

## **Saudi Arabia in an Accelerated and Risky Process of Transformation**

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The recent turmoil in Saudi Arabia, reflected in an unprecedented number of arrests of hundreds of officials, including key leaders of the economic, communications, and political sectors, ostensibly as part of a crackdown on corruption, may prove to be a development of historic magnitude. On November 4, 2017, the Supreme Anti-Corruption Committee headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) was formed by a royal decree and given power to interrogate and arrest suspects, prevent them from leaving the country, and freeze their assets. Among the hundreds arrested were 11 princes who are members of the ruling royal family, four incumbent ministers, former ministers, and businessmen. Also arrested was billionaire al-Waleed bin Talal, a known critic of the royal family. That same day, a helicopter carrying Saudi officials crashed for unknown reasons; among the casualties was Mansour bin Muqrin, a staunch rival of MBS since Mansour's father was deposed of his title as Crown Prince. To this day, what actually happened to Prince Abdul Aziz, the son of the late King Fahd and another harsh critic of MBS, is likewise not known.

The most critical development within the scope of MBS's crackdown relates to his takeover of an elite security force, when he relieved Miteb bin Abdullah of his post as commander of the Saudi National Guard (SANG). At issue is a well-trained and well-equipped military force that is based on tribal loyalty and whose original mandate was to safeguard the stability of the government and serve as a counterweight to the standing army of some 200,000 soldiers. The SANG, which numbers about 100,000 soldiers, is stationed along the borders, mainly on the border with Yemen, in the capital city of Riyadh, and in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. One of its vanguard units has been stationed in Bahrain since 2011 in order to safeguard the Sunni al-Khalifa ruling family in this island country, whose population is mostly Shiite.

The wave of arrests was apparently also designed also to remove current and potential opponents to MBS's accession to the throne. However, the Crown Prince opened the domestic front at a time when Saudi Arabia is embroiled in a number of external fronts in the Middle East – against Iran in Yemen (from where another long range missile was launched last week towards Riyadh), against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and against Qatar. Meanwhile, tensions with Iran are on the rise – what helps the king and his son rally Saudis around the flag (while oil prices are rising). These external confrontations and internal

political battles have the potential to destabilize the kingdom and warrant ongoing monitoring, and preparation of a response to this lack of stability.

The change in the balance of power that MBS seeks began gradually already in 2015, when he was appointed by his father, King Salman, to fill the following posts: Deputy Crown Prince, Minister of Defense, and the head of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs. In June 2017, MBS was promoted to Crown Prince and has continued, with his father's support, to heighten his power. Over the last two years, the princes' rivalry over the throne, particularly between MBS and Muhammad bin Nayef, has prompted concern that the strife inside the palace might jeopardize stability. In the meantime, bin Nayef, who controlled the internal security forces in the kingdom, was deposed of his titles as Crown Prince and Minister of the Interior in June 2017 and was reportedly placed under house arrest, together with his close associates.

Over the years the solidarity among the senior princes was a source of strength in the kingdom. To be sure, various power battles were waged among the sons of Ibn Saud from the king's different wives, and against this backdrop, political camps were formed according to the family lineage. However, these battles were waged behind closed doors, while the balance of power within the royal family was maintained and while the king functioned as the first among equals. It was clear to the princes that their power lay in their solidarity. Over the years, and in order to maintain a balance between the branches of the family, the kings divided the senior posts among the camps, including control over the security forces. Now, MBS alone controls the three main security forces: the standing army, the internal security forces, and the SANG. When MBS is crowned king, this will be the first time that the throne will be occupied by a grandchild of Ibn Saud, the founder of the dynasty. This transition was not arranged according to traditional succession procedures, and it therefore became the source of substantial tension and confrontation among the princes.

MBS's actions are perceived less as an authentic crackdown on corruption and more as an attempt to fortify his own power and standing – especially since his own extravagant lifestyle has not changed (the New York Times reported that bin Salman purchased a luxury yacht in 2016 at the cost of \$500 million). Therefore, it seems that bin Salman's actions aim to prevent criticism from rival factions in the family and prevent the formation of opposition to his rule. Perhaps his actions reflect his drive to seize the crown immediately. Indeed, in face of his rapid amassing of powers in recent years, senior princes in the kingdom have already voiced a rare public call for change, by expressing their lack of confidence in him and in his father, the ailing king.

MBS enjoys support (to the extent that it can be evaluated in an absolute monarchy) among the young generation – about half of the Saudi population is under the age of 25 – who are eager for reforms in the conservative social order and for the eradication of corruption. However, skepticism as to his ability to implement his Vision 2030 flagship plan at the intended pace and scope has grown recently, in light of reports of major changes in the plan and extensions of some deadlines or their elimination altogether. In the meantime, the public, which was long accustomed to a life of abundance generated by oil revenues, has become increasingly frustrated, due to the decline in salaries, the cutbacks in subsidies, and the rise in the cost of living resulting from the drop in oil prices. If these trends persist, MBS is liable to lose the support of the kingdom's youth. The wave of arrests and the concern about political instability are also liable to make it difficult for the kingdom to recruit foreign capital, which it needs for its ambitious plans and in order to deter potential investors.

In response to the situation in the kingdom, and against the backdrop of the unrest among the Shiite minority in the kingdom, a campaign was resumed in the Saudi social networks in September 2017 that urged citizens to come out and protest. That same month, clerics, intellectuals, and journalists were arrested for criticizing bin Salman's economic policy, Riyadh's conduct during the crisis with Qatar (which widened the rift between the Gulf states and did not trigger any change in Qatar's policy), and the war in Yemen started by MBS, which also appears to be far from resolution. MBS's assertive conduct, after years of Saudi Arabia being known for its policy of restraint and caution, has also aroused concern among Western intelligence agencies in recent years, due to the risks that it poses, including to the kingdom's stability.

MBS, who has earned public support from President Trump, is steering Saudi Arabia toward a government in which all power is concentrated in the hands of a sole ruler. The era characterized by a division of power, compromise, and demonstrations of solidarity among the princes, all of which contributed to the kingdom's stability, appears to be coming to an end. To a great extent, the Saudi government has become a one-man show that has not yet scored significant achievements, and focuses, rather, on amassing power and status. MBS, who seeks to institute necessary changes in all spheres of life in the kingdom – albeit in an accelerated and coercive manner – is severing himself from the tradition of collective decision-making in order to achieve this goal and is clashing, *inter alia*, with the religious establishment and with the economic and social elites, when it is not at all clear whether they will accede to his authority. The outcome of this process remains unclear.

Saudi Arabia has benefitted from relative stability over the last eight years, since the outbreak of the regional upheaval, even if it seemed at times that its power and influence

were overestimated. Today, the kingdom is challenged in nearly every dimension. Therefore, the magnitude of the potential external repercussions of the current crisis must be examined: will the political upheaval in Saudi Arabia be perceived by its enemies as a window of opportunity to intensify the pressure? Will Mohammed bin Salman end up the undisputed ruler of the kingdom, or will the kingdom be facing an era of instability, whose outcome is unpredictable? Strategists and analysts in countries affected by the standing of the Saudi kingdom, including Israel, should increase their monitoring of the kingdom's stability and prepare emergency plans in the event of destabilization.