Will Biden Tame the Arabian Racehorse?

In his strategy to bridle recalcitrant states, the newly-minted US President Joe Biden decided to start with the demonstrative taming of one of the most active of “Arabian racehorses”: the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman.

It was he who recently began to display particular “agility” in radically changing the archaic, corrupt way of life that has developed over decades in Saudi society, and which suits the United States very well. Having initiated a “Saudi perestroika”, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman originated explosive activity both inside and outside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and started to implement various reforms that became part of “shock therapy”, whose significance he recounted himself during an interview in February 2018 with the newspaper The Washington Post. Saudi King Salman, feeling both physically unwell and the need to transfer power in the KSA to an energetic ruler, on November 4, 2017 issued a decree to create a committee endowed with broad powers. The new organization, led by Crown Prince Mohammed, was tasked with conducting its own investigations, arrests, imposing travel bans, freezing bank assets, and taking other action as part of an anti-corruption campaign. Very quickly, the
activities of the Committee took on a “pre-trial” approach: the people involved in the investigations were not officially charged, nor were they prosecuted, and most of the detainees agreed to so-called “out of court settlements.” They made deals with the director of the Committee, Prince Mohammed, and transferred the lion’s share of their fortunes to him. Having confined several dozen members of the House of Saud, former ministers, and successful business executives in the two hotels in the capital - the Ritz Carlton and Courtyard - for weeks, Prince Mohammed collected more than $100 billion in ransom money from corrupt Saudi officials, clearly demonstrating his potential to dictate what conditions are present to everyone and everything within the Kingdom. These billions of dollars in exchange for the release of local corrupt officials became the most striking example of “shock therapy” practiced by the heir to the throne.

It is noteworthy that among the Saudi corrupt officials arrested by Prince Mohammed bin Salman was Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the country’s most famous arms dealer and its former director general of intelligence. As The Middle East Eye wrote, it was Prince Bandar who was close to the US administration and to many American diplomats as nobody else was, actively “encouraging friendship” with diamonds and bribes in US dollars. He personally participated in Reagan’s military schemes in the sensational story with the Nicaraguan Contras, and was accused of personally participating in the Iran-Contra movement when he and his American masters tried to unleash war in Iraq. He was a personal friend of Cheney, a confidant and a close personal friend of former US President George W. Bush, and personally supervised Arab-American covert operations to arm DAESH jihadists (a terrorist formation is prohibited in the Russian Federation) in Syria.

Besides “shock therapy”, Prince Mohammed initiated the emancipation of Saudi women by allowing them to drive cars, open their own businesses (without the consent of their husbands or other male relatives), visit stadiums, and participate in some “male” sports (weightlifting) during international competitions. They are now also allowed to serve in the army - in the ground forces, the navy, and in the air force, and they can achieve high military ranks.

In April 2016, he personally presented his own brainchild, something in which he involved Western experts, called the “Vision 2030” reform program, which requires formidable amounts of investment. Building just one high-technology megacity from scratch that has an area of 26,500 square kilometers in the Arabian sands on the Red Sea’s coastline (the NEOM project) is estimated to have a price tag of $500 billion.

Despite his youth, Prince Mohammed has still not made, at least so far, any fatal mistakes in charting the course for his reformist impulses that would lead to large-scale destabilization in the KSA, and how he has adjusted the balance of power among the main clans in the House of Saud family has not flared up into any political upheavals. Owing to that, the intra-Saudi consensus has been shifted in favor of the prominent Sudairi faction, whose leaders are King Salman and Prince Mohammed, without the monarchy sliding into an abyss of bloodshed and processes involving disintegration.

Outside Saudi Arabia, the young heir to the Saudi throne also enjoys a certain amount of prestige, both due to his image created for the West as a liberal proponent of modernizing the largest Arab monarchy and due to the votes of confidence given by Russia and China at the highest political levels. During a visit to Britain in May 2018, the future monarch was given truly royal honors: he was received by Queen Elizabeth II, met with the leadership of the kingdom’s foreign (MI6) and internal (MI5) intelligence services, and participated in a meeting of the British National Security Council - a rare privilege for a foreign leader. Riyadh and London announced the creation of a bilateral Strategic Partnership Council. In London, Crown Prince Mohammed, during an interview with The Telegraph, reiterated his plans to “destroy extremism” and return the Kingdom to the fold of “moderate Islam”.

Mohammed bin Salman’s actions were supported by the Trump administration. Even repeated accusations by various politicians in the United States, and other countries, that Prince Mohammed was involved in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 did not lead to any official accusations being brought against him by the previous US administration. However, both the fight against corruption and the Vision 2030 reforms, besides demonstrating the desire on the part of Muhammad bin Salman to move away from the old, archaic foundations that undergird the KSA and corruption, clearly showed the current Washington administration the possibility that such a sweet “Saudi pie” - something to which US Democrats have grown particularly accustomed - can shrink, and even vanish, for the United States itself. And there are many examples of this. Take the memoirs by Ben Rhodes, a speechwriter during the Obama administration, who shares his impressions of the “generous gifts” received by Obama’s entourage when they visited the Kingdom in June 2009 in his book The World As It Is. For example, US presidential aide Marvin Nicholson back then received gifts worth $18,580, and the White House Deputy Staff Secretary, Peter Rundlet - $12,560. The
wife and daughters of former President Obama received jewelry and other items of value worth almost $190,000, and just one set of jewelry with rubies that was given to Michelle Obama was estimated to cost $132,000.

Clearly realizing what threat Muhammad bin Salman could pose to the “welfare” of the current US administration, Joe Biden decided to “redraw the map”, and in the very first days of his official activity as President of the United States began to demonstrate his intention to keep Crown Prince Mohammed from having active contacts with the White House, demonstrating his intention in the future to communicate not with Crown Prince Mohammed, but with King Salman. For a long time, and “for educational purposes”, Biden also kept hanging on to the intrigues spun by the US intelligence community regarding the murder of journalist Jamil Khashoggi, according to which the operation to kidnap or kill him was approved by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Following the release of the intelligence report, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken even announced a “Khashoggi Ban” to “impose visa restrictions on individuals who, acting on behalf of foreign governments, were involved in taking serious extraterritorial action against dissidents, including suppressing, harassing, observing, threatening, or harmed journalists, activists, or others who are considered dissidents on the basis of their work.” Specifically, recently these kinds of restrictions were already imposed on 76 Saudi Arabian citizens in connection with the murder of Khashoggi. Within the framework of the Global Magnitsky Act, the US Treasury also imposed sanctions against the closest aide to Crown Prince Mohammed, General Ahmad Asiri; in addition, the elite national guard unit that is subordinate to the crown prince, which American intelligence suspects of being complicit in the murder of Khashoggi, was also included in the “blacklist”.

At the same time, President Joe Biden refused to impose sanctions against Prince Mohammed bin Salman himself, despite reminders given by American media about a promise made during the election race to punish leaders at the highest levels in the kingdom involved in this murder. This change by Biden at the last moment in his position toward Prince Mohammed is undoubtedly due to the fact that Washington considers the Saudi kingdom to be a very important partner, and a regional power that counterbalances Iran, which makes any attempts to distance itself almost impossible. As is taking any active steps to tame the “Arabian racehorse”.

However, the other day on the air on CNN Jen Psaki, the press secretary for President Biden, said that the United States has “more effective ways” than sanctions against Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Does that mean that the process of “taming” will continue?

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