

80/2023

22/11/2023

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**Saudi Arabia's multi-faceted  
external action**[Visit the WEBSITE](#)[Receive the E-NEWSLETTER](#)*Saudi Arabia's multi-faceted external action**Abstract:*

*Saudi Arabia's external action has a multi-faceted profile, with many rough edges. In its immediate neighbourhood, the country is finding it difficult to emerge as a regional hegemonic power: its military deterrence system has failed appreciably in Yemen, where it has lost control over the Houthi-held north.*

*The key challenges in Saudi Arabia's immediate environment are undoubtedly Israel and Iran. The recent Hamas attack on Israel, a disruptive event that has strained Saudi policy and put its latest diplomatic efforts with both countries on hold, cannot be overlooked.*

*By contrast, on the global stage, Saudi Arabia is an impressive power: its economic and social conditions are very positive, and it is using them to successfully position itself in emerging geopolitical environments where an economic alternative to the G7 is being forged.*

*Saudi Arabia has entered fully into this world where the rules of global order are changing and whose dynamism is causing tensions with the aforementioned G7, which has lost its capacity to govern.*

*In line with its economic dominance, Saudi Arabia is set to have more decision-making power in international bodies and more political authority in the global environment.*

*Keywords:*

*Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, BRICS, Hamas, Israel.*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## Arabia Saudita, una acción exterior polifacética

### Resumen:

La acción exterior de Arabia Saudí presenta un perfil poliédrico, con muchas y problemáticas aristas. En su entorno cercano, el país está teniendo serias dificultades para despuntar como potencia hegemónica regional: su sistema de disuasión militar ha fracasado de manera apreciable en Yemen, donde ha perdido el control sobre el territorio del norte, ahora en poder de los huzíes.

Los retos clave del entorno próximo de Arabia Saudí son, sin duda, Israel e Irán. En este sentido, no se puede pasar por alto el reciente ataque de Hamás a Israel, evento disruptivo que ha tensionado la política saudí y ha dejado en compás de espera sus últimos esfuerzos diplomáticos con ambos países.

Por el contrario, en el escenario global Arabia Saudí es una potencia que impresiona: posee unas condiciones económicas y sociales muy positivas que está utilizando para posicionarse exitosamente en los entornos geopolíticos emergentes donde se fragua una alternativa económica al G7.

Arabia Saudí ha entrado de lleno en este mundo que está cambiando las normas del orden global y cuyo dinamismo origina tensiones con el citado G7, que ha perdido capacidad de gobierno.

De acuerdo con su predominio económico, Arabia Saudí tendrá más poder decisorio en los organismos internacionales y más autoridad política en el entorno mundial.

### Palabras clave:

Arabia Saudí, Irán, Yemen, BRICS, Hamás, Israel.

### How to cite this document:

TORREGROSA RAMOS, Natalia. *Arabia Saudita, una acción exterior polifacética*. Documento de Análisis IEEE 80/2023.

[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2023/DIEEEA80\\_2023\\_NATTOR\\_Arabia\\_E NG.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA80_2023_NATTOR_Arabia_E NG.pdf) y/o enlace bie3 (consultado día/mes/año)

## Introduction

Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) is working in multiple directions to make Saudi Arabia a global player, by deploying powerful external action. Saudi projection is underpinned by strong and diverse assets such as oil production, business development, religious prestige and the migration dimension. In fact, the country is already part of the BRICS economic grouping, a new power configuration alternative to the G7 states.

Although its social and economic conditions give it considerable leverage on the world stage, Saudi Arabia is currently finding it difficult to emerge as a regional hegemonic power. Its environment presents a difficult scenario, the country's projection clashing with secular antagonisms, counterproductive military ventures and actions for prestige purposes. In this regard, Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran, its rapprochement with Israel, the failure of its military action in Yemen, its leadership in the Arab and Muslim world, and its humanitarian projection in providing aid in conflicts and natural disaster situations should be highlighted.

The key challenges in its immediate neighbourhood are undoubtedly Israel and Iran. In this regard, one cannot overlook the recent Hamas attack on Israel, a disruptive event that has strained Saudi policy and put its latest diplomatic efforts with both countries on hold, and even paralysed them.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is on the rise and the greatest threat to the Saudi regime continues to come from this country, its historic rival. Despite its economic deficit, Iran has been able to counter Saudi Arabia's military involvement in the Yemeni conflict through support for the Houthi militias. Its support for Hamas has also left Arabia, which is torn between defending the Palestinian cause and its incipient rapprochement with Israel, in a difficult position.

As for Israel, although Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's agenda included extending the scope of the Abraham Accords to Saudi Arabia, conditions are now extremely difficult for any bilateral dialogue: Hamas's armed action has had a huge psychological impact on Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu's government is extremely weak. There is even speculation that it will fall in the short term because of its inability to protect Israel's population from an attack that killed 1,400 people outright.

## Global projection

While maintaining its rapprochement with the West, whose scientific values are highly appreciated by Saudi Arabian society, Saudi Arabia is already fully represented in 21st century Asia: China overtook the US as its largest oil buyer in 2009, and on 1 January 2024 it will join the BRICS economic group (Brazil, Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa), made up of states integrated into the global economy and with a GDP higher than that of the G7 nations (the US, Japan, Germany, the UK, France, Italy and Canada).



Figure 1. Saudi Arabia's strengths in positioning itself in emerging global environments  
Source. Own elaboration based on photographs from mundopetroleo.com, aramcolife.com and mundoislam.com.

Saudi Arabia is already part of an emerging world where the balances of global power are shifting. This new order is giving rise to tensions with the G7 because due to their great economic power, emerging economies are aspiring to gain political advantages and more decision-making power in international bodies.

Oil gives Saudi Arabia a privileged global position and bargaining power. A major economic crisis occurred in 1973 when oil-producing countries raised prices by 70% to condemn Western support for Israel. The international economic landscape has been turned upside down again as a result of the 2022 price hike, mainly caused by Saudi Arabia's pressure on the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC+), which

the nation leads along with Russia. OPEC+ currently groups twenty-four producers, which in turn control 55% of the world's supply<sup>1</sup>.

On the business side, the Arabian Oil Company (ARAMCO) and the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC) are respectively the world's largest oil and refining companies. As Balbino Prieto, honorary president of the Spanish Exporters and Investors Club, points out, it is the largest companies that achieve the greatest export power. Saudi Arabian multinationals invest in R&D<sup>2</sup> and, in terms of brand value on the global stage, ARAMCO (oil), STC (telecommunications) and Al-Rajhi Bank (banking) stand out. The country also ranks in the top fifty in terms of access to and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Saudi Arabia's global position is also evident in the religious sphere: it is home to Islam's holiest shrines, a status associated with the prerogative of preserving Islamic heritage. In addition, Mecca, where Muslims pray their five daily prayers, is a popular destination for pilgrims from all over the world, with more visitors in 2023 than in the last five years. Notably, there are approximately 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, who are required at least once in their lifetime to complete the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage quotas set by Saudi Arabia.

After the US, Saudi Arabia is the country with the second largest migrant population in the world<sup>3</sup> (12.1 million), due to its high demand for professionals in the construction and service sectors. India is the main source country for migrant workers (30%), 70% of whom are in temporary jobs. In descending order of presence, refugees from the Arab region come from Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Palestine, Libya, Egypt and Lebanon. Notably, Syria was the country with the highest number of displaced people in 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> KEPEL, Gilles. *The prophet and the pandemic: from the Middle East to the jihadism of the atmosphere*. Alianza Ensayo, 2021, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> WIPO. *Summary: Global Innovation Index 2023*. Available at: [Summary - Global Innovation Index 2023 \(wipo.int\)](https://www.wipo.int/pressroom/2023/01/summary-global-innovation-index-2023)

<sup>3</sup> INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM). "Gulf Cooperation Council countries", in *Situation Report on International Migration 2019. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the Context of the Arab Region*. United Nations, 2020, pp. 34-40. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/situation-report-international-migration-2019-global-compact-safe-orderly-and-regular>

Riyadh is an international city, and almost half of its seven million inhabitants are non-Saudis.

Last, Saudi Arabia is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country with the most young people studying in other nations, mainly in the US and the UK, but also in Australia, Canada, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

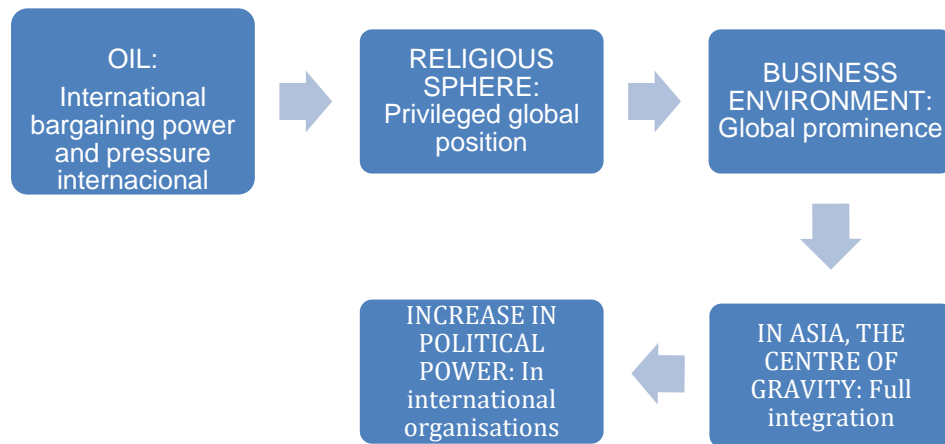


Figure 2. Deployment of external action  
 Source. Prepared by the author.

### Problems in the regional environment

Saudi Arabia does not relate so well on the regional stage. A number of stumbling blocks prevent it from enjoying the same kind of impressive global projection. In this regard, its regional military deterrence has failed significantly in Yemen and, for the first time in its recent history, it has lost control over the Houthi-held north of the country.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the rise, remains the biggest threat to the Saudi regime, its systemic rival. Saudi Arabia's relations with Israel, mediated by the Palestinian conflict, are likewise in a phase of timid rapprochement, but with an uncertain future.

Last, as a way of implementing soft power in the Arab region, Saudi Arabia began stepping up humanitarian and financial assistance to Türkiye and Syria following the February 2023 earthquakes, contributing supplies to other emergencies last September, such as the earthquake in Morocco and the Daniel storm in Libya.



### ***Agreements with Iran***

Iran and Saudi Arabia have been adversaries and have had several peripheral conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon, in what is known as the 'Middle East Cold War'.

However, China's impetus determined a completely new scenario, which took the form of the agreements for the re-establishment of bilateral relations and the reopening of embassies. First, in September 2022, Iran and the UAE signed an agreement. This was followed on 10 March 2023 by Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose pact is of greater significance.

In June 2023, Iran appointed Alireza Enayati as its ambassador to Saudi Arabia and announced the opening of the Riyadh embassy, the Jeddah consulate general and the permanent mission to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). For its part, in August the Saudi kingdom opened its embassy in Tehran and the consulate in the city of Mashad.

Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran also converge in Asia. For both, China is a high-value ally<sup>4</sup> and on 1 January 2024 they will join the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Investment from China, with its large numbers of technicians and workers in the country, is extremely important for Iran. Consequently, the relationship with the PRC is the first priority in Iranian foreign policy<sup>5</sup>.

Since the re-establishment of bilateral relations, a certain climate of mutual trust has developed that has made it possible to consider rebuilding Iran's diplomatic relations with the Gulf countries. First, Iran presented an initiative to create in Tehran a forum comprising the coastal countries bordering the Persian Gulf (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE). Also very significant were the first visits to

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<sup>4</sup> In the field of technology and knowledge, China tops the list of countries with the highest number of science clusters. Among the 25 most valuable unicorn companies, the Chinese company ByteDance (artificial intelligence) ranks first, followed by Shein (e-commerce) and Xiaohongshu (e-commerce). Unicorn companies are start-ups, privately held and valued at more than USD 1 billion.

<sup>5</sup> Iran is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which comprises India, Russia, China, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Tehran and Riyadh by the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers, Faisal bin Farhan and Hossein Amirabdollahian, respectively.

Prior to these agreements, Iran already had important energy relations with Qatar and Oman, mainly for the development of joint gas exploration in common offshore fields. Notably, these three countries do not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel. In the case of Oman, the rift even widened after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's election victory.

Qatar has maintained important foreign relations with Iran outside the agenda and decisions of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Because of these ties, between 2017 and 2021 the countries belonging to the body, which was formed in 1981, severed diplomatic relations. The rift was also caused by Qatar's support for designated terrorist organisations. More specifically, Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh and other Hamas members reside in the capital, Doha.

Iran's relationship with Oman<sup>6</sup>, the other nation bordering the Strait of Hormuz, date back to 1992 when the first negotiations began for the joint development of gas exploration in the offshore fields of Bukha and Hengam, a plan that was attempted to be resumed in 2015. Last, in May 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Sultan Haitham bin Tariq reached an agreement in Muscat to jointly exploit the Hengam oil field, located in the Persian Gulf in a common maritime space near the Iranian island of the same name <sup>7</sup>.

### ***Relations with Israel***

Neither does Saudi Arabia currently have diplomatic relations with Israel, and rivalry has previously been the main feature in this regard. Indeed, the country gained much influence within the Arab world due to its support for the Palestinian cause.

In 2002, Saudi Arabia put forward the Arab Peace Initiative, which offered universal recognition of the State of Israel by Arab countries and normalisation of relations in

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<sup>6</sup> TORREGROSA RAMOS, Natalia. "Geopolitical Assessment of Oman" (IEEE Analysis Paper, 52/2023). Available at:

[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2023/DIEEEA52\\_2023\\_NATTOR\\_Oman.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA52_2023_NATTOR_Oman.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> LUCENTE, Adam. "Iran and Oman agreed today to jointly develop an oil field in the Persian Gulf", *Al-Monitor*. 23 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/iran-oman-jointly-develop-oil-field#ixzz7UBZ8YGqt> [accessed: 08/10/2023].



exchange for its withdrawal from the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 and the creation of a Palestinian state within these boundaries, with Jerusalem as its capital, and a return of the Palestinian refugees.

On the Israeli side, a feature of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's programme from the beginning of his term in office in December 2022 has been to extend the scope of the Abraham Accords to Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia. Apart from the recognitions of Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), the fact is that the US-driven agreements have so far not yielded the expected results. The US was the first Arab country to recognise the State of Israel, an event that took place on 13 August 2020 in Washington. Since then only three other countries have signed the Abraham Accords: Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.

To move closer to Saudi Arabia, Israel gave up discussing the latter's sovereignty over the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir. Furthermore, the presence of Israeli businessmen in Riyadh, Saudi investments in American Jewish community technology companies and energy agreements have provided a space for mutual understanding. Saudi Arabia opened its airspace to Israeli commercial flights in February 2023.

However, there is a red line that none of the actors will cross: Saudi Arabia has stated that an agreement should be linked to its 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, a proposal that was rejected by Israel at the time. Meanwhile, Benjamin Netanyahu intends to cultivate relations with Saudi Arabia outside the Palestinian issue.

### ***The Palestinian cause***

Saudi Arabia has been supporting the Palestinian cause through financial commitments to its successive recognised representations. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), led by Yasser Arafat<sup>8</sup>, was the representative until the Oslo Accords (1993). Since then, although without authority over territories, the international community has recognised the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). However, in the so-called Cairo

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<sup>8</sup> Yasser Arafat died in 2004 and was succeeded by Mahmoud Abbas.

Declaration (2019) twelve Palestinian groups, including Fatah and Hamas, agreed to recognise the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians<sup>9</sup>.

In Ramallah, the administrative seat of the PNA, Saudi Arabia appointed Nayef Al-Sudairi, who presented his credentials to Foreign Minister Riyadh Al-Maliki, as non-resident ambassador to Palestine in September 2023. Earlier, PNA President Mahmoud Abbas had visited the Saudi city of Jeddah, where he was received by MbS.

In 2007, the Islamist Hamas movement began to rule the Gaza Strip (360 sq. km). At that time, Saudi Arabia had already acted as mediator in the Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas<sup>10</sup>, which sought to negotiate a coalition government with the Saudi offer of increased development aid to the occupied Palestinian territories.

However, due to its terrorist actions and armed activities that displaced Fatah, Hamas took the lead in the fight against Israel. This activity led to widespread consensus that the organisation was a terrorist one: the US State Department included it on its list of terrorist organisations, the EU gave it the same label, and it is also listed as such in the registers of other countries, such as Japan, Australia and Canada.

The Islamist Hamas movement<sup>11</sup> appeared on the Palestinian political scene in December 1987 in the context of the first intifada. Since then, its military activity against Israel has resulted in a large number of casualties in attacks, many of them suicide bombings. Hamas terrorism reached its zenith during the period of the second intifada or

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<sup>9</sup> Lecture by Carmen López Alonso, Emeritus Professor of the Department of History, Political Theories and Geography ("Commemoration of the Oslo Accords: an initiative to promote coexistence between Israel and Palestine from Spain". Faculty of Philology, Complutense University of Madrid, 7-8 February 2023).

<sup>10</sup> In 2006, Hamas won the legislative elections with an absolute majority (76 out of 132 seats in parliament). Under pressure from various Palestinian figures, Hamas and Fatah repeatedly attempted to form a coalition government. Saudi Arabia mediated these attempts in response to the refusal of Israel, the US and the EU to recognise the election result.

Cfr. KHADER, Bichara. *El mundo árabe explicado a Europa* (Icaria, Barcelona, 2009) and *Los hijos de Ajenor: Europa y Palestina, desde las cruzadas hasta el siglo XXI* (Bellaterra, Barcelona, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> "Hamas's Charter of 18 August 1988 is its ideological basis. Islam is established as a comprehensive system of life. Allah is their goal. The Prophet is their guide. The Koran its constitution [...] and Palestine is sacralised as an Islamic *waqf* [...]. A *waqf* is a good of Islam entrusted to all Muslim generations forever, an inalienable, non-negotiable and indivisible good, which must be defended through jihad" (LÓPEZ ALONSO, Carmen. *Hamas. The march to power*. Los Libros de la Catarata, Madrid, 2007).

Al-Aqsa intifada, with the peak of suicide attacks between 2000 and 2004, halting all peace plans, including Saudi Arabia's.

On 7 October 2023, in an attack named Tormenta de Al-Aqsa, Hamas once again torpedoed the possible normalisation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Lebanese militia Hezbollah said the attack was a message to all those fighting for a normalisation agreement.

What is certain is that the Hamas operation has introduced a new dimension to the dynamics in the region, making conditions now too difficult to engage in any bilateral dialogue.

The armed action has had a huge psychological impact in Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu's government is now facing major problems. Voices are even being heard that it will fall in the short term because of its failure to protect the Israeli population. The immediate outcome of the attack was 1,400 dead and 240 hostages taken. Nonetheless, it is difficult to think that the Hamas initiative, of whose planning Egypt had warned, went unnoticed by Israeli intelligence services.

The Israeli counteroffensive in the Gaza Strip - air strikes and two ground incursions to date - killing more than 8,000 people and injuring 21,000, has driven a wedge in relations between the Arab world and Israel: the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have condemned the attacks on civilians and violations of international norms in a joint statement in which they also criticised the Israeli occupation.

What is more, the attack now makes the Strip ungovernable. The Gazan population was previously extremely critical of Hamas because of its high level of corruption. However, as a terrorist group, the organisation has managed to increase its leadership in the ongoing confrontation with Israel.

The collateral effects of the conflict are already evident,<sup>12</sup> and the prospect of US or Iranian intervention emerges as the most serious risk<sup>13</sup> for the region, not forgetting that Israel is a nuclear state.

### ***Failure of hard power in Yemen***

Yemen has always been a hub on trade routes between West and East, but it gained its real strategic importance after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, when the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean were connected through the Red Sea<sup>14</sup>. Given this privileged transit position, the Saudi monarchy has perpetuated ongoing and strong interference in Yemen:

- In North Yemen, during the period of influence of Gamal Nasser and the Soviet Union in the Arab region<sup>15</sup>, war began between Ali Abdullah Saleh, supported by Nasser, and the supporters of Imam Al-Badr, backed by Saudi King Faisal. In fact, the press at the time dubbed the territory 'the Vietnam of the Middle East' because of the peripheral war between Saudi monarch Faisal and Egyptian President Nasser, which led to eight years of conflict in North Yemen (1962-1970).

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<sup>12</sup> RIBEIRO, Alex. "Shots from an Israeli army tank accidentally wound nine Egyptian soldiers on the border with the Gaza Strip", *Defence.com*. 23 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.defensa.com/africa-asia-pacifico/disparos-tanque-ejercito-israeli-hieren-accidentalmente-9-franja>

<sup>13</sup> Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin has put more than 2,000 military personnel on high alert with a deployment readiness order. On 17 October, the Pentagon said that should the president activate the units, US Army air defences, medical and logistical capabilities, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities in the Middle East would be further strengthened.

Across the Atlantic, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower carrier strike group is also ready to join the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group, which is operating in the eastern Mediterranean. Three ships of the USS Bataan amphibious group are deploying Marines in waters near Israel. A squadron of A-10 strike aircraft has arrived in the Middle East and the deployment of another squadron has been extended. More F-15 and F-16 fighter jets are also arriving in the region (BABB, Carla. "US warship shoots down several missiles "potentially" aimed at Israel", *Galaxia Militar*. 20 October 2023. Available at: <https://galaxiamilitar.es/un-buque-de-guerra-estadounidense-derriba-varios-misiles-potencialmente-dirigidos-a-israel>).

<sup>14</sup> ABULAFIA, David. *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*. Crítica, 2011, p. 555.

<sup>15</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt was the Soviet Union's first client state in the Middle East (POWASKI, Ronald E. *The Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union [1917-1991]*. Crítica, 2000, p.149-154).

- The Saudis also stirred up subversion in the British colonial territory of South Yemen, where they gained a strong foothold among the Hadramaut tribes because of the presence of oil in the British-controlled Shabwa district.
- After the 1979 Treaty of Union, the new Yemeni state's existence became extremely precarious due to the interference of the Saudi monarchy and other powers.
- Again, in 2011, the Arab Spring caused major political instability in Yemen, resulting in the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh<sup>16</sup> after 32 years in office, and the transfer of his powers to the then deputy prime minister, Mansur al-Hadi.
- The latest milestone came in 2014 with the rise of the Iranian-backed Houthi movement on the Yemeni political scene. The Houthis took control of the capital, Sana'a, founded the Supreme Revolutionary Council, dissolved parliament and ousted the government.

This marked the waning of Saudi hegemony in Yemen, especially in the north. This event also led to a military intervention against the Houthi militias led by Saudi Arabia in March 2015, marking the beginning of a long-running armed conflict, active for more than eight years and one of the most important geopolitical challenges in the Arab region.

Iranian and Saudi Arabian interference has prolonged the conflict indefinitely. On the ground, the warring parties are competing for control of at least one of the three governorates where the main oil and gas fields are located: Marib, Shabwa and Hadramaut. Specifically, in the centre of the country, Marib recorded the highest number of fatalities (8824 dead) and displaced people (902,836) by far in the period between 2021 and 2022<sup>17</sup>.

Saudi Arabia maintains a 15,000-strong contingent and high military capabilities in Yemen. Militarily and politically, the Yemeni National Resistance Forces, the Presidential Leadership Council and the Southern Transitional Council are totally dependent on Saudi

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<sup>16</sup> Former Yemeni President Ali Addullah Saleh was finally assassinated in 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Displacement data by governorate are from UNHCR ([Yemen Emergency - UNHCR](#)). Fatality statistics are taken from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (<https://acleddata.com/middle-east/yemen/> [see: 08/11/2023]).

Arabian financial support and regular deposits in the Bank of Aden. This anti-Houthi coalition is made up of 160,000 unstructured forces, made up the members provided by each armed group and the contingent deployed in Yemen by Saudi Arabia and the US.

In contrast, the Houthis are highly cohesive, with a 200,000-strong Iranian-sponsored contingent that adopts similar slogans to those of Iran, organises major parades to showcase its military strength and aspires to the formation of a political entity with control over some 60% of Yemen's territory.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the Yemen war also has an important maritime dimension<sup>18</sup>. The countries bordering the east coast of the Red Sea are Saudi Arabia and Yemen. As noted, because of the importance of this coastline, northern Yemen was traditionally an area of Saudi influence, which began to wane in 2015, when the government in Sana'a fell into hostile hands.

In addition to increasing its military naval capacity, in 2020 in this maritime area Saudi Arabia launched the Red Sea Alliance with other coastal countries: Jordan, Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt and Yemen.

For Saudi Arabia, securing the export channels of its major refineries and ensuring the route of its large oil tankers through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which links the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, are essential. For this reason, protection against Houthi attacks on port infrastructure along the Yemeni coast, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden is of paramount importance to their interests.

In October 2023, the US Navy (destroyer USS Carney) shot down several cruise missiles and drones launched by Houthi militants, weapons the Pentagon said were heading across the Red Sea towards potential targets in Israel<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> THE NEW ARAB. "The battle for control of Yemen's ports". 28 July 2023. Available at: <https://channel16.dryadglobal.com/the-battle-for-control-of-yemens-ports> [consultation: 01/10/2023].

<sup>19</sup> MAIZ, Julio. "US destroyer shoots down several missiles potentially aimed at Israel from the Red Sea", *Defence.com*. 28 July 2023. Available at: [US destroyer shoots down missiles potentially aimed at Israel - Defence News.com NATO and Europe](#)



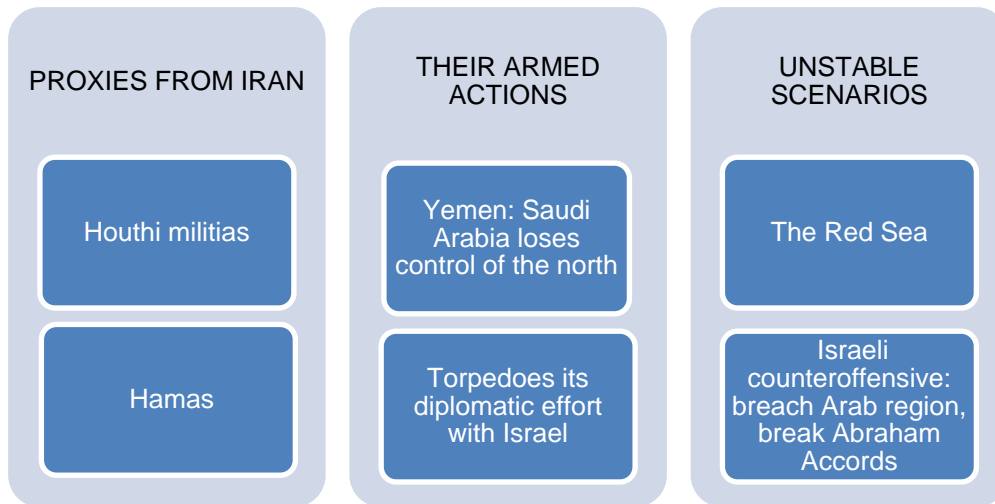


Figure 3. The regional environment is very problematic for Saudi Arabia.  
 Source. Prepared by the author.

## Conclusions

Saudi Arabia's external action takes place on two levels: the immediate environment and the global stage. In the former, it is having serious difficulties to emerge as a regional hegemonic power, while in the latter it has very successfully positioned itself in emerging geopolitical environments.

Its system of military deterrence has failed significantly in Yemen, where it has lost control over the Houthi-held northern territory.

The key challenges in Saudi Arabia's immediate environment are undoubtedly Israel and Iran. The recent Hamas attack on Israel, a disruptive event that has strained Saudi policy and put its latest diplomatic efforts with both countries on hold, cannot be overlooked.

By contrast, on the global stage Saudi Arabia is an impressive power, with very positive economic and social conditions that it is using among the BRICS, who are trying to forge an economic alternative to the G7.

### *Global scenario*

Based on economic parameters, Saudi Arabia is seen as a regional actor with sufficient means to deploy considerable financial pressure at the global level.

In line with its economic dominance, Saudi Arabia will have more decision-making power in international bodies and political authority in the global environment.

In terms of its projection in Asia, the country is fully integrated in the region, a circumstance that brings it together with Iran as a partner in the BRICS group.

### ***Power balances in the regional environment***

The Islamic Republic of Iran is also on the rise<sup>20</sup> in terms of foreign policy and has sufficient military capability to limit Saudi Arabia's power as a regional hegemonic actor.

The main threat to the Saudi regime is seen as continuing to come from Iran, its biggest rival. Despite Iran's economic deficit, the country has been able to put Saudi Arabia in check by opening two major war fronts through *proxy* actors: the Houthi militias and Hamas.

#### *Houthi militias in Yemen*

The regional deterrence system has failed appreciably in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia has consequently lost its traditional influence in the north of the country and its strategic position on part of the Red Sea coastline.

What is more, its military intervention since March 2015, alleged violations of international humanitarian law and the major humanitarian crisis are causing a serious reputational crisis for Saudi Arabia, revealing its incompatibility with its Vision 2030.

The Saudi military intervention is considered to have failed to achieve the objective of containing the Iranian-backed Houthi militias and restoring the pre-2015 political situation. In contrast, the Houthi authorities continue to occupy the capital of Sana'a, have political prestige and have strengthened their front lines. The Houthis want to negotiate a way out of the war, but they will not give up their ambition of a place in the country's future political system.

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<sup>20</sup> According to the assessment made by Javier Gil Perez, professor at Comillas Pontifical University, who spoke about Iran's foreign policy in a lecture given on 4 July 2023 during the summer course *Geopolitical Trends (IV): the effects of the war in Ukraine* (San Lorenzo de El Escorial, 3-7 July 2023).

Further, the conflict is expected to spread to the Red Sea in the short term due to Houthi attacks using a wide variety of surface-to-air missiles, although Saudi military naval assets can guarantee energy supplies and the security of export channels for the time being.

Repelling attacks in the Red Sea may require the protection of the US Navy, which would call into question Saudi Arabia's ability to defend its coastline.

For their part, in the Persian Gulf, the coastal countries of Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as Oman and Qatar, will remain stable as this is an area with a major impact on international relations and the world economy.

### ***Hamas***

Iran has radically changed the context of potential regional alliances between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Abraham Accords clash head-on with Iranian perceptions and the Hamas attack of 7 October is seen as key to halting the Saudi-Israeli negotiation process. Iran, through Hamas, has succeeded in alienating Israel from Saudi Arabia and has scuppered diplomatic efforts at rapprochement between the two countries.

Moreover, the Palestinian conflict, which had lost its international significance, is once again at the heart of relations between Israel and Arab countries. It is considered likely that, due to the Israeli counter-offensive, the UAE and Bahrain will think about breaking the Abraham Accords.

For its part, Hamas has achieved a great propaganda victory thanks to the manner of execution of its attack and the large number of casualties, which will enhance the group's importance in the fight against Israel and the revival of the conflict. Contrarily, the attack is seen as having further weakened the PNA.

Nonetheless, Hamas will probably no longer be able to govern the Strip. Moreover, due to the suffering of the Gazan population, Hamas is likely to lose its social base in the medium term.

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