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Political Crisis in Saudi Arabia: Survival Is the “Saudi Key Word”

By Nicola Nasser

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Survival is the key word to understand the Saudi dynasty's latest external and internal policies. These are designed to pre-empt change but paradoxically they are creating more enemies in a changing world order marked by turbulent regional geopolitics and growing internal demands for change.

The seventy-year old strategic oil for security US-Saudi alliance seemed about to crack on its 69th anniversary ahead of the summit meeting of US President Barak Obama and king Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in March.

With the US now committed to pivoting east and possibly on track to become an oil exporter by 2017, American and Saudi policies are no longer identical.

Former US President George W. Bush's democracy campaign, which Saudi opposed, alerted its rulers to be on guard. The Arab popular protests since 2011 pushed them into leading a regional defensive counterrevolution and ever since the gap in bilateral relations has been widening.

The Saudis could not trust the US' “regime change” strategy in the region, which depends on the Muslim Brotherhood International (MBI) as an instrument of change, sponsored by a regional

rival like Turkey and a co-member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), like Qatar, which has been for long contesting the Saudi leadership of the GCC, the Saudi leading role in Arab politics and the Saudi political representation of Sunni Muslims.

This trilateral alliance of Qatar , Turkey and the MBI would develop into a real threat to Saudi's survival if it was allowed to deliver change in Syria , Iraq , Egypt , Yemen , Lebanon , Tunisia , Libya and elsewhere in the region. It might quickly leave Saudi Arabia as the next target for "change."

The US pillar of Saudi security now seems to be in doubt as the United States stands unable to meet Saudi expectations on almost all the most critical issues in the Middle East, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Saudi-Iran conflict and the ongoing bloody conflict in Syria, let alone the conflict with the MBI, especially in Egypt.

Within this context, using the MBI as an instrument for "regime change" in the region has created a Saudi MBI phobia. Change is overdue in the kingdom, but, after decades of intensive Islamic education, change could only come camouflaged in Islamist form.

"It might seem ironic for a Wahhabi theocracy to oppose so forcefully a party that mixes religion with politics. But it is precisely because the monarchy bases its legitimacy on Islam that it fears Brotherhood rivalry," journalist Roula Khalaf wrote in the Financial Times in March.

Obama doesn't seem capable of mending the bilateral fences. His refusal to fight Saudi regional wars reminds them that he is the same man who as a state senator back in 2002 stated that:

"Let's fight to make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East – the Saudis and the Egyptians – stop oppressing their own people, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality, and mismanaging their economies."

However, as demonstrated by Obama's visit to the kingdom on March 28, the bilateral differences will remain tactical, while the strategic alliance will hold until the kingdom finds a credible alternative to its American security guarantor, although this seems an unrealistic development in the foreseen future.

Regional Shifts

Regionally, the kingdom is not faring better. The US-promoted and Saudi-advocated anti-Iran "front" of regional "moderates," with Israel as an undercover partner, seems now a forgone endeavor.

The Saudi call for converting the GCC "council" into a "union" is now dead.

Oman's public threat to withdraw from the GCC should it transform into a union and the Saudi current rift with Qatar threaten the GCC's very existence.

Saudi invitation to Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC was unwelcome by other GCC members and by Morocco .

In Bahrain , the kingdom has intervened militarily to squash a three-year old ongoing democratic uprising.

The latest Kuwait-hosted Arab summit meeting did not see eye to eye with Saudi on Syria .

Forming a Lebanese government without Hezbollah and its pro-Syria coalition has failed.

Egypt's calls for a "political solution" in Syria and its refusal to give the Syrian Arab League seat to the opposition could not be interpreted as a friendly position from a country that Saudi Arabia has bailed out, in exchange for its transition away from a MBI rule.

Turkey is at odds with the Egyptian-Saudi newly found partnership.

Iraq is accusing the kingdom of waging a "war" against it, with Saudi now the only country to not have a permanent ambassador to Iraq .

Meanwhile, the kingdom continues to deal with Iran as an "existential threat."

In the background, the Israeli threat could never be overlooked.

Self-confidence Challenged

Using petrodollars as soft power to gain influence abroad and secure loyalty internally, the kingdom seems self-confident enough, or overconfident, to feel secured on its own.

Speaking at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg , Virginia , on March 11, Prince Turki al-Faisal, chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research & Islamic Studies in Riyadh and former Saudi Ambassador to the US , said:

"Saudi Arabia represents over 20% of the combined GDP of the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region (and over a quarter of the Arab World's GDP) making it ... an effective partner and member of the G20.

"The Saudi stock market represents over 50% of the entire stock market capitalization of the MENA region.

"The Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), the Kingdom's central bank, is the world's third largest holder of net foreign assets ... Last but not least, Saudi Aramco, the Kingdom's national oil company, is the world's largest producer and exporter of petroleum and has by far the world's largest sustained production capacity infrastructure."

However, veteran journalist Karen Elliot House, has presented a starkly ominous picture. "Sixty percent of Saudis are 20 or younger, most of whom have no hope of a job," House wrote in her 2012 book. "Seventy percent of Saudis cannot afford to own a home. Forty percent live below the poverty line. The royals, 25,000 princes and princesses, own most of the valuable land and benefit from a system that gives each a stipend and some a fortune. Foreign workers make the Kingdom work; the 19 million Saudi citizens share the Kingdom with 8.5 million guest workers."

According to House, regional differences are "a daily fact of Saudi life." Hejazis in the West and Shiites in the East resent the strict Wahhabi lifestyle. Gender discrimination is a growing

problem. Sixty percent of Saudi college graduates are women but they account for only twelve percent of the work force.

Moreover, according to Anthony H. Cordesman, published by the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) on April 21, 2011,

“There are serious gaps between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots,’ regional differences in wealth and privilege, and tensions between Saudi Shi’ites and Saudi Sunnis.”

The kingdom has been squandering billions upon billions of petrodollars in a lost battle to finance a regional counterrevolution. Some \$20bn dollars were pledged to bailout Bahrain and the Sultanate of Oman out of the Arab Spring. Three billions more was pledged recently to buy French arms to prop up the Lebanese army against the Hezbollah-led pro-Syria coalition. Several billions more have been pledged to Egypt to reinforce the successors of the ousted former president Mohamed Morsi, let alone the reportedly other billions spent on financing “regime change” in Syria. Reportedly, Obama tried to convince King Abdullah during his latest visit to bail out the transition in Ukraine .

To contain the repercussions of the Arab uprisings internally, the Kingdom has already spent even more on buying the loyalty of its own people; for the same purpose twenty Royal Orders, which were economically dominated, were issued in March 2011.

In February 2011, King Abdullah pledged more than \$35 billion for housing, salary increases for state employees, studying abroad and social security. The next month the king announced another financial package worth more than \$70 billion for more housing units, religious establishment and salary increase for military and security forces.

Bailing the population out of protests economically seemed not enough to secure internal stability as the kingdom, instead of relaxing the internal situation, has recently tightened the screws with the issuing of the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Its Financing on last January 31, the Royal Decree No. 44, which criminalizes “participating in hostilities outside the kingdom,” three days later and on March 7 the Interior Ministry’s “initial” list of groups the government considers terrorist organizations, both inside and around the country and both Sunni and Shiite.

“These recent laws and regulations turn almost any critical expression or independent association into crimes of terrorism,” said Joe Stork, the deputy director of the Human Rights Watch for the Middle East and North Africa region. “These regulations dash any hope that King Abdullah intends to open a space for peaceful dissent or independent groups,” Stork added.

Internally and externally, the kingdom overconfidently seems intent on creating more enemies, neutralizing none, alienating world and regional powers, mainstream Sunni, Shiite, liberal, pan-Arab and leftist forces, wrecking regional havoc, all in what looks like an unbalanced reaction to threats, real and perceived, to the survival of the ruling dynasty. However, the kingdom seems like shooting its survival in the legs.