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The Moroccan-Saudi Rift: The Shattering of a Privileged Political Alliance

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Abstract:

The Morocco-Saudi relations, once regarded as strategic and privileged, have been strained in the past two years. A combination of factors has contributed to an unprecedented rift in their bilateral relations. The rise of Mohamed bin Salman, also known as MBS, to power is one of those visible factors. Since MBS tightened his grip on power following his appointment as heir to the Saudi throne, the once fluid and thriving relations between the two countries appear to have entered a period of uncertainty. With the unverified reports in February 2019 that Morocco has recalled its ambassador to Saudi Arabia for consultations—denied by the Moroccan government—many are wondering whether the government has decided to reassess its relations with Saudi Arabia. Despite the government's dismissal of the reports, bilateral ties between Rabat and Riyadh are strained.

There is no shortage of examples that confirm the deterioration of bilateral ties. Neither country sent high-level officials on visits in the past two years; King Salman decided not to spend his traditional summer vacation in Morocco last summer; Saudi Arabia lobbied against Morocco's 2026 World Cup bid; and King Mohammed VI snubbed Mohamed bin Salman on his recent world tour. All are just a few examples that demonstrate that a diplomatic rift has been simmering.

This paper seeks to analyze, from a geo-political perspective, whether the relations between Morocco and Saudi Arabia are metamorphosing as each country has aimed at repositioning itself at the regional and global levels. It contextualizes the diplomatic relations and reviews the long-standing historical

ties between Rabat and Riyadh and the underlying political framework that has governed their relationship. The academic body of knowledge on the topic and personal accounts gathered from some Moroccan diplomatic circles have informed the analysis. There is also an unseen layer or “classified account” of information used throughout the analysis to back up the argument that the rise of Mohamed bin Salman to power has not been the only trigger to the current rift.

The paper examines the changing nature of the alliance between Rabat and Riyadh, over the past three year, from the *regime security approach*. Political scientist Curtis Ryan has developed this approach to help explain the way the foreign policy alliance has strategized in the Middle East and North Africa. He points to a key fault line in Arab politics as the regime’s perception of its own security and stability. He explains “When this faces a significant challenge, regimes respond by re-arranging domestic support coalitions, increasing the active role of the internal security apparatus, and—in foreign policy— shifting alliances and alignments to better ensure regime security. Regimes are continually tempted to provide quick fixes to regime security concerns via foreign policy and alliance choices, however, because adjusting external relations seems less risky to them than genuine internal restructuring and reform.” (1)

Introduction:

Since the 1960’s, religious and political affinities, as well as personal ties between the two royal families, have cemented the relations between Morocco and Saudi Arabia. However, the 2011-Arab Uprisings marked their gradual decay as the two countries have gone separate ways in pursuing their security calculations. Morocco succeeded in navigating the murky waters of the Uprisings by adopting a new constitution and holding early elections, which enabled the Islamist Party of Justice and Development to head the government. For Morocco, not only the participation of the Islamists did not constitute a threat to the monarchy; but, it also allowed the country to market itself as an “exception” in the Arab world, where Islamists can coexist within a monarchy without putting its existence or the country’s stability in jeopardy. (2)

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been alarmed by the rise of Islamists to power, and feared that a spillover within their boundaries might threaten their rule. Hence their policy of support for counterrevolutionary movements in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. In their push to stem the rise of political Islam embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have sought to coerce other states to align with their policies. The Gulf Crisis was but the culmination of over five years of fierce media war and sporadic diplomatic tension between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other hand, over Doha’s alleged sympathy towards the Muslim brotherhood.

Morocco, whose main security challenges are to defend its territorial integrity, secure support for its sovereignty over the Western Sahara, and address pressing domestic demands, such as high rate of unemployment and rampant poverty, has sought to avoid being entrapped in the internal infighting and regional calculations of its Gulf allies.



[AIT]

Longstanding Historical Ties

International observers were taken aback by a report published by the Associated Press Friday evening, February 8, that Morocco had allegedly recalled its ambassador to Saudi Arabia for consultations. Many wondered whether Morocco had indeed made such an unprecedented decision in its bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia. The speed at which the news spread was commensurate to the nature of the relations between Morocco and Saudi Arabia. The current diplomatic rift is an abnormality and aberration in the historic relations between the two countries. Though Morocco established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in 1957 less than a year after its independence, it was not until 1961 that relations started to warm up.

Upon his coronation on March 3, 1961, the late King Hassan II strove to anchor Morocco into an axis of Arab monarchies in which Saudi Arabia was front and center. On the first anniversary of his coronation, Hassan II made King Saud bin Abdelaziz Al Saud, the second King of Saudi Arabia, his guest of honor. The highly symbolic move proved to be the first building block of what would become strong and fraternal relations between the two countries and their leaders. The particularity of these bilateral relations lies in the fact that they have not been limited to conventional diplomatic relations but translated into cordial relations between the two royal families. Mutual trust, permanent

coordination, and communication at the highest level have been for six decades the main characteristics of the relations between both royal families.

These cordial relations were further cemented by the kinship between the two royal families. The late Prince Abdellah, the brother of King Hassan II, was the brother-in-law of Saudi Arabia's Prince Talal bin Abdelaziz Al Saud. They were both married to the daughters of the former Lebanese leader Ryad Essolh.



[Getty]

The most salient characteristic of the relations between Rabat and Riyadh is their continuity. No matter who has been at the helm of the House of Saud, devotion to Morocco has been a given. The cordial relations between the two royal families translated into increased coordination and shared views on the most pressing issues on the Arab agenda at the time, especially the Palestinian issue. For instance, following the fire in Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in August 1969, Morocco and Saudi Arabia spearheaded the efforts of the Muslim World to denounce Israel. A month later, Rabat hosted the first Islamic Conference, which laid the groundwork of what would become the Organization of Islamic Conference (now the OIC or Organization of Islamic Cooperation), headquartered in the Saudi city of Jeddah.

In their push to stand by the Palestinians and thwart Israel's plan to annex East Jerusalem, the sixth OIC summit established the Al Quds Committee whose chairmanship was entrusted to King Hassan II, thanks to the Saudi support. In December 1982, the 12th Arab Summit Conference, hosted in Fez, adopted the Arab Plan for the establishment of an independent state. The plan was based on a proposal made by King Fahd bin Abdelaziz. (3)

Unwavering Bilateral Support

Morocco and Saudi Arabia have been staunch supporters of each other's agenda. At the height of Morocco's diplomatic showdown with Spain over the Western Sahara in the early 1970s, Saudi Arabia stood steadfastly by Morocco. (4) In November 1975, Riyadh sent a high delegation to participate in the Green March, in which 350,000 Moroccans marched into the territory to reclaim it from Spain's occupation.

Saudi Arabia also helped Morocco bear the cost of the war against the Polisario Front between 1976 and 1991, as British scholar Neil Patrick wrote in his book "Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation." (5) Morocco has never wavered in its support for Saudi Arabia's security and territorial integrity. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, King Hassan II sent 1200 Moroccan soldiers to defend Saudi Arabia's borders against a potential Iraqi attack. The symbiosis between Rabat and Riyadh continued after the death of King Hassan II. When King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in July 1999, he maintained the same privileged and cordial relations with the Saudi royal family.



[Getty]

When Saudi Arabia proposed the Arab Initiative during the Arab League summit in Beirut in March 2002, Morocco was among the first countries to back its proposal. The same level of trust and coordination, at the highest level, continued during the reign of Saudi's King Abdulla bin Abdelaziz. Morocco has also been at the forefront of countries that back the Saudi efforts to push back against Iran's destabilizing policies in the Middle East. In 2009, Morocco moved to cut its diplomatic ties with Iran after an Iranian official questioned Bahrain's sovereignty. (6) According to French daily le Monde, Morocco made the decision mainly to please Saudi Arabia. (7)

When the so-called 'Arab Spring' protests broke out in the winter of 2011, Saudi Arabia floated the proposal that Morocco and Jordan join the Gulf Cooperation Council (8) as a move against the potential of those uprisings might to disrupt the region's status quo and jeopardize long-lasting alliances between Arab monarchies. The proposal, which surprised most observers, was short-lived. (9) Instead, the GCC countries promised to grant both Morocco and Jordan \$5 billion over five years ending in 2017. (10) By virtue of the deal and with the exception of Oman and Bahrain, each of the Gulf countries was to grant Morocco \$1.25 billion to help it shore up its economy, build much-needed infrastructure, and absorb the unemployment dilemma.

Translating their shared destiny, Morocco renewed its commitment to defend Saudi Arabia against all destabilizing forces in the region, including Iran and Hezbollah. Morocco's support for Saudi Arabia's regional security strategy has also translated at the multilateral level where Rabat has aligned itself with Riyadh on issues such as Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon and the fight against terrorism. When Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a coalition to fight the Houthi rebels in Yemen and restore the authority of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Morocco was among the first countries to join the coalition. Rabat sent six warplanes, which took part in the first airstrikes against the Houthis.

The Crown Prince MBS Factor

Currently, the relations between Morocco and Saudi Arabia are at their worst ever amid unverified reports that Morocco has allegedly recalled its ambassador to Saudi Arabia and suspended its participation in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. The decision to withdraw from Yemen may have been expected in light of Al Jazeera interview conducted in February with Morocco's foreign minister, Nasser Bourita. He said Rabat had decided to change course after further evaluation. But, recalling Morocco's ambassador to Riyadh sets a precedent in the relations between the two monarchies.

Rabat has also resorted to other media outlets to convey a clear message to the Saudi leadership: Morocco accepts neither any disregard of its territorial integrity nor being blackmailed. The clear message that Morocco sent to Saudi Arabia came a few days after Saudi news channel Al-Arabiya aired a report in which it presented the Polisario Front as the "legitimate representative of the Sahrawis" and questioned Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. The report, an unprecedented departure

from Saudi Arabia's longstanding official support for Morocco's territorial integrity, caused an uproar in Morocco.

The backlash that the Al-Arabiya report prompted on social media has apparently caused some debate in Saudi Arabia to realize the gravity of their misstep. The Saudi daily Al Riyadh published a long report about the Western Sahara as a sign of supporting Morocco and reflecting Saudi Arabia's original position on the conflict. (11) However, the damage was already done. Morocco seemed to have decided that the time has come to reassess its ties with Saudi Arabia and remind the Saudi crown prince that Morocco is a sovereign state that will not accept being bullied.



[Getty]

The Tip of the Iceberg

Morocco's silent anger comes on the heels of tension that has been simmering for over a year and half between the two capitals since the spring of 2017. They have become vulnerable to the Saudi crown prince's mood and reckless decisions, particularly the blockade against Qatar. The Qatar case brought to the fore the disagreement between Morocco and Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Salman mistakenly thought that Morocco would stand by Riyadh and support its unjust blockade of Qatar. King Mohammed VI surprised everyone by declaring neutrality and offering himself to bridge the gap of misunderstanding between the parties and end the conflict. (12)

The statement that the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, released a few days after the Gulf Crisis broke out, showed clearly that Morocco wanted to steer clear from taking sides in a rift pitting its

close Gulf allies against each other. “Because of the strong personal ties of sincere fraternity and mutual consideration between King Mohammed VI – and His brother Kings and Emirs of the Gulf countries, the Kingdom of Morocco has been careful not to pay into public statements and hasty statements which only reinforce discord and deepen differences,” read the statement of the ministry. The statement also emphasized Morocco was “ready to offer its good offices with a view to promote a frank and comprehensive dialogue on the basis of no-interference in internal affairs and the fight against religious extremism.” (13)

The following day, the Moroccan monarch sent a package of humanitarian aid to Qatar, which many viewed as a political message reflecting Morocco's desire to maintain a neutral stance in the Gulf crisis. The same day, in a clear statement of Morocco's eagerness to end the rift, King Mohammed dispatched his foreign minister, Nasser Bourita, to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Less than three weeks after the Crisis broke out, Morocco's king sent a warm message to Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Al Thani on the fourth anniversary of his coronation. The timing of the letter, its tone, and its allusion to the brotherly ties between the two leaders and their families and the “fruitful cooperation and solidarity between our two countries” were significant. They conveyed to all parties involved in the Gulf Crisis that Morocco wanted to stay at equidistance between its Gulf allies. To further assert the independence of Morocco's foreign policy, King Mohammed visited Qatar at the height of the blockade. After a visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), King Mohammed VI flew from Abu Dhabi to Doha airport, becoming the first head of state to break the air embargo imposed on Qatar. The Moroccan move angered both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. (14) The unexpected position of Morocco seems to have shocked Saudi Arabia and aborted its plan to isolate, weaken, and ostracize Qatar at the regional and global levels.

Using Saudi Surrogates to Strong-arm Morocco

On the surface, there were no apparent indicators of tension between Morocco and Saudi Arabia. However, Mohamed bin Salman used his surrogates to send hostile messages to Morocco. The most notorious of them was Turki Al Sheikh, former chairperson of the General Sports Authority, known for being among bin Salman's inner circle. Through his tweets against Morocco, Al Sheikh made it clear that they were in fact indirect messages from the Saudi Crown Prince to the Moroccan authorities. In the period leading up to the June-13-2018-vote to select the host of the FIFA World Cup 2026, Al Sheikh lobbied many Arab and Muslim countries to vote for the US-Canada-Mexico bid at the expense of the Moroccan hopes.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates turned their back on Morocco and voted for the North American “United 2026” bid. The Saudi move caused an unprecedented wave of anger against Saudi

Arabia on social media. Many Moroccans called on the Moroccan government to reconsider its overall relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and to end its participation in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

Rabat remained calm and avoided direct confrontations with Riyadh. Meanwhile, less than a week after the vote, Morocco decided to boycott a meeting of Communication Ministers in the Coalition Supporting Legitimacy in Yemen on June 23 in Saudi Arabia. (15) A few hours after the World Cup vote, a statement from the royal cabinet said King Mohammed VI had a phone call with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. During the phone call, Sheikh Tamim informed King Mohammed VI of Qatar's full support for Morocco in the event it presents its bid for the World Cup 2030. (16)

Furthermore during a meeting of the Arab parliament in Cairo in December 2018, the heated exchange between the Moroccan and Saudi representatives offered a glimpse into the deteriorating ties between Rabat and Riyadh. (17) The Moroccan interlocutor opposed the attempt of the Saudi representative, the current chair of the Arab parliament, to introduce a proposal in the final communique denouncing France's "state violence" and "human rights abuses" against the yellow-vest protests.

Following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, King Mohammed VI's made his decision not to welcome Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman on his tour of Tunisia and Argentina. Morocco was also among the few Arab countries that issued no statement of support for Mohamed bin Salman following the murder. (18)

Shifting the Cards in the Saudi-led War in Yemen

When Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a coalition in March 2015 to oust the Houthi rebels and restore the authority of President Abd Rabo Mansour Hadi, it came as no surprise that Morocco agreed to join the coalition. Morocco's participation, however, did not enjoy the support of Moroccan public opinion. There have been no polls or studies to measure the sentiment of Morocco's public opinion about the Yemen conflict. However, the heated debate on social media gave a glimpse about the sizable opposition among Moroccans to their government's involvement in the Saudi-led coalition. (19)

Morocco was under public pressure early on in the conflict following the death of Moroccan pilot Yassine Bahti, whose warplane was downed by the Houthi rebels. (20) As time went by, more and more voices started to urge Morocco to withdraw from the war, and explain the rationale behind its participation alongside Saudi Arabia. (21)

Additionally, because of Saudi Arabia's indiscriminate killing of Yemeni civilians, Morocco's participation in the war in Yemen began to cause reputational damage to Morocco at the international level. In a report submitted to the Security Council in 2017, the UN Secretary-General named Morocco, and backlisted the Saudi-led coalition for "killing and injuring 683 children in Yemen and attacking dozens of schools and hospitals in 2016." (22) The official withdrawal of Morocco from the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen was no longer a matter of if, but when.

As the Moroccan news outlet "Le Desk" reported In April 2018, Morocco had ordered the withdrawal of its F-16 planes from Saudi Arabia.(23) The information, however, had never been confirmed or denied by the Moroccan government until recently. Morocco's withdrawal was confirmed during a lengthy interview Nasser Bourita gave to Al Jazeera on January 23, 2019. Rabat decided to use of Al Jazeera as a medium through which the Moroccan foreign minister informed the Arab and international public opinion of Morocco's foreign policy on various pressing issues. It was an unencrypted message to Riyadh that Morocco would not give in to its provocations, would not accept interference in its sovereignty, and would not accept anything that was not in line with its strategic interests.

Bourita asserted the independence of Morocco's foreign policy, and showed that its orientations were not dictated by a third party's agenda. He spoke about all the regional conflicts in the Arab region, including the blockade against Qatar, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, the Syrian crisis, and Iran's destabilizing policies in region. (24)

Morocco's top diplomat renewed Morocco's offer to mediate in the Gulf Crisis if the parties so wish. Answering a question about King Mohammed VI's alleged decision to snub Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman on his world tour, Bourita said that the Moroccan Monarch was not able to welcome the Saudi prince because of conflicting schedules. Bourita denied the existence of any tension between Morocco and Saudi Arabia. Bourita also said Morocco had decided to change its participation in the war after further evaluation. The decision resulted in Morocco's absence from the military maneuvers and meetings of the coalition. (25)

1. The Root Causes of the 'Old Brotherly' Diplomatic Rift

The Moroccan-Saudi diplomatic rift runs deeper than the Gulf Crisis of 2017, which was not the cause of the rift but one of its symptoms, and the rise of Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman to power has accelerated it. A careful reading of the interactions between the two governments over the past three years (2015-2018) shows there has been some weariness on the Moroccan side towards Saudi Arabia. Morocco has realized progressively that Saudi Arabia's grandiloquent statements of support for Morocco are only lip service. Whether in terms of financial aid or a clear-cut and aggressive support

for Morocco on the Western Sahara issue, Saudi Arabia has fallen short of living up to its status as Morocco's closest ally.

2. Morocco off Saudi Arabia's Radar

Since the toppling of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and subsequent election of Mohammed Morsi, Saudi Arabia threw its weight behind Abdel-Fattah Sissi in an attempt to preserve the status quo and prevent the rise of political Islam. Since Sissi seized power in June 2013, Saudi Arabia has pumped \$25 billion into the Egyptian economy to help the new president assert his rule and keep the Egyptian economy from collapsing. (26) For the most part, Saudi Arabia's lavish support for Egypt did not come with strings attached. Egypt still had latitude to adopt foreign policy decisions that do not necessarily align with Saudi Arabia. For instance, Egypt did not contribute troops or military hardware to the Yemen coalition.

At the height of the Syrian civil war [2015-2016] and while Egypt was a member of the Security Council, Egypt showed support for Syrian President Bashar Assad. In October 2016, Egypt voted in favor of a Russia-sponsored draft resolution. The Russian resolution opposed a draft resolution sponsored by France and endorsed by the UK and the US, which was supported by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. (27)

Despite Egypt's reluctance to provide unconditional support on these pressing regional issues, financial aid to Egypt continued flowing. In April 2016, King Salman bin Abdelaziz visited Egypt and made a statement before the parliament. During the visit, the two countries announced the establishment of a \$16 billion investment fund aimed at boosting the Egyptian economy. (28)

Having provided unconditional support for Riyadh and showed unrelenting commitment to defend it against all foreign threats, Rabat found itself off the radar of Saudi calculations. In comparison to the billions of dollars Riyadh lavished on Cairo, Rabat was promised an annual financial assistance of as little as \$330 million a year. However, it realized progressively that it was no longer a priority in the Saudi foreign policy. Hence, Morocco moved to open up more to Qatar and strengthen its strategic ties with it.

3. Rejection of Saudi 'Lip Service' on Western Sahara

Rabat was also unsatisfied with Saudi Arabia's rhetoric about the Western Sahara conflict. The Saudi support has shifted to low profile statements, made from time to time, and did not lend any political weight to the Moroccan position. In some private conversation with the author, a number of Moroccan diplomats described the Saudi Arabia's alleged support for Morocco as 'mere rhetoric', pointing out that Saudi leaders had not lived up to Moroccan expectations. The Sahara question has

been absent from the list of issues that Saudi Arabia has defended in its annual statement during the United Nations General Assembly in September of every year. Since Morocco submitted its autonomy proposal to the UN Security Council in April 2007, Saudi Arabia made not a single statement of support for the Moroccan proposal during the UN general debate. (29)

When the Obama administration submitted to the Security Council in April a draft resolution that was perceived as 'hostile to Morocco', it was rumored that Saudi Arabia had allegedly interceded with Washington in favor of Morocco. Such information, however, has never been substantiated. Countries, such as South Africa and Nigeria, have been constantly keen to reiterate their support for the Algeria-backed Polisario, calling on the UN to enable the Sahrawis to exercise self-determination. (30) In his speech before the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, then- South African President Jacob Zuma called on the UN to stop undermining and denying the "right of the Western People to self-determination." Similar political support was provided to the Polisario by the current South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa. In his statement before the 73rd session of the UNGA in September 2018, Ramaphosa called on the international community to intensify its "efforts to secure the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination and full national sovereignty." (31)

Before Morocco's charm offensive towards Nigeria in 2016, the West African country had often stated its support for the right of the Sahrawis to self-determination. In his speech before the 70th session of the UNGA, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari equated the Sahara conflict with the Palestinian cause; and called on the UN to enable the Palestinian people and those of Western Sahara to fulfil "their inalienable rights without further delay or obstacle." (32)

Such lack of vocal support for and solidarity with Morocco were also on display when Morocco was embroiled in a diplomatic showdown with Sweden in the fall of 2015 over Stockholm's alleged intention to recognize the self-proclaimed 'Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic'. At the height of the tension between the two countries, Saudi Arabia's lack of political support was very conspicuous. It was not until the first Morocco-Gulf summit in Jeddah in April 2016 that the question of Western Sahara started to get some significance in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy discourse.

4. Lack of Coordination on the Palestinian Cause

The Palestinian issue has been among the main reasons that may help explain the causes of the current silent diplomatic rift between Rabat and Riyadh. Since its independence in 1956, Morocco has branded itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause, which it regards as a national cause. (33) Morocco has maintained its commitment to defending the rights of Palestinians to establish their independent state along the lines of June 4, 1967. Since Morocco assumed the presidency of the Al Quds Committee in 1975, it has defended the status of Jerusalem as a capital of the future Palestinian

state and prevented the change of its legal, religious, and political status. Morocco has always sought to carve out a leading role in the Palestinian-Israeli political process. It has, thus, taken part in all Arab initiatives to break the deadlock in the political process.

Morocco and Saudi Arabia have regularly coordinated their position on the Palestinian issue, which has often come up in phone calls between the two Monarchs or their face-to-face meetings. However, the Rabat-Riyadh coordination over the Palestinian cause has been disrupted with Mohamed bin Salman's rise to power. He has sought to use the Palestinian issue as a bargaining chip to win the Trump administration's support for him as the next in line to the Saudi throne, instead of former crown prince Mohammed bin Nayef. In addition, MBS's forceful attempts to position himself as the 'leader of the Arab world' and main interlocutor with the Trump administration on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has not been well received in Rabat.

5. Keeping Distance from MBS's "Deal of the Century"

The first sign of Morocco's resolve to distance itself from Mohamed bin Salman's calculations was not the Gulf crisis, but the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh May 20-21, 2017. Observers were surprised by King Mohammed VI's absence from the summit. However, the series of events that unfolded in the following months validated Morocco's decision and gave a glimpse into what arguably motivated it.

Trump's decision to make Saudi Arabia his first foreign destination instead of Canada or Mexico was part of a deal struck between his senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, MBS, and Emirati Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed. In exchange for the Trump administration's commitment to repeal the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and support MBS's royal ambitions, the crown prince was ready to ditch the Palestinian people and support the plan that Washington seeks to impose on the Palestinians. Since 2015, the UAE's ambassador in Washington, Youssef Otaiba, has sought to convince the Washington political establishment to support MBS. (34) The UAE saw in MBS's thirst for power, lack of experience, and impulsiveness an opportunity to influence Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, thus advancing Abu Dhabi's ambitious project to shape the Middle East political landscape in line with its agenda. (35) Trump's election provided the Emiratis with a golden opportunity to implement their plans. In his controversial meeting with Trump in Trump Tower in December 2016, the UAE's crown prince, Mohamed bin Zayed, praised MBS to Jared Kushner and his advisers, implying that he was well positioned to serve Kushner's plan to reach a deal on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in favor of Israel. (36)

Kushner's and MBS's ambitions were a perfect match. Kushner was on the lookout for a Middle Eastern partner who could help him implement his plan aimed essentially at securing the stability and

security of Israel and solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Israel's terms. MBS, on the other hand, was in search of an insider within the Trump administration to help him ditch his cousin as crown prince. MBS positioned himself as the man who could help Kushner achieve his goal. What has been dubbed as the "Deal of the Century" seeks to force the Palestinians to accept Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel, deprive the Palestinians of the right of return, and incorporate illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank into Israel. (37)

Reasserting the Chairmanship of the Quds Committee

Viewed from Morocco, MBS's plan to impose on the Palestinians a deal, that goes against the two-state solution, UN resolutions, and international law, does not only break the long-held Arab consensus about enabling the Palestinians to establish their independent state along the lines of June 4, 1967, but also breaks the traditional policy of coordination and consultation between Rabat and Riyadh on issues of mutual concern. King Mohammed VI—who, in his capacity as the chairman of the Al Quds Committee, has the moral obligation to defend the historical, cultural, and religious character of Jerusalem and its status as a capital of the future Palestinian state—has sought to convey to MBS that he could not approve of, or be associated with, a plan that seeks to obliterate the Islamic and Christian character of the holy city and betray the struggle of the Palestinian people.

In addition to shunning the May 2017 Arab Islamic American Summit, King Mohammed VI sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in which he urged the UN and the international community to reign in Israel to stop its "continued, systematic violations in the city of Al-Quds Al Sharif and around the Al-Aqsa mosque." The King said "I insist on the need for resolute action on the part of the international community and the influential powers to compel Israel to put an end to those practice, through which it seeks to impose a fait accompli and decide singlehandedly the fate of the City of Jerusalem – an issue which should be addressed within the context of final status negotiations." (38)



[Maroc.MA]

The Moroccan Monarch has been at the forefront of Arab and Muslim leaders who have expressed their rejection of President Trump's decision to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. (39) On the eve of the implementation of the decision, he sent a letter to the American president in which he warned against his decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. He said the decision would "negatively impact the prospects for a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, knowing that the United States is one of the main advocates of the peace process... In accordance with relevant international resolutions, including the Security Council resolutions, Al-Quds is at the heart of final status issues," which requires that it maintains its legal status, explained the King. (40)

A day later, King Mohamed sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in which he urged the diplomat to convince the Trump administration to abandon its plan to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. "Jerusalem is a question that concerns the Palestinians – since it is part of their occupied land – as much as it does the Arab and Muslim World, given the fact that it is home to the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque, the first of the two Qiblas and the third holiest mosque," (41) said the King in the letter. He also expressed in unequivocal terms Morocco's longstanding position on Jerusalem and its support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinians to establish their independent state.



[MWN]

Uncertain Future

The current diplomatic rift challenges the longstanding relations between Rabat and Riyadh and fraternal bonds between the two royal families and casts a dark cloud over the future of their bilateral relations. The emergence of MBS in 2015 and his rapid consolidation of power, coupled with his foreign policy adventurism, have disrupted the principles of consensus between senior members of the Saudi royal family that have held the country together for over seven decades. Maintaining solid

and privileged relations with Morocco has previously been part of that Saudi consensus. For over six decades, members of the Saudi royal family have considered Morocco as their second country. The successive Saudi Kings, as well as many senior members of the royal family have considered Morocco their favorite summer destination where they spend at times extended visits in their luxurious residences scattered across the country, as Neil Partrick points out in his book “Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation.”⁽⁴²⁾ Saudi royals’ long stays in and their emotional attachment to Morocco have further consolidated ties between the two royal families, as well as between their senior officials. That tradition seems to be progressively losing its relevance with MBS, who not only appears bereft of any emotional attachment to Morocco, but seeks to treat it as a vassal state which has to follow Saudi dictates.



[AFP]

Two Irreconcilable visions

With King Mohammed and MBS, the confrontation of two irreconcilable visions may intensify in the future. The former is a firm believer in the need for Arab countries to unite their forces to face common threats and an advocate for developing mechanisms of coordination and consultation between all Arab states. This was clearly expressed in his speech during the first Morocco-GCC summit in 2016. “What is at stake is not the situation in a particular country as much as the need, for all of us, to be aware of the challenges confronting us and to show genuine determination to renew our strategic pact with our partners, on the basis of clear determinants that can govern our relations in the decades to come. This is a turning point; a watershed moment between what we want and what the others want us to be. Today, more than ever, we need clear, unified stances between all Arab States. Either we stand together, like a solid structure, whose parts reinforce one another, or we become something we do not want to be,” said the King in his speech. ⁽⁴³⁾ The same call for Arab

unity was expressed in King Mohammed VI's speech to the 27th Arab Summit in Nouakchott, Mauritania, in July 2016. (46)

In contrast, Mohamed bin Salman's main goal is to consolidate his power and eliminate all domestic and external threats that might challenge his authority or put his ambitions in jeopardy. At the domestic level, he has eliminated all potential competitors to the throne. (47) That was the main goal of his so-called anti-corruption purge when he rounded up hundreds of his relatives in the Ritz-Carlton, including Prince Mitaab bin Abdullah, who was stripped of his post as head of the National Guard. (48) Internationally, the Saudi crown prince seems determined to impose his reckless and ill-thought-out agenda on his Arab partners and impose himself as the leader of the Arab world. Years of propaganda led by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies—a think tank close to Israel—in coordination with the UAE have helped seduce Mohamed bin Salman into believing that the main enemies that pose existential threats to his country are not Israel, but Iran and political Islam. (49) For MBS, pushing back against Iran's ambitions in the Middle East has become the mainstay of his foreign policy, and normalizing ties with Israel has become a means to achieve that end. Any country that stands in his way faces harsh consequences and will be exposed to pressure and blackmail. This was the rationale behind the Saudi-UAE-led blockade against Qatar, which has been falsely accused of entertaining close ties to Iran, of supporting terrorism, and of sowing discord and strife in the region. Mohamed bin Salman's lack of experience has made him think that Morocco will bend to his pressure to endorse and support his adventurism in the region. But Rabat has shown resilience and sought to assert both the independence of its foreign policy and its displeasure with the blockade of Qatar.

Morocco's offer to play the role of mediator was in keeping with the traditions that have governed its relations with Riyadh. For instance, at the height of diplomatic rivalry between Morocco and the Algeria-Libya axis over their support for Polisario in the late 1970s and early 1980s, then Saudi King Fahd bin Abdullaziz offered to mediate between Morocco and its neighbors. (50) Following the outbreak of the Gulf crisis and given the privileged ties of fraternity King Mohammed VI has entertained with Gulf leaders, Morocco's mediation in the conflict was a given.

To Morocco's dismay, however, its offer fell on deaf ears and was not taken seriously. Saudi Arabia's dismissal of the Moroccan offer was indicative of the rupture of channels of communication at the highest level between Rabat and Riyadh. Morocco's decision to recall its ambassador to Saudi Arabia, though later downplayed and denied by the foreign ministry, signals a worrisome deterioration in the relations between the two countries.

Conclusion

The new turn that the Moroccan-Saudi relations have taken over the past three years proves Morocco's resilience in navigating the ever-changing and unpredictable politics of the MENA region, as well its readiness to retract from alliances and adopt foreign policy decisions that are in line with its long-held principles and strategic interests. It goes without saying that Morocco has every interest in preserving and strengthening its relations with Saudi Arabia and should spare no efforts to minimize the impact of the rift that has impacted them in recent years. For these relations to be beneficial for both countries and the region as a whole, they should, however, be relations of equals built on the principle of mutual respect of interests and the delineation of the sovereignty of each state and the independence of its foreign policy.

Having solid ties with Saudi Arabia should not be tantamount to supporting, unconditionally, every foreign policy decision it takes regardless of whether that decision spills over Morocco's strategic interests. Saudi Arabia must come to term with the fact that Morocco is not a vassal state, that it is an independent country that has its own concerns, priorities and interests that may at time be at odds with the Saudi interests.

Morocco should build on its courageous and wise decision to remain neutral in the Gulf crisis to further assert the independence of its foreign policy. While Saudi Arabia seems obsessed with the rise of political Islam and ready to engage in miscalculated and risky foreign policy decisions, Morocco should capitalize on its mediator role in the region as exemplified in its efforts to mediate the Libyan crisis. Saudi Arabia's recklessness and adventurism since MBS' rise to power are not only contrary to Morocco's strategic interests, but have already caused reputational damage to the country. As a result of its participation in the Saudi-led coalition, Morocco was named in a 2017 UN report, which blacklisted the Saudi-led coalition for "for killing and injuring 683 children in Yemen and attacking dozens of schools and hospitals in 2016." (51)

Morocco should learn lessons from its unconditional support for Saudi Arabia and avoid aligning with or support an agenda that is causing more chaos, destruction and strife in the region.

Thus far it would be still too risky to predict how the relations between Rabat and Riyadh will look a few years from now. For the time being, both capitals have abstained from making any escalating moves and have attempted to downplay their diplomatic rift.

The visit of Prince Ahmed bin Abdelaziz, King's Salman brother, to Western Sahara last week sought mainly to defuse tensions between the two countries.(52) That a senior prince, who many regard as the potential replacement of Mohamed bin Salman, would visit Western Sahara amid the diplomatic rift between Rabat and Riyadh was a powerful message to Morocco that the Saudi royal family still stands by Morocco's territorial integrity.

Whether Mohamed bin Salman will pay the price of the killing of Jamal Khashoggi and be rejected by the Trump administration is unclear. So far, his main advocates in Washington, D.C., Jared Kushner, and Israel Prime Minister's Benjamin Netanyahu have succeeded in preventing his downfall. With the consolidation of all levers of power into his hands, the elimination of all potential opponents, relations between Morocco and Saudi Arabia have entered an unprecedented period of uncertainties.

If Mohamed bin Salman stays at the helm of the Saudi royal family and does not learn from the disastrous foreign policy decisions he has made since 2015 or seek to restore trust and communication with longstanding Saudi allies, the estrangement between Rabat and Riyadh may deepen in the coming years to the point where it may be damaged beyond repair.

About the Author



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