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Saudi Arabia's shifting military aid politics

In an era of oil prices' fall, Saudi Arabia has been reconsidering its foreign aid policy in the Arab region. However, notwithstanding the collapse of oil prices, Saudi military agreements are primarily tied to geopolitical considerations framed by hegemonic schemes, rather than to fixed spending cuts. The redrawing of military aid's allocation has already consolidated a "defence sectarianisation" pattern, as the promotion of security coalitions (like the suggested "Islamic Alliance") or bilateral sectarian deals for anti-Iranian power politics purposes, clearly show.

Since the 2010-11 Arab uprisings, foreign aid policy has been the most relevant driver of Saudi regional politics. Through the strategic allocation of oil rent, Saudi Arabia has co-opted clients and forged transnational allegiances, empowering Riyadh-friendly governments, parties and militias in order to downplay the Iranian influence in the Middle East and shape a regional framework more favourable to its strategic aims.

Saudi direct rent has been channelled for specific aims of foreign policy so far to: monarchies' resilience (Jordan, Morocco, the GCC region), counter-revolution (Egypt), balancing (Lebanon) and realignment

(Sudan). However, foreign aid policy implicitly requires political conditionality: it is not by chance that Riyadh stopped on February 2016 \$4billion of military aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF), denouncing Hezbollah's de facto monopoly on Beirut's institutions and its military commitment in Syria.

Saudi Arabia has always allocated direct rent through two parallel channels, the official, state-centred one and the informal one, empowering militias: thus in Lebanon Riyadh is now likely to increase the funding to local non-state actors.

The Egyptian case is particularly complex. Riyadh is dissatisfied with Cairo's decision not to send ground forces in Yemen, but Gulf monarchies' money is fundamental for the survival of president Al-Sisi. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have just signed a \$1,5 billion development deal aimed at boosting social and infrastructural projects in the unstable Sinai peninsula.

The Wahhabi kingdom has decided to strengthen Morocco and Sudan's armed forces in spite of revenues reduction. Beyond technical military cooperation, Riyadh has invested \$22 billion in the development of the Moroccan military industry, so helping Rabat to become a weapons-producer. Due to its ground forces' commitment in Yemen, Sudan has been rewarded by Saudi Arabia with \$5 billion in military aid: Khartoum's sanctioned regime has shifted from the Iranian geopolitical camp to the Saudi one for clear budget security reasons.

The "Islamic Alliance" against terrorism suggested by Saudi Arabia appears primarily as a tool of intra-regional, anti-Shia confrontation, rather than a coalition devoted to fight extremisms: it intrinsically divides states with not-homogenous societies as Lebanon and Iraq and sharpens internal rifts. Therefore, the reorganization of Saudi foreign aid policy (with particular regards to military aid) dovetails with this new, sectarian-framed, military assertive regional politics, in the framework of the so-called Middle Eastern Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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