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Saudi Arabia: the coming political struggle for the National Guard

In Saudi Arabia, the National Guard is at the centre of a decisive political struggle. In the aftermath of the arrests of November 4th in Riyadh, international headlines highlighted the Saudi anti-corruption campaign, as well as the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's power consolidation strategy.

On the contrary, few analysis emphasized the deep significance of the removal and then the detention of the chief of the National Guard, Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah al-Saud [David D. Kirkpatrick, Saudi Crown Prince's Mass Purge Upends a Longstanding System, *The New York Times*, November 5, 2017], then released at the end of November.

On November 18th, two dozen of Saudi military officers, also retired, were reportedly arrested by Riyadh's authorities, with corruption allegations [Middle East Monitor, Report: Saudi Arrests Army Officers in anti-corruption purge, November 20, 2017].

The strategy of power consolidation followed by Mohammed bin Salman involves also the military. However, differently, from the Saudi modern history, the crown prince has been centralizing, in his hands, all the coercive power, so waning, sometimes removing, established checks and balances.

First of all, Mohammed bin Salman is also the minister of defence: without military education and experience, the crown prince commanded the controversial armed intervention in Yemen. On June 2016, the Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was rapidly removed from the interior minister, notwithstanding his internationally-praised engagement in counterterrorism. On July 2016, a new body, the Presidency of State Security, was established to control several security agencies (as the rapid intervention forces) formerly under the Interior ministry authority, so furtherly centralizing power on king Salman and his son.

Currently, the Saudi Arabia National Guard (SANG) is the better trained and equipped military force in the Wahhabi kingdom and it also has rapid response capabilities. SANG was founded in 1954 to counterbalance the Saudi army (Royal Saudi Land Forces, RALF), who had turned into a professional military: since the beginning, the National Guard is tasked of regime security, border protection, defense of the holy sites and oil/gas infrastructures. The Saudi army coalesces the al-Saud's kingdom tribal base, contributing to firm the original alliance; but only the most loyal tribal clans (proceeding from the central region of Najd) are represented in the SANG.

Under Mohammed bin Salman's political leadership, role and tasks of the National Guard are put into discussion. From a foreign policy perspective, the Saudi assertive stance vis-à-vis regional security promotes the centrality of the military factor: the intervention in Yemen (joined by RALF and SANG) is the first "out of boundaries" operation led by Riyadh. Therefore, the Saudi military has to deal

unprecedentedly with power projection, not only with regime security and internal defense. The new SANG aviation-wing was deployed in the south of the kingdom in late 2017 to enhance border security.

From a domestic politics level, the National Guard's de facto personal centralization carried out by Mohammed bin Salman could trigger the overall restructuring of the military. The SANG had an autonomous ministry so far; now, it could be placed under the direct control of the minister of defense, (who is the crown prince).

As a result, the National Guard and the Saudi army can be called to perform convergent tasks, as already happens in Yemen, although the Saudi ground involvement is definitely lesser than the Emirati one. Most of all, the SANG is no more the counterweight of the RALF due to the removal of prince Mutaib. The crown prince's attempt to furtherly centralize the military power could succeed, deeply altering political-military relations and inter-tribal balances in Riyadh, but it could also provoke resistance amid National Guard's experienced Saudi officers.

Eleonora Ardemagni - *Analyst of the Middle East, focused on foreign policy and security issues of Yemen and the GCC region. External researcher (Mediterranean and Middle East Program) at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies and regular contributor for the Aspen Institute Italy*