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Muhammad bin Salman, a new protagonist in the Middle East

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Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (Mbs) is starting a revolution both inside as well as outside Saudi Arabia. This is already a big success for a 32-year-old leader. Despite the fact that the Saudi heir to the throne took the lead of the country only three years ago, he was able to introduce new policies which seemed very unlikely before his arrival, especially those concerning women's rights. Bin Salman himself explained his plan to change the political direction of the country, one that started some 40 years ago, when a conservative wave guided by religious leaders, characterized by a predominantly Wahhabist vision, dominated Saudi Arabia. Two events influenced the Saudi royal rulers: the 1979 Great Mosque attack in Mecca perpetrated by radical Islamist dissidents; and the Khomeinist revolution in Iran. Since then, the religious scholars exercised control over society and life in general.

Henceforth, through these new reforms the Crown Prince is directly challenging their authority. Significant reforms include the reopening of movie theaters, the lifting of the ban on female drivers and the admission of women in stadiums. This was made possible thanks to Mbs's strong and determined personality: he trusts few advisors, he is authoritative and centralizing but at the same time upholds liberal ideals.

Central to his project is Vision 2030. The economic policy adopted by the Kingdom has always been predominantly focused towards, and dependent on, oil. The oil revenue was needed to provide free services to the population and the religious establishment. Yet, with the downfall of oil prices this policy became ineffective and unsustainable. Bin Salman was the first to understand this and set out an ambitious reform plan in order to make the country less dependent on oil. The Crown Prince is in a position to implement these policies because he is young and favored by 65% of the population under 30 years old.

In order to implement the Vision 2030 reforms, significant investments are needed. Hence, the sale of 5% shares of the state's owned oil company Aramco is imperative. In this regard, China, among other powers, has made several purchase bid offers. The privatization of Aramco will serve different purposes aimed at the development of new economic branches, such as the military industry. The main reason pushing for this operation is that Riyadh needs them to support its engagement in an expensive military war in Yemen and elsewhere if needed. The State's defense budget, the majority of which are imported from abroad, amounts to 10% of the overall budget. As such, a local military industry would help the relaunching of Saudi's economy and encourage investments in infrastructures.

While waiting for the profits that will result in the sale of Aramco in 2019, the Prince has adopted a new policy, rather unconventional, in order to buttress the Saudi economy. Last November hundreds of wealthy businessmen and royal princes were arrested and detained in the luxurious Ritz Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. The "war against corruption" led to earnings amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars deposited by the detainees. However, this controversial method, no matter how effective, could jeopardize foreign investments from the US and Europe, but also from Russia and China; and it is in Saudi Arabia's interest that these great powers keep investing in the country.

A *New York Times* investigation denounced Saudi Arabia for using torture methods on prominent Saudi citizens detained at Ritz Carlton Hotel after the anti-corruption raid. Perhaps an overstatement, since these people were locked in a luxurious hotel, with all sorts of comforts available to them, and not in an actual prison. Nonetheless, psychological pressure exercised by MbS was enough to convince them to donate part of their wealth to the State.

Behind this war against corruption lay not only economic interests but also political ones. By taking this route MbS could neutralize potential rivals to the succession to the throne, first among them Muhammad bin Nayef the "dethroned" Crown Prince. Among the two currents within the royal family competing for the succession to the throne, the one endorsing Bin Salman is currently advantaged.

Despite this daring political move, the Prince is not yet certain whether he will be proclaimed King, since his success depends upon the will of 5000 Saudi princes. This battle for the throne also involved rumors that he kept his own mother away from his father, the king, out of fear she would stand in the way of his rapid consolidation of power.

Still, the main concern to MbS's accession to the throne is foreign politics. The battle with Iran is escalating, and the Crown Prince himself initiated two new fronts: the war in Yemen in 2015 and the clash with Qatar in summer 2017. On the one hand, the threat posed by the Houthis in Yemen, Iran's allies, is increasing in spite of the support provided by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. On the other hand, cutting the ties with Qatar was a failure mainly due to Turkey's, and Iran's, support for the emirate. Turkey came to the rescue of Qatar by recently inaugurating a new base and sending military reinforcement to the emirate.

Qatar's blockade put under the spotlight the conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood, supported by the Qatari royal house, whose soft power is very influential, especially through the Al-Jazeera broadcaster. Saudi Arabia has tried to neutralize the bond between Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood and other jihadist groups, as Jabhat al Nusra in Syria. When King Salman took power in 2015, he immediately invited Egypt's President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Riyadh to try to mediate

between the two on this issue, but his effort did not succeed. MbS drastically changed the Saudi strategy, he set off an offensive action against the Muslim Brotherhood and established an alliance with al-Sisi during a recent visit to Cairo on the 4th of March.

Another challenge in Saudi Arabia's foreign politics is posed by Lebanon. With his straight forward attitude, MbS "convinced" Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri to distance himself from Hezbollah. Hariri announced his resignation live on television from Riyadh as it was not clear whether his announcement was the result of Saudi pressure while he was held in custody in the country. Eventually, he returned back to Lebanon and to his office, adopting policies conflicting with those of Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah is still a powerful enemy, retaining a considerable military capability and backed by its ally, Christian President Michel Aoun. On the 6th of May elections under a new law will take place in Lebanon which could end up in a great victory for Hezbollah, possibly allowing it to control 70% of Parliament's seats.

Hence, at this point in time, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is struggling in Yemen, Qatar, Lebanon and in its relationship with Turkey, even though Prince bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met several times. Overall, these struggles can be regarded as part of the challenge against Iran.

The battle that is taking place in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran has led Bin Salman towards another strategic decision, to provide nuclear capability to the country. A project that plans to spend more than \$80 billion to build 16 nuclear reactors for civilian purposes over the next quarter of a century.

However, Riyadh aims also to attain a military capability sufficient to counter Iran in the event the Ayatollahs will decide to develop nuclear weapons. In an interview with CBS's 60 Minutes on March 18, MBS openly admitted it was a possibility: "Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible." This is an action that will be influenced largely by the nuclear negotiations with the US, as the Trump administration seems inclined to permit Saudi uranium enrichment. MbS's argument is that the JCPOA agreement (P5+1 group of world powers), including the US, has already permitted Iran to enrich uranium.

Saudi Arabia will need time to build an atomic bomb since now it does not have the necessary industrial infrastructures at its disposal. This acceleration depends also on the worsening of ties with Pakistan. Riyadh relied on Islamabad, a nuclear power, to back up the kingdom in case of an escalation in the confrontation with Iran. Riyadh was disappointed by Pakistan's lack of support for the war in Yemen. Hence, its desire to be independent from Pakistan with regard to nuclear capacity. However, Pakistan recently announced that it will send a composite brigade of the Pakistani military to Saudi Arabia, reportedly for advisory and training roles.

The rush to the nuclear risks to affect proliferation in all of the Middle East. Israel for its part is worried and Prime Minister Netanyahu urged US President Donald Trump not to support an agreement with the Saudis that would allow them to enrich uranium.

MbS is pushing towards nuclear development due to an increased perception of the threat posed by Iran to Saudi interests in its backyard. The Saudis consider the Houthis as the new Hezbollah, as the ideology, symbolism and behavior of the Houthi leaders resembles Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah in many aspects, including the way they deliver speeches. In addition, there is a significant Shia community in Saudi Arabia and a majority in the neighboring Bahrein. The territory in which Shiites live coincides with where oil wells are

located, hence increasing the fears of an insurrection supported by Iran. Saudi Arabia perceives Houthis and Hezbollah as the *longa manus* of Iran in Yemen, Lebanon and Syria.

The fear of Iran has persuaded Crown Prince bin Salman towards a path that was unthinkable until lately: cooperation with Israel in the fight against Iran and in solving the historical Israeli – Palestinian conflict. Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States are now working together to find a common solution to this conflict. The Saudis will probably put forward a plan, supported by the Arab League, in coordination with the Trump administration. The challenge is that, should Israel agree on a compromise, the Palestinian National Authority still does not control the Gaza Strip, under Hamas's firm grip. Moreover, for the moment it seems that the PA does not accept the US-Saudi diktat and the Palestinians have the means to derail such a plan.

During his two-weeks visit across America in April 2018 (*Time* magazine even compared it with the historical visit by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1959), MsB not only met with Jewish community and religious leaders (AIPAC, the Jewish Federations of North America, the Conference of Presidents, B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee), but for the first time for a Saudi leader, in an interview to *The Atlantic*, he recognized that “each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation...[and] the Palestinians and the Israelis **have the right** to have their own land.” More precisely the crown prince told *Time*: “We cannot have relations with Israel before solving the peace issue with the Palestinians because both of them they have the right to live and coexist, but when it happens, of course next day we'll have good and normal relation with Israel and it will be in the best for everyone.” MbS praised Israel's big economy compared to its size and spoke of a lot of interests shared with Israel “if there is peace.” Practically, during the same days, Saudi Arabia permitted Air India to overfly its territory in its flights to Israel, a first sign of normalization.

The Prince's decision to strengthen relations with the United States and Israel has not jeopardized the ones with Russia, Washington's greatest rival. Moscow and Riyadh had a heated dispute over Syria with Vladimir Putin supporting Bashar al Assad's regime by providing weapons and military advisors, and Riyadh financing and arming the rebels. However, since the Russian military intervention in Syria, Saudi Arabia is not intending to step into the Syrian conflict, or at least not directly. For the first time in Saudi Arabia's history, King Salman made an official visit to Moscow, where he met Putin in the Kremlin. Furthermore, Moscow is interested in maintaining correct relations with Saudi Arabia because by supporting Iran it is jeopardizing its interests in the Sunni world, which represents the biggest portion of the Muslim world population. Parallely, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan want to enhance their relations and military cooperation with Russia in order to counter the Russian-Iranian present alliance.

The Obama administration distanced itself from Saudi Arabia by signing the nuclear deal with Iran and at the same time reluctant to challenge the Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the region. Saudi Arabia's new foreign policy under MbS, shifting towards a more decisive and uncompromising position towards Iran, was bolstered by Donald Trump's victory in the United States elections. On the internal arena, the Vision 2030 project is creating a link between Saudi Arabia and the rest of the world, liberalizing a very conservative society and driving it towards modernization, in order to be better accepted in the world, especially in the U.S. and the West.

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's April visit to the United States was meant to take advantage of the honeymoon with the Trump administration by meeting the leaders of the high-tech industry in the Silicon Valley, Amazon's Jeff Bezos and Microsoft's Bill Gates, mainly looking for foreign funds and modernization

investments, a crucial element of Vision 2030, “his plan that promises to reconcile feudal society with the world around it,” as phrased by the *Time*.

There are however important hurdles for the young crown prince. Most of his reforms target the pillars that hold up the Saudi state: the royal family members, by centralizing power within the monarchy; religious ideology, which provided consensus and support from the conservative ulemas; and state welfare, endangered by the declining oil prices. The monarchy risks narrowing the rack on which it stands without providing some other firm stability. The failure of the economic and social reforms could open the door to chaos and disorder. On the international arena, the most obvious danger is from bin Salman’s impulsiveness in foreign policy, the war in Yemen being the most immediate worrisome example. Time will tell if MbS can stand to these enormous challenges and finish his career as a reformist, or even a revolutionary, long living Saudi king.