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EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

POLITICAL
ASSESSMENTS

7 NOVEMBER 2017

Saudi Arabia: Dimensions of targeting princes

Research and Studies



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Saudi Arabia: Dimensions of targeting princes

Research and Studies Unit

Introduction

A considerable set of resolutions and instructions have been issued in Saudi Arabia since Prince Mohammed bin Salman became the Kingdom's crown prince (on Wed. June 21, 2017). Despite their different content, these decrees came within a single framework with common objectives, namely: to empower the new regime, protect it against internal and/or external dangers, and ensure its stability and continuation. Also, the latest decisions included fundamental changes in the structure of the regime, concentrating the political power, military forces, financial resources, and media organs in the hands of Mohammed bin Salman.

It seems that the surprise and shocking decrees – in terms of nature, magnitude, and involved parties – issued on Nov. 4, 2017, will not be the last decisions or instructions in this context, as Mohammed bin Salman and his aides believe that there are threats against him that must be addressed and dealt with firmly and decisively at the proper time. They also believe that there are one-time opportunities that can contribute to tightening control, and achieving stability and survival of the regime.

Because all human decisions and attitudes are subject to degrees of right and wrong in both content and style, the result is always a mixture of negative and positive implications, both immediately and on the long run. This requires an understanding of decisions within a systematic framework based on documentation of events and their motives.

First: Decrees of Nov. 4, 2017

Saudi Media sources announced on Nov. 4 before midnight (without a formal royal declaration) that some surprise important decrees have been issued, most notably:

- 1- Dismissal of Prince Miteb bin Abdullah from his position as Minister of National Guard and arresting him.
- 2- Arrest of 11 princes, including Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdul Aziz and Prince Turki bin Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, Prince of Riyadh.
- 3- Forming a supreme committee chaired by the crown prince (and the membership of: chairman of the monitoring and investigation commission, chairman of the national anti-corruption authority, chief of the general audit bureau, attorney general and head of state security) for combatting corruption.

The anti-corruption committee has the following tasks and powers:

- To identify offenses, crimes, persons and entities involved in cases of public corruption.
 - To investigate, issue arrest warrants, ban travel, disclose and freeze of accounts and portfolios, track funds, assets and prevent their remittance or transfer by persons and entities, whatever they might be. The committee also has the right to take any precautionary measures it sees.
 - To take whatever measures deemed necessary to deal with those involved in public corruption cases and take what it considers to be the right of persons, entities, funds, fixed and movable assets, at home and abroad, return funds to the state treasury and register property and assets in the name of state property.
- 4- Dismissal of Economy Minister Eng. Adel bin Mohammed Faqih and arresting him, as well as the arrest of a number of current and former ministers, detaining them in a hotel complex in Riyadh, and preventing any contact with them until the investigation

is over. The German News Service (DW) Sunday, Nov. 5, 2017 the number of detainees reached 49 figures. The arrest warrants included prominent figures such as Walid al-Ibrahim, owner and chairman of the Pan-Arab broadcaster MBC Group, Sheikh Saleh Kamel, businessman and owner of the ART TV network and two of his sons, Sheikh Bakr bin Laden, the chairman of the Jeddah-based Saudi Binladin Group, Khalid al-Tuwaijri, former chief of the Royal Court, Amr Al-Dabbagh, the chairman of Saudi General Investment Authority and others.

Also, there were unconfirmed reports about the arrest of other figures, including Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz and a number of other princes and a group of businessmen including Mr. Sulaiman Al Rajhi, a Saudi corporate figure and billionaire, and others.

5. Reopening the 'Jeddah Floods' file (2015) and investigating the corona epidemic issue (Middle East respiratory syndrome **coronavirus** in Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2017).

6- Preventing private planes from leaving Saudi Arabia and closing private airports.

Remarks on the decisions:

1- The dismissal of ministers and the change of the naval forces' command were issued coincidentally with the decision to form the Supreme Committee for Combating Corruption.

2 - The arrests came only hours after the formation of the anti-corruption Supreme Committee, which means that we are in front of a premeditated top-secret plan – maybe to avoid abortion – and this brings it out of the usual procedures to combat corruption.

3. The Supreme Committee to Combat Corruption is an administrative committee which has absolute power to make decisions without allowing any administrative or

legal appeals against them. The committee has been granted huge powers that will have a great impact on the objectives for which these decisions were issued.

4. Among its powers, the committee has the right to determine what it deems to be in the public interest, especially with those who have responded (positively) with the committee. "It (the committee) may take whatever measures deemed necessary to deal with those involved in public corruption cases and take what it considers to be the right of persons, entities, funds, fixed and movable assets at home and abroad, return funds to the state treasury..." This text opens the door wide for holding deals related to funds and assets abroad, especially that the detainees include princes, former ministers, and businessmen, whose balance exceeds millions to billions.

5- The decision to establish the Supreme Committee did not limit the scope of its work among Saudis only, which opens the door for exercising its full powers on the expatriates as well.

6- The nature of the committee powers exceeded the political framework related to the monopolization of power to an economic framework, which necessarily requires linking these events with the economic situation in the Kingdom, including the budget deficit, the funding problems of 2030 projects and initiatives, the National Transformation Program 2020, as well as the acquisition of all major sources of power in the Kingdom.

7- The arrest of Economy Minister Eng. Adel bin Mohammed Faqih, one of the prominent figures in planning, supervising and guiding of Saudi Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program 2020 may mean that the regime has taken a decision to get rid of Faqih to hold him responsible for the 'Jeddah Floods' file, including issuance of building permits in the floods way. This is also considered a strong internal message that allows the current Saudi regime to disclaim responsibility for violations and at the same time gives move an impressive momentum, especially among young

people and reformist forces, who earlier criticized Faqih's promotion and appointment as Minister of Labor and then Minister of Health instead of bringing him to account for corruption regarding the 'Jeddah Floods' file.

8- Dismissals and arrests included Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, the former Minister of National Guard and his brother Prince Turki, the Prince of Riyadh, which means achievement of more than one objective including:

- Elimination of sons of late King Abdullah's control of one of the largest armed military strongholds in the country within the framework of one of the largest campaigns against corruption in the country (as it is claimed) allows Bin Salman to present his move as not a personal matter against Prince Miteb or in the context of power struggle, which justifies his orders before the symbols of the ruling royal family.

- This is a clear message to those who did not swear allegiance so far, that the regime is able to overcome this and even punish them for issues related to corruption.

- To provide a message to the outside that the regime is strong and able to deal with opponents with new methodology.

9 - Arrest of a number of businessmen, particularly Alwaleed bin Talal sends two strong messages as follows:

- Anti-regime businessmen who have taken their money out of the kingdom during the last period to weaken Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program 2020, are not away from the government's punishment whether inside or outside the country.

- The door is not closed to major businessmen at home and abroad to assume their responsibility, bear the current and future economic burdens, and support the regime voluntarily; otherwise the authorities are able to force them to do so.

- In addition, the financial measures taken against this number of princes and businessmen, as well as the concentration of this huge amount of funds and assets

obtained in the hands of Mohammed bin Salman, eliminates any future prospect of competition with Bin Salman's economic institutions in the Kingdom.

10- The significance of detainees and their status as princes and ministers sends a message to the foreign investors – who are invited by the state to invest in major tourism and recreation projects in the western region on the Red Sea coast – that the current regime opens a new page with investors to eliminate corruption even if it came from princes or ministers, and completely supports transparency to ensure the engagement of foreign investors in these mega projects.

11 - The list of detainees included a number of owners of major media networks to ensure silencing these networks and restrict media prevalence to only the satellite channels associated with Mohammed bin Salman, particularly Al Arabiya.

- The decisions were followed by a number of important events, such as the crash of Prince Mansour bin Muqrin's helicopter, the rumors on death of Prince Abdul Aziz bin Fahd, as well as claims that the detention circle was extended to include Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz.

Second: Motives and objectives of the decrees

From the previous analysis, the motives and objectives of these decisions can be summed up in:

1- At the internal level

- Strengthening the regime politically, maintaining empowerment of Mohammed bin Salman and concentrating all powers and resources in his hands alone, which sends a violent message to opponents, help control the royal family and the tribal powers of influence and employ them (in favor of the regime), as has been done with the Council of Senior Scholars.

- To work on drawing a mental image of the current regime based on transparency and combating corruption, after the fight against terrorism lost its luster in the street, especially in light of reports on the kingdom's role in supporting terrorism, published by newspapers and magazines, and repeated by the European institutions.
- Drawing people's attention to a very hot and important issue, especially as the events may be renewed on a daily basis, to make them forget the problems of the Yemen war, as well as the problems resulting from the decline in oil prices, and other internal problems.
- Weakening the opposing businessmen and supporters of the anti-regime media programs abroad (financially and morally) and aborting any attempt to harm the regime.
- Collecting (usurping) large amounts of money through confiscation of the funds and assets of detainees or by reaching compromises with them to support the economic situation.
- Limiting the financial capabilities of expatriates, whether in banks or in assets, especially for those who adopt anti-regime attitudes.

Some observers said that the decisions that have been made were aimed at aborting a major coup attempt that was orchestrated by these parties led by Prince Miteb bin Abdullah. Narrators of this story cited the Russian Sputnik website, which came out to be incorrect. However, this view can still be considered a possibility which has had no evidence so far.

2- At the Gulf and regional levels

To demonstrate the power of the regime and its ability to confront its opponents abroad, especially in the crisis with Qatar and Iran (in Yemen), reflecting the regime's

ability to “trim the nails” of its opponents internally even if they were princes or ministers.

3- At the international level

- Improving the mental image of the regime through highlighting its fight against corruption and its keenness on achieving an advanced degree of international transparency to attract major foreign investors.
- Sending a strong message that Mohammed bin Salman is the only strong ruler of the kingdom, who must be addressed in all matters, both politically and economically.

Third: Implications and likely scenarios

- 1- The existence of convulsions in the Saudi stock market may affect the economic situation negatively on the macroeconomic level, especially in the event of the actual application of the withdrawal and seizure of assets and funds held by defendants in cases of corruption.
- 2- Difficulties that may face the recovery of funds and assets abroad, especially for businessmen and princes residing abroad as this needs legal and procedural rules, may not enable the Supreme Committee to undertake its job, which weakens its image domestically, leading to freezing it later on.
- 3- An escalating state of tribal and family rejection and discontent towards accusing their children of corruption, especially princes and senior businessmen.
- 4- The existence of a legal and constitutional problem in the event of the detainees’ rejection of any economic compromise, or any procedures taken by the committee.

5- The likely reaction of those who have not been affected by the recent arrest orders so far, especially those who have a declared or undeclared attitude against Bin Salman's allegiance.

6- Giving a negative message to foreign investors that there is no immunity to any funds in the Kingdom if there is any dispute between them and authorities, which may affect the entry of serious investments as targeted by Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030.

7- The negative attitude of some tribes and/or major families affected by the recent arrests may have negative aspects in the transfer of power in the event of the death of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdel-Aziz.

8- These sudden, massive, and violent changes may undermine the Kingdom's stability as a result of the sudden disruption of political, military, economic, media and religious balances; and concentrating these powers and tools in the hands of one person, known for making swift and daring decisions and entering into large-scale conflicts that are never well-thought out ().

(1) The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of EIPSS