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Saudi Arabia: the political implications of a new regional policy and the jihadist challenge

By Dr Fatiha Dazi-Heni*

King Salman has, since he ascended the throne nine months ago, adopted a more interventionist regional approach¹ and new political tactics. This is a radical break with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA's) past low-key policy. It is raising a number of questions about the country's future stability, in particular vis-à-vis his relationships with jihadi groups.

This new approach enhances political rapprochement with recent past enemies such as the regional Muslim Brotherhood (MB), including Hamas in Palestine², al-Islah party in Yemen, and Syrian MBs mainly represented in Jaysh al-Fatah, one of the most efficient armed rebel group fighting Bashar al-Assad and Islamic State (IS) positions in Syria.

Given that the country's new monarch, King Salman, is known as sympathetic to religious conservative factions and notably Salafists that share al-Qaeda's and IS's rejection of Shiites, and given KSA's more aggressive regional policy in Yemen and Syria, the Saudi stance towards radicalism and jihadi groups has become far more sensitive. KSA's new regional policy is highly questioned and seen by many as ambivalent and risky for its future stability.

What is King Salman's new assertive regional policy?

The Muslim Brotherhood is no longer considered an immediate threat to the Kingdom and indeed shares similar political objectives, such as defeating Assad in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. At the same time, the MB and other Sunni political movements - ranging from the AKP in Turkey to Ennahda in Tunisia - see their interests more closely aligned with King Salman's leadership³. Most prominent Islamist activists in KSA, Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain supported the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen as well as the armed support of rebel Syrian groups alongside Turkey and Qatar.

¹ Mohammad Bazzi, "Saudi Arabia strikes out", <http://newyorker.com>, July 16, 2015.

² This rapprochement was marked by the visit of a high level delegation of Hamas leaders, including its chairman Khaled Meshaal on 15 July 2015, to KSA. Though officially to undertake to perform Umrah, the delegation met with King Salman, crown prince Muhammad Bin Nayef and vice crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman.

³ Kristin Diwan, "The (limited) rehabilitation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf", <http://www.agsiw.org>, July 31, 2015.

In order to take full advantage of its fight against the Houthis in Yemen and Assad's positions in Syria, King Salman, with the assistance of the GIP and Mabahit agencies⁴, chose a tactical entente with al-Qaeda affiliated groups: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen as well as Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) and Ahrar al-Sham in Syria. This tactical move aims to curb the Iranian regional influence in the Middle East and to fight Islamic State's positions.

Such strategic choices taken by King Salman are radically different from those of his predecessor, King Abdallah. King Salman's regional policy calculates that classifying Iran and its Shiite Islamist allies (Hezbollah or the Houthis), jihadi Sunni movements (IS, JaN, Ahrar al-Sham), and mainstream Islamists MBs at the same level of threat will result in failure, as under King Abdallah⁵. Salman's new strategy is to unite as much as possible Sunni Islamists⁶ in order to weaken Teheran's cohesive bloc made up of its Shiite regional proxies.

The risks for KSA's future domestic stability

Seeking a detente with Muslim Brotherhood groups does not mean a full rehabilitation of the Islamist political mainstream for King Salman and the crown prince, who still consider the MB the ultimate threat to Saudi dynastic power. Indeed, this so called "Sunni alliance" is not fully accepted by Egypt and the UAE, both of whom show no sign of reconciliation with the Brotherhood.

Furthermore, IS's violent transnational plan of increasing territorial influence, lying at the heart of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's conception of the caliphate, is an open existential threat to the Saudi-Sunni pan-Islamist religious legitimacy⁷. Shiites in the Gulf have emerged as a key target of IS, with recent attacks on Shiite targets in the Arabian Peninsula (Shiite mosques in Riyadh and Kuwait in May 2015, both killing 29 persons, and in Sanaa during the same period). IS seeks to be the only true defender of Sunni Islam, and is trying to destabilise Saudi Arabia by highlighting the contradictions of KSA's religious policy vis-à-vis its Shiite population.

In the face of these attacks, Riyadh has tried to reverse its discrimination against its Shiite minority with a unionist and patriotic rhetoric claiming all Saudis are part of the same nation. Countering Iranian and Shiite influence remains the priority of KSA's new regional assertive policy and a challenge. IS is exploiting this situation in order to fuel sectarian strife.

KSA's vulnerability to IS (marked by the arrest of over 400 members of an IS Saudi cell on 19 July 2015) along with likely continued security problem posed by the Houthis to the southern Saudi border, are very risky to the country's future domestic stability.

⁴ GIP is the General Intelligence Presidency in charge of the external intelligence service under the supervision of General Khalid Ali Bin Abdallah al-Humaidan, the previous head of Mabâhit (General Intelligence Directory/domestic intelligence service). Both intelligence agencies are under the supervision of the crown prince and interior minister, Muhammad Bin Nayef who defeated al-Qaeda in the Kingdom after a bitter struggle in 2003-2006.

⁵ Under King Abdallah, KSA published in February 2014 its list of classified terrorist organisations including the MB, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and the Houthis.

⁶ Hussein Ibish, "Saudi Arabia's new Sunni Alliance", *The New York Times*, July 31, 2015.

⁷ Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia forced to rethink ideology in fight against IS", www.al-monitor.com, December 3, 2014.

King Salman with his new tactics to position KSA at the core of the regional game is trying to adjust the scales of power that are still in favour of Iran's domination in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. These manoeuvres, however, appear to be short-sighted leaving the future looking uncertain in the longer run.

About the author

Dr Fatiha Dazi-Heni is a political scientist at Sciences Po Lille (IEP) and a researcher on the Gulf program at L'Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (IRSEM) - Paris.

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contact@arab-reform.net