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The Desperate Saudi Bid to Prepare the State for All-Out War

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman knows he has to transform the state into a war machine if the kingdom is to survive the Iranian onslaught. To do that, he has to amass power by removing the system of checks and balances of rival princely factions and tribal affiliations as well as a security system that is weakened by both. The question is whether he will be able to avoid the fate of the Shah, who transformed Iran into a regional power but fell victim to wall-to-wall opposition bred by his concentration of power.

Even in the US, a nation that enshrines its system of checks and balances, which limits executive power and mitigates the risk of tyranny, there has always been broad recognition that in times of imminent and vast external danger, a War Powers Act must be passed to allow the executive great powers to face the challenge. A well-known legal classic on the theme was aptly entitled "Constitutional Dictatorship."

Saudi Arabia is facing just such an external threat. In response, young Muhammad Bin Salman (also known as MBS), the Crown Prince and Minister of Defense, is determined to transform the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia's system of checks and balances is based on rival camps composed of hundreds if not thousands of princes and rival tribal affiliations. Its security establishment is riven by competitive strife between an army belonging to one part of the royal family, a National Guard belonging to another, and a religious establishment with its own policing arm. MBS's aim is to reshape this agglomeration into a concentrated, centralized war machine.

Why is this necessary? Because as was recently demonstrated when Houthi forces in Yemen launched a ballistic missile at the state's largest airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia is fighting an all-out war for survival.

Few states have been so beset by geostrategic misfortune as Saudi Arabia over the past two decades. Mainstays of the Saudi security environment that had allowed that unique and archaic state to thrive simply evaporated into thin air one after another as Iran, its formidable nemesis, went on the ascendant.

One of those mainstays was the US. The Saudis no longer consider the US to be a reliable policeman who can be relied upon to stave off external threats and maintain the sovereignty of states, as it did in 1991 when it amassed a coalition of half a million (mostly American) troops to roll back Iraqi forces from occupied Kuwait.

During Obama's term in office, the Saudis could console themselves to an extent that his belief in "engaging" enemies to the point of signing an agreement with Iran over its military nuclear capabilities was a temporary aberration. But the gap between Trump's bark and his bite suggests that American disengagement might be more deep-seated and historic. Trump knows many of his supporters prefer guns in their closets to American arms abroad. They certainly don't favor using American weaponry and personnel to protect the Saudi state, which produced most of the terrorists of 9/11.

Regionally, the Saudis have had to face the realization that though there are plenty of Sunni Arab states in the area, it is the only such entity with the potential power to meet the Iranian challenge. This solitary position stems from the sharp decline of Egyptian power in the region. A half century ago, Egypt was in a position to menace Riyadh by threatening to wage a war to destroy the Yemeni dynasty and replace it with a military regime of its own making. Today, Egyptian security forces are only barely succeeding in containing ISIS, which operates in no more than 1,000 square kilometers in Sinai between Al-Arish and Rafah. Given this performance, the Egyptian military scarcely has the ability to come to the aid of the Saudis beyond its borders.

To the east, the Saudis could once rely on Iraq to be a buffer between themselves and Iranian imperial ambitions – though they loathed both the Hashemites who ruled it when it was a kingdom and the Baathists who came in their wake. This is why Riyadh financed Saddam Hussein, a man it intensely detested, in his long, grueling war with Iran during the 1980s.

That buffer has not only ceased to exist, but Iraq has come under Shiite rule. Its prime minister and political elite, at least from the Saudi vantage point, have

become Iranian puppets. Militarily, the Shiite militias – which display a clear loyalty to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard – might be even more powerful today than the official Federal Army.

To add insult to injury, the US, which destroyed this buffer by invading Iraq in 2003, has committed itself to the strengthening of the Iraqi army, which recently routed the Kurds in Kirkuk. The predominantly Sunni Kurds were the last more or less reliable ally of the Saudis in the region after the setbacks suffered by their proxies in Syria.

Worse still has been the failure of Saudi financial soft power to promote proxies to wage war against the Iranians on the kingdom's behalf. Financing proxies was the central mainstay of the Saudi security architecture for decades, but especially since the so-called Arab Spring. The comeback of the Assad regime with the re-conquest of Homs and Aleppo, and the linking of Syrian forces and Alawite and Shiite militias with their Iraqi counterparts along Syria's southeast border to recreate the Iranian-Shiite crescent, has come at the expense of the Sunni rebels financed by Riyadh. This not only represents a major strategic loss for the kingdom in terms of its balance of power with Tehran, but also reflects the inadequacy of a basic tool of Saudi power.

MBS understands that Saudi Arabia has no choice but to wage this war directly. This is why he has hit at the finely tuned checks and balances of the Saudi system. They might have preserved internal stability, but they severely limit the transformation of Saudi Arabia into an effective war machine equipped to take on the Iranian threat.

Can MBS galvanize Saudi youth to meet the danger? Equally pressing, will he be able to centralize power and become the leading regional power in the manner of the Shah, yet avoid the Shah's fate? Making bold moves like entering the air war in Yemen or jailing a dozen or so political celebrities in Saudi Arabia might be a promising beginning, but they in no way indicate how successful MBS will be in meeting the challenges ahead.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

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