

# The Changes in Saudi Arabia: Preparing for Possible Destabilization

Amos Yadlin and Yoel Guzansky

Pessimistic assessments about political stability in Saudi Arabia are not new, especially since the upheaval that began in the Middle East in late 2010, and they have become more frequent with the steep drop in oil prices.<sup>1</sup> While as of the writing of this essay the kingdom faces no severe and immediate risk to its stability, current challenges make this risk greater than it has been in the past. Furthermore, in recent years, the Middle East has seen seemingly stable regimes collapsing with no prior warning signs. Given the far reaching consequences of a collapse of the regime in Riyadh, it is important to consider this potential scenario.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a historic process of accelerated change that, if successful, will position Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) as the kingdom's unchallenged leader and pioneer of modernization. This top-down revolution, however, could also culminate in the destabilization of the kingdom. This essay reviews the main challenges facing the kingdom, and proposes initial directions for thought in the event that the developing processes result in destabilization. It looks at various crisis scenarios in the kingdom, their possible consequences, and the risks they generate. The combination of internal political crises and external conflicts requires careful monitoring of developments that are liable to undermine the kingdom's stability. While destabilization in Saudi Arabia is neither imminent nor unavoidable, in view of the kingdom's economic, religious, and political importance, the possible consequences of destabilization should be assessed.

Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin is the Director of INSS. Dr. Yoel Guzansky is a senior research fellow at INSS.

## Internal Challenges

### *Socioeconomic Pressures*

Political stability in the kingdom is tied directly to the population's high standard of living. The high oil prices of 2011-2014 will likely not recur any time soon, and Saudi Arabia is therefore preparing for a continuation of the current price level (of which the kingdom was one of the main causes), while attempting to achieve agreements on a cut in production in order to bring about a rise in prices. The royal house is aware of the need for reform, including weaning the kingdom from its dependence on oil, and proclaims at home and abroad that it possesses the means to achieve this. Paradoxically, the process of the reforms, while necessary in itself, is liable to trigger destabilization in the kingdom. Due to this concern, the International Monetary Fund has warned the kingdom's leaders against carrying out reforms and austerity measures too quickly.<sup>2</sup>

What to cut is as much of a political issue as an economic one, and can be regarded as one of the key challenges facing the kingdom. Furthermore, it would be overly optimistic to assume that the kingdom currently has all the resources, and especially the capabilities, required to achieve the goal it has set for itself of eliminating its dependence on oil profits.<sup>3</sup> Doubts have also increased recently about the ability to implement the main reform (Vision 2030) at the rate and to the extent declared by MBS, given the reports about significant changes in the plan and the postponement of several of its objectives. Meanwhile, frustration has grown among the public, which has been accustomed to oil-based abundance, as salaries fall and the cost of living rises (for example, with a 5 percent VAT on a broad range of goods and services) due to cuts in subsidies (and in January 2018, the price of gasoline doubled). Against this background, the September 15, 2017 movement was launched on the social networks, calling for Saudi citizens to protest the increasing poverty, housing crisis, and unemployment among young people.<sup>4</sup>

In general, Saudis regard the arrangements and benefits paid for by oil profits as the basis of the social order that rewards them for their loyalty to the royal house. According to this equation, an erosion of their welfare is liable to undermine their loyalty, or lead them to demand to be significantly involved in the kingdom's political order. Social unrest may also erupt if the public becomes convinced that the princes have not curbed the royal house's ostentatious lifestyle. In 2006, despite the austerity measures and the call for citizens to tighten their belts, Mohammad bin Salman himself

reportedly purchased a luxury yacht at a cost of over \$500 million, an estate for \$300 million, and a painting for \$500 million.<sup>5</sup> In a proactive attempt to prevent criticism on this matter, the “Supreme Committee to Investigate Public Corruption” was established on November 4, 2017, headed by MBS, with the authority to investigate, arrest, and imprison suspects; ban them from leaving the country; and freeze their assets. In addition to an alleged war on corruption, the committee seems to be replenishing the dwindling public treasury and neutralizing political opponents.<sup>6</sup>

### *Accelerated Political Change and Struggles in the Palace*

The Supreme Committee to Investigate Public Corruption began its activity with an unprecedented wave of arrests. Some 200 senior figures were apprehended, including 11 princes of the ruling family, four serving government ministers, former ministers, and businessmen. Most of those arrested have been released, following the nationalization of some of their property and wealth – compromise arrangements that added a great deal of money to the royal treasury.<sup>7</sup> The most important development in the framework of MBS’s recent measures, however, concerns his takeover of another portion of the security establishment – in addition to the regular army, which was already under his control – with the ousting of National Guard commander Mutaib bin Abdullah. The National Guard is a trained and well-equipped force based on tribal loyalty, whose original function was maintaining the regime’s stability (guarding senior members of the royal house and security in the main palaces) and balancing the power of the 200,000-man regular army. The National Guard (comprising 100,000 troops) began procuring Blackhawk and Apache helicopters, assisting in the fighting in Yemen, and deploying in Riyadh and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (and in Bahrain since 2011).

The change in the political balance of power pursued by MBS began in 2015, when his father appointed him deputy crown prince and Minister of Defense, and put him in charge of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. In June 2017, MBS was promoted to crown prince, and with his father’s support has continued to fortify his position since. The rivalry between the leading princes in the struggle for succession, Mohammad bin Salman and Mohammad bin Nayef, has caused concern since 2015 that a struggle within the palace could jeopardize stability.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Mohammad bin Nayef, who held the authority over the kingdom’s internal security forces, was dismissed from his position as crown prince and minister of the interior

in June 2017, and was reportedly under house arrest. It is possible that these measures by MBS indicate growing anxiety about the emergence of opposition to his rule and a sense of urgency to inherit the throne before his father dies. In view of MBS's increased power in recent years, senior princes in the kingdom issued a public call for a change, while expressing lack of confidence in the prince and his ailing father.<sup>9</sup>

Unity among the senior princes in the royal house has always been a source of stability. Power struggles arose more than once between the sons of Ibn Saud by different mothers. This was the background to the emergence of different political factions determined by family relationships. These struggles, however, took place behind closed doors, and there was an effective balance of power in the royal family, with the king functioning as the first among equals. It was clear to all the princes that their power was grounded in unity. Over the years, in order to preserve the balance between the branches of the family, the kings divided the senior positions among the factions, including control over the security forces. MBS now controls

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the three main security arms: the regular army, the internal security forces, and the National Guard.<sup>10</sup>

To a great extent, the government in Riyadh has slowly become the rule of one man with no significant achievements to his credit so far, but who has concentrated on fortifying his standing and power. MBS, who seeks to make essential changes in all spheres of life in the kingdom, and at an accelerated and forced pace, has abandoned the tradition of collective decision making for this purpose, and in the process is confronting the religious establishment by diminishing its authority and the power of the

social and economic elites, who will not necessarily bow to his authority. This process incurs quite a few risks. In this context, the American defense and diplomatic establishment has expressed growing concern about "bin Salman's impulsive behavior" which is potentially "liable to jeopardize American interests."<sup>11</sup>

## External Pressures

### *Increasing Tension with Iran*

The external challenges facing the kingdom are related to its struggle against Iran, which constitutes the main external threat to the kingdom. In

response, Riyadh has adopted an assertive policy to push back Iran. This policy has even aroused concern among Western intelligence agencies due to the risks it incurs to the kingdom's stability, and the contrast to the traditional Saudi policy of restraint and caution.<sup>12</sup> Saudi senior officials, headed by MBS, have escalated their statements against Iran, and MBS has even threatened that Saudi Arabia would fight a war against Iran in Iran, hinting at support for a change of regime there.<sup>13</sup> In a number of cases, above all in the war in Yemen, the escalation of the conflict against Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the political and economic siege of Qatar, MBS has taken a controversial line with uncharacteristic risks, in comparison to the way the kingdom formerly conducted its foreign policy. Furthermore, it appears that the price of this policy not infrequently outweighs its achievements. Saudi Arabia's regional status has declined, due to Iran's achievements through the nuclear agreement and the difficulty encountered by the kingdom in influencing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

### *The War in Yemen*

In March 2015, upon entering the war in Yemen (Operation Decisive Storm), MBS promised a quick and crushing victory over the Houthis and the Iranians. Thus far, Saudi Arabia has exposed the limitations of its power and its difficulties in defeating a determined enemy on its doorstep. The expensive military campaign in Yemen, even though it initially led to certain achievements, has come to a standstill, and is far from victory, even though Saudi Arabia possesses some of the world's most advanced weapons and its defense budget is the fourth largest in the world, after the United States, China, and Russia.<sup>14</sup> Over nearly three years, it has achieved no satisfactory results in the fighting, while costing Saudi Arabia an estimated \$5 billion a month. Despite the kingdom's huge investment in defense, it is liable to give the appearance of a paper tiger. The military campaign has become a burden on the public treasury, and the Houthis are shooting ground-to-ground missiles – some of them Iranian-made – at Saudi territory, while the kingdom is having difficulty intercepting them with its air defense capabilities. Furthermore, in addition to the international criticism of Saudi Arabia (of exacerbating the humanitarian situation in Yemen and causing extensive collateral damage and harm to civilians), there is also internal criticism of how the war is conducted.

### *The Crisis with Qatar*

Since June 2017, the kingdom has led a diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar, while posing very severe demands: a downgrading of relations with Iran, closure of the al-Jazeera broadcasting network, withdrawal of Turkish forces from Qatar, and termination of support for the Muslim Brotherhood and for terror. Qatar is paying a considerable price, mainly economic, because of the boycott. However, Saudi Arabia is also paying a rising price. The image of its power is affected, if only because of its inability to date to subject a small (and “recalcitrant”) country like Qatar to its dictates. Saudi Arabia’s relations with important Muslim allies, from Pakistan to Morocco, are tense because of their “neutral” position in the crisis. For its part, since the crisis began, Qatar, has upgraded its relations with Iran and Turkey, both of which are helping it overcome the boycott. Here too the kingdom’s foreign policy posture has led to considerable internal criticism. A wave of arrests began in September 2017, including of senior clerics, among them Salman al-Ouda (a known critic of the royal house who has 14 million Twitter followers), academics, and journalists.<sup>15</sup> Common to those arrested was their criticism of the royal house’s policy in initiating the crisis with Qatar, which aggravated the rift between the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and did not bring about any substantial change in Qatar’s policy.<sup>16</sup>

### **Possible Scenarios**

Political shockwaves are possible for many reasons and are difficult to predict precisely. The future scenarios can come from a wide spectrum of possibilities: a quiet palace coup by a competing branch of the al-Saud tribe, a seizure of power by an Islamic organization hostile to the West, accelerated civil unrest, or a combination of these scenarios. The results of these shocks could range from a prolonged low intensity crisis simmering beneath the surface to a power struggle between two or three emerging factions to the loss of state control and absolute chaos. Each one of these scenarios in various magnitudes can naturally lead to different political and strategic results, and pose a variety of challenges of varying intensity.

### *A Military Coup and Power Struggle within the Palace*

There is currently little likelihood of a military coup in Saudi Arabia, even if it is less unlikely than in the past. The most recent coup attempt occurred in 1969, with no known similar attempts since. One of the reasons for the

difficulty in staging a military coup in the kingdom was that until now, the internal armed forces were not under a single command; they were loyal to different parties in the royal house. All of the loci of power in the kingdom have now been concentrated under MBS, which reduces the likelihood of a military clash between the respective power bases and their leaders. However, the ousted princes and those loyal to them were well rooted in the organizations that they headed, and constitute a potential source for feelings of revenge, which could be expressed in attempts at a coup. Perhaps MBS's fear of criticism, possibly even of a military coup, was what caused him to order the arrest of 16 senior retired officers of the Ministry of Defense and the National Guard on accusations of corruption, as reported in November 2017.<sup>17</sup> Another threat is liable to come from a quiet palace coup by a competing branch of the al-Saud tribe that feels that it has been pushed aside.<sup>18</sup> In such a case, the kingdom would manage to survive the crisis and maintain stability in the long term only if a broad consensus is achieved among the senior princes about who the future king will be, as was the prevailing practice before MBS emerged as the dominant player.

### *A Takeover by Extremist Islamist Groups*

Until now, the presence of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Saudi Arabia has ostensibly been more of a tactical nuisance (albeit a painful one) than a strategic threat. After decades of Salafi-Wahhabi indoctrination, however, in the event of a political crisis, liberals might suffer defeat by Islamic extremists. A takeover by Islamic elements hostile to the West will also be dangerous because these elements are liable to use the kingdom's ample resources against Western interests. It is likely that the elimination of the royal house as a party operating largely according to realpolitik will culminate in an aggressive anti-Western foreign policy. For this scenario to materialize, however, no "caliphate" movement is necessary; it is enough for the influence of the Wahhabi establishment on the royal house to become stronger, as has occurred in the past. Nevertheless, the kingdom's confrontation with Salafi extremism in the form of the Islamic State organization, which rejects Saudi Arabia's legitimacy and religious validity, potentially poses a material threat. The Islamic State has proven its ability to challenge the kingdom's security despite, and perhaps because of, its territorial failures in Iraq and Syria. The most recent attempt at a terrorist attack was in October 2017, when the Peace Palace in Jeddah was attacked (although it is unclear whether the organization was involved). In July 2016, there was an attempt

to blow up the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, where Muslims believe that the Prophet Mohammad was buried. Even in the event of internal chaos in Saudi Arabia, the establishment of a caliphate-like state requires the appearance of a charismatic figure capable of inspiring the masses, combined with the strengthening of the existing Wahhabi establishment (even if Saudi clerics question the legitimacy of a particular king or the entire royal house, this does not undermine the legitimacy of the existing belief in the king ruling with the help of religious advisors).

### *External Subversion and Shiite Unrest*

A scenario is possible in which the kingdom is paralyzed as a result of internal struggles, while Iran takes advantage of the instability to bring about an effective revolt in the Shiite area. At the same time, although it is capable of inciting groups in the Shiite population in the kingdom against the royal family, it is highly doubtful whether Iran is capable of directly causing the overthrow of the Saudi royal house. Furthermore, the Saudi Shiites, who comprise approximately 15 percent of the kingdom's population, are for the most part ideologically detached from the Iranian religious establishment, and so far have not posed a significant threat to the regime in Riyadh. However, unrest incited by forces with a different agenda seeking a change could occur. In an extreme case scenario, widespread unrest is liable to lead to chaos and dissolution of the kingdom into separate provinces and regions, the most important of which will be Nejd, home to Riyadh and the government institutions; Hejaz, where the holy places of Islam are located; and the eastern province, which contains most of the oil reserves and where most of the kingdom's Shiite population lives.

## **Significance and Risks**

### *Crisis in the Oil Markets*

A severe internal crisis will almost certainly lead to a sharp rise in oil prices. Such a rise could be moderated, especially if the oil markets continue to feature excess supply and (relatively) low prices, by the ability of other suppliers, headed by the United States, to compensate for the missing supply. A prolonged absolute halt in production will damage mainly (although not exclusively) the economies of the Far East, especially China, the principal importer of Saudi oil. At the same time, such a development will undoubtedly benefit the oil economies of Iran and Russia, the kingdom's competitors in the oil market. A rise in prices could also propel further development



of the shale oil industry and, in the long term, could help free the world of its dependence on Middle East oil.

If one Saudi group controls the oil, it will be able to attain a significant advantage over its rivals. If a number of groups control the oil fields, the main beneficiaries are likely to be the importers of Saudi oil, given the market competition. As in the case of Libya, however, the rivalry between the various power groups in the country is liable to paralyze oil production and exports. In any case, it is clear that loss of the oil fields will be a severe blow to the Saudi royal family or any other group replacing it, given the great importance of this sector in the national economy.

### *Strengthening of Iran*

Iran is likely to improve its strategic position under each of the scenarios, and exploit possible shocks in the kingdom in order to expand its regional dominance. In the event of a significant political crisis in the kingdom, the Houthis will gain the upper hand in Yemen, and Iran will encounter less resistance in maintaining its supremacy in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. If the Saudi royal house encounters serious difficulties, it is uncertain whether Iran will use force to help achieve Shiite independence in the eastern province of the kingdom and escalate destabilization in Bahrain. One clear result of a prolonged civil war along the lines of events in Iraq and Syria will be damage to Saudi Arabia's ability to retain control of its borders and any parties crossing them in either direction. Thus along with which internal groups might participate in the fighting in its early stages, at issue is which external groups are likely to be active in Saudi Arabia in more advanced stages of a civil war.

### *Loss of Control and Dispersion of Advanced Weapon Systems*

Another risk is future control of the kingdom's advanced Western weapon systems if stability is undermined. In the event of total instability in the kingdom, the weapon systems are liable to fall into the "wrong hands," as happened to less sophisticated weapon systems in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. At the same time, terrorist organizations will find it difficult to operate advanced weapons and "heavy" systems. Furthermore, it is possible that there are American-British shelf plans for neutralizing or taking control of essential systems in a crisis.

### *External Involvement and Security in the Islamic Holy Places*

It is unclear whether the major powers will take action to restore stability in the kingdom in the event of instability there. A positive answer is likely to reduce the risks incurred in the scenarios portrayed above. It is very doubtful, however, whether any of the major powers has the motivation and/or ability to undertake additional significant intervention in the Middle East. Furthermore, intervention by the major powers might well escalate the crisis, as happened in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. Possible external intervention depends on a number of secondary questions: the divisions between the contending forces in Saudi Arabia, their political orientation and territorial distribution, the balance of power between them, and the possibility that a specific group will achieve hegemony over the others. The actions of regional and international players, whom they will support, and whether a divided kingdom will be in their interest, should also be considered.

If general chaos prevails in the kingdom, Iran is likely to use the pretext of “saving the holy cities” (or the excuse of protecting the Shiite population) to augment its subversion and indirect pressure on the kingdom, and possibly also direct pressure. The National Guard is responsible for defending Mecca and Medina, but in an extreme case scenario, the kingdom might call for help from external Muslim forces. Pakistan has the world’s largest Muslim army, and is the only Muslim country with nuclear capability (obtained to a large extent with financial help from Saudi Arabia), and Riyadh regards it as a force multiplier for support in a crisis. However, it is doubtful whether Pakistan will be willing to side with the kingdom in a crisis as it did in the past, when it extended aid in freeing the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 and stationed military forces in Saudi territory.

### *The Israeli Context*

Riyadh’s internal and regional difficulties are liable to cool Israel’s enthusiasm for the “regional approach,” whereby Israel works with Saudi Arabia, the core of the Sunni axis opposing Iran and perhaps a party that can offer material assistance in achieving a breakthrough in the political process with the Palestinians. All of the scenarios for destabilization of the Saudi regime are negative for Israel, due to the possibility that the kingdom will become a failing state or one controlled by a hostile regime. This in turn would damage the standing of the United States in the region, while advanced weaponry might fall into hostile and terrorist hands liable to use it against

Israel. Beyond the possible damage to the limited cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, instability in the kingdom will cause shockwaves that might upset regimes important to Israel, headed by Jordan and Egypt. To the extent that the kingdom is internally vulnerable, it will be less able to cooperate with Israel, if only because of its desire to appease various sectors that can challenge its stability and that are critical of its relations with Israel. Under a scenario of an internal coup in the kingdom, where the kingdom is presumably still controlled by a regime operating according to realpolitik, it is likely that the objective interest in cooperation with Israel will remain. Some in Israel favor Saudi activism, which is aimed mainly against the Iranian interests in the Middle East in general, and in the Gulf region in particular. Israel and the Western countries should therefore examine the best way to help the royal house maintain stability, and what should be done on the day when Saudi Arabia is weakened and becomes a less central figure in the camp opposing Iran.

## Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has enjoyed relative stability since the beginning of the regional upheaval, even if its power and influence may at times have been overestimated. The kingdom, which has substituted a proactive policy for its traditional cautious and conservative strategy, is challenged in almost every dimension, while its acting ruler, MBS, has launched important historic processes that may cause instability in the kingdom. Opposition groups may take advantage of this instability to undermine the regime, and regional and international forces may take the opportunity to challenge the kingdom. In face of the potential instability in the kingdom, events must be monitored and emergency plans prepared for scenarios of destabilization. Those formulating such plans should consider how to make sure that Iran does not take advantage of instability in the kingdom to enhance its regional hold, how to deal with the shocks in the oil market, how to safeguard advance weapon systems, how to safeguard the holy places of Islam, and what the consequences of instability in Saudi Arabia will be for its neighbors, some of whom face similar challenges.

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Doubts of the kingdom's stability have proven erroneous in the past,<sup>19</sup> but the resilience demonstrated by the kingdom over the last seven tumultuous years does not guarantee its long term stability. The risk of an outbreak of political violence exists. In order to preserve its stability, the kingdom will have to meet the expectations of a young and well-educated generation accustomed to abundance, and find new ways of including it in the management of the state's affairs; pass critical reforms, even if they are in themselves hazardous; cope differently and more successfully with Iran in the regional theater; and restore some of former features of internal political management that contribute to stability.

It is clearly impossible to determine whether and when several of the elements of the threat reviewed above will emerge to a degree sufficient to destabilize the kingdom, nor can all of the possible consequences of those elements be envisioned. This essay, therefore, does not aim to predict a precise time at which the kingdom might become unstable, or assess the degree to which instability in Saudi Arabia is inevitable. Rather, it seeks to warn of the possible consequences of this scenario and generate related insights, including outside the intelligence agencies. The countries that will be affected by possible destabilization in Saudi Arabia, including Israel, should recognize the historic changes underway in the kingdom, and should make preparations for possible difficult scenarios, whose likelihood is now greater than before.

## Notes

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