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## **THE PERILS OF THE SAUDI DESTABILIZATION POLICY**

There are essentially two centers of power in Saudi Arabia: the royal family and the Wahabi clergy. One validates the other. So far, social peace in Saudi Arabia was upheld by these two pillars of the Saudi social system. The wealth and power exercised by the main exponents of the aforementioned categories and the control of the country's security apparatus kept Saudi Arabia afloat.

Today this system is under attack by the son of king Salman, Mohamed. Members of the royal house, ministers and various high-ranking officers have been arrested – some have even been tortured - and their bank accounts have been frozen. All of this happened because Mohamed bin Salman is not just the designated crown prince, head of the royal court, minister of defense and of the council for economy and development, but also the head of the anti-corruption commission. He controls all of the country's neuralgic centers and now needs to consolidate his power by eliminating his enemies or those that can hinder his plans.

### **The purge**

The arrest of so many high-ranking figures within the royal house (several members of the Wahabi clergy had previously been locked up) is not aimed at eliminating corruption or crime, but rather at curbing opposition. And there is another element at play, one that's more economic than political in nature: the ongoing negotiations with the arrested individuals – who are also very wealthy – aimed at bartering their freedom with a good part of their wealth (it is no coincidence that prince Al Waleed bin Talal, head of the Kingdom Holding investment fund, is among the detained). With less money in its pockets, the opposition would become less dangerous while the state's coffers, depleted by the low price of oil, would profit from a substantial shove.

Mohamed bin Salman wishes to inherit his father's crown (the old king is now 81 years old) with the country already firmly in his grip. His proclaimed fight against corruption is clearly geared at clearing his path from any opposition. The first to pay the cost of Mohamed's purge was prince Muqrin bin Abdullaziz, the brother of king Salman and the original crown prince (though he's recently been stripped of the title). Muqrin's dangerousness was due to his having held the reins of the kingdom's intelligence services for some time. He had the connections that could potentially thwart the plans of prince Mohamed. Mohammed bin Nayef, the prince's oldest cousin, was also stripped of his crown prince title and of his office at the Ministry of Interior. Currently, Mohammed bin Nayef is held at home arrests and his bank accounts have also been frozen. But it's not the end of it. Among the 'purged' subjects there appear the heads of various military structures: prince Miteb bin Abdullah (the son of the preceding king), who was booted from the National Guard's command, and

former Navy commander Abdullah al Sultan. Lastly, in order to gain a firm grip on the country's economy, Mohamed bin Salman removed the Minister of Economy and Planning, Adel Faqih.

In the Saudi world, where there prevails a tribal culture, the violent booting from power coupled with the public use and abuse of arrests means that the victims will lose their face and be publicly humiliated. Generally, such an offense is liable to be vindicated with blood. But prince Mohamed feels strong and isn't worried by such possible reprisals.

Notwithstanding, the disruptive impact of the crown prince's initiatives are destabilizing the social fabric of Saudi Arabia and will cause unforeseeable future effects. Mohamed wants to command Saudi society and modernize it at the same time.

The purge against high-ranking members of the Wahabi clergy is also a part of this plan. As a matter of fact, the social underdevelopment of Saudi Arabia is mostly the product of Islamic radicalism as professed by the same Wahabi clergy. Modernization must therefore derive from a reduction of religious influence in the country's politics.

In addition to this, Mohamed, in the guise of minister of economy, also wants to diversify the country's economy, which is currently too dependent on oil money. Yet an open economy, tourism and the arrival of foreign investment and companies can only happen in a more advanced social context, where the introduction of new, foreign cultures and habits will not cause discomfort and unnecessary juxtapositions.

Less religious interference; development and modernization of society; opening up to the world. All of Mohamed bin Salman's initiatives follow a specific logic but they are also happening suddenly, perhaps too suddenly for a world that's deeply rooted in tradition and used to a very slow advancement in progress.

The recent decree that will allow women to drive automobiles in the future is also a part of the crown prince's attempt to modernize the country.

### **Foreign policy**

Mohamed chose to take over the reins of foreign policy as well and, again, the impact of his decisions was shattering. The crown prince proceeded with a lot of guts, few qualms and a scarce consideration of the consequences that can derive from each initiative. Saudi Arabian policy under Mohamed bin Salman has proven to be much more aggressive than in the past.

The disastrous war in Yemen is a direct consequence of the crown prince's new foreign policy. If the conflict was geared at opposing the Houthi minority in the country and its ties to Teheran, the result was diametrically opposite. The aggravating circumstance is that the "legitimate" president, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who sought refuge in Saudi Arabia three years ago and whose ascent to power is supported by the Saudis, cannot return to his country because he is disliked by the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's allies in Yemen.

The recent sanctions against Qatar, guilty of failing to align with Riyadh's plans, was yet another reckless move. If the sanctions against Qatar were aimed at isolating Doha from other Sunni gulf countries due to their alleged collusion with terrorism (i.e. Hamas,

Hezbollah and the Muslim Brothers), again the result was diametrically opposite: Qatar got even closer to Iran and now Turkey has its own military mission in the country (There is a proven connection between Erdogan's AKP and the Brotherhood).

If, on the internal front, the aggressive policy of the crown prince could potentially succeed, the same approach to foreign policy has been a failure this far. In an unstable region like the Middle East, where friends, enemies, conveniences and contradictions intersect and sometimes cancel each other out, foreign policy is often based on subtle diplomatic work, rather than threats and ostracism.

In this regard, Mohamed bin Salman has yet to learn to be prudent. The greatest threat that looms over the Sunni gulf countries, of which Saudi Arabia is the most important and militarily equipped, is the expansionism of Shiism and of Iran. But this problem cannot be solved with an armed confrontation, seen that Iran is backed by Russia. Such a war would not be a regional clash anymore, but rather a direct clash against a superpower. All of these elements suggest that diplomacy should win over an armed intervention.

### **The Lebanon initiative**

Mohamed bin Salman's latest foreign feat, albeit one that's marked with uncertainty on the operative front, is the crisis it purposely triggered in Lebanon, where prime minister Hariri, who has a dual Lebanese-Saudi citizenship and is backed by Riyadh, decided to resign from his post during a trip in the Saudi capital. Whether the resignation was voluntary or suggested by the crown prince, its objective was clearly to censure Hezbollah's influence in Beirut's decision-making (Hariri's government includes representatives of the Hezbollah). Seen that the Hariri family has economic interests in Saudi Arabia, the task of persuading the young PM to resign was probably an easy endeavor.

Lashing at the Hezbollah means lashing at Iran and trying to oppose its plans to create a Shiite crescent that includes Iran, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Once again, it is unclear how Saudi Arabia would profit from destabilizing Lebanon, a country which is already historically unstable. The Hezbollah in Lebanon need to be contained by Israel for obvious geographical reasons. To say the truth, even the other Sunni countries were doubtful of Mohamed bin Salman's initiative in Lebanon.

But if common strategic interests can bring Israel closer to Saudi Arabia (Israel confirmed secret meetings between the two countries, in which Mohammed bin Salman was probably present), the possibility of a war against the Hezbollah, and the triggering of a new civil war in Lebanon, are definitely not on Israel's wish list.

A civil war in Lebanon would benefit the stronger military group in the country, the Hezbollah. Israel and Saudi Arabia have common objectives but choose to adopt different tactical solutions. Triggering a reaction that could put into motion the Shiite volunteer militias that move between Syria and Iraq, some 50,000 men under the command of the Iranian Pasdaran's head general Qassem Suleiman, would be much too dangerous. Once again, Mohamed bin Salman seems to overlook the consequences of his actions.

### **The internal and external fronts**

The crown prince's internal fight against the opposition and the external one against his enemies casts serious doubts on the role that Mohamed bin Salman wants to play both in his country and internationally. Perhaps the crown prince's haste was dictated by his father's desire to abdicate quickly, which made him accelerate the steps needed to consolidate his power.

Internationally, his recurring belligerence has already caused damages in Yemen, Qatar and will probably do the same in Lebanon. The money splashed on rebel groups that fought against Assad didn't produce results, neither on the military level, nor on the political one, because it prevented the Saudis from having any contractual power in the subsequent negotiations. In addition, his attempts to prevent Iran from controlling Baghdad was also a failure. Despite all of this, US president Donald Trump praised the crown prince's initiatives, both internal and external, on several occasions.

Internally speaking, the crown prince's actions are too recent to be evaluated properly; their consequences are as yet unfathomable. Again, Mohamed underestimates the fact that 20% of the Saudi population is Shiite and lives in and around the main oil producing regions of the country. These populations are very sensible to Tehran's policy, especially since they are persecuted by the Sunni majority in their country.

While he is busy fighting Iran and Shiism in the Middle East, the Saudi crown prince could well end up having to soon fight his enemies in his own back yard.

## **ZIMBABWE, THE SAME OLD AFRICAN STORY**

In Africa, more than anywhere else across the world, events tend to turn into a farce. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, labelled by some as the “old elephant”, was finally demoted after 37 years in power by his former deputy president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, known as the “crocodile”, or *ngwena* in Shona. While Bob’s wife, Grace Mugabe, dubbed “Gucci Grace”, lately “Dis-Grace”, whom he had chosen to succeed him, has fled to Namibia.

Bob is 93. Increasingly senile, he didn’t want to give up power and planned to pass it on to his young spouse, a former secretary of his and 41 years junior of his husband. That’s why he kicked his deputy out to pave the way for the advent of Grace. But the military stepped in and the old elephant was defeated by the crocodile. During the days of the liberation struggle Mnangagwa was illiterate and is now 75.

The three main actors of this African comedy are responsible for the tragedy affecting Zimbabwe. 95% of its citizens are unemployed and 70-80% live below the poverty line. Mugabe, whom to date has been the only president of Zimbabwe since independence in 1980, leaves a country in shatters. But the next in line has been at his side for the past four decades, sharing his policies, the misappropriation of the country’s riches, the abuse of power. Emmerson Mnangagwa is a resourceful individual, he has been capable of siding with the winners all the time, that is until he came at odds with the president’s wife.

### **Dictatorial dynasties**

What is happening in Zimbabwe is nothing new under the sun in Africa. The continent is full of dictators, autocrats that enrich themselves while the people stay poor. These same rulers choose to perpetrate their grip on power and pass it onto their families, turning into odd monarchies. Some of these dictators rule until their death, like Omar Bongo in Gabon, who was replaced by his own son, while others find a premature end, as Muammar Gaddafi. Others instead, like Tunisia’s president from 1987 until 2011 Ben Ali, manage to escape before it’s too late. Ben Ali took off with yet another young spouse with a penchant for luxury, Leila Trabelsi.

Unfortunately Robert Mugabe didn’t make it to the top of the list of long-standing rulers. With his 37 years in power, he is in the good company of Gaddafi and Bongo, both leading with 42 years at the helm. But we all know records are there to be beaten. A good candidate is Teodoro Obiang in Equatorial Guinea, who leads the country with the iron grip since 1979. He is followed by Sudan’s Omar Bashir, in power since 1987 and who continues to rule his country despite an arrest warrant by the ICC nobody wants to enforce, and by Chad’s Idriss Deby.

Although Africa has witnessed all sorts of rulers, Mugabe is still a world apart.

### **The betrayal of the heroes**

Robert Mugabe led his country to independence against the racist Rhodesia ruled by Ian Smith. He was a marxist revolutionary and a political opponent who spent time in jail before evolving into a “moderate” and a “democrat”. He gradually began to betray his own

people by sliding into a repressive and corrupt regime, where the State's coffers were his own and impunity for the ruling elite became the rule. The delirium reached its climax when he chose his wife to replace him.

The opposition to Mugabe outside the ruling party was embodied by the MDC, the Movement for Democratic Change, led by Morgan Tsvangirai. He had won the presidential election in 2008, but vote rigging, threats and repression forced him to back down to prevent a bloodbath. Tsvangirai tasted his dose of incarceration, beatings, torture and even escaped an assassination attempt. This convinced him that it wasn't wise to go on a head-on-collision with the old elephant.

But now that Mugabe is at the end of his run, will life improve for the people of Zimbabwe? It would be hard to be worse than Robert Mugabe. But you never know.

His successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has been in government for decades: Minister of Security, Defense, Justice, Public Housing, Parliament Speaker, Secretary of the ruling ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African Patriotic Union – Popular Front) and, since 2014, vice president of Zimbabwe. His political faction was known as “Team Lacoste”, possibly to emphasize that he was indeed the crocodile.

It is hard to believe Mnangagwa will change the way the country is ruled. He was part of Mugabe's despotic and authoritarian rule for too long. It is likely he will just do as his old boss did. It is also significant to note how he promised Robert Mugabe both immunity and a safe conduct for his wealth. After all, you never know what might happen in the future and such a good deed could turn out to be useful. What we all wonder is: what will happen to the Rolls Royce Gucci Grace just purchased in South Africa? Will the Mugabes still be able to use it?

### **The advent of the crocodile**

Emmerson Mnangagwa was not democratically elected and his rise to power is the result of a power struggle with ZANU-PF. Gucci Grace was despised by many, while Mnangagwa was in good terms with both the military and the intelligence agencies that forced Mugabe to resign. There is also a tribal element to take into account. Emmerson Mnangagwa is part of the Karanga clan, who represent about 30% of the population, while Mugabe was from the Zezuru, who account for 25% of the people.

Mnangagwa also took part in the liberation struggle; he was arrested and tortured and allegedly committed a series of atrocities in return. So, if need be, he knows how to deal with opposition. One could ask MP Blessing Chebundo from the MDC, who defeated Mnangagwa in the Kwekwe Central electoral college. He survived because the hitmen sent by the Crocodile weren't able to light up Chebundo, who was soaked in gasoline.

This shows how ruthless Emmerson Mnangagwa can be. Some sources allege that, after he was removed from the vice presidency, he was poisoned with an ice cream and decided to flee to South Africa. Robert Mugabe accused him of being disloyal, dishonest and unreliable. He also added a snake should be hit on the head before it's too late. But

poor old Mugabe was dealing with a crocodile, and a simple knock on the skull was not enough to kill it.

Robert Mugabe leaves an internationally isolated country in economic decline, subject to hyperinflation, food crisis, where life expectancy is 59 years, birth mortality is around 30% and AIDS affects 14% of the population. There is no doubt that the people of Zimbabwe should deserve much more than a crocodile.

## **PRAGMATIC CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

China is probably the only superpower capable of keeping a low political profile while, at the same time, infiltrating its business interests in strategic geopolitical areas. It has done so in Africa, it is doing so in the Middle East. The Chinese don't care about Syria's or Iraq's territorial integrity, the Kurdish struggle for independence or the infighting between Sunni and Shia. Beijing is an external observer of the war in Yemen, the quarreling among Gulf States, the heated Palestinian debate. China consciously ignores these regional conflicts because of its business interests.

After all, where there is war, there is hope. Years of civil wars, systematic destruction of industries, infrastructure, roads and buildings offer wide opportunities for reconstruction. And while the other superpowers fight over political hegemony and for peaceful solutions to these conflicts, Beijing simply waits along for business opportunities. We all know China can offer competitive prices, accepts barter (work in exchange for raw materials) and usually delivers on time. Of course, the quality of the infrastructure built by the Chinese is often not very high, but this is just a secondary detail in countries where corruption is widespread.

The Chinese are not intrusive and hardly pose any problems. They bring their own people, set up a camp where they live confined, work 24-hour shifts and then leave. They do everything by themselves, without any economic spillover on the local economy. Even the materials they employ usually come from China. The money just goes in a circle: it leaves China and then returns home. The only additional tariff is the price of gaining the favors of the decision-makers. But the Middle East is full of oil, natural gas, and this puts the Chinese expectations way up high.

The Chinese are obviously interested in a stabilized Middle East. This is why, although often not more than a spectator, China attends the negotiations over Syria and Iran. Now that Bashar al Assad is posed to hold on to power, China has decided to send 300 doctors and military instructors to Syria also to defend its construction sites. In the recent past, China acted to favor the deal on the Iranian nuclear program. Today, instead, China is at ease signing billion dollar deals with general Khalifa Haftar in Libya, while the internationally recognized government is the one led by PM Fayez al Sarraj.

The economic penetration of the Middle East is a priority for Beijing. It was clearly stated by Chinese president Xi Jinping during his speech at the Arab League at the start of 2017. Strengthening the "One belt, one road" project, the new Silk Road spanning from Pakistan to the Middle East, was at the center of the discussions during the recent congress of the Chinese Communist Party. The intended development of the project with the countries touched by this revived commercial route should happen in three stages: focus on energy, then construction of infrastructure alongside trade and finance, to then culminate in technological and scientific collaboration.

The "One belt, one road" project has also a key strategic value, because it grants Chinese goods the possibility of crossing terrestrial and maritime routes via Iran, Pakistan and the Strait of Hormuz all the way to East Africa without having to go through the Suez Canal.



After all, China imports around 60% of its oil and gas from the Middle East. And this is also why the Chinese are building a harbor in Duqm, in Oman, to manage its trade routes.

In 2013 the value of trade between China and the Middle East was worth around 230 billion dollars. Beijing wants to raise that figure to 600 billion by 2023, increase financial investments and create a free trade area. This is an ambitious target for a market that, unlike Africa or parts of Asia, is more sophisticated and requires a greater attention to quality.

In order to consolidate the economic links with the region, China is enlarging the base of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to Middle Eastern countries. The group focuses on economy, security and culture and its membership was, until now, mainly from Asia. But it's evolving to include Iran, which might soon shift from being an observer to a member as requested by president Xi, and Egypt, Syria and Israel, who have all applied to become observers.

We all know that China does not shy away from business, regardless who the political, religious or ethnic counterpart is.

The Chinese have signed a deal to build houses in Israel and will deploy around six thousand construction workers. Beijing doesn't care that these buildings commissioned by the Israelis are in the Occupied Territories and are considered illegal by the UN. While the Chinese vote against illegal settlements at the Security Council, on the other they sign deals to build them.

Saudi Arabia is the biggest commercial partner in the region for the Chinese. The cooperation is stretching to nuclear energy production and in helping the Saudis diminish their dependence from oil. China will help Egypt develop its telecommunications infrastructure and improve its national electric grid. The Chinese will finance the project by issuing bonds, as Beijing does not lack liquidity.

Right after the signing of the deal on its nuclear program, Iran has signed 5 billion worth of contracts with China in the following sectors: transport, mining, energy, steel and iron, chemical and pharmaceutical, automobiles and telecommunications. China exports equipment, provides technology and technical assistance. In other words, it is providing qualified economic penetration.

There are also a series of multinational projects: China is building a railroad stretching from Kuwait to Oman and crossing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates but also Qatar and Bahrain.

The only issue China seems to be worried about is the spread of radical Islam, given the presence of Uighur fighters in the ranks of the ISIS and following a number of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang. In 2016 the Chinese have signed an antiterrorism memorandum with Syria that will grant them access to the files of Asian terrorists detained in Syrian jails. At the same time, Egypt has started to persecute and arrest Uighur students who have taken refuge in the country. The Chinese are obvious masterminds of this repression.