Who and what is behind the Crisis in Saudi Arabia?

One of the key players in the global fossil fuel market - Saudi Arabia - a rich and influential kingdom, is currently experiencing quite a severe crisis. Saudi Arabia's outward stability as a nation state and its rulers’ seemingly firm grip on power belie deep-seated rifts, the discontent felt by the elite and social tensions.

A high unemployment rate among the youth, wide-spread poverty, and tensions not only within the royal family but also between Sunni and Shia Muslims are all factors that call into question the ability of the Saudi rulers to maintain stability within the kingdom and to hold onto power in the long-term. Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud promised his people decisive reform and innovation, with the help of, for instance, Saudi Vision 2030. However, implementing changes within a conservative religious society is not easy, and other questionable steps taken by Mohammad Bin Salman only tend to make things worse.

Tensions that have built up within Saudi Arabia’s closed society for a long time could erupt at any time nowadays for many reasons. Some people are dissatisfied with the rapid pace of changes proposed by Mohammad Bin Salman while others are unhappy about how slow they are. At present, the kingdom is at crossroads as its economy and the standard of living in the nation are deteriorating because crude oil prices are low; the war in Yemen is a fiasco and so is the blockade of Qatar, and Iran’s influence is expanding in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. And the succession to the throne is in question too.

In addition, the Crown Prince’s personal issues are having a negative impact on his relationship with Washington. The author believes that unfortunately for Mohammad Bin Salman, he “bet on the wrong horse” during the US election race, and despite his reputation for being adept at backroom politics, after the Democrats lost in November 2016, his relationship with the key backer, the United States, began to deteriorate. According to the author, Donald Trump has not forgotten about the active support the Crown Prince provided to his opponents and, apparently, even tried to instigate a coup in Saudi Arabia in autumn 2017. Its aim was to ensure that a Saudi prince more loyal to Donald Trump came to power.

This first attempt by Donald Trump to “rock the boat” in the kingdom was made in November 2017. Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, who had recently become the Crown Prince, managed to arrest 11 Princes, 4 government ministers at the time and dozens of former ministers, entrepreneurs and other powerful individuals. Officially, they were detained on corruption charges but, in reality, for plotting a coup. Saudi media outlets immediately reported that a new anti-corruption committee carried out the investigation that led to the arrests. Most of the detainees spent almost 100 days under house arrest at the Ritz-Carlton, the most luxurious hotel in the capital of Saudi Arabia. These individuals were released only after they had agreed to “compensate the government” for any losses incurred, in the amount of $100 billion.

However, there was more unrest on 6 March 2020 (literally the same evening after Russia’s Minister of Energy Alexander Novak and his counterpart Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman failed to reach an agreement over oil production), when a number of Princes as well as powerful individuals within the kingdom (300 people in total) were arrested again for “corruption”. The detainees included Muhammad bin Nayef Al Saud (a nephew of King Salman and Crown Prince’s cousin) and the only surviving full brother of the current King, Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (a former Minister of Interior), who was an heir to the throne before Mohammad Bin Salman, in accordance with Saudi rules of succession. The New York Times reported that the third detainee was Prince Nawaf bin Nayef.

The 78-year-old Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, is believed to be one of the three members of the royal family to
oppose Mohammed bin Salman becoming Crown Prince in June 2017. Out of 34 members of the Allegiance Council, which consists of surviving sons of Ibn Saud (the first monarch and founder of Saudi Arabia) or their immediate heirs, only 31 voted for Mohammed bin Salman. And it was Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud who “has remained a critic” of Crown Prince’s policies. Two sources have informed The Guardian that the detainees stand accused of “trying to establish Prince Ahmed as chairman of the Allegiance Council, a position that is currently vacant”.

Muhammad bin Nayef Al Saud is one of the most influential individuals in the kingdom and was the former Crown Prince. For 13 years, he was the head of the nation’s counter-terrorism program, and was even dubbed the “prince of counterterrorism”. Muhammad bin Nayef Al Saud was viewed as a trusted partner within the US administration and by European politicians. In comparison, the King’s son appears to be an inexperienced youngster, which is why King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud was unable to make him his successor straight away. Muhammad bin Nayef Al Saud spent a lot of his time travelling for work, which allowed him to be sidelined. Nonetheless, it appears as if the former Crown Prince still has his sights on the throne.

It is noteworthy that all the detainees are known to have good relations with the United States. Hence, it is not surprising that within Saudi opposition groups, discussions began straightaway about the key reason for the arrests, which is, according to unofficial sources, the fact that the detainees had been plotting a coup. In fact, these individuals are even referred to as “US agents”. The author thinks that Washington’s previous attempt (in 2017) to get back at Mohammad Bin Salman for his “shortsightedness” with regards to US domestic politics was perfectly understandable. Nowadays, the key reason behind the latest move against the Crown Prince is the appearance of US shale oil in global markets and Donald Trump’s increasingly clear strategy to promote the interests of American oil producers world-wide. And the US-China phase 1 trade deal, agreed on in January, clearly demonstrates the aforementioned point. Hence, at present, the simplest solution to US problems is unrest in Saudi Arabia. And this, according to US plans, will promptly discourage Saudi Arabia from disagreeing with Washington, and will make Riyadh more pliable when it comes to future steps with regards to the “oil stand-off”. And the United States certainly cannot afford to waste any time as based on market behavior, American shale oil will soon “tank” and it needs to be rescued immediately.

The feelings among the Saudi elites are such, at present, that they are prompting Mohammad Bin Salman to engage in yet another external war, over oil. The Crown Prince appears to be in a very difficult position as he has little room to maneuver in the region and as unprecedented domestic struggles continue. Hence, it seems foolhardy of him to start a hard-to-win confrontation against Vladimir Putin, who is far better prepared for it, and who has become a highly influential politician in the Middle East. The author thinks that Mohammad Bin Salman has misjudged the situation. After all, the Crown Prince will not only be unable to handle an “oil price war” against Russia, but to even hang on to the throne unless he makes substantial changes to his policies towards the United States and Russia.

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