Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman: Between Transformation and Confrontation?
Brandon Friedman

Saudi Arabia has been at the center of a firestorm of events during the past month. These developments have raised acute questions about the nature of Saudi behavior. Alarmists have suggested a “regional war” was imminent, while other observers were concerned that the Saudi crown prince was needlessly destabilizing the kingdom to centralize power. Bridging these arguments, Dov Zakheim noted that the consensus in Washington earlier in the month was that 32-year old Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) was consolidating his domestic power in order to be in a stronger position to confront Iran.

On November 4, the crown prince authorized a wave of anti-corruption arrests of senior Saudi princes that sent shockwaves through the kingdom. On the same day, he met Lebanese Prime Minister Sa’ud Hariri, who then abruptly announced his resignation as head of the Lebanese government. The reason Hariri gave during his televised address was Iran’s interference in Lebanon. Later that evening, Houthi rebels in Yemen, against whom the Saudis have waged a brutal war since April 2015, fired a missile at King Khalid International Airport, 20 kilometers north of Riyadh. The Saudis accused Iran of being behind the missile attack, which Iran denied, and the incident led to an escalating war of words

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3 Dov Zakheim, “Jared Kushner, Mohammed bin Salman, and Benjamin Netanyahu Are Up to Something,” Foreign Policy.com, November 7, 2017.
between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In what many took as a Saudi effort to avoid another full-blown crisis, Hariri then returned to Lebanon and announced he was suspending his resignation.

MbS's anti-corruption campaign has been overwhelmingly viewed as a cynical power-grab designed to neutralize his rivals. The crown prince, they argue, is borrowing from Chinese President Xi Jinping's playbook. Among the senior Saudi princes and former government ministers charged with corruption were Prince Mit'eb bin 'Abdullah and Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal. Prince Mit'eb was the head of Saudi National Guard (SANG) and the son of the late King 'Abdullah (d. 2015). Prince Al-Waleed is one of the wealthiest men in the world, and a major shareholder in a number of internationally traded public companies. Khalid al-Tuwajri, who ran the royal court under the late King 'Abdullah, was also arrested, as was Ibrahim al-Assaf, who was the Saudi finance minister for 20 years.

Activist opponents of the kingdom similarly claim the arrests were intended to silence internal dissent and preempt instability within the royal family. A common line of argument is that MbS wants to turn the Saudi government “into a one-man show” and is focused “on amassing power and status.” The Crown Prince, some say, is an overly ambitious young man, whose bid to seize power has led to reckless mistakes, like the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as part of the ongoing Saudi war, and the head-scratching Hariri resignation/recant episode.

Yet explaining bin Salman's actions exclusively as a means to confront Iran runs the risk of overlooking important long-term developments within the kingdom that MbS is seeking to address. The Saudi population has grown from 3.12 million in 1950 to 32.93 million (c.22.5 million citizens, 10.5 million expats) in 2017. The population is dominated by the Crown Prince's generation: an

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estimated 70 percent of the population is under 30 years old and 40 percent is under the age of 24.13 The kingdom is expected to add another 4.5 million working age Saudis by 2030, which would mean there would need to be three times as many new jobs created each year than the kingdom was able to create during the oil boom between 2003 and 2013.14

During the boom decade (2003-2013), real GDP in Saudi Arabia grew nearly three times faster than it did between 1993 and 2003 (6.1 versus 2.2 percent average growth per year).15 This enormous growth reduced the urgency to reform the system. But since 2013 the socio-economic challenges facing the kingdom have mushroomed. The Saudi government has spent more than $250 billion of the state’s $737 billion in cash reserves since August 2014.16 Declining oil revenues, depleted cash reserves, and a rapidly growing population have rendered the state-driven rentier economy unsustainable.17

MbS’s championing of urgent change is driven as much by an awareness of these facts as it is by personal ambition.18 Therefore, the anti-corruption arrests in early November were a message intended for the 70 percent of the Saudi population under the age of 30. He was signaling to them that the kingdom’s economy would no longer be the exclusive preserve of a small group of senior Saudi princes.19 Most view this argument cynically, at best characterizing it as royal populism.20 And at worst, suggesting it is a public relations stunt that is only intended to superficially boost the kingdom’s international image by paying lip-service to modernizing reforms that the kingdom will not implement.21 It may

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be cynical, to be sure, but only in the sense that MbS is trying to put the ruling Al Saʿud family's primacy on firmer ground.22

And it is more than just lip-service, for change is afoot in the kingdom.23 The crown prince does seem to be trying to reengineer the state order or social contract.24 As one Saudi businessman described it to the Guardian, “This is at least partly about creating citizens from subjects.”25 Another way of putting it would be to say that MbS is trying to nationalize the kingdom.

The nationalizing of Saudi Arabia is a response to the fraying state-order,26 which unfolded between 1990 and 2011. The Wahhabi religious establishment no longer dominates the religious sphere in the kingdom, and therefore the founding pact between the ‘ulama’ (Wahhabi religious leaders) and the umara’ (senior Saudi princes) can no longer fully guarantee the regime’s legitimacy and stability.

To be sure, the Wahhabi religious establishment is still a vital Al Saʿud ally, one that is an essential partner in shaping Saudi "nationness," but the nationalizing of Saudi Arabia is a political process that has emerged in response to two challenges facing the kingdom: (1) the Saudi monarchy's function as the carrier of message of Wahhabism has been under sustained attack by Sahwis, al-Qaʿida, and the Islamic State;27 and, (2) changes in the size and average age of the Saudi population, coupled with declining oil revenues, has meant that the Saudi state has to find an alternative social contract to replace the rentierism of Faysal's Order.28
These two challenges are not new, but three developments have triggered collective action from both state and society which have been characterized by a powerful expression of Saudi national identity: 29 (1) the outbreak in 2011 of the Arab Spring uprisings; (2) the sense of growing external threats from Iran and the Islamic State; and, (3) the new leadership of King Salman and his son Mohammed.

The nationalizing of Saudi politics represents the crown prince’s effort to reinvent the state order. 30 It is embodied in the Vision 2030 plan, announced in April 2016, to transform the Saudi Arabian economy from being predominantly state-driven to a largely market-driven one. 31 The plan indicates that the state is trying to reshape the identity of the core Saudi nation and mobilize it for the purpose of promoting its economic welfare, fostering a new form of socio-political solidarity, defending its borders, and re-legitimating the Al Sa’ud family’s political domination of the country.

Many observers question Saudi Arabia’s capacity to fully implement Vision 2030. However, the document also includes a section labeled “Taking Pride In Our National Identity,” which affirms a collective Saudi identity that includes Islam, but is not limited to it: “We take immense pride in the historical and cultural legacy of our Saudi, Arab, and Islamic heritage.” 32

The document also commits individual Saudis to taking personal responsibility for their futures, and in doing so delivers the implicit message that they are not to leave it in God’s hands. Notably, Vision 2030 does not distinguish between the responsibilities of the rulers versus those of the ruled, but instead refers, in the first-person plural, to a collective realization of a shared obligation to Saudi society: “As such, we will develop ourselves and will work to become independent and active members of society, developing new skills in the process.” Enjoining Saudis to become “independent” and “active” individuals are ideas rooted in modernist thought and constitutes a radical break from a system traditionally rooted in the Wahhabi creed and tribal collectivist norms. 33 At the same time, Vision 2030 also attempts to reassure the more conservative elements of Saudi society by promising that “This will all be achieved by adhering closely to Islamic principles, Arab values and our national traditions.” 34

32 Ibid, p. 17.
Nevertheless, even Islamic principles, which in Saudi Arabia have been bound to a Wahhabi interpretation since the eighteenth century, are being repositioned in line with MbS’s vision. On November 24, The New York Times published an effusive profile of bin Salman, in which the crown prince said that he was “restoring Islam [in Saudi Arabia] to its origins,” a period when, he argued, there were musical performances, mixing between men and women, and respect for Jews and Christians in Arabia. The article was harshly criticized by some for uncritically accepting the crown prince’s claims and for failing to holding him accountable for his failures to date. Abdallah al-Arian, a professor at Georgetown University in Qatar, expressed his cynicism about the MbS profile by posting links to more than 60 years of New York Times articles characterizing past Saudi kings as modernizing reformers. In essence, the critical backlash in response to the profile fundamentally questions whether the crown prince is in earnest, suggesting that bin Salman’s talking points were a common royal refrain throughout the twentieth century. As Algerian intellectual Kemal Daoud recently noted, while “reform in Saudi Arabia now seems necessary,” to many it remains, “at the same time, impossible.”

MbS appears to be counting on the combined power of youth and women to be his agents of change. Vision 2030 calls for increasing household spending on cultural and entertainment activities from 2.9 percent to 6 percent. An “entertainment city” is to be built south of Riyadh, which will include a theme park and a safari park. The technocrats explain this as part of a plan to foster local tourism in the kingdom, which they claim is a lucrative untapped market for economic growth. These developments, intentional or otherwise, have been contributing to a new cultural environment in the kingdom. Fahd al-Rasheed, a Saudi executive, noted, “We have become accustomed to the government leading from the top. But government acting alone cannot achieve this gargantuan undertaking. It requires the involvement and commitment of all - government, non-profits, civil society and, of course, the private sector.” Women have been the biggest beneficiaries of this new cultural environment. In June 2018,

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36 Abdallah Al-Arian, Twitter Post, November 24, 2017, 7:26am.
38 “Saudi tourism to reach $81 billion by 2026 driven by local tourist trips,” al-Arabiya, April 19, 2017.
women will have the right to drive for the first time in the kingdom's history.\textsuperscript{41} Vision 2030, which calls for raising the percentage of women in the work force from 22 percent to 30 percent, makes women’s participation in the economy an explicit point of emphasis.

During the past month, analysts have compared Mohammed bin Salman alternatively to Sultan Mehmed III of the Ottoman Empire (who assumed power in 1595), President Xi of China, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.\textsuperscript{42} Implicitly, these comparisons suggest that MbS’s reign will either be one of transformative success or of failure. The active pursuit of his agenda on all fronts simultaneously, both at home and abroad, certainly increases the degree of difficulty in achieving his aims. To be sure, MbS draws on the strong support from both China’s President Xi and U.S. President Trump.\textsuperscript{43} However, external support will not help if he does not have firm backing at home. Observers see immediate danger in MbS’s bold challenge to the opaque and brittle Saudi system, but perhaps the real risk lies elsewhere. Bin Salman declared that Vision 2030 will unlock the country's human potential, emphasizing that Saudi Arabia’s “real wealth lies in the ambition of our people and the potential of our younger generation. They are our nation’s pride and the architects of our future.”\textsuperscript{44} Therefore, one could argue that the broader risk to Saudi Arabia’s future lies in the big bet the crown prince is placing on his own people.

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\textsuperscript{44} “Saudi Vision 2030,” April 25, 2016, p. 7.
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