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Saudi Foreign Policy: Change of Direction Required

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Saudi Arabia's current foreign policy is more assertive than it has been for years; some would even call it adventurous. Mohammed bin Salman, the current Crown Prince, has in a number of cases - primarily the war in Yemen and the political-economic siege of Qatar - pursued a controversial approach, taking risks that are not characteristic of the way the Kingdom used to manage its foreign relations. However, it appears that the cost of this policy often exceeds its benefits. The Saudi strategic picture is now dominated by the significant damage to the Kingdom's regional status due to Iran's achievements (partly under the aegis of the nuclear treaty), the difficulties it has encountered in the effort to influence the balance of power in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and the not inconsiderable internal challenges that it faces. These issues create the impression of Saudi Arabia as a regional player that is not at the peak of its power, and a country that must review its policy regarding central issues and find new directions in order to demonstrate better control of the strategic situation. Chief among these problems are the struggle with Qatar and the ongoing war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia's Regional Status

In the Syrian arena, Iranian and Russian forces, identified with the Assad regime, have the upper hand, while the forces supported by Saudi Arabia have suffered losses. In Iraq, in spite of renewed attempts by Riyadh to court elements with political, religious, and tribal influence, the forces identified with Iran are still dominant, particularly in light of the achievements recorded by the Shiite militias supported by Iran at the expense of Islamic State (ISIS).

Since June 5, 2017 a number of Arab countries – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Bahrain – have imposed a diplomatic and economic embargo on Qatar while presenting a challenging and even extreme set of demands (once again Kuwait has assumed the role of intra-GCC mediator). These demands include degrading relations with Iran, closing the al-Jazeera network, removing Turkish forces from the UAE, and most importantly – ending support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then, there have been unofficial

signals from the Arab Quartet, which apparently expected Qatar to buckle under the pressure faster, that these states are prepared to withdraw some of their demands, realizing that they have gone too far.

No doubt that Qatar has paid a considerable price, mainly economic, for the embargo. However, the price paid by Saudi Arabia for what it wished to achieve is rising steadily. Its strong image has been damaged, if only because of its inability thus far to bend a tiny (and "recalcitrant") country like Qatar to its will. Relations with central Muslim allies headed by Pakistan are tense because of their "neutral" position in the crisis, while for its part, Qatar has improved its relations with Iran and Turkey since the beginning of the crisis – perhaps as a show of defiance against Saudi Arabia and the UAE – and these countries have helped it overcome the embargo.

Since President Trump took office, Washington and Riyadh have made an effort to demonstrate that the tensions that characterized the Obama presidency have been overcome. However, against the background of the crisis among Gulf states, it is not at all clear how far Washington and Riyadh are "on the same page" on regional matters. In his visit to the Gulf, comments by President Trump (whether intentional or not) were apparently interpreted as a "green light" to action against Qatar, but the American government is interested in presenting a united Sunni front in the struggle against the Islamic State and the jihadi terror organizations, as well as against Iran, and this front currently looks far from reality due to the Gulf crisis. At first, the US government spoke with two voices – which did not help ease tensions – but now is eager find a diplomatic solution and perhaps allow Riyadh to save face. Saudi Arabia would do well to seek a compromise with Qatar, also because the attempt to isolate Qatar nearly brought about the collapse of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi Arabia was always the powerhouse in the GCC, which in spite of disagreements among its members has recorded some significant achievements since its establishment in 1981, while the other members have served as a kind of "strategic backdrop" and buffer between the Kingdom and Iran.

In the meantime, the war in Yemen continues without any military decision. The expensive military campaign in Yemen, initiated by Mohammed bin Zayed, the UAE Crown Prince and acting ruler, and Mohammed bin Salman, has reached a stalemate, with no victory in the war against the Houthis in sight, even though Saudi Arabia has some of the most advanced weapons in the world and its defense budget is the third largest in the world, after the United States and China. This creates the impression that in spite of its enormous investment in security, the Kingdom is in fact a paper tiger. The military campaign has become a burden on the public purse, while the Houthis and their allies, former president of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh and his followers, hold northern

Yemen and the capital Sana'a, and routinely firing rockets and missiles into Saudi territory. Moreover, beyond the humanitarian disaster in Yemen and the extensive damage to the population, and the international criticism of Saudi Arabia and its handling of the war are the hundreds of Saudi soldiers killed (there is no reliable official figure) and any domestic criticism is silenced.

The Domestic Front

The meteoric rise of Mohammed bin Salman to the role of Crown Prince and the concentration of security and economic powers in his hands has not increased the number of his supporters in the royal family. Outside the royal family, the criticism coming from religious leaders, academics, and journalists led to an unprecedented wave of arrests in September. The ousting of Mohammed bin Naif as Crown Prince and Minister of the Interior and his being placed under house arrest heightened the criticism of bin Salman (although mainly behind closed doors) and increased the ranks of his opponents in the ruling family: Mohammed bin Naif has an impressive record in the field of security that is respected by many inside and outside the Kingdom. Nevertheless, bin Salman will reportedly be crowned King soon, even before the death of his father.

The moves against Qatar and Yemen are ascribed to bin Salman. The damage to the regional standing of Saudi Arabia comes against the background of controversial actions taken by the Crown Prince to reinforce his domestic power before he takes the throne from his father. In addition, he must justify the reforms he promoted to adjust the Saudi economy to global and regional economic conditions now and in the coming decades ("Vision 2030"). This is in light of reports of difficulties in achieving the targets of the plan within the defined timetable, and due to fears that are not unfounded of public protests that could erupt against heavy handed treatment of citizens.

Implications

Doubts have arisen recently as to whether Saudi Arabia's assertive regional policy has actually improved its status, particularly compared to previous years, when the Kingdom showed restraint in managing its foreign relations. In spite of its wealth, the Kingdom is unable to cope on its own with the significant threats in its strategic environment. Its army is equipped with advanced weaponry, but it is relatively small and untrained. Therefore, it appears that Saudi Arabia would do well to return to some of the elements that formerly characterized its foreign policy – avoiding direct conflict with enemies, demonstrating its "deep pockets," and trying to reach diplomatic accords with Qatar and Yemen, even if not perfect from its point of view. These measures can help it cut its losses and neutralize risks.

Some decision makers and analysts in Israel are satisfied with Riyadh's boldness, which is mainly directed against Iranian interests in the Gulf region and the Middle East in general. However, in view of the heavy price it is paying for its failure to achieve the objectives of its involvement in various arenas, Saudi Arabia's regional policy could change. Riyadh's attempts to get closer to Russia in order to influence the political picture emerging in the region, and particularly to cut its losses in Syria (King Salman is due to visit Russia shortly) can be seen in this context. In addition, Riyadh's regional losses and its domestic difficulties could cool Israel's enthusiasm for the "regional approach," in which Saudi Arabia is seen as the axis of support for the Sunni camp that is struggling alongside Israel against Iran, and even as an element that could contribute to a breakthrough in the political process with the Palestinians.