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With New Crown Prince, Saudi Arabia Doubles Down On Political Repression And Regional Aggression

Doug Bandow

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Saudi Arabian King Salman bin Abdulaziz has shaken his nation's closed political system by making his youngest son his heir. Although heralded as a "modernizer," 31-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, also known as MBS, is the architect of Riyadh's disastrous attack on Yemen and disingenuous campaign to turn Qatar into a Saudi satellite. Given President Donald Trump's warm embrace of the monarchy, Prince Salman's recklessness is likely to draw the U.S. more deeply into destabilizing regional conflicts.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an anachronism, an absolute monarchy in a democratic age. A few thousand princes sit atop a society of roughly 32 million, treating the nation's wealth as their family's piggy bank. The royals live a generally licentious lifestyle outside of public view, but buy off the KSA's fundamentalist Muslim clergy by promoting the intolerant Islamic sect of Wahhabism worldwide. The kingdom's population long has been a generous source of people and money for radical and terrorist groups, including those attacking the West.

What amounts to a totalitarian state—there is no religious or political liberty and only limited social freedom, at least in public—has no popular appeal other than its open checkbook. Which makes political Islam so threatening: a country like Iran is an awful model, but life revolves around something other than money. For that people are willing to fight and die. In contrast, the

Saudi royals buy domestic loyalty while hiring foreigners to do the dirty work. With little to fight for, even the Saudi military performs poorly despite the best American weaponry.

The kingdom confronts a multitude of challenges. For years a group of elderly brothers held the kingship and other top positions among themselves. This self-aggrandizing gerontocracy lost what little public appeal it had when oil prices dropped, reducing the financial benefits for the average Saudi. Riyadh's cash reserves have fallen by almost a third since 2014.

In 2015 King Salman succeeded to the throne. He appointed his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, as Crown Prince, and his favorite son, MBS, as Deputy Crown Prince. But the king emasculated his nominal successor, merging Prince Nayef's court with his own and stripping the Crown Prince's other positions of authority. The 81-year-old king introduced his son to Washington, seeking unofficial blessing for his plans to anoint MBS his successor.



Now Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia (C) is escorted by U.S. Deputy Chief of Protocol Mark Walsh (R) as they walk into in the White House on June 17, 2016 in Washington, DC.

The young prince, whose experience had been limited to serving his father, had the latter's ear and effectively ruled. MBS won praise for seeking to diversify the economy. Last year he initiated Project 2030, which promotes development beyond oil. He also imposed an austerity program, cutting benefits for the entitlement-minded population—only to restore some of them recently, to quiet discontent. Moreover, he loosened some social strictures and restricted the religious police, to the applause of many younger Saudis.

However, his highly-touted liberalism does not extend to religion or politics. There is not one church, synagogue, or temple in the entire kingdom. No public worship or other activity is allowed any other faith, even though the KSA is filled with contract workers, many of whom are Christians or Hindus. The Shia minority worships only at sufferance, while facing persistent discrimination and repression. Saudi Arabia ranks with North Korea in its extraordinary hostility to religious liberty. MBS has changed nothing.

As for politics, the reigning prince has demonstrated no inclination to allow those not of royal blood to have any say in their own government. Freedom House ranks the KSA as “Not Free,” with the lowest possible rating for both political freedom and civil liberties. The human rights

group declared simply: “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties through a combination of oppressive laws and the use of force.”

The U.S. State Department detailed Riyadh’s manifold crimes in its latest human rights report, explaining: “The most important human rights problems reported included citizens’ lack of the ability and legal means to choose their government; restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and pervasive gender discrimination and lack of equal rights that affected most aspects of women’s lives.” Other than that, life in the KSA is great.

Indeed, the kingdom’s hated enemy, Iran, looks like a democratic paragon compared to Riyadh. Saudi Arabia does not hold elections. Or allow organized political opposition. Or tolerate media criticism, or criticism of any sort. Dissident blogger Raif Badawi was sentenced to ten years and 1000 lashes for his writing; his attorney then was tossed into jail for 15 years. Observed Maya Foa of the human rights group Reprieve, “The reality is Prince Mohammed has stood alongside and publicly defended the king as young men have been tortured and executed for peacefully protesting.” Where is MBS the reformer?

Of greater concern to the U.S. is the crown prince’s international aggression. He is pushing a quasi-war against Iran, pledging to “work so that the battle for them is in Iran.” Antagonism toward Tehran sparked Riyadh’s destabilizing support for radical jihadists in an attempt to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

MBS orchestrated the invasion of Yemen two years ago to restore to power a friendly autocrat ousted in the latest iteration of that nation’s endless internecine conflict. What was supposed to be a brief cakewalk morphed into a lengthy sectarian struggle in which more than 10,000 civilians have died, most from Saudi bombing—for which the U.S. provided the weapons, refueled the planes, and suggested the targets.

After Riyadh sowed the wind, Iran encouraged the whirlwind, providing modest aid to Riyadh’s Houthi opponents. Tehran seeks not to “win” but to bleed its Saudi antagonist. There is no end in sight to the immoral, counterproductive conflict into which Washington is being ever more deeply drawn. In contrast, Prince Nayef, well regarded as interior minister by foreign governments, was skeptical of MBS’s Yemeni misadventure.

The young ruler-in-waiting also apparently is the driving force behind the Saudi-led assault on neighboring Qatar. Although Saudi Arabia has done more than any other nation to fund and staff anti-Western terrorist organizations, Riyadh accused Doha of supporting terrorism.

The Saudi royals were angered by Qatar’s friendly relations with Iran, growing naturally out of their shared natural gas field. These ties also encourage the world’s most populous Shia nation’s more responsible participation in the international system. The Saudis criticized Qatar for backing the Muslim Brotherhood, the world’s most important exponent of political Islam, a diverse activist (not terrorist) group whose members serve in at least two governments and are well integrated into other Arab nations. Riyadh’s war on the Brotherhood threatens to drive its activities underground and radicalize even more young Muslims, who find no appeal in a discreditable corrupt monarchy.

Finally, Riyadh, which allows no media freedom, targeted Al Jazeera, the Qatar-backed

television network which publicized the 2011 Arab Spring and criticized the Saudi royals, among others. MBS is seeking to impose his own nation's totalitarian controls abroad. No independent state could accept Saudi Arabia's outlandish demands. Again, Prince Nayef was more cautious, urging a diplomatic resolution. His opposition to MBS' international thuggery reportedly triggered his ouster as royal heir.

Even Riyadh's Sunni neighbors are not entirely comfortable with MBS's outsized ambitions. Warned Chas Freeman, George H.W. Bush's ambassador to Saudi Arabia: "Some of the neighbors regard it as a drive for Saudi hegemony in the region." Which could be as unpleasant as Iranian domination.



Despite the good press received by MBS as a dynamic new ruler, so far he has demonstrated an unerring ability to fail upward. Yemenis continue to successfully resist Saudi aggression, Qatar so far has withstood Riyadh's attempted extortion. The government has had to retreat from last year's budget cuts. Only the young heir's modest social reforms have survived. With MBS poised to officially rule, the U.S. should back away from a relationship which has simultaneously undermined American values and security. The Saudi regime is destined to fall. Then Washington will pay a heavy political price for having supported the oppressive royals for so long.

The new Saudi crown prince's pleasant countenance cannot disguise the brutal character of the system he represents. Even assuming the royal family is truly united—and there likely is greater disquiet than publicly known—anointing a younger, more vibrant ruler in Saudi Arabia is like putting lipstick on a pig. The essential problem remains the dictatorial theocracy's lack of public legitimacy and appeal. The only question is when the Saudi people will finally free themselves.

