United States point of view the attraction of Saudi Arabia has always been its immense oil wealth and willingness to use the income derived from that source on the purchase of American weaponry.

As recently as 2017 the Saudis signed a deal with the United States for an immediate purchase a $110 billions of armaments and a commitment to buy $350 billion over the following 10 years. This made Saudi Arabia the world’s largest arms importer. Between 2015 and 2019, the first five years of the Yemen war, Saudi Arabia was the world’s largest importer of US weapons. It was an astonishing level of purchases for a relatively small country (35,000,000).

Enthusiastic support for the Yemen war was provided by the Trump administration, who saw it as a means of embarrassing the Iranians who had been one of Yemen’s staunchest supporters. It has not worked out that way. The Yemenis have proved to be remarkably resilient to Saudi attacks. There has been growing opposition to the war from other major European countries such as Italy which was Saudi Arabia’s 10th largest source of arms. They have now been suspended.

In February of this year United States president Joe Biden announced the end of US support for the Saudi war against Yemen. It was a significant step and one that is likely to lead to an end to the war. Such as a result would be a major victory for Iran that has consistently been a major supporter of Yemen.

Yemen’s recent ability to hit Saudi Arabia with drones has also marked a major upgrade in their war. In my view these following developments are linked. The withdrawal of United States military support, the increased counter-attacking capability of the Yemeni forces, and the willingness of the Saudis to conduct face-to-face negotiations with the Iranians, all reflect the growing power of Iran in the region.

An end to the Yemen war, apart from also bringing an end to the awful carnage of Yemeni children, one of whom under the age of five dies every 10 minutes the war continues, is wholly to be welcomed. The Saudis never had a good reason to wage war on Yemen and a cessation of their hostilities on that country will enhance their relationship with China.

The Chinese, although careful never to directly comment on the politics of other countries other than in response to comments made on China, also welcome the end of the Yemen war. Its ending will enhance relationships with China and speed the day when Saudi Arabia qualifies for full membership of the SCO.

The Saudis are unlikely to ever win plaudits for moves toward a more democratic system of government, but one has to take what small moves they make in putting its house in order. The cessation of its war against Yemen will be seen as a major step and undoubtedly do much to improve relations with other members of the SCO.
Although the influence of the United States will continue to wane, one must also give appropriate credit to President Biden for making the United States position that the Yemeni war had to end. For a country so addicted to promoting war, and his predecessors Donald Trump and Barak Obama doing so much to promote the Yemen war, such a move by Biden is to be welcomed.

One must hope that the BRI opens up better opportunities for Saudi Arabia and that it becomes a more responsible economic and political partner.

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