A Comparative Analysis of the Foreign Policies of Egypt and Saudi Arabia After the Arab Spring

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**Overview**

The following paper seeks to find insight into the foreign policies of Egypt and Saudi Arabia after the events of the Arab Spring. The foreign policy decision making of these states is explored through the importance of religion, economic prosperity, regional conflict, and regime stability as they apply to the creation and use of foreign policy influence. These questions are significant because many believe that the events that occur in Saudi Arabia and Egypt within the next decade could influence that region more than anything ever seen before. The future of the post-Arab Spring Middle East lies within the decision making and the futures of these two states.

The following essay is influenced by research found within books, scholarly journals, publications from other universities and organizations, and a news source in order to express recent changes in the balance and issues within the Middle East. This research was found through library resources as well as online databases and other searches and required vast hours of reading and connection making between the policies of the two states. Information on Egypt was particularly hard to find as their foreign policy has not become an issue of much concern until recent years.

Important sources found throughout this research include Ayoob and Kosebalaban’s book *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State.* This book provided immense insight into the history of religious influence within the state while also explaining the conflicts that arise between the al-Saud family and the religious leaders, the *ulama*. This book provided multiple points of view in the relationship between Wahhabism and the State and was crucial to the development of key points of this essay. Another key source was a paper written by Lucas Winter entitled *Jordan and Saudi Arabia after the Arab Spring.* This essay brought to light some of the more recent challenges facing Saudi Arabia and the Middle East as a whole. It was crucial in developing connections with many issues that have just come to light in the Middle East. Winter provides insight into future possibilities and conflict that the region could face in the future and the key factors through which these issues would emerge. The unique information and viewpoints of the texts also allowed for more advance and in-depth research. Both texts proved to be essential in making the necessary connections in research that made this paper what it is.

**I**

**Introduction**

The Middle East is a region with more tension, violence, and instability than any other in the world. This has become evident since the uprisings of the Arab Spring that occurred all over the region in 2011 and removed several rulers from their position of power (Gause). This history of instability and a seeking of regional power by states in the region has led to a variety of foreign policies being formed by different states. Particularly interesting comparisons of foreign policies can be found between Middle Eastern states that are allies.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have foreign policies that are uniquely their own and possess differences which could call into question the future of their relationship with one another depending on the form they take. As repercussions of the Arab Spring continue to arise, change in the region is inevitable, but the manner in which the new Middle East is formed will be heavily influenced by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Together these states could single handedly shape the Middle East within the next decade as long as they can maintain their partnership and reach a level of stability in each of their states that is yet to be seen in the MENA region. This paper will aim to analyze the effects of economic prosperity, religion, regional conflicts, and, for Saudi Arabia, regime survival and the roles in the development and objectives of the foreign policies of these states in a post-revolutionary region of the world.

**II**

**The Role of Religion**

Religion is an aspect of foreign policy that differs greatly between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Saudi Arabia centers the foundation of their government on the royal family and Wahhabism, a strict form of Sunni Islam (Ayoob and Kosebalaban). The ideals of Wahhabism are implemented into Sharia law by religious leaders and the royal family. These laws tell all citizens of the state how they should conduct their day to day lives and the religious standards which must be upheld by all individuals (Ayoob and Kosebalaban). Saudi Arabia is unique as a state when it comes to its goals of “legitimizing Wahhabism as an ideology” in its government because very few other states in the Middle East have or are still trying to do this (Winter). After the Arab Spring and the push for more equality and rights among individuals and a lessening in authoritarian style governments the idea of trying to implement ideological based governments has become very unpopular with many governments simply wishing to maintain regime stability. While Wahhabism helps the al-Saud family continue its rule in Saudi Arabia it also causes conflict and disagreement between the royal family and religious leaders when it comes to modernization and new influence coming from the West. So far the al-Saud family has been able to appease the religious rulers by finding a balance between extreme Wahhabism and growing Western influence.

Saudi Arabia has also played a part in creating the instability caused by Islamic extremists. It is well known that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia trained and funded Osama bin-Laden, the former leader of Al-Qaeda and it is also thought that Saudi Arabia has been funding other extremist groups in the region (Al-Rasheed). Al-Qaeda and its extremist ideology became very popular among Saudi youth in the1980s and led to many of them heading to Afghanistan (Al-Rasheed). As these radicalized Saudi youth have returned to the country there has been a growing separation between these religious extremist and other youth pushing for more western ideals and rights. However, both groups are seeking reforms from the regime making it even more difficult for the al-Saud family to find balance.

During the Arab Spring Saudi Arabia used Wahhabism and the fact that it is considered to be the “cradle of Islam” as a means of maintaining stability. As Shia minority groups in the east and groups of women throughout the country began small protests during the Arab Spring the government was quick to quiet them by stating that the “uprisings in surrounding nations” and Saudi Arabia were “contrary to Islam” and the ideological practices of Saudi citizens (Winter). Saudi Arabia has used Wahhabism to build a nation and also to constrain the state as a means of regime stability since the al-Saud family came into power and have been using it even more in recent years. The role of religion in Saudi Arabia is far different from that of Egypt.

Egypt has been the center of attention in the world since the Arab Spring. The initial success of the uprisings had many believing that a democracy would emerge from turmoil in Egypt and for awhile it did. After Mubarak was overthrown Egypt had elections and elected Mohammed Morsi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, to power in June 2012 (Haber and Ighani). This change from authoritarian regime to new democracy led to drastic changes in foreign policy as well as policy within the state itself.

Egypt varies greatly from Saudi Arabia when it comes to the religious makeup of their states with the vast majority of Saudi Arabia being Sunni Muslim, while Egypt on the other hand contains a mix of Muslims, Coptic Christians, and a very small population of Jews. This religious diversity creates a unique atmosphere in Egypt compared to many other states in the region. However, it also makes it harder for the ruling power to keep everyone happy. As the Muslim Brotherhood took over and tried to implement Sharia law into the Egyptian constitution Coptic Christians and secularists began to protest once again. After a military coup Egypt’s government came full circle, going from a militarily created regime to a democracy only to go back to a militarily ruled government once more. General Al-Sisi has now come to power and has once again been faced with difficult changes to be made in foreign policy, as well as many domestic issues. He has thus far taken the side of the secularists and recently an Egyptian court has banned the Muslim Brotherhood from being a party and charges have been pressed against former president and Muslim Brotherhood leader, Morsi (BBC). The future of religious influence, or lack thereof, on Egyptian politics will help determine the final outcome of the Arab Spring and the future of the Middle East as a whole.

**III**

**The Economics of the Arab Spring**

The economic prosperity of states played a large role in uprisings throughout the Middle East. Egypt and Saudi Arabia had very different economic situations as the uprisings of the Arab Spring began. Saudi Arabia has generally always been able to keep its citizens at ease economically. Saudi Arabia’s large oil revenues lead it to “account for 20 percent of GDP of the MENA region” and “50 percent of the stock market capitalization” (Al Saud). These revenues have led the al-Saud family “to increase spending to $130 billion on its citizens” after the uprisings of the Arab Spring (Gause). Saudi Arabia’s economic strength and independence allow it to increase domestic stability by paying off or ridding of those who contest the government; this is a strategy that is often used (Winter).

The government’s large oil revenues also allow it to spread its influence throughout the Middle East by providing aid to neighboring states as a way of forming good diplomatic relations and spread Wahhabism (Al Saud). However, if oil prices maintain low levels for a long period of time and demographic trends force a continuous rise in fiscal responsibilities, Saudi Arabia could face the uprisings caused by economic struggle in other Arab states. Overspending or corruption within the royal family could also lead to dissent among citizens of Saudi Arabia as it has in the past when some princes have had problems with overspending on lavish and extravagant items. The regime must also be wary of its dependence on other nations for water and food because of the lack of arable land in their state. The regime’s ability to maintain economic stability, continue economic development, and appeal to its citizens financial needs will be a factor in determining if the Arab Spring ever truly makes its way to Saudi Arabia.

Egypt has a very different economic situation compared to that of Saudi Arabia. Egypt’s minimal amount of oil, large and growing population, and insufficient amount of arable land lead it to be extremely economically dependent on other states. Much of the tensions and discontent in Egypt before the uprisings of the Arab Spring were caused by economic struggles. During Mubarak's last few years in power Egypt’s “national debt increased, GDP and economic growth rate shrunk by a significant amount, unemployment reached nearly 30 percent, and inflation also rose to around 30 percent” (Saikal). Economic growth simply could not keep up with a rapidly growing population and government corruption and unnecessary spending did not help the economic situation.

Every leader of Egypt, no matter what their other foreign policy positions were, took into account Egypt’s dependence on foreign aid. Egypt receives billions of dollars from both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in foreign aid annually. However, instead of most of this going directly to the people of Egypt, or their need for food and water, it goes to military and other types of government spending. This financial irresponsibility lead to the outcome of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Even though Egypt is dependent on other regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, as well as the U.S. and are still slightly unstable after the Arab Spring they continue to play a vital role in both regional and world affairs. If Egypt can develop an economy free of dependence on foreign aid their foreign policy options and role in the MENA region would change drastically. The economy will be the greatest foreign policy factor in whatever government structure is implemented in Egypt.

**IV**

**Regional Conflict**

Regional conflict and the constant struggle between Sunni and Shi’a Islam in the Middle East is a concern of the foreign policies and state survival of both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Egypt and Saudi Arabia both have populations that are majority Arab of ethnicity and Sunni Islam of religious background which causes them to be allies in the Middle East even though they may have other differences. Apart from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Egypt and Saudi Arabia take similar stances on conflicts in the Middle East. One state in particular is the largest source of worry; Egypt and Saudi Arabia have stood united against Iran and its attempt to spread Shia influence in the Middle East as well as its aims at nuclear proliferation (Al Saud and Saikal).

Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Hadith rebels of Yemen are all Iranian backed militant groups that Saudi Arabia and Egypt are concerned about (Al Saud). The Hadith rebels in Yemen are seen by Saudi Arabia as a direct threat to Sunni Islam as well as the al-Saud regime which is why the recent military campaign of many Arab states has begun in Yemen (Winter). Neither Saudi Arabia and Egypt nor Iran are afraid of a conflict that could determine just exactly who the region’s greatest power is and possibly put an end to the Shia/Sunni argument. Saudi Arabia’s recent succession only make the situation more unpredictable by having a new king that seems to wish to take a far more aggressive foreign policy and military approach when it comes to Iran’s meddlesome tactics (Al Saud). Egypt has recently been more focused on its domestic issues more than their regional conflicts apart from their military assistance to Saudi Arabia with the situation in Yemen. Egypt even though it is in turmoil is a pivotal Arab State that is often the deciding factor in times of conflict (Saikal). If rebels funded by Iran can manage to spread their influence into Saudi Arabia or Egypt it could cause the end of whatever government is in power in these states which would be catastrophic not only in the MENA region, but also have severe repercussions for Egypt and Saudi Arabia’s foreign allies.

**V**

**Conclusion**

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have foreign policies that are strikingly similar and different from one another. For Egypt their foreign policy has changed drastically in the years following the Arab Spring due to rapid changes in who was holding power. Saudi Arabia has not been affected by the Arab Spring in the same way Egypt was because they were able to maintain stability with oil revenues and by stating that protests were combative of Wahhabism ideology and Islam. Saudi Arabia still believes themselves to be very stable and due to this have stated that they should be a regional leader and therefore wish to influence other countries as a manner of spreading stability and Wahhabism ideology throughout the Middle East (Al Saud). The Arab Spring led to Saudi Arabia’s government turning to Islam for an answer while Egypt rejected the Muslim Brotherhood party and has moved toward more secularist ideas. This change in religious position in Egypt has not affected the amount of foreign aid it receives from Saudi Arabia and other Arab and Sunni Islam states due to the fact that the need for alliances and regime support outweigh the wants of religious leaders.

The economic positions of Egypt and Saudi Arabia are also very different, but both develop foreign policy goals that are centered around economic prosperity or lack thereof. Egypt’s large population and slow rates of economic growth led to the discontent that fueled uprisings in 2011. If Egypt does manage to become a legitimate and successful democracy a more developed and stable economy that is not dependent on foreign aid must follow in order to ensure its success. Saudi Arabia also must continue to keep its citizens economically satisfied if the regime wishes to remain in power. In order for both states to maintain the influence they now have they must also slow down the instability that Iran is funding in the Middle East. If Saudi Arabia and Egypt can keep Iran in check and provide solutions to other regional conflicts both will emerge with more regional and international power and influence. The future of the Middle East lies in the changes and implementation of the foreign policies of Egypt and Saudi Arabia within the next decade. The final outcomes of the Arab Spring will change the way the world views the Middle East and Egypt and Saudi Arabia will be the x factor of whatever change arises, but for now the world simply waits, watching.

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