

INTERPRETATION OF THE RISE OF THE CROWN PRINCE MUHAMMAD BIN SALMAN AND SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY ACCORDING TO THE BARAKAH CIRCLE THEORY

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ABSTRACT: Saudi Arabia has begun to pursue an active and ambitious foreign policy in recent years, especially under the rule of the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The main parameters of this new era may be stated as: an increasing dependence on the US; the further demonisation of Iran and its regional allies; greater efforts to normalise political relations with Israel; the establishment of closer cooperation with the UAE and Egypt; and the promoting of Madkhali Salafism in the Middle East. Riyadh's emergence as a new power centre significantly relies on regional and international power politics. In this respect, the geopolitical dimension of Middle Eastern politics plays a crucial role in examining the Saudi position. This article aims to explain Riyadh's recent foreign policy moves within the context of the Barakah Circle Theory as a non-Western geopolitical framework.

KEYWORDS: Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin Salman, Islamic Jerusalem, UAE, Madkhali Salafism, Egypt, geopolitics.

Beytulmakdis Bereket Daireleri Teorisi bağlamında Veliht Prens Muhammed Bin Selman ve Suudi Dış Politikası

ÖZ: Suudi Arabistan, özellikle Veliht Prens Muhammed Bin Selman'ın göreve gelmesinin ardından, son yıllarda aktif ve iddialı bir dış politika izlemeye başladı. Bu yeni dönemin ana dinamikleri şu hususları ihtiva etmektedir: ABD'ye bağımlılığın artması, İran'ın ve bölgedeki müttefiklerinin daha da şeytanlaştırılması/ötekileştirilmesi, İsrail'le siyasi ilişkileri normalleştirme girişimleri, BAE ve Mısır ile daha yakın işbirliği tesis etme çabaları ve Orta Doğu ölçeğinde Medhali Selefiliği teşvik etmeye dönük adımlar. Riyad'ın bölgesel bir güç merkezi olarak ortaya çıkması, büyük ölçüde bölgesel ve uluslararası güç dengelerinin bir sonucudur. Bu bağlamda, Suudi dış politikasının konumunun belirlenmesinde Orta Doğu siyasetinin jeopolitik boyutu önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Riyad'ın son dönemde izlediği dış politikayı, Batı-dışı bir jeopolitik yaklaşım sunan, Beytulmakdis Bereket Daireleri Teorisi bağlamında açıklamayı hedeflemektedir.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER: Suudi Arabistan, Muhammed bin Selman, Beytulmakdis, Kudüs, BAE, Medhali Selefilik, Mısır, jeopolitik.

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INTRODUCTION

The “Middle East”, as one of the most controversial and conflicting regions, is once again on the focus of the international community. In particular, analysis of the post-2011 Arab Uprisings era attracts increasing attention due to re-shaping of the region in terms of political, economic, cultural and security parameters. However, geopolitical dimension of analysis is generally ignored while examining the regional developments. This article tries to analyse and interpret the Middle Eastern conflicts, focusing on the rise of the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and the Saudi foreign policy, according to the Barakah Circle Theory as a geopolitical framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE BARAKAH CIRCLE THEORY

Barakah Circle Theory is a new geopolitical theory founded and developed by Abd al- Fattah El-Awaisi, professor of international relations, based on power politics in the Middle East. El-Awaisi (2007: 23-24; Abu-Munshar, 2013) gives a central role to IslamicJerusalem which is praised in Qur’an by its feature of ‘surrounded with Barakah’ and he determines the mosque as the ‘core of the core of Bayt al-Maqdis’. In theory, three circles surrounding al-Aqsa Mosque reflects the power politics of the region.

The first circle, Bayt al-Maqdis or IslamicJerusalem is not a city or another urban settlement, but a region which includes several villages, towns, and cities, of which al-Aqsa Mosque is the centre.² The second circle mainly consists of historical Syria (Bilad al-Sham), Eastern Egypt and Cyprus. The third circle involves Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia (Hijaz), Iraq, western Iran along with Turkey. El-Awaisi (2007: 23-27) summarises the main predictions of his theory as; i) Egypt is the power centre of the Arab world, ii) Turkey is the power centre of East Muslim peoples, iii) the security of Egypt and Syria is interdependent, iv) Palestinian people does not have adequate capacity to save Bayt al-Maqdis alone, v) in order to liberate Bayt al-Maqdis, initially the peoples of second and third circles should be liberated, then they would lead the liberation of Bayt al-Maqdis.

SAUDI ARABIA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE BARAKAH CIRCLE THEORY

Saudi Arabia (Hijaz) is located in the second and third circles of Barakah Circles. Although theory does not give a central role to Saudi Arabia compared to Egypt and Syria within the power politics equations of the region, the country still has a significant position according to theory and primarily affects the developments regarding Bayt al-Maqdis geography.

The holiest cities of Islam, Makkah and Madinah are part of Saudi Arabia and these two cities have close connections with IslamicJerusalem in terms of historical and religious understanding. Israeli scholars reveal their interest towards the Arabian Peninsula and describe the land as one of the oldest Jewish homelands (particularly Madinah and Yemen) (David, 2018). In addition,

geographical proximity of Saudi Arabia to the region of Bayt al-Maqdis and Israel grants substantial role to Riyadh in regional dynamics. On the other hand, Saudi leaders have a unique and steady relationship with the United States and did not prefer to participate in the hot conflicts and wars between Arabs and Israeli forces during the Cold War period.

Riyadh's conservative foreign and security policy in post-2011 Arab Uprisings era and harsh stance against the freedom movements of Arab peoples should also be analysed in context of geopolitics along with its foreign policy orientation. Additionally, close cooperation of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in foreign and security policies in recent years and their coordinated steps with Israel increases the importance of Saudi Arabia in the context of Middle East geopolitics. All these parameters make Saudi Arabia a gripping case study for the Barakah Circle Theory.

CASE STUDY: THE RISE OF PRINCE MUHAMMAD BIN SALMAN AND SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY

23rd of January 2015 will be evaluated as a significant turning point in terms of the modern history of Saudi Arabia when 91 year old King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz passed away and his brother Salman bin Abdul-Aziz replaced him. King Salman was appointed as crown prince when his brother, Nayef, died in 2012. Following the coronation, King Salman immediately appointed his son Muhammad bin Salman as deputy crown prince and defence minister. This surprising decision made Muhammad bin Salman the first of the grandsons of Ibn Saud,³ the founder of the kingdom, to move on to the line of succession. As a second turning point, King Salman replaced Muhammad bin Nayef as crown prince in favour of his son in June 2017 and placed him under house arrest. This extraordinary and ambitious move was labelled as 'palace coup' by international news outlets (Addiction and intrigue, 2018; Saudi prince, 2018).

When dissociated and fragmented structure of the House of Saud is taken into consideration, fighting for the throne, especially to access the crown prince position, does not astonish anyone. However, the overthrow of the whole royal system in order to pave the way for a young and inexperienced prince was extremely unusual and is still confusing. Transfer of royal power from the sons of the founder, Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, to his grandsons has created troubles recently; on the other hand, the extremely rapid rising of Muhammad bin Salman and the transformation of the whole political formation attaches additional risks and discomfort to Saudi internal dynamics (Tisdall, 2017).

Muhammad bin Salman's profile does not reveal much detail about new 'power centre' of the Saudi palace: He was born on August 31, 1985. His mother, Princess Fahda bint Falah is from the Ajman tribe, whose leader is the princess' grandfather. In 2008, bin Salman married Princess Sarah bint Mashhoor bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, and together they had three children. He received his

primary education in Riyadh, where he was ranked among the kingdom's top ten students. He obtained a law degree from King Saud University, where he graduated second in his class. After graduation, bin Salman established a number of firms before he became involved in governmental work. He served as secretary-general of the Riyadh Competitive Council, special adviser to the chairman of the board for the King Abdul-Aziz Foundation, and member of the board of trustees for the Albir Society for development. He also established the MiSK Foundation, a non-profit organisation that works on cultivating learning and leadership among Saudi youth and develops start-ups in the country through various business incubation programmes. Prince embarked on his political journey when he served as an adviser to the Council of Ministers for two years in 2007. In 2009, he became special adviser to his father, who was governor of Riyadh at the time, and continued to serve the experts commission of the Saudi cabinet as a part-time consultant until March 2013 (Profile: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, 2018a).

Muhammad al-Yahya, a Saudi political analyst, describes the increasing role of the crown prince as, “currently, foreign policy, defence matters, and issues of social change are all under Prince Mohammed’s control” (Tisdall, 2017). In addition, Prince’s duties on economic sphere, especially huge oil industry, also grant him the final decision in economic and commercial policies of the Kingdom. As a result, although his 83-years old father King Salman sits in Saudi palace as the monarch, Crown Prince emerges as the real orchestrator of internal politics, economic management and foreign-security orientation. Due to his de-facto position, bin Salman is considered as the ‘real King’ outside, particularly his various visits to the US, Europe and the Middle Eastern countries reflect this perception.

Muhammad bin Salman’s close relations with the US leaders, policy makers and business circles, even before his appointment as crown prince, has contributed to form a legitimising basis both for his growing role within the intra-Saudi political elites and a new influential actor in Middle Eastern politics. The cost of Prince’s image-making activities is not known yet; but serious investment in lobbyists in Washington, public relations companies and his promise to inject funds into the US economy are the main factors behind his constructed reputation in Western media. Except for a short period at the end of Obama administration and his fluctuated image to some Congress members and American media outlets, Prince was benevolently adopted by Trump and his close circle thanks to his generous promises to increase Saudi investments in the US and utilisation of Saudi petro-dollars in parallel with the US foreign policy goals in the Middle East (Al-Rasheed, 2018: 235-237). However, Trump and the US side refrain from mentioning the role played by Saudi Arabia in proliferation of destructive activities of Salafi/Jihadi networks in context of 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda and the ISIS ideology, in particular through the Saudi Wahhabism approach and financial support. President Trump’s business-oriented visit and his speech in

Riyadh, in May 2017, clearly reflect that type of symbiotic relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia:

We signed historic agreements with the Kingdom that will invest almost \$400 billion in our two countries and create many thousands of jobs in America and Saudi Arabia. This landmark agreement includes the announcement of a \$110 billion Saudi-funded defense purchase – and we will be sure to help our Saudi friends to get a good deal from our great American defense companies. This agreement will help the Saudi military to take a greater role in security operations. (President Trump's Speech, 2017).

According to my analysis, Saudi foreign policy, under the ambitious rule of the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has been constructed on five main pillars (Al-Rasheed, 2017: 143-158; Korany, 2016: 79-101; Kinzer, 2011; Al-Rasheed, 2018: 235-250):

- 1) Increasing dependence on the United States in security and regional politics;
- 2) Close cooperation with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt;
- 3) Rapprochement and normalisation policy towards Israel and abandoning Palestinian people / Islamicjerusalem cause;
- 4) Further demonisation of Iran and its allies/partners across the Middle East (including Gulf);
- 5) Promoting Madkhali Salafism⁴ in Islamic world and fight against non-Salafi political Islam.

The US Factor in Saudi Foreign Policy

Hudson (2016: 357-358), while discussing the roots of the US involvement in the Middle East argues that, three issues drove the US's great power politics during the Cold War: communism, oil and Israel. Saudi Arabia has played a key role in oil politics of the US since the end of the World War II and supported low price strategy in parallel with the US interests. King Faisal was the only exception of this stance who led the oil embargo during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war to protest the unconditional US support to Tel Aviv. In addition, Riyadh never contributed the military campaign organised by other Arab states against Israel in the aftermath of the establishment of Israel in 1948 and harshly criticised by the Arab world. As the modern history of the US-Saudi Arabia relations clearly reveal, in any case, Saudi regional policy is explicitly tied to American –and by extension Israeli– designs, with Saudi Arabia playing the role of a chief regional antagonist to Iranian influence. On the other hand, a shared threat perception emanating from the Arab nationalism also fuelled close cooperation between the US and Saudi Arabia (Ismael and Perry, 2014: 11-12).

The security and sustainability of Al Saud dynasty plays a central role in external and internal politics of Riyadh; all the other regional/ international calculations and policy moves are designed to strengthen dynastical interests (Karim, 2017: 72-73). Huge income of oil exports are also used by Saudi policy makers to secure those existential interests. For instance, SAMA (Saudi Arabia

Monetary Authority) and Public Investment Fund (PIF) are two sovereign wealth funds established by utilising the enormous oil revenues which was calculated at approximately \$2 trillion only between the years 2009 and 2016.⁵ The geographical distribution of Saudi investments reveals a traditional density on the American short and long term assets. According to some calculations, Saudi total investments in the US economy are currently evaluated at \$800 billion (de la Mercad, 2017). As stated above with the statement of President Trump, the huge arms sales deal between the US and Saudi Arabia are also similar instruments utilised by Riyadh to sustain the same profits. In this respect, within the context of existing political and economic conditions, as Lippman (2011: 49) argues, the US will remain a major trading partner and security guarantor of Saudi Arabia, which remains vulnerable, surrounded by troublesome neighbours.

Emergence of the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi-Cairo Axis

As a powerful Gulf kingdom, Saudi Arabia has always been in close cooperation with other Gulf monarchies and instrumentalised the Gulf region to safeguard its own stability and security interests. To this end, the Gulf Cooperation Council was founded in 1981 under the leadership of Riyadh following the Gulf Arab states' threat perceptions emanating from the 1979 Revolution of Iran. There have been fluctuations in the Saudi relationship with other GCC countries, like the July 2017 decision to cut links with Qatar, and generally the UAE and Bahrain are the closest allies of Riyadh among the GCC states. 2017 Qatar crisis is based on the allegations of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi towards Doha's relationship with 'terrorist organisations'; one of the requests from Qatar was also about closing the Turkish military base and halting joint military cooperation inside Qatar. Egypt also joined the Saudi-UAE axis in the boycott of Qatar due to Doha's support of the Muslim Brothers which was toppled by Abd al-Fattah el-Sisi in 2013. However, Qatar has not accepted the 13 terms imposed by this axis and strengthened its cooperation with Turkey and became more dependent on Iranian airspace and imports, upgraded its relationship with both Ankara and Tehran (Perthes, 2018: 95–104; Aras and Akpınar, 2017: 6–7).

Increasing ties between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt can also be seen in the demonisation of the Muslim Brothers and affiliated networks in the region, namely Palestine, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia etc. In the aftermath of the coup in 2013, Egypt received \$12 billion from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in form of different types of aid, i.e. cash, oil, financing for projects. Saudi Arabia and the UAE injected together between 25 and 41.5 billion dollars in 2014-2015 to strengthen el-Sisi's government and recover economic weakness of Egypt. In March 2015, the same GCC countries, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, reaffirmed their intention to assist the Egyptian president, each promising an additional \$4 billion in investments deposits in the Central Bank of Egypt. In this relationship, el-Sisi needed the financial support of monarchies to revive Egyptian economy and reinforce his position against the Muslim Brothers; while

Riyadh and its allies needed el-Sisi to defeat and prevent the spread of the Muslim Brothers' ideology in the region (Piazza, 2018: 425-426).

Yemen is another field of cooperation for the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis. A coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched a military intervention (Operation Decisive Storm) in March 2015 to back Yemeni President Mansour Hadi and to stop the advances of the Iran-backed Houthi (Zaidi-Shiite) forces. The coalition includes all GCC countries (except Oman) and Egypt alongside the participation of Jordan, Morocco and Sudan. The intervention was designed initially as a 'success story' for the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and reveals his ambitions to profoundly shape the region; however, quickly it transformed to a full-scale humanitarian disaster and became an extreme fiasco for Riyadh and its allies. Egypt's participation in the Saudi-led campaign may also be read as the 'payment' of the GCC's abovementioned financial support instead of its own national interests or perception of security threats from Yemen (Byman, 2018; Piazza, 2018: 437-438). As Lucas (2017: 31-33) states, the Gulf and Middle East became a theatre where an alliance of 'young sheikhs', Muhammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Muhammad bin Zayed of the UAE, ambitiously try to shape the power politics and future of the region and acting to preserve the autocratic Arab regimes is a crucial pillar of their alliance.

Palestine Issue and normalisation with Israel

The conflict over Palestine is considered the longest protracted conflict in modern history. Arab states and peoples viewed the separation of Palestinian land in 1948 as a blatant case of injustice made to all Arabs (and Muslims). The conflict was also politically utilised by some nationalist Arab leaders to gain personal prestige and regional influence and also to blame the other Arab states (Korany and Dessouki, 2010: 50-51). The Arab leaders, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser,⁶ Saddam Hussein, and Hafez al-Assad were nationalist figures who used the Palestine issue to mobilise their peoples and the Arab world to gain personal prestige or national influence among the Arabs. On the other hand, with the exception of King Faisal⁷ in 1970s, Saudi leaders generally stayed in the background in the international arena concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict and Palestine issue, they also did not join the military campaigns led by nationalist Arab states against Israel during the Cold War.

Although there are some circles who blame Saudi Arabia (and the UAE and Egypt) for 'selling out' the Palestinian people and surrendering to Israeli politics, this evaluation does not reflect the realities and ignores some important initiatives of Saudi leaders until recent years. For instance, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, along with Egypt, pursued a pro-Palestinian policy within a pragmatic framework and under their strong alliance with the US, also supported Intifada politically and financially, and took steps to lead peace initiatives (Lippman, 2011: 40-41; Mansfield, 2013: 320-322, 350). However, starting from 2006 Hizbullah-Israel war, Iranian factor and Shi'a question heavily affected and, to a certain

extent, dominated Saudi foreign policy regarding Israel and its regional activities (Fattah and Korany, 2010: 373-376).

As a second phase in post-2006 era, Riyadh's approach on the Palestinian issue under the rule of Muhammad bin Salman significantly transformed into a negative and non-supportive stance and Saudi normalisation with Israel emerged as a primary determinant in parallel with the rise of the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis. According to Ulrichsen (2018: 79); although the process of creating informal ties between the Gulf states and Israel has been decades in the making, the nature of the post-2011 connections between Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel have greater strategic depth and are taking place in a far more open setting than ever before. Mutually shared threat perceptions of Tel Aviv and Riyadh-Abu Dhabi regarding Iran and Shiite factor in the Middle East plays the key role in rapprochement with Israel, Trump's accession to the US Presidency also accelerated this 'overt but unofficial' cooperation. In these new circumstances, the Palestinian issue and liberation of IslamicJerusalem has been also sidelined within the Saudi foreign policy priorities. The Crown Prince's statements in his March 2018 visit to the US clearly point out that approach:

The Palestinian issue is not at the top of the Saudi government's agenda... There are much more urgent and more important issues to deal with, such as Iran... For the past forty years, the Palestinian leadership has missed opportunities again and again, and rejected all the offers it was given. It's about time that the Palestinians accept the offers and agree to come to the negotiating table—or they should shut up and stop complaining. (Palestinians Must Make Peace or Shut Up, 2018).

The history of Saudi-Israeli relations since 1948 shows a cautious and pragmatic relationship. Beyond rhetoric, Riyadh never challenged the very existence of the Jewish state. Recently, the trend of rapprochement between Riyadh and Tel Aviv is a successful example of the realist axiom of '*the enemy of my enemy is my friend*'. During the last 70 years, the relationship of two states was held in secret and usually through the US, but since the 2006 war direct bilateral connections were established and security-diplomatic officials met in a regular basis with an increasing frequency (Podeh, 2018). Under the existing political environment and security perceptions of two states in the region, normalisation of Saudi-Israeli relations will not be surprising in the near future. The recent US initiative to settle the problem in favour of Israel, so-called 'the century's deal', is another reflection of close coordination among Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US on the Palestine issue.

Fight against Iranian influence and Shi'a factor

Saudi-Iranian relations were mostly evaluated within a geopolitical rivalry and power politics context; until the 1979 Iranian Revolution both states were under the US security umbrella, yet following the revolution the Shiite factor in Iranian foreign policy added a new dimension to existing geopolitical risks and power

competition with Saudi Arabia. Increasing influence of Tehran particularly in Lebanon has been an important threat for Riyadh in 1980s and 1990s; as a result, Saudi leaders did not back Hizbullah in its war against Israel in 2006 and has tense relations with Iraqi government which is perceived as pro-Iranian political entity since the US invasion in 2003. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Iran has gained more room for manoeuvre particularly in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq through Shiite communities / proxies and its close ally Bashar al-Assad.

In post-2011 era following the proliferation of Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia backed Syrian armed rebels aiming to downfall Assad which would threaten Iran's influence in the Levant and its strategic link to Lebanese Hizbullah. However, due to diverging political strategies of regional and international actors along with the existential threat emanating from the ISIS, armed struggle resulted in a failure (Umar, 2017: 78–79). Under enormous Iranian influence in the Levant region following the survival of Assad, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi aims at transforming their policies towards Syria in order to revive their weight in the internal war-weary country. To this end, the UAE led the GCC countries in re-opening its Damascus embassy in the last week of 2018; Bahrain also declared its readiness to re-activate its embassy a day after the UAE's decision. Moreover, the Jordan-Syria border crossing officially re-opened in October 2018 and bilateral trade resumed; first commercial flight from Syria to Tunisia in seven years took off in December 2018; also Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir became the first Arab state leader to visit Syria since the war began (Bahrain says work in Syria embassy 'continuing', 2018b). These kinds of moves are viewed as an indicator of some Arab countries' preparation to welcome Syria back into the Arab League from which Assad government was expelled following its use of military force against the opposition. On the other hand, Trump declared Saudi Arabia's role in financing the reconstruction of Syria.

Muhammad bin Salman's unsuccessful military campaign in Yemen since 2015; Riyadh's efforts to balance Tehran in Lebanon through Sunni community and prestigious Hariri family; establishing ties with powerful Iraqi cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr who strongly opposes Iranian influence in Iraq are the recent steps of the Saudi leadership in order to prevent the spread of Tehran's political and military gains in the region. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's firm stance to harshly repress its own Shiite community, active support in repression of Bahraini Shiite opposition, and continuous criticism of Obama administration for signing the 'Iran nuclear deal' also reflect Riyadh's strong determination to limit Iranian influence (Al-Rasheed, 2017; Legrenzi and Gause, 2016). As aforementioned, the rapprochement policy of Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel is also another measure against Iran (Koç, 2019: 112).

Utilisation of the Madkhali Salafism

Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s led by the Egyptian president Abdel Nasser and Baathist rulers of Syria and Iraq was on the top of Saudi Arabia's

security threats agenda. Fall of Arab nationalism, following the 1967 war and death Nasser, then the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein by the US forces diminished nationalist threat for Riyadh. However, the rise of the political Islam through the Muslim Brothers and affiliated groups within the Arab World constituted a new threat to the Gulf monarchies. The Arab uprisings and the accession of the Muslim Brothers to government positions particularly in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Palestine (in 2005) alarmed the Saudi leaders to take measures in containing the rising Islamist groups. Riyadh's unconventional support to el-Sisi who toppled the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and also Khalifa Haftar in his fight against the local moderate Islamist government fractions and militias are two most remarkable examples in Saudi struggle to limit political Islam (Lacroix, 2017: 51–53; Al-Rasheed 2018: 242–244). Most recently, attempts to legitimise the murder of the prominent Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by the Crown Prince with his alleged membership to the Muslim Brothers (Khashoggi murder, 2018; Wittes, 2018).

In this context, a new phenomenon was instrumentalised by the Saudi political and security elites: *the Madkhali Salafism*. The neo-takfiri group was named after the Saudi cleric Sheikh Rabi al-Madkhali who advocates absolute obedience to the ruler and regards any form of opposition as non-religious. The Madkhalis harshly criticise the Muslim Brothers, or any other Islamic movements even to the point of accusing them of being non-religious. The group has a remarkable influence over Libyan politics and society and utilised by Egypt and Saudi-UAE backed General Haftar to counter local Islamist forces and internationally recognised Tripoli government. The Madkhali Salafis are substantially instrumentalised by the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia, as well as Libya (Salah Ali, 2017; Olidort, 2015: 4–7; Kekilli, 2017: 171–172).

INTERPRETATION OF THE SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY ACCORDING TO THE BARAKAH CIRCLE THEORY

As indicated in introductory part, Saudi Arabia, when compared to Egypt and Syria, has a secondary role in context of the Barakah Circle Theory. However, the influential foreign policy of Riyadh beyond its borders and region has significant role in the geopolitical framework of the Middle East and Bayt al-Maqdis. While considering the alliance of two young sheikhs, ascension of Muhammad bin Salman to the crown prince position and his close relations with the crown prince of the UAE, Muhammad bin Zayed, have also added a new ambition and assertive dimension to the Saudi foreign policy. Following the analyses, it can be derived and concluded within the theoretical framework of the Barakah Circles Theory that:

- 1) The rise of a young and inexperienced (but extremely ambitious) prince in 2015 surprised the all regional and international actors and signalled a new approach to design the geopolitics of the Middle East. His urgent military campaign in Yemen and harsh stance against Iran were the initial signs of the

- new era. The US politics, under Donald Trump, also coincided with bin Salman's macro strategy. The rise of el-Sisi after military coup in 2013 against the Muslim Brothers in Egypt also established the fourth pillar of the new axis (Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Washington and Cairo).
- 2) 'Overt but unofficial' normalisation efforts of Saudi and Emirati leadership with Israel emerge as a strategic move and strengthen the cohesion of the first axis. At this early phase, the sides do not declare the normalisation loudly; but at a later stage, most probably, it would be declared officially, such as the Camp David agreement and Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty.
 - 3) The overthrowing of the Muslim Brothers was a turning point in post-2011 Arab Uprisings era; after the fall of the local Islamists in Egypt, the similar / affiliated local networks in Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Palestine also weakened. The rising trend in aforementioned states is further empowerment of pro-Saudi local political and religious figures, such as el-Sisi in Egypt, Haftar in Libya, the secular or Islamic Tunisian groups opposing en-Nahda and Ghannoushi, the Madkhali Salafists etc. Also in Syria, Saudis abandoned the backing policy of Islamist armed rebels against the Assad government and started the normalisation process with secular/Baathist Damascus regime to constrain the local Islamist opposition.
 - 4) One of the most important consequences of the new era is Riyadh's claims (along with the UAE) towards regional leadership and primary position within the Arab World. While Egypt, as the geopolitical and historical power centre of the Arab World, has been weakened during the past decades, emergence of new actors (namely Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) to claim leadership does not surprise anyone. Moreover, the new axis has exerted great effort to form an alliance with the weakened Egypt in order to prevent it from independently moving or join a rival axis.
 - 5) Normalisation with Israel also requires the abandoning of the Palestinian people and the cause of Bayt al-Maqdis. As the Crown Prince clearly states, Riyadh adopted a resolute policy to leave alone the Palestinians against the prevailing Israel. At this point, Saudi move also cut the link between Egypt and Turkey from forming an alliance to support Bayt al-Maqdis or liberating it. Riyadh's steps to further deepen the ongoing political conflict among the Palestinian groups and prevent Egypt to help Gaza through the Rafah border crossing also worsen the economic and humanitarian conditions of the Palestinian people.
 - 6) Riyadh's ongoing disputes with Turkey and Qatar also have significance in terms of regional geopolitics. As the 2017 Qatar crisis has revealed, Saudi Arabia tries to fill the political vacuum in the region and enforce the other Arab states to obey Riyadh's ambitions. One of the main goals of Saudi foreign policy is to limit the Turkish-Qatari partnership in the Gulf region, Syria and North Africa. The Khashoggi murder, normalisation process with Israel and Syria, harshly criticising Iran and its partners, sidelining Palestinian people, repression over Muslim Brothers affiliated groups and the promoting of Madkhali Salafism etc. can also be viewed as the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi-Egypt-Israel-US axis' strategic moves to damage Ankara-Doha alliance.

CONCLUSION

The Barakah Circle Theory is developed by a Muslim Professor of International Relations from the region and aims at explaining the controversial power politics of the region within the geopolitical context which is generally ignored while analysing the regional developments. One of the crucial aspects derived from the theory is the emergence of artificial, or unnatural, power centres under the weakness of traditional geopolitical power bases. This article's case study, Saudi Arabia's aggressive foreign policy under Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman reflects this situation. On the other hand, according to the Barakah Circle Theory, Saudi Arabia, as a second and third circle region, is expected to form an alliance with the real power centres of the "Middle Eastern" geopolitics (Egypt, Syria and Turkey) to liberate the Bayt al-Maqdis. However, while analysing the current political and economic orientation of the Saudi leadership and its pro-US, pro-Israel moves; in the short to middle term, positive expectations from Riyadh lose ground.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 “Glory to He Who did take His worshipper, Muhammad, for a journey by night **from** Al-Haram Mosque [at Makkah] al-Aqsa **to** Mosque [at Islamicjerusalem], which we have with surrounded Barakah, Al-ladhi Barakna Hawlahu...”. (Qur’an, 17:1)
- 2 For a detailed map of Islamicjerusalem, see El-Awaisi (2007a).
- 3 Abdul-Aziz al-Saud (1875-1953), the founder and first king of Saudi Arabia.
- 4 *Madkhali Salafism is evaluated as a sub-category of Quietist Salafis who usually align with Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi religious establishment. They also call for believers to show absolute obedience to the ruler of any Muslim country in which they are based. The most influential scholars with whom this strand is most closely associated are Muhammad Nasir-ud-Din al-Albani, Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymeen, Muhammad Aman al-Jami, and Rabee’ al-Madkhali. The “propagandist” section of the Quietist Salafis follows Sheikh Rabee’ al-Madkhali (as a result they are also often referred to as “Madkhalis”) and present supporting the Saudi regime as an article of faith. Quietists reject political involvement or political frames within their discourse, at least until Islam is “purified” of bid’a (innovation) and other evils. Madkhalis are especially critical of the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, whom Sheikh al-Madkhali describes as a “supermarket of heresies.” For further information on Madkhalis and their relations with other Salafi groups and Islamist networks see; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens (2018). *Salafism in America: History, Evolution, Radicalization*. The George Washington University- Program on Extremism (also available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Salafism%20in%20America.pdf>); Taylor Luck (2018). “Libya crisis as opportunity: Who are the Madkhalis?”, the *Christian Science Monitor*, January 17, 2018, available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2018/0117/Libya-crisis-as-opportunity-Who-are-the-Madkhalis>*
- 5 These figures are based on this author’s own calculations by using the relevant data published by the OPEC and IMF. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2017/12/14/pp121417gcc-economic-outlook-and-policy-challenges>; http://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB2009.pdf
- 6 Gamal Abdel Nasser was the second president of Egypt, serving from 1954 until his death in 1970. Nasser led the 1952 overthrow of the monarchy and known as the symbol of Arab nationalism during the 1950s and 1960s.
- 7 King Faisal Al Saud was born in Riyadh in 1906. He is the third son of the Kingdom's founder, King Abdul-Aziz Al Saud. He is famous with his leading role of oil embargo in 1970s, assassinated by his nephew in 1975