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Saudi Arabia May be in for a Nasty Shock

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Foreign leaders visiting King Salman of Saudi Arabia have noticed that there is a large flower display positioned just in front of where the 80-year-old monarch sits. On closer investigation, the visitors realised that the purpose of the flowers is to conceal a computer which acts as a teleprompter, enabling the King to appear capable of carrying on a coherent conversation about important issues.

One visiting US delegation meeting with King Salman recently observed a different method of convincing visitors – or at least television viewers watching the encounter – that he can deal with the escalating crises facing Saudi Arabia. The king did not look at the group but at a giant television screen hanging from the ceiling of the room on which was appearing prompts. Simon Henderson, the Saudi expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who tells the story, writes that off to one side in the room was an aide who “furiously hammered talking points into a keyboard”.

Of course, King Salman is not the only world leader past or present whose inability to cope has been artfully concealed by aides and courtiers. But eyewitness accounts of his

incapacity does put in perspective the claim by the White House that President Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia and two hour meeting with the king on 20 April was "cordial" and cleared the air after a troubled period in Saudi-US relations.

It is hardly a secret that real authority is shifting to Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef and his son, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. But the power vacuum does help explain the bizarre and self-destructive nature of present-day Saudi foreign policy that suddenly shifted from cautious use of Saudi Arabia's vast oil wealth to further its aims, while always keeping its options open, to a militarised and confrontational pursuit of foreign policy objectives.

It is not exactly that the Saudi's priorities have changed, but that the means being used to achieve them are far riskier than in the past. Since King Salman succeeded to the throne, Saudi Arabia has escalated its involvement in the war in Syria and engaged directly in an air war in Yemen. Both ventures have failed: greater support for armed opposition to President Bashar al-Assad in Syria early last year allowed the rebels to advance, but also provoked direct Russian military intervention, making Assad very difficult to displace. Bombing Yemen has not forced the Houthi opposition out of the capital Sanaa and, where the Houthis have retreated, there is chaos which al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has used to set up their own mini-state on the south coast of Yemen.

The Saudi leaders are more or less openly saying that they are waiting for the departure of President Obama from the White House to resume their status of most favoured ally of the US. The permanently anti-Saudi bias of the present administration, though usually verbal rather than operational, came across clearly in the interviews with Mr Obama and his top officials in the *Atlantic* by Jeffrey Goldberg. He says that "in the White House these days, one occasionally hears Obama's National Security Officials pointedly reminding visitors that the large majority of 9/11 hijackers were not Iranian, but Saudi".

But the Saudis are making a mistake in imagining that hostility to them will dissipate once Mr Obama leaves office. There is renewed pressure for the release of the unpublished 28 pages in the official Congressional 9/11 report on possible Saudi official complicity in the attacks, with CBS's influential and widely watched *60 Minutes* devoting a segment to it, thereby putting it back on the political agenda. "Saudi Arabia legitimises Islamic extremism and intolerance around the world," states an op-ed by Nicholas Kristof in *The New York Times*. "'If you want to stop bombings in Brussels or San Bernardino, then turn off the spigots of incitement from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.'" Not only is there a

growing anti-Saudi mood in the US, but it is one of the few political developments common to both parties.

In reality, the missing 28 pages in the 9/11 report on possible high level Saudi involvement may not be as categorical or as damaging to the Kingdom as the fact of their continued non-publication. The secrets that Saudi Arabia has most interest in hiding may be rather different, and relate to allegations that between 1995 and 2001, two senior Saudi princes spent hundreds of millions of state funds paying off Osama bin Laden not to make attacks within Saudi Arabia, but leaving him free to do whatever he wanted in the rest of the world.