

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia: A Royal Revolution

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Key Points

- Saudi Arabia is undergoing profound social change instigated by King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed.
- Mohammed appears determined not to let anything or anyone stand in his way towards taking the throne and bringing about his goal.
- That approach, as with his plans for social and economic change, carries enormous risk but, if successful, could transform the kingdom and the region.

Summary

Saudi Arabia, long-known for being the epitome of conservatism and orthodoxy in the Middle East, is in the process of undergoing a revolution in its leadership, economy and social structure. The process is unusual in that the changes being wrought, to all intents and purposes, stem from and are authorised by the current leader, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. While Salman may have authorised the changes being made to his country, it is his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, often referred to by his initials MBS, who executes his father's decrees.

Given the kingdom's history, ideological leadership, its economic clout and its standing as a regional actor, the changes being brought about are having, even at this early stage, a major impact upon the kingdom itself, the region and beyond. That impact will grow as the

changes continue and demand examination. This paper will examine, therefore, the factors that may have brought about the need for change and some of their possible consequences.

Analysis

The Background

King Salman is the last recognised son of the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz Al Saud. Succession to the throne has been conducted uneventfully until now, passing from one son of Abdulaziz to another. It is not surprising then that Salman himself was in his seventies when he ascended the throne. That is not to say, however, that there has never been tension between the various factions in the ruling family. In 1964, for instance, Crown Prince Faisal used the National Guard, which body he commanded, to oust King Saud from the throne. Recognised as a reformer, Faisal himself was assassinated by his namesake, the son of his half-brother, Faisal bin Musaid. It has been [suggested](#) that the assassination was an act of vengeance for the death of Faisal bin Musaid's brother, Prince Khalid bin Musaid, who was shot and killed by police while attacking a television station. Prince Khalid disapproved of television in the kingdom, believing it to be un-Islamic.

King Salman appointed Prince Muqrin, at the time 69 years old, as the Crown Prince in 2015. Three months later, however, Muqrin was replaced by Mohammed bin Nayef, a grandson of Abdulaziz and the first of a new generation of rulers. Mohammed bin Nayef was chosen because he was believed to have more political experience than Muqrin and a better lineage – Muqrin's mother was said to have been a Yemeni slave. It would appear, given the benefit of hindsight, that Mohammed bin Nayef was merely a transitional figure: Salman also appointed a Deputy Crown Prince, his son Mohammed bin Salman. It appears that the issue of MBS's age – he was only 29 years at the time – was of little consequence when he was appointed.

MBS appears to have used the Xi Jinping playbook as his political guide. He lost little time in accruing power. He headed the Ministry of Defence, the Council on Economic and Development Affairs and, notably, Aramco, the Saudi-owned oil producer that is one of the world's most valuable companies. MBS claims that Aramco is worth US\$2 trillion but analysts doubt that figure, estimating its [worth](#) at between US\$500 billion and US\$1.5 trillion. Aramco is a cornerstone of MBS's plans for Saudi Arabia. Those positions aside, MBS also heads the Anti-Corruption Committee, serves as the First Deputy Prime Minister, Secretary-General of the Royal Court and, following his father's decision to depose Mohammed bin Nayef as Crown Prince, assumed that role on 21 June 2017.

The Anti-Corruption Committee is a powerful body that has the royally-mandated authority to make arrests, freeze the bank accounts of people being investigated, prevent the transfer of funds, trace funding, prevent the liquidation of assets and to prevent people being investigated from travelling.

The Doer-In-Chief

Still adhering to the Xi Jinping playbook, MBS has worked relentlessly to effect major changes in Saudi Arabia and how the kingdom conducts its affairs. He first sought to consolidate his position, making himself central to the Saudi leadership, just as Xi has done in China and, like Xi again, has initiated an investigation into allegations of corruption in the kingdom. The Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya news channel [reported](#) on 4 November 2017 that eleven princes and dozens of former ministers were detained in an anti-corruption probe conducted by the Anti-Corruption Committee. The Committee, it was announced, had reopened an investigation into the floods in the port city of Jeddah in 2009 and the government response to the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome virus that killed several hundred people over the preceding few years. Not altogether coincidentally, the leading council of Saudi clerics, the Ulema, issued a statement declaring the fight against corruption an Islamic duty, in essence validating MBS's anti-corruption drive.

Saudi citizens had long complained of government corruption and the misuse of public funds. MBS used this as the basis of his investigation. The Committee soon arrested at least seventeen princes and top officials, including Prince [Alwaleed bin Talal](#), the billionaire businessman who owns 95 per cent of Kingdom Holding, which holds stakes in global organisations such as Citigroup, Twitter, Apple and News Corp. At least thirty-eight former, current and deputy ministers were also [arrested](#) on charges of corruption. Other notables who were arrested include the construction mogul Bakr bin Laden, the billionaire Saleh Kamal and Waleed al-Ibrahim, owner of the influential Arab satellite network MBC.

Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, head of the National Guard, was ousted and that command was given to MBS, thus securing for him control of the last branch of the security forces that was not yet under his power. Miteb was replaced by another prince, Khalid bin Ayyaf al-Muqrin, who had held a senior position within the organisation. Miteb's father, the late King Abdullah, headed the National Guard previously and transformed it into a powerful force, the primary tasks of which were to protect the Saudi royal family, the mosques in Mecca and Medina and various oil-producing sites. The National Guard was essentially transformed into a modern day Praetorian Guard with all the prestige of that body.

Prince Miteb was considered a contender for the throne and his position as the head of the National Guard posed a decided threat to MBS's claim. His ouster from that position, therefore, sidelines him and reduces any claims he may have to kingship. The Minister of Economy and Planning, Adel Fakeih, was also removed and replaced by his deputy, Mohammad al-Tuwaijri, and the Commander of Saudi Naval Forces, Admiral Abdullah Al-Sultan, was removed and replaced by Admiral Fahd bin Abdullah Al-Ghifaili, who has close ties to MBS.

The removal of Mohammed bin Nayef, the previous Crown Prince, from the powerful position of Interior Minister, when viewed in conjunction with that of Miteb bin Abdullah, leads to the suspicion that, like Xi once again, MBS has used the allegations of corruption to consolidate his current and future positions. His authority over the security and economic apparatuses is now securely centralised in him.

There have been allegations that the arrested royals and ministers have been treated harshly. One source [alleges](#) that some of the 201 people arrested so far have been hung upside down by their ankles and beaten. One news [report](#) alleged that the “interrogations” were conducted by American mercenaries from the firm previously known as Blackwater, but that organisation’s successor, Academi, strongly denied even being in Saudi Arabia and said it does not engage in torture, which is illegal for US citizens to commit anywhere in the world. ‘We do not provide security services in KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), we have no contact or connection with any government official or private party regarding this allegation,’ the company [said](#).

A day after the purges occurred, another Prince, Mansour bin Muqrin, died in a [helicopter crash](#) along with eight other high-ranking Saudi officials. Prince Mansour was the son of Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, a former director of the Saudi intelligence service, the Al Mukhabarat Al A’amah, from 2005 to 2012 and one-time crown prince. He was also a close confidant of King Abdullah during the latter’s reign. Prince Muqrin was removed as crown prince in April 2015 by his half-brother King Salman in favour of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, a chief of the Saudi counter-terrorism forces and Interior Minister. The timing of Mansour’s death has led, one is tempted to say “naturally”, to suspicions that the crash was more fortuitous for MBS than unfortunate for those who were killed in it.

On the Plus Side...

MBS has, however, not allowed any of this to affect him and has continued to work towards reforming Saudi Arabia. He has the solid backing of Saudi youth, who want a more “normal” life and a less restrictive society, one without the ideological and economic constraints that they currently face. To that extent, MBS would appear to be more a reflection of his generation than an impetus that motivates its demands. Saudi youth, those under the age of thirty, constitute a full 70 per cent of the population. King Salman decreed, almost certainly with the input of his son, that women may apply for [driver’s licences](#) from 2018. That overthrows a major element of the conservatist construct in the country. Women, furthermore, do not require the permission of a guardian – a male relative – to apply for a licence or to have a male guardian accompany them when they drive. In a further [sign](#) of an attack on conservatism, Saad al-Hijri, head of *fatwas* (legal opinions) in Saudi Arabia’s Assir governorate, was suspended from all religious activity after advising against allowing women to drive because he stated that women’s brains shrank to one-quarter the size of a man’s when they go shopping. In September of this year, women were allowed into the main stadium in Riyadh for the first time. Long resistant to the slightest notion of having its culture influenced by foreign practices, on 14 November, the Saudi Ministry of Trade and Industry listed [yoga](#), a discipline closely related to Hinduism, under “sports activities”, which allows any Saudi citizen to practice or propagate it by obtaining a licence to do so from the government. On 15 November, the Ministry of Justice [announced](#) that women would be allowed to work in that agency as religious and legal researchers and as administrative staff, and that the advertisements for those positions would be posted on its website. On 7 December, Saudi Arabia hosted its first [concert](#) by a female singer.

It was, however, MBS's [comments](#) on returning his country to “moderate Islam” that could have the greatest consequence for Saudi Arabia, the region and the fight against radical Islam. On 24 October, he informed a group of foreign investors at a gathering in Riyadh that he would return his country to “moderate Islam”. While that has been spoken about in private, it was the first time that a Saudi leader said so unequivocally in a public setting. ‘We want to live a normal life. A life in which our religion translates to tolerance, to our traditions of kindness,’ he [said](#), adding, ‘Seventy per cent of the Saudi population is under 30, and honestly we will not spend the next 30 years of our lives dealing with destructive ideas. We will destroy them today and at once. We will end extremism very soon.’

That could have profound implications for Saudi society as a whole. While the implementation of such a radical change in Saudi society remains a matter of conjecture, the fact that the future king was willing to make such a profound statement so openly and clearly speaks volumes. If carried out even partially, this could see women in the workforce in even greater numbers, working under the same rules and regulations as Saudi men, and the country tapping into and exploiting the skills and resources of a full half of its population. Freer educational opportunities could herald further changes for women’s rights and in how they are perceived in the kingdom. The conservative forces, already being diminished, could be all but wiped out as an organised factor altogether.

This appears to be only the start of the social changes that MBS has planned. It would not be overly difficult to perceive a time in the near future when Saudi Arabia does, indeed, become more “normal”. It is difficult to see how MBS could allow religions other than Islam to be practised openly in the kingdom, however, but that could be an evolutionary step, achievable further down the line. Tradition has it that Mohammed, the founder of Islam, [said](#) that “no two religions can exist in the Arabian Peninsula”, i.e. the only religion permissible in the peninsula is Islam, all others being forbidden. For MBS to overturn that tradition would require a re-evaluation of the hadith (the alleged sayings of Mohammed), which could imply at least a partial re-evaluation of Islam itself. That would have profound implications for the religion and Muslims the world over. It could also mark a turning point in the war against terrorism and the fight against radical Islam.

Judging by his actions so far, MBS appears to be a man driven to remake Saudi Arabia and will stop at little in order to bring about that change. The comparatively minor changes that he has already implemented are just the first, preliminary steps towards achieving his goal: to bring Saudi Arabia fully into the twenty-first century by shedding the chains of conservatism that have withheld its social and economic growth. Saudi Arabia has much to gain in supporting him in this venture and he has, equally, much to lose if he fails, for, if he does, the conservative forces that have long held the upper hand will return in greater force.

Having examined some of the social aspects of the changes implemented by MBS, the second part of this paper, to be released in January 2018, will focus on some of the economic and foreign policy changes that the Crown Prince hopes to achieve and their attendant risks.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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