



HOW MBS IS RETHINKING SAUDI NATIONALISM

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The outbreak of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis on 5th June 2017 led to dramatic polarization between United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain plus Egypt and, on the other hand, Qatar, due to Doha's alternative foreign policy supporting Muslim Brothers' political ideology, especially during the Arab spring revolts. On the other side of the GCC, Kuwait tries to multiply its mediator efforts and Oman has strengthened its commercial relations with Qatar to avoid its isolation.

The boycott against Qatar became the stage of confrontation for a new generation of GCC leaders, who publicly antagonized one the other on regional policies orientations, thus challenging the long-standing traditional caution in royal dealings and practices.^[1]

Thus, this GCC crisis serves more to the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) to shape a new assertive foreign policy tone in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, rather than being a pure nationalist narrative.

USING THE EXISTING HERITAGE TO SHAPE AN ALTERNATIVE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

Crown prince Mohammed actually promotes a renewed national narrative in continuity with kings Fahd (1982-2005) and Abdullah's heritage (2005-2015). Both former rulers emphasized secular identifications within the collective Saudi identity in order to strengthen domestic legitimacy, which relied only on the Islamic register that became deficient, especially after the second Gulf war. King Fahd was the one who encouraged the most the Islamic imagery related to the Wahhabi Saudi salafist uniform inside and outside the Kingdom^[2]. He also started the promotion of Najdi cultural heritage after the unprecedented domestic defy led by *sahwa* clerics^[3] in early Nineties against the US army arrival on the Saudi soil. The aim was to elevate the Najdi folklore through the establishment of the Al Janadriyya festival as a national reference, despite this is related only to the central province, Najd (the geographical origin of Al Saud family and the Wahhabi clergy).

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As for King Abdullah, he was the first to promote cultural Saudi heritage through development of tourism: he rehabilitated the archeological Nabatean site of Madâ'in Sâlih classified in 2008 by Unesco. The historic city of Jeddah followed the same path on 2014, and before that, King Abdullah decided to restore the Dir'iyyah district, historic fiefdom of the Al Saud family. Therefore, the renewed national narrative promoted by MBS follows up the rewriting of Saudi national history in turning away, although gradually, from the Wahhabi heritage. Nevertheless, under kings Fahd and Abdullah, the first intention was to enhance the Al Saud Najdi reference as a national one. For the young crown prince, the new national narrative is functional to his ambition to build a Saudi modern nation, breaking with the traditional system where the royal family as a whole was the core of the regime^[4].

THE AMBITION TO BUILD A "VIBRANT" NATION^[5]

Mohammad Bin Salman permanently refers to his Grandfather's model who created the modern Saudi State: doing so, he projects himself as the one who will build the modern Saudi Nation, but with his Vision 2030 at the core^[6], while his family and Islam will not serve anymore as ultimate references. The crown prince aspires to embrace youth into a future nation that will not obey to the traditional royal family as an institution stemming from tribal tradition and referring exclusively to Wahhabism. Instead, the absolute loyalty will go to him and to his Vision 2030 as the ultimate reference to the future Nation.

MBS retook the secular narrative introduced by king Fahd and mainly developed by king Abdullah. But he went far beyond in rehabilitating pre Islamic sites (al-'Ulâ with Madâ'in Sâlih and other ancient millenary sites in Hâ'il, Northern province or Al Ahsa, Eastern province), as parts of the long history of the Arabian Nation narrative. Crown prince Mohammed's readiness to encourage public cultural events is also a clear sign of his political will to emancipate from the original Saudi-Wahhabi pact that used to regulate politics and society^[7]. Boosting culture,

sports, entertainment, and relegating religious police from its responsibility to regulate public social control (as occurred with the Royal decree of 13 April 2016) are major keys at stake for MBS' empowerment. In the same way, new institutions (a royal commission, a new ministry of culture) are dedicated to regulate culture and heritage alongside with institutions devoted to sports and entertainment; all are supervised by his close-knit friends and royal peers of the same generation.

MBS does not oppose to religion and the Wahhabi clergy as a component of the Saudi identity, but he contests the monopolistic control of the religious establishment on society: he aims to control and monopolize society through his inner circle. This top-down approach intends to encouraging a youth cultural identity, with specific socialization and leisure for a generation mainly attached in communicating through social media.

The different qualitative interviews I conducted mainly in Riyadh but also in Jeddah during MBS period ascension to power (from May 2016 to December 2017) with young Saudis under 30 years old were quite illustrative to the systematic approach the prince adopted towards this young public. He promoted a new Saudi generational identity relying on shared cultural references, first with his non-profit foundation MISK, created in 2011.^[8] In this context, celebrating events such as the National Day on 23 September 2018, festivity unprecedentedly celebrated at the King Fahd Stadium and with gender mixing, emphasizes this new nationalist credo. This secular celebration is nevertheless considering being contrary to Islam precepts by the conservative Wahhabi orthodoxy.

NATIONALISM AND HYPER NATIONALISM AFTER THE GULF CRISIS OF JUNE 2017

Crown prince Mohammed promotes patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric to foster a more secular atmosphere by encouraging broader nationalism and, at same time, reducing archaic traditions and "extremist" Islamist ideas^[9] and religious control over society. MBS refers to 1979



as the main breaking point period of the contemporary history of his country, when political Islam and Wahhabism were at the climax, so deep-rooted during the Eighties in all fields of the Saudi society: his aim is to recover public social life in the Kingdom as it was before this date.

The crisis with Qatar gives to the crown prince the opportunity to spread on its firm belief in order to tackle and silence Islamist “extremism”, thus following his Emirati mentor, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), who targets mainly the Muslim Brotherhood. MBZ is actually the one who runs the confrontational action against the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional offshoots, considering them the roots of Islamic radicalism and extremism, with Qatar as the main financial and state supporter. In the same footpath, crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman considers this ideology as the worst enemy of the Saudi nation and the Muslim world, although the King and his advisers in the Royal palace do not share entirely the same belief.

Therefore, on the domestic agenda, any activist or sympathizer of Muslim Brotherhood’s ideas is nowadays charged of being a traitor and accused of collusion with the enemy (that is to say Qatar).

This situation is unprecedented in the Kingdom: authorities use a nationalist narrative to label any person supposed to infringe red lines. Anyone criticizing or from the guidelines fixed by the crown prince on domestic or foreign policy issues becomes a traitor to the nation, as

demonstrated by the arrests of tens of pacific activists, intellectuals and clerics on September 2017 and with the feminist activists arrested on May and June 2018.

Therefore, the crisis with Qatar added to the process of radical transformation of the former dynastical monarchy into a vertical and reinforced authoritarian power: this has been paving the way to hyper nationalism and to disruptive temptations towards despotism, as illustrated with the dramatic episode of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi on 2nd October 2018. The hostile narrative against the Iranian regime also serves the enflaming nationalist reaction in the Kingdom, since Iran is widely perceived by the Saudis as an existential threat to Kingdom’s national security through its support to the Houthis in Yemen.

As a result, the new Saudi leadership promotes patriotic and nationalist rhetoric to build a strong nation through two main dimensions. First, it uses the rewriting of a national narrative based on secularism and long history, for instance promoting archaeological sites: therefore, Islamic identity is still prominent but is no more the unique reference. Now, the nation is associated with long and millenary history and no more just the cradle of Islam. Second, a foreign policy marked by crises (Qatar, the Yemen war and Iran being the worst regional threat) serves as a tool to exacerbate the other face of nationalism, inflaming the rhetoric on regional crises.

1. Fatiha Dazi-Héni, “Kuwait and Oman mediating policy traditions in rupture with Gulf crisis protagonists”, *Orient II*, April 2018, pp 41-46.
2. Nabil Mouline, *Les Clercs de l’Islam: Autorité religieuse et pouvoir politique en Arabie saoudite, XVIIIe –XXIe siècle*, Paris, PUF, 2011.
3. Stéphane Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens: Une insurrection manquée*, Paris, PUF, 2010.
4. Michael Herb, *All in the Family. Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, New York, State University of New York, 1999.
5. For more details on the Vision, see www.vision2030.gov.sa and for an interesting analysis, see Jane Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia’s social contract. Austerity and Transformation*, Middle East and North Africa program, Chatham House, London, 2017.

6. Fatiha Dazi-Héni, “Arabie saoudite: la nation selon Mohammed Bin Salman. Relégation du religieux et pouvoir sultanique », Olivier Da Lage (ed.) *L’Essor des nationalismes religieux*, Paris, Demopolis, 2018, Chapter 4, pp.71-87.
7. Madawi Al Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic voices from a new generation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
8. “MISK Foundation objective is to captivate best skilled young’s from 18 to 35 in new creative digital media, technology, art and culture, empowering Saudi youth to become participants in the future economy”, interview with Shima Hamiduddin (executive CEO at MISK), March 2017, Riyadh.
9. See this interview with MBS: “We will not wait 30 more years of archaism to reform....”, *The Economist*, 6 January 2016.