

THE NEXT GENERATION OF GULF PRINCES



As leading members of the ruling families of Gulf states, these three princes are among the richest and most powerful on the planet. On one side, there is the Emir of Qatar, Tamim Al Thani, 38. On the other, Mohammed Bin Salman, or "MBS", 33, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, who has an ally in his ambition to be the strong man of the Middle East in the shape of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Bin Zayed, or "MBZ", a military strategist who has become the regent of the United Arab Emirates. From Yemen to Syria, they are locked in proxy conflicts, imagining the moment when they will have to confront one another face to face.

Beyond the war of egos, this film explores their confrontation and offers an in-depth analysis of the of the strategic issues driving this part of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Whereas their parents and grandparents knew the rigors of the desert and Bedouin tents, they grew up in air-conditioned palaces of marble, with no limits on their caprices.

MBS, the Saudi crown prince, recently acquired the most expensive house in the world, at Louveciennes in France. He is also thought to have bought the world's most expensive painting as a gift for his friend MBZ, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, who plans to hang it in his outpost of the Louvre Museum. But these two old friends have some competition when it comes to follies of grandeur. Tamim Al Thani, the emir of Qatar, owns the Al Jazeera TV network, PSG soccer club, and – you guessed it – the most expensive player on the planet. On top of that, he used his billions to become host nation for the 2022 soccer World Cup. Many think that MBS and MBZ decided to impose an economic blockade on Qatar to obtain, among other things, the cancelation of the World Cup and the closure of Al Jazeera, which had dared to criticize them.

But these are more than just childish squabbles; the foreign policies of these new Gulf princes have deadly consequences. They command the best-equipped armies in the region and since arriving in power, they want to prove it.

The intervention in Yemen can be seen as a wish to test their military forces on a “soft” enemy, a small pro-Iranian Shiite militia in the region's poorest country. It was intended to be a way to say to their powerful Iranian neighbor, considered their main enemy, that the time for diplomacy is over. But what should have been a lightning war to reshape the Middle East is going into its fourth year with no military or political end in sight.

From Iran to Libya, passing through Syria and Lebanon, the competing visions of these three princes are destabilizing the whole region and beyond. Even the United States is not spared, amid suspicions of interference in the election of Donald Trump.

To recount this story, specialists in the oil monarchies will provide an insight into this war of princely egos which is leaving thousands of civilian victims each year.



THE FILM

Their parents were born in Bedouin tents in the desert. Before the discovery of oil, the Gulf states were among the poorest on the planet. Affiliation to a royal family was indicated only by the possession of some prestige animals: Horses, dromedaries, and falcons – beasts that were regularly pitched against each other to measure the might of the various clans.



In the Gulf, political life played out in the *majlis*, interminable gatherings of tribal chiefs which are supposed to conclude with a consensus, the sovereign simply acting as the guarantor of an immutable and highly conservative order. This decision-making system, in conjunction with strict Islamic culture, meant the monarchies of the Gulf remained among the world's most backward countries in terms of human rights.

This system tended to put power in the hands of the elderly and most consensual figures: Kuwait, where the emir is 89; Oman, where the sultan clings on aged 77; and above all Saudi Arabia, which is officially ruled by one of the 53 sons of the founder of the house of Saud, now 82.

But between June 2013 and January 2015, due to the physical incapacity of the old monarchs, three new princes came to power in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. These three countries are by far the richest and most powerful in the region.

And very soon, this new generation sought to upset the established order. These princes perpetuated tradition, but rejigged it in accordance with their near-unlimited wealth. Now, these royal families challenged each other via entire stables in the major horseracing events and European soccer teams in the Champions' League. The most famous racing fixture, the Prix Arc de Triomphe in Paris, was even bought by and rebranded with the name of Qatar.

But for how long will these rivalries remain limited to symbolic battles on the sports field? The oil monarchies, to whom Western governments have sold an arsenal of F-16s, Mirage 2000s and Rafales, are already clashing in proxy wars in which they back opposing camps, in Yemen, Syria and Libya. With this new generation of princes with their unbridled ambitions, are we heading for another Gulf War?

THE TURBULENT THREESOME

Ruling Qatar Since 2013 – Tamim Al Thani – Islam’s Athlete

The first to accede to power was Tamim Al Thani. In 2013, his father handed him the reins when he was just 33 years old. After a career in sporting federations and Olympic committees, he acquired PSG in 2011. His apparently inoffensive ambitions on the international stage in the world of football came with a dark side - his father’s legacy of political compromises with the most extremist Islamic forces. His TV channel Al Jazeera often provides a platform the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, while Qatar is accused of financing Islamic groups in Syria. This ambiguous stance towards armed Islamic factions would never be forgiven by the other princes in the region. In the spring of 2018, to break out of its isolation, Qatar bought its way into some alliances in Turkey, Russia, and France, stumping up billions of dollars in the process.



Ruling the United Arab Emirates since 2014 - Mohammed Bin Zayed – the desert warrior

For him, fully-fledged power was nearly a mirage in the desert: Aged 57, the man they call MBZ had to show great patience. Finally, in 2014, his elder half-brother, the emir of Abu Dhabi fell victim to a stroke. Although the sibling is still officially on the throne, MBZ became de facto regent of the United Arab Emirates – a role he had dreamt of since boarding school in London. Passionate about war and military matters, he graduated as a fighter pilot at Sandhurst in England and in 2004, became Minister of Defense and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. With close ties to Western intelligence services, he gradually moved the Emirates from a discreet tax haven to the most interventionist regime in the Arab world. Every two years, MBZ hosts the world’s biggest weapons fare, welcoming industrialists and dictators with open arms. The country is now the world’s most militarized per inhabitant. Politically, he has granted himself full powers and does not countenance dissent. His greatest threat comes from the Muslim Brotherhood, which he violently repressed in the Emirates at the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and which he hunts down throughout the Middle East.



Ruling Saudi Arabia since 2015 – Mohammed Bin Salman – the ambitious heavyweight

His rise to power alone is worthy of a novel. For no one had seen Mohammed Bin Salman – known as MBS in a nod to MBZ – as the heir apparent of the house of Saud. His ascension began with a stroke of luck in 2015 when his father, Salman, finally took the crown. At the age of 79, the new king is one of the last living sons of Ibn Saud, and for the first time since 1953, power would be handed down to the next generation (traditionally, the crown passes from brother to brother). MBS knew that he had an historic opportunity and he was not going to let it slip. Appointed Minister of Defense by his father, of whom he is the favorite son, MBS steadily sidelined his many rivals, sometimes violently. His favorite hobby is Call of Duty, a video game inspired by the Second World War. The intervention in Yemen gave his career a huge boost, propelling him center-stage in the media, to the detriment of his challengers. The nationalist fervor which has since gripped the country has allowed the state propaganda machine to transform this thirtysomething with a blank CV into a valiant war leader, countering Iranian expansionism.



ABSOLUTE MONARCHIES

All three are at the head of absolute monarchies. Whoever dares to oppose their will goes to prison.

The only reforms allowed are economic and social – part of a movement that Qatar and the Emirates had already started since the start of the 2000s to attract Western capital and ex-pats. The application of Sharia law was softened. Women were allowed to study, work, open a bank account, and travel alone. Islam remained the main source of law, but even alcohol was allowed in some hotels and wearing a veil was no longer obligatory. However, in many legal cases, things often reverted to the old Islamic moral code: A woman found guilty of adultery still faces up to 15 years in prison.

Once he took power, MBS drew inspiration from his two most progressive neighbors to launch a wave of reforms unprecedented in the kingdom. He called to heel the hated Islamic police and won the support of Saudi youth, which makes up 60% of the population. The first cinemas opened, municipal elections were held, and women could vote. They were also recently allowed to drive. However, militant feminists who have risked prison in the past for calling for such rights have been silenced, and those who disobey are arrested.



THE SEEDS OF DISCHORD

When these three young princes came to power, they inherited a tense legacy. Soon after the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera, the most-watched Arabic news channel, became a platform for Islamic parties that were gaining in prominence. In Tunisia, this contributed to Ennahdha's electoral victory; and in Egypt, to Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, being elected president. In Libya and Syria, Qatar chose to finance its own less-than-reputable groups, like the Islamic brigades of Misrata and Ahrar el-Sham.

Meanwhile, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi observed the fall of dictators and the growing influence of political Islam with horror. These absolute monarchies see this as a threat to their own legitimacy and an encouragement for their respective citizens to rebel. Qatar does not have the same concern, with a population one-quarter that of the Emirates, which itself is 20 times less populous than Saudi Arabia.

The latter two thus systematically adopt an opposing stance to Qatar and set out to undermine the groups it supports. In both Syria and Libya, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates supplied arms to the militia, stoking civil wars. In Egypt, their involvement was even more direct: To bring down Morsi's government, they promised full backing and 20 billion dollars to the then Minister of Defense, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates backed and financed the Tamarod movement, which organized huge demonstrations that provided the pretext for a military coup. In what can be seen as a symbolic act, after el-Sisi seized power, and with repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in full swing, an Al Jazeera crew that had come from Qatar was jailed in Egypt for several months.

DEADLY HONEYMOON IN YEMEN

At the start of 2015, MBS, appointed Minister of Defense, decided to engage his country's armed forces in Yemen against the Houthis, a pro-Iranian Shiite minority, forcing the rest of the Saudi government to back this invasion. In a matter of days, he put together a coalition of Arab and Sunni countries – including Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. He received the immediate backing of the gung-ho MBZ, who at last saw an opportunity to deploy his highly trained and well-equipped army.

But what was supposed to be a lightning war quickly became bogged down in a political impasse. The Saudi army, despite its sophisticated weaponry, was ill-prepared and had never really seen combat. MBS chose to sub-contract this dirty war to allies in need of cash like the Sudanese and foreign mercenaries. Very quickly, the proliferation of war crimes and the suffering of the Yemeni people made this war illegitimate in the eyes of the international community. The alliance between the three princes has scarcely been forged before it hit the buffers, as Yemen slid into a bloody war. In this conflict in Yemen against Iranian-backed opposition, Qatar was caught in a bind, given that its immense wealth is due to a gas field which it shares with Iran. Caught up in the fierce rivalry between Teheran and Riyadh, it has always tried to appease both sides. But one incident upset this dangerous equilibrium.



THE HUNTERS HUNTED

At the end of November 2015, a group of Qatari hunters from the royal family were kidnapped in Iraq by a militia bankrolled by Iran. As a result, Teheran held a powerful bargaining chip with Qatar. After detaining them for 16 months, Tamim Al Thani was forced to make considerable concessions on a number of issues, notably on the Syrian front, where militia financed by Doha were fighting Bashar al-Assad's Teheran-backed regime, and had to pay close to a billion dollars to various intermediaries, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and other armed groups in Iraq and Iran.

These payments to allies of Iran – the sworn enemy of Saudi Arabia and the UAE – added to their historic quarrels with Qatar: MBS and MBZ were furious and planned unprecedented measures to hit back. The two princes were further emboldened knowing they had the full backing of Washington since the arrival in power of Donald Trump, with his own personal obsession against Iran.

INTERFERENCE IN THE USA

MBS and MBZ had felt their schemes to remodel the Middle East had been blocked by the Obama administration. So they poured millions of petrodollars into Trump's campaign.

This foreign influence attracted much less coverage than Russia's supposed interference in the US election. And yet the UAE also allegedly participated in illegal lobbying to elect the American billionaire, who has huge interests in the Emirates, including several luxury hotels and a golf course bearing his name. But above all, Trump shares with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates the same hatred of Iran. And the two Gulf monarchies would deploy all their lobbying weight to get the new president to tear up the nuclear treaty signed with Iran under Obama.

EMBARGO ON QATAR

On 24 May 2017, the Qatar News Agency, the official Qatari mouthpiece, published sentiments that could have come from Tamim: "Iran must be a strategic ally and not seen as the traditional enemy and troublemaker in the region." For 10 days, MBS and MBZ led an anti-Qatar campaign in the media, which resulted in the setting up of a blockade on 5 June with the aim of suffocating Qatar by any means. Doha claimed manipulation, saying its press agency had been the victim of hacking. This defense seemed unlikely, but in fact turned out to be true. An investigation rapidly showed that the Qatari internet service suffered a breach from hackers based in the United Arab Emirates. Although the ruse was quickly exposed, the economic sanctions had been imposed and Qatar found itself under embargo. The world's richest country per inhabitant was a pariah state.

SHUT DOWN AL JAZEERA AND WE'LL CALL OFF THE DOGS

MBS and MBZ issued an ultimatum with 13 demands. Some of these were diplomatic, like the end of good relations with Iran and the closure of the Turkish military base in Qatar. Others were economic, like the humiliating audit of the Qatari economy. Persistent rumors even circulated about a demand to cancel the World Cup. But the main thing Saudi Arabia and the Emirates wanted was the closure of Al Jazeera and all its related media outlets. Since its creation, the pan-Arab channel had been anathema to leaders in the region, because the satellite network directly addressed Arabic-speaking populations without going through the filter of national censorship. As soon as he got into power, MBZ had suggested to the Pentagon to bomb Al Jazeera's headquarters in 2001, on the grounds that it broadcast messages from Al Qaida.

IN SYRIA, BASHAR THE BIG WINNER

Throughout the civil war in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, each for their own reasons, have done all they could to destabilize the Damascus regime. From 2012 onwards, the Qataris have been shipping whatever they like into northern Syria. It was they, for example, who supplied Chinese-made FN6 portable ground-to-air missiles to the Syrian rebels – weapons that Washington explicitly asked them not to distribute, for fear that a terrorist group might get hold of them and fire on a civil airliner. For its part, Saudi Arabia has provided covert funding for CIA programs. The training of so-called moderate rebel groups by Washington was financed by Riyadh. Observers agree that Saudi Arabia is the country that has spent the most – by far – to fund anti-Bashar groups. With Tamim's arrival in power in Qatar in 2013, competition between the two oil monarchies on Syrian turf intensified. Each supplied their protégés, urging them to progress both militarily and politically at any cost, which further fragmented and paralyzed the Syrian opposition movement. Without surprise, the big winner from this dissension will be Bashar al-Assad. The latest battle in which this division led to the defeat of rebel forces was that for Eastern Ghouta.

BE IN - BE OUT, THE RETURN OF THE GULF PIRATES

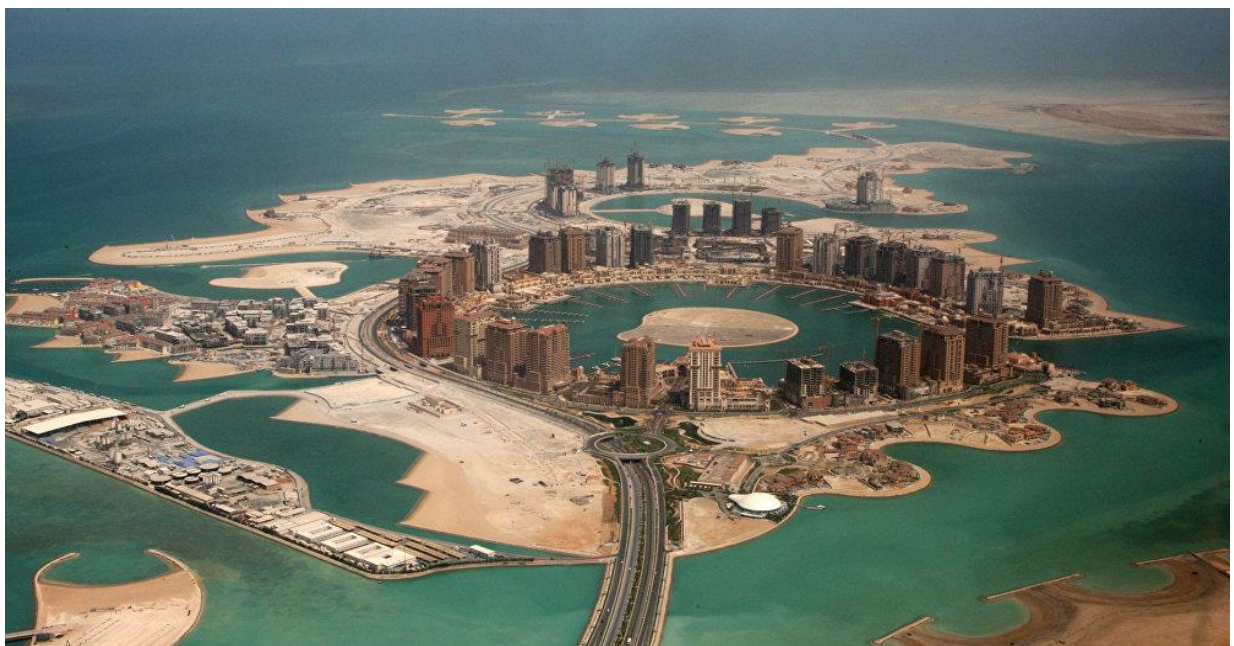
At the start of the 20th century, before the discovery of oil, the Persian Gulf was mainly notorious as a refuge for pirates who attacked ships on the spice route. Today, to bring Qatar to its knees, new forms of piracy have emerged.

Through its BeIN Sport channels, Qatar has secured a quasi-monopoly on soccer broadcasts in Arab countries, notably for competitions like the Champions' League and 2018 World Cup in Russia.

For MBS, it was unthinkable for his subjects to have to watch the Saudi team play in the World Cup on a Qatari channel. That was when a surprising pirate Arab channel popped up, BeoutQ, which re-broadcast all the content of BeIN Sport with a 10-second delay and offered all the World Cup matches without paying a dime to FIFA. This marked an unprecedented violation of international TV rights by a sovereign state. The Saudis swore they were nothing to do with BeoutQ, which was officially a Cuban-Colombian channel. But Qatar traced the pirate signal back to Riyadh. Doha filed a complaint with the highest authorities for what it claimed was fraudulent action costing it billions of dollars.

THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ISLAND

Riyadh's latest crazy plan to isolate Qatar involves digging a 60km canal along the land border between the two countries, 200m wide and 15-20m deep. The Saudi kingdom announced a tender process for this monumental project, with a budget of some 640 million euros. If this project is ever completed, Qatar would become an island, cut off from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. And as an additional insult, the Saudis stipulated in the presentation of the canal project that the excavations would be used as a site to bury their nuclear waste.



CONCLUSION: TOWARDS ANOTHER GULF WAR?

At the start of June 2018, the cold war that hangs over the Gulf states entered its second year, and showed no sign of abating. On the contrary.



PRODUCER'S NOTE:

The situation in the Middle East is of a complexity that often defies analysis. Miyuki Droz Aramaki and Sylvain Lepetit provide a clear summary of what is playing out in this region. Built around these three larger-than-life characters, their analysis will illustrate the strategies and issues in a way that facilitates comprehension. The use of maps inspired by the universe of video games will give the film an original look that is entirely in keeping with the subject matter.



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