

A View from the West: The Houseboat of Saud

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's economic prosperity – and thus its legitimacy – depends on oil shipping. However, post-Arab Spring crises have threatened the stability on which that shipping depends, causing Riyadh to turn away from its traditional inward-facing policy and towards regional engagement. Lacking the capability to respond to emerging challenges unilaterally, the Kingdom is seeking regional alliances within which it can assume a leadership role.

An opportunity for Saudi Arabia to lead rather than follow in regional military and diplomatic initiatives has been provided by American policies aimed at reducing local dependency on its presence. The resulting apprehension among Arab states about an American withdrawal has provided space for leadership.

Saudi Arabia and its neighbours have significant shared interests in the maritime movement of goods, and this makes the naval sphere a key step on the Saudi path to regional leadership. By capitalizing on its naval advantages and shared interests with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt and other regional states, Saudi Arabia is securing a preeminent role in the Arab world.

To lead in maritime security, Saudi Arabia needs to be a regionally credible naval power. It has prioritized fleet modernization despite serious economic problems caused by declining oil prices and shrinking currency reserves. The Saudi procurement program is geared towards the threat of shipping disruption at maritime chokepoints by its rival, Iran, over and above other threats like piracy, smuggling and terrorism.

Riyadh's current Saudi Naval Expansion Program II (SNEP II) builds on a predecessor program to revitalize the Eastern Fleet that emphasized hardware that could counter large-scale shipping disruption. Vessels like its *Al-Riyadh* F3000S stealth frigates have substantial anti-air/missile and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.¹ These capabilities are enhanced by the Eastern Fleet's mine countermeasures (MCM) and ASW capabilities in the *Addriyah* minesweeper and *Al-Madinah* frigates.

SNEP II has been allocated an estimated USD \$20 billion to update the ageing Gulf Fleet. Iranian anti-access/area-denial capabilities potentially threaten Gulf shipping with fighter and missile fleets, swarm tactics, naval mines and submarines. SNEP II attempts to address these challenges through the purchase of Lockheed Martin's Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), modified for increased surface-to-



Saudi Arabia's stealth frigate, *Al-Riyadh* F3000S KSA *Sawari II*.

surface, anti-air and anti-missile capabilities.² Gaps that the LCS leaves in ASW and MCM are to be addressed with new helicopters, submarines and MCM and patrol vessels like the Mk. V Special Operations Craft.³ These capabilities make the Kingdom a valuable ally to smaller regional states, placing it in a natural leadership position.

Saudi-led Naval Cooperation

While fear of American withdrawal has also pushed other Gulf states to expand their navies, these expansions have remained modest as most Gulf monarchies lack the populations or strategic incentives to develop more than small navies. Instead, these states employ defence doctrines that rely on allied support.

Most Gulf navies, and their procurement programs, focus on protecting local oil platforms and islands, as well as close-in interdiction of coastal threats. Kuwait's new amphibious capabilities, Bahrain's expanding patrol fleet, and Qatar's pursuit of fast attack craft and helicopters are all designed for local operations. Even the better equipped fleets of Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) suffer from capability gaps in anti-air/missile, ASW and MCM. Saudi Arabia's relative strength in these areas induces a reliance among GCC states on the Saudi navy for their maritime security.

The Saudis have leveraged the GCC's shared national interests in shipping security into a more unified GCC. Despite its failure to make the GCC into a full union – a proposal shot down by Oman in December 2013 – Saudi Arabia has made concrete advances in Gulf naval cooperation. Riyadh proposed a joint naval force akin to Peninsula Shield, the GCC's land force, at the December 2014 GCC

summit.⁴ The move was approved unanimously and joint exercises and logistical cooperation are well underway. Continued threats to shipping will likely pave the way for expanded GCC cooperation under Saudi leadership.

Egypt, while not part of the GCC, is a key regional actor and an important partner for Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring and the protests that removed both President Hosni Mubarak and his replacement have created significant instability in Egypt. This has made the country unable to project influence to the degree it could during the Cold War. Instead, Egypt has been focusing inward rather than pursuing Arab leadership, taking on a secondary role, and cooperating with Saudi Arabia on initiatives that advance Egyptian national interests. Saudi coalition-building is indirectly strengthened by Egypt's goodwill as a former leader of the Arab world. To this end, Riyadh pursues cooperation like the July 2015 Cairo Declaration that included agreements to define Red Sea maritime boundaries and cooperation on threats to shipping.

Saudi Arabia has poured aid across the Red Sea to fund the growth of Egypt's navy, funding the purchase of two *Mistral*-class Landing Helicopter Docks (LHD). These LHDs, should Egypt surmount the technical challenges to make them effective, will markedly improve its amphibious capabilities. Saudi aid also partially funds other Egyptian naval capabilities, like the acquisition of its Gowind corvettes, FREMM frigate and plans for new submarines.

The other central focus of Saudi interests is Yemen. Its long coastlines on both the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea make Yemen a key locus for ensuring the freedom of the sea lanes vital for Middle Eastern oil shipping. Consequently, control of large parts of the country by Iran-backed Houthi rebels that ousted a transitional administration in January 2015 sparked consternation in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh fears a Houthi victory could threaten the Bab al Mandeb Strait – through which 4.7 million barrels of oil transited per day in 2014⁵ – in the same manner that Iran looms over the Strait of Hormuz.

Many local states share concerns about what a Houthi-dominated Yemen could mean for the free movement of shipping. On 25 March 2015, Saudi Arabia leveraged this mutual interest to build a coalition to intervene in Yemen, even drawing on states outside of Saudi Arabia's traditional sphere of influence, like Morocco and Sudan.

Naval operations have been essential to the coalition's campaign, and have included even hesitant states like Oman and Pakistan in various capacities. The coalition established a blockade on 30 March to prevent foreign support of the Houthis, diverting and detaining suspicious vessels, including two Iranian ships carrying weapons

in September 2015. This blockade enables further naval activity, including Saudi-Egyptian naval bombardment during the May-July siege of the port city of Aden and the coalition's seizure of the strategic Perim Island in the Bab al Mandeb, and Hanish Islands in the Red Sea in fall 2015.⁶

Yemen's strategic location vis-à-vis maritime trade and the coalition's naval response have underscored the regional importance of Saudi naval power that underpinned coalition-building. Saudi Arabia's versatile navy has provided credibility and authority for its diplomatic initiatives.

On the Road to Arab Leadership

Saudi Arabia's procurement and diplomatic efforts place it in an influential role, facilitating its regional exercise of power. Whether or not the American withdrawal feared by Gulf states is occurring, the Kingdom's expanding navy, its push towards cooperative maritime security with the GCC and Egypt, and its coalition-building in Yemen indicate a more activist Saudi foreign policy.

So where does Saudi leadership move next? The clearest answer is continued pursuit of GCC union and relationship building with important regional allies. The Yemeni campaign includes many states outside the traditional Saudi sphere of influence, indicating the development of a wider regional network to call on for future threats, bolstering the legitimacy and capabilities of any Saudi response.

Still lacking the naval capabilities to act unilaterally, Saudi Arabia needs structures in place to build coalitions. Its procurement and diplomatic initiatives in the GCC, with Egypt and against insurgency in Yemen, shows it is rapidly moving to set in place those structures that will enable it to take the preeminent position in the Arab world. 🇸🇦

Notes

1. "Al Riyadh (F3000S Sawari II) Class, Saudi Arabia," *Naval Technology*, no date, available at www.naval-technology.com/projects/al_riyadh.
2. Christopher P. Cavas, "US OKs Potential \$11.25B Saudi Deal for LCS Variant," *Defense News*, 20 October 2015.
3. Defence Security Cooperation Agency, "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – Mark V Patrol Boats," 10 July 2013, available at www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/kingdom-saudi-arabia-mark-v-patrol-boats.
4. "GCC Creates Joint Police and Naval Forces as Regional Threats Mount," *Gulf Business*, 10 December 2014, available at <http://gulfbusiness.com/articles/industry/gcc-creates-joint-police-and-naval-forces-as-regional-threats-mount/>.
5. US Energy Information Administration, "Oil Trade off Yemen Coast Grew by 20% to 4.7 Million Barrels Per Day in 2014," April 2015, available at www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=20932#.
6. See Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," Washington Institute, 10 August 2015; and Mohammed Mukhashaf, "Gulf Arabs Wrest Strategic Yemen Island from Iran-allied Group," Reuters, 5 October 2015.

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