



מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי
مركز عزري برای مطالعات ایران و خلیج پارس
The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

The Persian Gulf Observer

Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf



The first year of the rule of King Salman bin
Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia

Issue No. 16
(March 29, 2016)

ס

ס

ס

The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa is happy to launch *The Persian Gulf Observer: Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf*. *The Persian Gulf Observer* will be published periodically, expressing the views and analysis of the Ezri center's researchers on various issues concerning the Persian Gulf region and the countries which lay by its shores. Attached please find the sixteenth issue written by Dr. Glen Segell on "The first year of the rule of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia"

You are most welcome to follow the Ezri Center's tweets at: <https://twitter.com/EzriCenter>, be our friend on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Ezri-Center-for-Iran-and-Persian-Gulf-Studies/141080069242626>

Watch and listen to conferences and lectures in the Center's YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZdzvlhv7a8nxLjYZdaz68Q>

and visit our site: <http://gulfc.haifa.ac.il/>

You are also cordially invited to visit our site in Persian www.TeHTel.com, where you could find interesting material on various aspects of the life in Israel.



The Persian Gulf Observer: מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי באוניברסיטת חיפה שמח להשיק את

Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf, בו יוצגו מאמרי דעה שיופצו בתדירות תקופתית, פרי-עטם של חוקרי

המרכז על מגוון נושאים מאזור המפרץ הפרסי והמדינות השוכנות לחופיה.

להלן הגיליון החמישה-עשר ובו מאמר מאת ד"ר גלן סגל בנושא "השנה הראשונה של שלטון המלך סלמאן בן עבד-אלעזיז של ערב הסעודית"

אנו מזמינים אתכם לעקוב אחרי ציוצי המרכז בכתובת: <https://twitter.com/EzriCenter>,

להיות חברים שלנו בפייסבוק: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Ezri-Center-for-Iran-and-Persian-Gulf-Studies/141080069242626>

[Persian-Gulf-Studies/141080069242626](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZdzvlhv7a8nxLjYZdaz68Q)

לצפות ולהאזין לכנסים והרצאות בערוץ היו-טיוב של המרכז:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZdzvlhv7a8nxLjYZdaz68Q>

ולבקר אותנו באתר הבית: <http://gulfc.haifa.ac.il/>

דוברי ויודעי הפרסית שביניכם מוזמנים לבקר באתר שלנו בשפה הפרסית www.TeHTel.com בו ניתן למצוא חומרים

מעניינים על היבטים שונים של החיים בישראל.

The desert sand in the hour glass falling by gravity tolls not time but destiny provides an apt analogy to the passing of the first anniversary of the rule of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz in Saudi Arabia. Since taking reign after the death of his predecessor on 23 January 2015 he is reputed to lack the ability to concentrate for long periods due to age and illness; not different from his predecessor. The destiny of his kingdom is beyond his control and appears to be falling deeper into many crises including leadership struggles, regional security and foreign policy debacles, domestic terrorism and economic strife, just to mention a few.

Although not reported by the local media that fear to criticise the authorities there are many signs of state collapse and leadership crises. Waiting in the sidelines are a cadre of hopeful successors' who are devoting their time more to the power struggle than to governance of the kingdom. These include Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef bin Abdul Aziz who is also First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman who is also Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. The former is first in line to the throne but only a nephew of the new king while the later is the second in line to the throne but the son of the new king. Not left out is Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz's campaign against any and all royal decisions, announcing neither pledge of loyalty nor obedience.

To date there is no clear indication or set process of how rule will pass to any of these in a peaceful manner. What is clear is that if the king and hopeful successors were to devote their attention to the affairs of their kingdom; then they could well start with the wars it is embroiled in. Perhaps the most salient is the war in Yemen being the closest on its southern border, and threatening to destroy unity of the Arab and Muslim nation. Yemen and the various rebel factions and extremist groups that reside there including al-Qaeda have been a thorn and threat to the region and Saudi Arabia in particular for many years.

Under the slogan of "restoring the hope" in Yemen, the king formed a military coalition of 10 countries to restore the ousted president. Despite pledges of support the more powerful of these, Egypt and Pakistan, refused to take active part leaving most battles to the Saudis and Emirates and some mercenaries. There is no end in sight to this war.

To the north the war in Syria is no different. Originating as an Arab Spring effort to topple the Alawi Ba'ath party regime of President Assad the civil war became protracted. It has involved a few hundred rebel groups against Assad, the Islamic State attempting to create a Caliphate, Iranian Shia sponsored groups supporting Assad including Hezbollah from Lebanon and intervention from Russia.

The king leads a coalition of Sunni states engaged in a costly and lengthy effort to topple the Assad regime as a proxy to its confrontation with to Shia Iran rather than to place any particular rebel group into power. In both Syria and Yemen and despite high expenses and many announced goals the king hasn't been able to make any achievements. Heading to the negotiation table to stop the war would be hard without confessing defeat. At the same time the king is also threatened by the Islamic State that that is engaged in terrorism against his rule in Saudi Arabia.

War in Syria and Yemen has not only reshaped regional security but also reflects a difference of opinion between the king and the United States. President Obama is insisting on a solution to the crises in Yemen while doing little regarding Syria. The differences are further exacerbated by the Iranian nuclear deal that the king sees as American support for Iran at the expense of Saudi interests.

If these foreign wars, regional security and relations with the United States were the only crises and worries that faced the new king then it might have been possible for advisors to reflect and adjust policies accordingly. However these are both influencing domestic affairs and are an extension of the domestic crises. The domestic crises of terror and debt that the new king is experiencing are one that his predecessors would never have feared.

The terror comes in the form of attacks and bombs by both Sunni and Shia groups. During the first year of the king's reign these included Islamic State suicide attacks in the Mosque of Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb in al-Qudeih in the eastern al-Qatif Province and the Imam al-Hussein Mosque in the eastern al-Anoud neighbourhood, a booby-trapped car in front of a checkpoint on the way to al-Haer-Riyadh, an armed attack against the Haidariya Husseiniya in Sehat, and an explosion that targeted a mosque belonging to the Ismaili sect in Najran, south Saudi Arabia. These pale in

comparison to the Mena tragedy classified as the bloodiest incident in the history of Haj pilgrimage, claiming the lives of 2121 victims.

Saudi citizens might be forgiving of Royal family leadership feuds, foreign wars, decreased regional security and deteriorating relations with the United States. Even isolated domestic terrorism could be brushed off as worries for the new king. However the average Saudi citizen has also felt the results, consequences, ramifications and overall instability in his own pocket. This makes the rule of the new king precarious.

In brief the oil-rich kingdom has a debt that exceeds 80 billion dollars. This results from a policy of burning billions of its financial stock to keep oil prices low or below 50 dollars per barrel, and at the same time, to meet expenses regarding the wars in Yemen and Syria. Little can be done to change this policy as is coupled with another policy of swamping the market with oil products adopted to harm the Iranian and Russian economies and prevent the Americans from extracting shale oil.

Such economic debt has pushed the new king towards imposing new and unpopular policies, such as lifting support of fuel prices, imposing taxes on water and electricity services, and even planning to impose value-added taxes. Not even the introduction of domestic reforms such as permitting women the right to vote in and contest municipal elections has bolstered support for his beleaguered rule.

Yet the first year of the new king's rule will not be remembered uniquely for any of this. All of these could be are part and parcel of any Middle East states' politics and economics. Why should Saudi Arabia, its king and its citizens be different or be seen to be different from any others in the region.

The main event will mark the first year of the rule of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz in Saudi Arabi as unique is the series of bloody executions. The new king ordered the execution of over 150 people including the prominent Shia Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr. Such executions are not dissimilar to those performed by the Islamic State and for similar reasons; threats to Sunni Islam, the king and the state.

Such executions not only shook the Muslim world but also caused the eruption of a crisis between the Saudi Kingdom and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Breaking off diplomatic ties was

followed by garnishing GCC and Arab League support to isolate Iran and ridicule its Shia proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon as a terrorist organisation.

On the horizon for the new king is a deepening in the rift between Sunni and Shia Islam, and no end in sight for the numerous crises including leadership struggles, regional security and foreign policy debacles, domestic terrorism and economic strife, just to mention a few. Russia, America, states in the region and Saudi citizens may well prefer a younger more able king or even democracy to resolve these, but that doesn't seem plausible. Hence the feeble and unimpressive rule of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz is likely to continue.