

# Political character And Saudi Arabia's fire diplomacy

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to trace the political nature behind Saudi Arabia's decision The Kingdom of the Saudis executes Shia cleric Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr using speech act theory. It is no coincidence when the implementation of the NIMR conducted before the implementation of the JCPOA reached Iran with the 5+1 group and the European Union. Saudi political action arises from a political character that is both personal and tribal. This article provides theoretical reinforcement to earlier related research, notably Hermann Frederick Eilts on Saudi Arabian foreign policy, also Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner highlighting state formation and Arab tribal country patterns. Fire diplomacy tracking model relying on oil (money) and sword (military), a little bit to contribute to the urgency to understand the political nature, including the style of diplomacy, as great maps to analyze the political action of the Arab kingdom of Saud actors in responding to regional and global political dynamics.

**Keywords:** speech act, political nature, personal, tribe



## A. INTRODUCTION

Within the discipline of International Relations, Nicholas Greenwood Onuf proposes a speech act theory regarding the relationship between the influence of agents and structures taking place in a circle of interactions. The subject creates and influences the structure, while the structure influences the subject. Because it's people who make the rules, then the rules govern society and the rules of society are what make people do it themselves in a certain way. As stated by Onuf in *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (1989: 66), "People make rules, rules make society, society's rules make people behave in ways specific".

Onuf (1989: 66) sees human beings - especially politicians - in the construction of reality through their actions in the form of real actions or speech acts. Repetitive actions and statements form rules for other actors. The declarations of politicians become rules that provide only two choices for the other political actors, whether to follow them or not, obviously with the respective consequences.

Onuf's glasses help trace the political character of Saudi Arabia's rulers from his political action to execute Nimr Baqir al-Nimr which was executed on the second day of the new year 2016. The reason is that the execution of al-Nimr it did not arise from a purely Saudi internal affairs decision. with national security , but more influenced by external factors, especially as a reaction to regional and global dynamics.

Al-Nimr's execution comes amid easing tensions between Iran and the West over the nuclear issue as Iran and the 5+1 group and the European Union reached a nuclear deal in Vienna. The agreement reached by the two sides on July 14, 2015 gave birth to a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that would ease the Western sanctions imposed on Iran for years. It is no coincidence that the execution of Al-Nimr was carried out about two weeks before the implementation of the JCPOA on January 16, 2016. (<http://www.irna.-ir/fa/News/81923180/>).

For more than three decades after the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia and most of the other Arab countries in the Persian Gulf region have enjoyed great support from the United States. At the same time, Western exclusion of Iran benefits Saudi Arabia's dominance of the region. Thus, as the West started closing with Iran, Riyadh's concerns about Iran's strengthening influence in the Middle East region surfaced. Saudi political action to execute Al-Nimr as a reaction to the regional (and global) transformation of the Middle East raises big questions about the political nature underpinning the political and diplomatic style of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## **B. METHOD**

This research approach uses a qualitative analysis system in which the qualitative research process is carried out by researchers through literature studies and subject-related studies. The character of qualitative research is a complete narrative, in which the researcher tries to carry out a thorough analysis of the research questions so that the analysis can be carried out under various aspects. Therefore, this search should be able to display the problem clearly and completely.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Tracing Saudi political character**

Around the sixtieth decade, Dean Acheson (1893-1971) once said that the national goal of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, like any other country, was to survive and prosper, but it must add conditions under the Al Saud dynasty. Hermann Frederick Eilts has posed the statement by the US Secretary of State in the era of President Harry S Truman as an entry point to understanding the nature of Saudi Arabian politics, including foreign policy, and even its diplomatic style (Brown, 2004: 219).

Judging by his national goals, the ruler of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia defines the national goals of the Arab state in terms of the interests of the Al Saud dynasty. Although Saudi Arabia has adopted political institutionalization in its pyramid of power, its characteristics are tribal and personal (Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, 1987). The so-called Shura as an alternative to Western democracy, or Bedouin Democracy, was nothing more than an association of Al Saud dynasty princes plus Wahhabi scholars. According to Fred Halliday, this form of political institutionalism does not explain the character of the modern state (Halliday, 2005: 44).

Anthropological investigations show that the social order prevailing in the Arabian Peninsula for centuries was based on the centrality of tribes in the life of Arab society. A group of people shares the territory under their control and their economic interests are supported by kinship. Members' political allegiance to the boss will receive physical and economic protection and social status. However, a tribe is not a monolithic structure but is divided into sub-units: families, clans and larger factions. Collective solidarity (*asabiyah*) is expressed through military and economic cohesion. This model is still valid today in a more systematic and broad form with the dominance of the Al Saud tribe over the other tribes of Saudi Arabia (Kostiner, 1993: 16-17).

With such a social structure, it is not surprising that the voice of the people has little room in making political decisions in this Arab country. Furthermore, the important posts of Saudi Arabian power have always been held by princes of the Al Saud dynasty, as well as persons affiliated with the king and crown prince. For example, the governorship of Mecca was held by Khalid al-Faisal Al Saud. Previously held by Mishaal bin Abdullah Al Saud who was also a prince.

Askari's research shows the personal political nature of Saudi Arabia's rulers. This is indicated by the thin wall between the state treasury and private accounts to meet the needs of the authorities which are almost unlimited (Askari, 2009: 107-108).

Following the personal and tribal nature of the Al Saud regime's policy helps to understand the reason for Al-Nimr's execution.

First, the execution of Al-Nimr as a way for the Al Saud dynasty to suppress the popular protest movement that has been accelerating since 2011, especially in the heart of the oil-rich area to the east. Al-Nimr's beheading sent a signal to all of Riyadh's opposition government to stop their action against the Al Saud kingdom. Riyadh currently offers only two options; obey Al Saud, or muzzle.

Perhaps it is not important for Riyadh to distinguish whether Nimr rioted by taking up arms, or simply shouting at the podium with his words to simply express the oppression of the people claiming his legal rights. Because there is only one narrative on the interpretation of the nation and the state according to Al Saud's definition, not others.

For about five years, this personal political style has been dominant in the various repressive actions of Al Saud in response to the peaceful wave of popular protests in the eastern region demanding justice and democratization.

Personal political character, as practiced by Saudi Arabia, is determined by who is in power as king, which transcends the constitutional system and existing laws. One of the features of the government system of the absolute monarchy is its thick personal characteristics. A king's decision is a law and can invalidate the rules, even change them.

Furthermore, from the point of view of the social psychology of Middle Eastern society, the tribal political style shows that Al Saud only wants to interact with top leaders, not with community members or their representatives through elections. If a

tribal leader can be asked to compromise, he will become an ally, but if he refuses, he must be removed and fought against. This character is still preserved today.

When Al-Nimr as the leader of the Saudi Shiites cannot be silenced out of silence, then the path Al Saud has chosen is to suppress him. Furthermore, studies of Middle Eastern political anthropology show that tribal resistance never lasts long when its leader dies, unless it has other equal or better charismatic leaders.

This approach also explains why Arab countries fight each other for regional dominance, as the Saudis did with Yemen, Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, this problem indicates that democracy, which promotes the interests of ordinary people, is seen as a threat to the national interests of some Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia.

Secondly, Nimr's execution sent an important message to Tehran after the nuclear deal was reached between Iran and the 5+1 group in July 2015. Riyadh sees Tehran as the main rival for its position to dominate the Middle East. Al Saud's tribal political character tends to be ambitious and wants to make him the most influential ruler in the Middle East (Western Asia) region.

Anthropological studies of the Middle East illustrate the high competition among tribes in the region to compete for regional dominance. The Al Saud dynasty itself controlled the Hejaz, with its major cities Jeddah, Mecca and Medina, through a bloodshed battle known as the "Mecca War" in 1924.

Since ancient times, the personal and tribal nature of Arab politics has been very well read and utilized by imperialists such as Britain and now the United States, for the benefit of their own political economy. At the time, a British archaeologist and diplomat named Thomas Edward Lawrence launched an asymmetrical provocation that sparked a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire and the separation of the Hejaz in 1916.

As is the case today in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, in the past the Arab nations with their personal and tribal characteristics were easily contrasted by Lawrence more than a century ago. This British scientist and diplomat played an important role in the Aqaba War in 1917, the Tafilah War in 1918, and the Sykes- Picot Treaty in 1916 between Britain and France, which divided Ottoman Turkish territory into fragments. Even today, Arab countries in the Middle East are so dependent on the West, especially Britain and the United States.

If a century ago the conflict unleashed by Britain against the Arab nations was a common enemy of the Ottomans, now it has changed its name to Iran, and has been brought forward not only by Britain, but by the United States as a new player. Imperialist goals have not changed since then until now to control natural resources that have overflowed. Furthermore, these imperialist countries profit from the sale of arms in the wars they are waging in the region. Moreover, he managed to turn Muslims against each other.

The personal and tribal nature of the Al Saud regime's politics easily adopts the grand "iranophobia" narrative heralded by the West, especially the United States and

Britain, and Israel. For Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran after the victory of the Islamic Revolution is the culprit in the region.

For more than three decades, the Saudis have agreed with the United States and Britain in various ways to reduce the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Riyadh's support, along with the West and some Arab countries, for Saddam Hussein in the war with Iran in 1980-1988 yielded no results. Indeed, a few years later, Saddam was overthrown by the United States, which had previously supported him, through a military invasion in 2003, and Saddam himself was executed on December 30, 2006.

Not only that, the Saudis have also intervened in many countries in the region to realize their ambitions, including support for terrorist groups like ISIS operating in Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia also launched military aggression in Yemen to provoke Iran, and previously in Bahrain.

Third, the personal and tribal nature of Saudi politics is very strong in the collective representation that the Al Saud regime has echoed with great fanfare. Al-Nimr's execution was carried out to strengthen Saudi Arabia's position of collective representation among Arab countries and the Islamic world in order to reduce Iranian influence.

This collective representation can be explored somewhat by Durkheim's analysis of how to act from collective elaboration through authoritative legal rules (Durkheim, 1982, & Ceri, 1993: 135-152). The goal is to raise collective sectarian awareness of the subjective values planted by the Saudis by building solidarity among Arab and Sunni tribes, as opposed to Iran. The Saudis use in-group solidarity to conduct a confrontation with the Sunni Islamic world in order to destabilize Iran, which is posed as an out-group. Therefore, the communication models used are "we" and "them", or propaganda "Shia is not Islam" and others.

When this scenario was realized by the Saudis, in fact Riyadh was carrying out an imperialist plot to segregate the Islamic world in a plot of sectarian political tensions, precisely to serve the ambition of regional domination by the Al Saud regime and the agenda hidden of the West, especially the United States, which has political business interests behind the conspiracy. That.

It seems that, as the ruler of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Al Saud regime has idealized its values. As these values are enacted in the state, its leadership will become solid. And conversely, Sunni or Shia, any opposition force like Sheikh Nimr will be eliminated to maintain the status quo of Al Saud.

The Al Saud regime's decision to execute Al-Nimr cannot be separated from the support of the West's "blank check on human rights". Saudi Arabia's election as a panel of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the 2014-2016 term was a cover for its actions. Even The Independent said there was a hidden agreement between Britain and Saudi Arabia on this issue. (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com>)

Several human rights institutions around the world have explained a number of human rights violations committed by Saudi Arabia. More recently, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that Saudi Arabia used a banned weapon, a CBU-58 type cluster bomb manufactured by an arms factory in the US state of Tennessee in 1978 to target residential areas around Sanaa, the Yemeni capital. ( <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/07/> )

### **Fire Diplomacy: Oil and Sword**

Korany and Dessouki (1984) describe four components of foreign policy as a starting point for analysis in the form of domestic environment, foreign policy orientation, decision-making processes and behavior (Halliday, 2005: 28). In the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, these four factors are a function of different variants with interactive factors, namely: Arab identity and its status as the largest entity in the Arabian Peninsula; a unique Islamic heritage as custodians of the Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina; petroleum natural resources and the impact of international finance resulting therefrom (Eilts, 2004: 222). These various factors, coupled with the full political and military support of the West, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, have made the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia more confident in claiming to be the most influential power in the Middle East region.

The study by Askari et al shows the Persian Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, as the major customers of the global military industry, especially from the United States. In fact, arms manufacturers from various countries compete fiercely to reap the benefits of gaining access to the highly lucrative Persian Gulf arms market (Askari, 2009: 105-107). Saudi Arabia's political character is played out very massively in the form of fire diplomacy using two mediums, the sword (military) and oil (money). Fire diplomacy reached its peak in the era of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud and his son became Defense Minister , Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud.

Highlighting the militarization of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) report shows that Saudi Arabia is ranked as the fourth largest military spending country in the world after the United States, China and Russia, with a worth \$80.8 billion in 2014. The SIPRI report also shows a 112% budget increase from 2005 to 2014 with a 10.4 percent share of the Arab country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (SIPRI, 2014). Meanwhile, the International Institute for Strategic Studies ranks Saudi Arabia's military spending third in the world with a budget of \$80.8 billion and a contribution of 10.7 percent of the oil-rich country's GDP ( International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015).

All of these figures are based on 2014 estimates that do not take into account the rising military costs of financing the continued war in Syria in support of Assad's opposition, in Iraq and Yemen, which continues today with direct or indirect assistance from United States and Great Britain. In addition to deploying military advisers, the United States and Britain have supplied Saudi Arabia with weapons in the war in Yemen.

Apart from the military, the fire diplomacy conducted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia uses oil (money) to fulfill its foreign interests. Saudi Arabia's decision to increase its oil supply above its quota to nearly 11 million barrels per day has plunged oil prices to their lowest level in years. While ostensibly this policy is to curb the pace of US shale oil, the CNN report shows that Iran (and Russia) are the main targets of Saudi oil price reduction policy. So how long will this strategy continue. The reason is that this policy actually backfires on Riyadh itself. The exchange rate of the Saudi rial, known to be strong, fell to its lowest level since 1999. Reuters (01/04/2016) reported that the exchange rate of one US dollar was 680 Saudi riyals, while on Thursday it was perched at 425 riyals. In addition, the Saudi Stock Exchange's composite stock price index fell 2.4%.

Perhaps under *ceteris paribus* conditions, all other variables are constant, the decline is still considered normal. But the problem is that Saudi Arabia is experiencing the largest budget deficit in its state budget in decades. Last year, the IMF projected a budget deficit of more than 400 billion riyals or the equivalent of \$107 billion. This figure is calculated with oil sector revenues of 81%, which have been reduced from the previous 90%. However, the Riyadh-based Samba Financial Group expects government spending to rise by 0.4% in 2016.

In late 2015, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia agreed to raise fuel prices by up to 50 percent to overcome a budget deficit of US\$98 billion, or about Rs1.372 trillion. The US business magazine Forbes has published an article by Katie Sola, an economic analyst, on the rupture of diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tehran, which would cost Saudi Arabia billions of dollars. Forbes, in its report on the breakdown of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran on Tuesday (5/1), revealed that if the Tehran-Riyadh cut resulted in stopping sending Iranian pilgrims to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh would lose most of its revenue.

Forbes added that 100,000 Iranian pilgrims visit Saudi Arabia every year and have contributed 5 percent of the world's two million Muslim pilgrims. Saudi Arabia in 2015. The American magazine pointed out that the pilgrimage is very beneficial for the Saudi economy. According to Forbes, a Saudi economist said that Saudi revenues from Haj and Umrah in 2014 were \$18.6 billion, \$8.5 billion of which came from Hajj. Therefore, if that figure were assumed for the Iranian pilgrims Haj and Umrah, the Saudis would lose three billion dollars

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Fire diplomacy was once carried out massively by Saddam Hossein's regime, assisted on a large scale by the West in the war with Iran from 1980 to 1988. But then the US changed direction when Saddam was out of control attacking Kuwait which triggered the birth of UN Sanctions and the inclusion of Iraq in the articles of the seven UN charters. So, will Saudi Arabia's fate in the hands of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz be like Iraq in the hands of Saddam left by the West? Maybe time will test it.

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