

Middle-East: Will the Saudis Go to War?

Friday 24 November 2017, by [LAZARE Daniel](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2017).

The Persian Gulf may be on the brink of a new regional war.

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Is a major war about to break out in the Persian Gulf for the fourth time in less than forty years?

For better than two weeks, the world has watched transfixed as Muhammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's all-powerful crown prince, has struck out at a growing list of enemies. The action began on Saturday evening, Nov. 4, when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation — not in Beirut as one would expect, but in Riyadh to which he had been summoned just a day earlier. Speculating that Hariri had been forced to step down against his will, one journalist noted that he spoke “with the conviction of a kidnap victim.”

A short time later, Saudi defense forces reportedly intercepted a missile that Shi'ite Houthi militias had fired from Yemen some eight hundred miles away. A few hours after that, mass roundups began as eleven princes — including billionaire Alwaleed bin Talal, the world's forty-fifth wealthiest individual — found themselves under arrest along with four government ministers and numerous others, many of them forced to camp out on mattresses in Riyadh's Ritz Carlton under an armed guard [1].

Observers dubbed it the Night of the Long Knives after Hitler's bloody purge of Ernst Röhm in 1934. Saudi Minister for Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan, a notorious anti-Shi'ite hardliner, blasted the Lebanese government as “warmongers against Saudi Arabia due to the aggression of Hezbollah,” while, on Tuesday, MbS, as the crown prince is known, accused Iran of supplying the Houthis with the missile that they had used against Riyadh. Muhammad called it “an act of war.”

Amid such unprecedented sword rattling, the big question is whether MbS will follow up with an act of war of his own.

What he and his advisers (read: yes-men and sycophants) will decide is unknown. But three things seem clear. One is that the Saudis give all signs of gearing up for a showdown with their rival across the Persian Gulf. A second is that while the kingdom enjoys certain key advantages, the odds will turn increasingly against them if an actual shooting war erupts. The third is that if MbS loses, the royal family will likely lose too — bigly. Monarchy doesn't go well with modern warfare, as a slew of royal families beginning with the Hohenzollerns, Habsburgs, Romanovs, and Ottomans discovered in World War I and after. The issue now is whether the House of Saud will join such half-forgotten dynasties in the great royal graveyard.

Oil and War

For years, observers have wondered what a Saudi collapse would mean for global politics. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of the 2007 bestseller *The Black Swan*, calls Saudi Arabia the most “fragile” nation on earth [2], while the liberal foreign-policy website Lobelog.com speculated last year [3] that if the kingdom were to undergo a Libyan-style meltdown, the Islamic State would be the chief beneficiary. With the Persian Gulf teetering on the edge of catastrophe, the world might now get a chance to find out.

How did things arrive at such a perilous state? For years, Saudi Arabia was a sleepy outpost. It was bankrupt in the 1930s and on the verge of starvation during World War II. Even after the discovery of oil, it remained a backwater. But the price explosion of the 1970s changed all that by sparking the greatest gold rush in history. Hundreds of billions of dollars in oil revenue went to gold-plated Rolls Royces, private jets [4], and vast desert mansions where the air-conditioning runs night and day even when everyone is off on vacation. But it also went into high-tech military equipment. With America pouring an estimated \$11 trillion into militarizing the Persian Gulf — not counting the 2003 invasion of Iraq — Saudi Arabia has joined in the build-up too, emerging in recent years as the single biggest arms importer in the world [5].

The effect of all those armaments has been to fuel Saudi paranoia and aggression. Since 2011, the kingdom has rained bombs on Yemen and financed and armed Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other Sunni jihadis in Libya, Syria, and Iraq. It has sent troops to crush democratic protests in Shi’ite-majority Bahrain and imposed a blockade on Qatar for the crime of insufficient hostility to Iran. Accusing Lebanon of being overly tolerant of Shi’ism, it is now attempting to impose regime change there as well.

The kingdom finds itself surrounded by a ring of fire of its own making. But Saudi Arabia is not only destabilizing others — it’s destabilizing itself. Power in the kingdom essentially rests on a three-way social compact among the House of Saud, the general population, and the *Wahhabiyya*, which is to say the overgrown religious establishment. The first is allowed an absolute monopoly on political power as long as it shares a portion of its oil wealth with the broad masses in the form of jobs and social benefits. The people, in turn, are allowed to collect such benefits as long as they grovel, keep quiet, and do not disturb the status quo. As for the mullahs, their job is to drum up support for the House of Saud as long as the royal family returns the favor by safeguarding *shari’a* at home and promulgating the kingdom’s austere, violent, and women-hating version of Islam abroad.

It’s all quite neat and simple — except that in the last two decades it’s largely come undone. Promoting Wahhabism meant promoting jihad, which led to Al Qaeda and 9/11 and an unprecedented breach with the Saudis’ great patron and protector, the United States. A suffocating religious atmosphere has fueled lawlessness and social decay [6] while massive financial looting by thousands of princes has undermined the economy to the point where it’s even less diversified than it was forty years ago [7]. With oil prices off 50 percent from their mid-2014 peak, the government has had to cut social spending so that King Salman can keep taking \$100 million vacations in Morocco [8] and MbS can plunk down €500 million whenever a super-luxury yacht catches his eye off the South of France [9].

Meanwhile, the war in Yemen has turned into a nightmare as Houthis raid deep into Saudi territory and fire missiles seemingly at will. Qatar thumbs its nose at the Saudi blockade, while Bashar al-Assad is on the verge of cleaning out the last of the Saudi-backed jihadis responsible for turning Syria into a charnel house (with the exception of an Al Qaeda stronghold in the northern province of Idlib).

In the face of such problems, MbS has responded ever more erratically. He's tried to lure foreign investors with promises of massive building projects [10], only to scare them off by arresting members of the Saudi business class and attempting to shake them down for as much as \$800 billion [11]. He's called for "a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions" while imprisoning dissidents and inveighing against Shi'ism as if it were still the Middle Ages.

Most disturbing of all, he's formed a close working relationship with the only leader even rasher and more aggressive than he is: Donald Trump. "I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing," Trump tweeted in response to the recent arrests. "Some of those they are harshly treating have been 'milking' their country for years!"

As journalist Patrick Cockburn said of Prince Muhammad [12]: "Combine his failings with those of Trump, a man equally careless or ignorant about the consequence of his actions, and you have an explosive mixture threatening the most volatile region on earth."

The Saudi Advantage — and the Saudi Risk

The risks of a blowout are therefore on the rise. One reason Saudi Arabia may be tempted to attack Iran is its belief that it holds the military cards. And indeed it does, if only for the moment. Thanks to its recent spending spree, it has assembled a formidable strike force consisting of more than two hundred advanced fighters and bombers [13], a mix of F-15s, Tornados, and next-generation Eurofighter Typhoons. The kingdom has purchased some twenty tankers for mid-air refueling and a large supply of high-precision cruise missiles.

It also has the advantage of some 120 miles of water lying between it and its enemy, not to mention Kuwait and Iraq. A major air or sea assault across the Persian Gulf appears beyond Iranian capabilities while opening up a land corridor with a couple of sovereign states in the way is presumably a non-starter. So while Iran's manpower reserves are greater, it has no clear way of delivering them to the battlefield [14].

Saudi Arabia is therefore in a position to attack with relative impunity. It enjoys US backing, which could be highly important in terms of financial support and military supplies, and tacit support from Israel as well. So why doesn't it launch the long-awaited first strike and get it over with?

The reason is that Iran is not without assets of its own. Its air force is out of date [15], consisting of pre-revolutionary F-14s and F-5s plus a mix of Russian and Chinese aircraft based on designs dating as far back as the 1950s. But it has beefed up its air defenses [16] with mobile surface-to-air missiles including advanced Russian S-300s [17] and has also installed long-range radar capable of spotting Saudi aircraft not long after they get off the ground.

Iran would have two other things in its favor. One is friends. The Islamic republic is less isolated than it was during the 1980-88 war with Iraq when both the United States and Soviets sided with Saddam Hussein. This time Russia is in its court to a degree, and it can count on strong support from Syria and Hezbollah. Iraq, meanwhile, is sympathetic.

The other thing Iran would have in its favor is staying power. Though a brutal authoritarian state with no more than an admixture of political democracy, it's a far sight better than Saudi Arabia, perhaps the most autocratic nation in the world – one that enslaves women, bans political associations, imprisons liberals, executes Shi'ites, and classifies atheism as terrorism along with anything "calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based." [18]

As a consequence, the relationship between the people and the state is completely different. Where King Salman and Muhammad are isolated not only from the masses but even from other members of the royal family (with whom they're effectively at war), Iranian president Hassan Rouhani was re-elected in June with 57 percent of the vote, seven points more than he received four years earlier.

Political dynamics are always unpredictable. But given such a level of support, Iranians would be much more likely to rally around their leader when the going gets tough. The powerless and demoralized Saudi masses would be much more likely to crack.

A Widening Conflict?

Any war with Iran could thus turn into a Yemen-like nightmare on a far grander scale. But even that assumes a conflict would remain confined to just two countries, which is hardly realistic. If fighting were to break out in Lebanon, Syria could be drawn in, and perhaps Iraq, too. Though Israel would presumably prefer to watch from the sidelines, it, too, could intervene if it looks like archenemy Hezbollah is prevailing. Iran would presumably be at pains not to involve the United States while the Saudis, eager as ever to have others do their fighting for them, would do their utmost to draw America in. If they're successful, the conflagration could spread even farther.

While ISIS and Al Qaeda appear to be headed for defeat in Syria and Iraq, both could see a turn-around in their fortunes if Saudi Arabia becomes the next failed state-cum-imperialist battleground. As a string of historians from Ibn Khaldun [19] to Friedrich Engels [20] to Perry Anderson [21] have pointed out, virtually all Muslim dynasties began as desert tribal federations fighting for a revived Islam. That's what the Saudi clan did in the mid-eighteenth century when it hooked up with a fundamentalist preacher named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and set out to conquer the desert interior. And it's what Al Qaeda and ISIS are doing today.

That's why, if the House of Saud were indeed to fall, the next person on the throne in Riyadh could well be Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISIS in charge of some 22 percent of the world's proven oil reserves? That's something to keep Washington's laptop bombardiers awake at night.

Daniel Lazare

P.S.

* Jacobin. 11.22.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/saudi-arabia-iran-trump-war-bin-salman>

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Footnotes

[1] The Persian Gulf may be on the brink of a new regional war.

[2] <https://www.ft.com/content/b2e15d16-c62f-11e7-b2bb-322b2cb39656>

- [3] <https://lobelog.com/what-if-the-state-of-saudi-arabia-collapses/>
- [4] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3515463/Inside-life-rich-Saudi-playboy-fleet-golden-cars-taken-London-storm.html>
- [5] <https://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/?toURL=https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2015/03/10/saudi-arabia-has-become-the-worlds-biggest-arms-importer-infographic/&refURL=https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/saudi-arabia-iran-trump-war-bin-salman&referrer=https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/saudi-arabia-iran-trump-war-bin-salman#4ef7c6795b98>
- [6] <https://www.amazon.com/Joyriding-Riyadh-Urbanism-Cambridge-Studies/dp/1107641950>
- [7] <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301420715000215>
- [8] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>
- [9] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-yacht-france-new-york-times-a7365261.html>
- [10] <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-neom-saudi-mega-city/>
- [11] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-expands-crackdown-on-elite-1510062385>
- [12] ESSF (article 42516), [United States / Saudi Arabia: Trump and Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman are the most dangerous men in the world – and they’re meeting next week.](#)
- [13] <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/rsaf-equipment.htm>
- [14] <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/saudi-arabias-new-missile-force/>
- [15] <http://armedforces.eu/Iran>
- [16] <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-counterintuitive-role-of-air-defense-in-irans-anti-status-quo-regional>
- [17] <http://www.dw.com/en/iran-tests-new-russian-made-s-300-missile-system/a-37808317>
- [18] ESSF (article 42517), [Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights – Campaign to Silence Peaceful Activists.](#)
- [19] https://www.amazon.com/Muqaddimah-Introduction-History-Princeton-Classics/dp/0691166285/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1511299119&sr=1-1&keywords=The+Muqaddimah%3A+An+Introduction+to+History
- [20] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894/early-christianity/index.htm>
- [21] https://www.amazon.com/Lineages-Absolutist-State-Verso-History/dp/1781680108/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1511299177&sr=1-1&keywords=Lineages+of+the+Absolutist+State