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Falling Saudi Arabian Diplomacy Part3: Saudi Arabia left behind

Traditionally Saudi Arabia has been praised as the leader of Islam and has gained the support of Islamic countries by consistently confronting Israel on the issue of peace process between Israel and Palestine. In addition, it has contributed to the stability of the world's energy supply as the world's largest oil-producing country. Saudi Arabia has supported the prosperity of Wall Street and the military industry in the United States with abundant oil wealth. Saudi Arabia with big economic power also gained international fame as the only one G20 members in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia is the most reliable ally of the US in the Middle East. It echoed to the US sanctions on Iran. It has been suppressing the neighboring countries from the center of the Arabian Peninsula.

However, Israel and the UAE signed a peace agreement, followed by Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. The pride of Saudi Arabia as a political leader in the Arab nations was falling down. And in the field of energy politics, the United States has established self-sufficiency system by the development of shale oil and gas. Thus, Saudi Arabia is becoming less important. The OPEC+ (plus) system, which aimed to revive the myth of the OPEC oil cartel, has been scratched by Russia. And in the Yemeni civil war, the disunion within the Yemen government upset mediatory efforts of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Saudi Arabia itself was exposed to the of drone attacks by the Houthi faction in Yemen.

1. Overtaken by the UAE and neglected by Bahrain.



It was taboo for Arab countries to conclude peace treaty with Israel. Only Egypt and Jordan were the exception because they lost Middle East Wars and compelled to agree peace agreement with Israel in 1979 and 1994 respectively. In practice, it was obvious that even if Arabs united together,

they could not compete with Israel. Only young princes of the second or third generation like two Crown Princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi in the Gulf countries understood the power game in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (commonly known as MbS) had no experience about the Middle East Wars because he was born in 1985. He has little interest in the Palestinian issue. He is keen to enforce the relationship with the United States. The US Trump

administration has implemented extra Israeli-oriented policies to relocate the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and accept the annexation of the Golan Heights. Meanwhile Trump withdrew from the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) and applied tougher economic sanctions against Iran. This Trump administration's policy has ignited MbS's ambition to monopolize the diplomatic leadership in the Arab world.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, became the mediator between US President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, and MbS. President and Kushner sought to achieve peace between Israel and the Arabs in order to enhance their legacy. MbS thought that the Kingdom could become the head runner. However, his conservative father, King Salman, persisted Two-State Solution Saudi Peace Initiative which was advocated by ex-King Abdullah. He did not accept bilateral peace treaty. King Salman usually makes MbS have his own way for most of government policies. But the king does not stubbornly give up on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Big discrepancy took place between father and son.

President Trump desired to be re-elected. Domestically he had several problems including corona virus pandemic. Then he looked for diplomatic fruit to cover the disadvantage. That was the reason why he tried to achieve peace between Israel and the Arab countries. He hoped to get solid support of the Christian evangelicals who enthusiastically backed Israel. Trump could not expect the quick response by Saudi Arabia due to the wide difference of the opinions between the king and the crown prince. President changed the partner to the UAE. He proposed the UAE to sell the F-35 stealth fighter which the UAE is eager to get.

Bahrain had another story. In Bahrain, the Iranian Shiites are majority, and ruled by Khalifa royal family of Sunni minority. The society is not always stable. The US 5th Fleet is stationed in Bahrain with nearly 10,000 soldiers in such circumstance. The Khalifa ruling family used to be obedient to Saudi Arabia. But now Bahrain chose the United States as the guardian. Bahrain neglected Saudi Arabia which has been a political and economic patron.

MbS had too much confidence in himself as a go-between in the Middle East. He also tried to develop aggressive political and energy policy using the hotline with US President Donald Trump (then) and Russian President Vladimir Putin. But he was now reminded that he was a naked king.

2. Nominal coalition force in Yemen: Supported by Saudi Arabia only

Traditionally Yemen was a tribal society. The country was fallen into civil war after the demise of President Ali Abdullah Saleh due to the Arab Spring in 2011. The northern region, including the capital Sana'a, is controlled by the Houthi tribe. Houthi belongs to Shiite sect of Islam and is backed by Iran. It is a nuisance to the bordering Saudi Arabia of Sunni sect.



Saudi Arabia supported the new Yemeni President Mansur Hadi. But Hadi government was too weak in military power to defend capital Sana'a. They moved to Aden in the south region. The Hadi government tried to counter with the Houthi movement in association with the southern armed militia. The southern region was, however, strongly independent oriented. The conflict between two forces took place frequently. President Hadi was exposed to the Houthi offensive, too. Hadi could not

even defend Aden.

President Hadi and his cabinet members took office in Riyadh of Saudi Arabia. They looked like government-in-exile¹. Saudi Arabia could not overlook the situation and formed Arab-led coalition with Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries including UAE and Sudan in 2015. They had no chance of winning in the ground battle. They, therefore, carried out air strikes. Ground battles and airstrikes devastated Yemen and resulted in a large number of refugees, making Yemen the poorest and most dangerous failed state in the world. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly appealed the United Nations that Hadi government was an internationally recognized orthodox government, while the Houthis was a terrorist organization backed by Iran which was the state sponsor of terrorism.

The Yemen civil war looks like a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both of them should be blamed. But for ordinary Yemeni citizens, the air bombing by foreign Saudi jet fighters is more repulsive than the fellow Houthi. Houthi who battles on the ground are the same Yemeni citizens. Saudi pilots are foreigners and they sit in the cockpit jet fighter far above in the sky without risk. They bombed buildings, road and bridges at random like playing a video game.

There was also a big difference between sophisticated arms of coalition force and old ones of Houthi. Nevertheless, the Hadi government and the coalition forces were overwhelmingly pushed by the Houthi militia. Yemen was still an old country where tribes were dominant. Allied Southern Traditional Council (STC) was influential local tribes and superiority in fighting ability. Hadi government had no strong tribes. They wholly relied on Saudi coalition forces. They cannot compete with the Houthis or even the STC. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia continues to support the Hadi government by raising the flag of the coalition forces. It is because Saudi government is afraid that the Saud ruling family would be jeopardized if the Houthi takes control of Yemen.

The UAE had supported the powerful STC. When the internal conflict between the Hadi government and STC took place, UAE left the front with the stack of coalition force. Coalition members other than the UAE, such as Egypt, were reluctant to intervene in Yemen civil war from

the beginning. As a result, Saudi Arabia is the only one supporter of Hadi government in the Civil War. But Saudi Arabia has no competent ground force. Saudi Arabia, therefore, procures frontline soldiers from Sudan and arms like missiles, drones, and shells from the United States. Poor Sudan makes money by dispatching mercenaries, and the United States makes money by exports of arms as a looker-on. Saudi Arabian wallet becomes empty and debt is increasing day by day.

The coalition force by Saudi Arabia will not last forever. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia is under attack by Houthi's drones of Iranian-made and launched from Yemeni territory. Saudi Arabia desperately intercepts with the Patriot missile. It was reported that the wreckage of a drone shot down by US-made missile has fallen down into one private house in Riyadh², Saudi Arabia is threatened its security. Crown Prince MbS, who is also the Minister of Defense, had not to sleep well in these days.

3. King Salman and his sons cling to the United States



Currently Saudi Arabia is dominated by King Salman and his two sons, Crown Prince Muhammad (MbS) and Prince Abdulaziz. They are the members of the House of Saud. The King is the Prime Minister, the Crown Prince (MbS) is the Defense Minister, and Prince Abdul Aziz is the Oil Minister. The country's political, economic, diplomatic and defense issues are monopolized by them. The Kingdom is an authoritarian dictatorship.

Saudi Arabia has two implications; state and ruler. State of Saudi Arabia is generally considered as the leader of the Islamic Sunni sect against Iran, the leader of OPEC, which controls the world's energy supply, and one of the political leader in Arab region. The ruler of Saudi Arabia is the House of Saud. Its official name is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The House of Saud has been allowed its sovereignty by distributing oil wealth to people (so-called rentier state). Taking into consideration of current rulership, it might be better to call Kingdom of Salman and his clan instead of Kingdom of The House of Saud. Now King Salman and his sons make utmost effort for the survival of Kingdom and themselves in both domestic and international arena.

Saudi Arabia itself is extremely vulnerable. Though Saudi Arabia is the strongest economic power in the Middle East, it is far from Iran, Turkey and Egypt in other fields. Saudi Arabia cannot compete with even Israel which has less population. Saudi Arabia cannot match in the war with Yemeni rebel where is the poorest country in the world. Only the close relationship with the United States can overcome the weakness of Saudi Arabia.

The relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia during the Trump administration was extremely good. It was a clear evidence that President Trump visited Saudi Arabia as the first foreign countries after taking office. Then the President withdrew from Iran nuclear deal and supported to form the coalition force led by Saudi Arabia for civil war in Yemen. Trump administration also designated the Houthi rebels of Yemen as a terrorist organization. US decisions delighted the King Salman.

In return Saudi Arabia ordered huge amounts of US arms as a proof of gratitude when President Trump visited the Kingdom. And Crown Prince MbS actively supported the Middle East peace plan by Jared Kushner, President's son-in-law. But this was the peak of MbS. Conceited MbS made an irrecoverable mistake. It was the murder case of journalist Mr. Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey³. It is clear to everyone that MbS has ordered or agreed to kill Mr. Khashoggi. Even CIA report of US shows that fact. But President Trump did not admit the facts and did not release the CIA report during his tenure.

MbS seemed to come back on the stage. But Europe and other countries except US President Trump suspected MbS. The IPO of state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco in New York or London stock market has been postponed indefinitely. MbS's hope to restore his fame hardly came back.

MbS aimed to be a pioneer of the peace maker between Israel and the Arab countries. The peace agreement was the long-waiting legacy of President Trump. MbS utilized his close relationship with Kushner. But King Salman was more conservative and cautious than Crown Prince. A crack was born between them and they couldn't make final decision. The fruit of peace was overtaken by the UAE⁴.

When President Biden took office, the situation has become more unfavorable for Saudi Arabia. President Biden who puts priority on human and women's rights has no mercy on Saudi Arabia, especially on MbS.

President Biden has released the CIA report of Khashoggi case and imposed economic sanctions on the participants who were subordinates of MbS. The President called King Salman a month after his inauguration, and Secretary of State called MbS respectively. This is a natural protocol of diplomatic procedure. But MbS must have been dissatisfied because he was accustomed to the good treatment by former President.

Saudi Arabia has complicated problems with US in energy and peace. Ecology requested Saudi Arabia to switch from oil to renewable energy. The United States has established a 100% self-sufficiency system in oil. US is going to neglect Saudi Arabia in economic field. Peace between Israel and the Arab nations has spread to Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco following the UAE. US is no need to embrace Saudi Arabia for the time being. Furthermore, the United States has removed

the Yemeni Houthis from the list of terrorist organizations and urged Saudi Arabia to make peace with them. The primary concern of US foreign policy is now how to contain China, while withdrawing from the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia is now being left behind on the international arena. The partner that Saudi Arabia can rely on is the United States only. King Salman and his sons make efforts desperately to curry favor with President Biden. At the last OPEC+ meeting Saudi Arabia offered voluntarily cut production by one million B/D while Russia and other countries tried to ease production cuts. Saudi Arabia's proposal implied to attract the favor of United States as follows.

As the result of voluntarily production cut, oil price became higher. But the benefits of the price increase are cancelled for Saudi Arabia due to own production cut. While the US oil industry enjoys double advantage of price up and increase of production. It can be said that Saudi Arabia's voluntarily production cuts show self-sacrificing loyalty to the United States.

Currently Saudi Arabia is making utmost effort to get favor of the United States.

End

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¹ New Yemeni power-sharing govt sworn-in in Saudi Arabia

2020/12/27 Khaleej Times

<https://www.khaleejtimes.com/region/mena/new-yemeni-power-sharing-govt-sworn-in-in-saudi-arabia>

² World leaders condemn Houthi attack on Riyadh

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1817346/saudi-arabia>

2021/2/28 Arab News

³ How Saudi Arabia can manage the murder case of Jamal Khashoggi?

<http://ocininitiative.maeda1.jp/0464KhashoggiCaseApr2019English.pdf>

⁴ Israeli-UAE relations rapidly deepening with Abraham Accord

<http://ocininitiative.maeda1.jp/202011AbrahamAccordEnglish.pdf>