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Volume 11, Number 18 November 27, 2017

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman: Between Transformation and Confrontation?

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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,¹ while other observers were concerned that the Saudi crown prince was needlessly destabilizing the kingdom to centralize power.² 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.³

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'd Hariri, who then abruptly announced his resignation as head of the Lebanese government.⁴ The reason Hariri gave during his televised address was Iran's interference in Lebanon.⁵ 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.⁶ The Saudis accused Iran of being behind the missile attack, which Iran denied, and the incident led to an escalating war of words

¹ Abd al-Bari Atwan, “[On the Brink of War](#) [in Arabic],” *al-Ray al-Youm*, November 19, 2017.

² Amos Yadlin and Yoel Guzansky, “[Saudi Arabia in an Accelerated and Risky Process of Transformation](#),” INSS Insight No. 992, November 14, 2017; John Kemp, “[Saudi purge takes kingdom into unpredictable new era](#),” *Reuters*, November 6, 2017.

³ Dov Zakheim, “[Jared Kushner, Mohammed bin Salman, and Benjamin Netanyahu Are Up to Something](#),” *Foreign Policy.com*, November 7, 2017.

⁴ Samia Nakhoul, Laila Bassam, Tom Perry, “[How Saudi Arabia turned on Lebanon's Hariri](#),” *Reuters*, November 11, 2017.

⁵ Anne Barnard, “[Saad Hariri Quits as Lebanon Prime Minister, Blaming Iran](#),” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2017.

⁶ Naser Al Wasmi, “[Houthi attack on Riyadh highlights Yemen missile threat](#),” *The National*, November 5, 2017.

between Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁷ 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.⁸

MbS's anti-corruption campaign has been overwhelmingly viewed as a cynical power-grab designed to neutralize his rivals.⁹ The crown prince, they argue, is borrowing from Chinese President Xi Jinping's playbook.¹⁰ 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-Tuwaijri, 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.¹¹ 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."¹² 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

⁷ "[Saudi Arabia and Iran in a war of words](#)," *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2017; David D. Kirkpatrick, "[Saudi Arabia Charges Iran With 'Act of War', Raising Threat of Military Clash](#)," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2017.

⁸ Kareem Shaheen, "[Lebanese PM Saad Hariri suspends his resignation](#)," *The Guardian*, November 22, 2017; Louisa Loveluck, "[Lebanon's Prime Minister puts his resignation on hold](#)," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2017.

⁹ Bruce Riedel, "[High stakes as Saudi prince tries to remove opponents](#)," *al-Monitor*, November 5, 2017; Robin Wright, "[The Saudi Royal Purge – With Trump's Consent](#)," *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2017; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "[What the Hell Just Happened in Saudi Arabia?](#)," *Politico.com*, November 6, 2017.

¹⁰ David Ignatius, "The Saudi crown prince just made a very risky power play," *The Washington Post*, November 5, 2017; Ali Al Shihabi, [Twitter Post](#), November 6, 7:35 AM; Yaroslav Trofimov, "[In Saudi Purge, Echoes of Putin and Xi](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2017.

¹¹ Hala al-Dosari, "Silencing Dissent in Saudi Arabia," *Sada*, Carnegie International Endowment for Peace, November 7, 2017; Madawi al-Rasheed, "[The Night of the Long Knives in Saudi Arabia](#)," *The Middle East Eye*, November 7, 2017.

¹² Amos Yadlin and Yoel Guzansky, "[Saudi Arabia in an Accelerated and Risky Process of Transformation](#)," INSS Insight No. 992, November 14, 2017.

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

¹³ [“World Population Prospects: key findings & advance tables,”](#) United Nations, 2017 Revision.

¹⁴ [“Saudi Arabia Beyond Oil: The Investment and Productivity Transformation,”](#) McKinsey Global Institute, December 2015, p. 5.

¹⁵ John Kemp, [“Saudi Arabia’s dwindling oil revenues and the challenge of reform,”](#) *Reuters*, January 21, 2016.

¹⁶ Margherita Stancatti and Summer Said, [“Saudi Crackdown Targets Up to \\$800 billion in Assets,”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2017; Andrew Torchia, [“Saudi foreign reserves resume falling in July,”](#) *Reuters*, August 24, 2017.

¹⁷ [“Saudi Arabia Beyond Oil: The Investment and Productivity Transformation,”](#) McKinsey Global Institute, December 2015, p. 22; Paul Rivlin, [“The Saudi Predicament: Low Oil Prices and Strategic Threats,”](#) *Iqtisadi: Middle East Economy* 5: 11, November 30, 2015.

¹⁸ Alaa Sharine, Vivian Nereim, Donna Abu-Nasr, [“Saudi Arabia’s Great Makeover Can’t Afford to Fail This Time,”](#) *BloombergPolitics*, October 16, 2017; Peter Waldman, [“The \\$2 Trillion Project to Get Saudi Arabia’s Economy Off Oil,”](#) *BloombergBusinessWeek*, April 21, 2016.

¹⁹ Martin Chulov, [“‘This is a Revolution’: Saudis absorb crown prince’s rush to reform,”](#) *The Guardian*, November 7, 2017; Simeon Kerr, [“Saudi elite start handing over funds in corruption crackdown,”](#) *Financial Times*, November 24, 2017.

²⁰ Sohrab Ahmari, [“The Real Arab Spring,”](#) *Commentary*, November 6, 2017; Hussein Ibish, [“The Saudi Crown Prince Is Gambling Everything On Three Major Experiments,”](#) *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2017.

²¹ Rosie Bsheer, [“Don’t be fooled by the comforting rhetoric coming from Saudi Arabia’s crown prince,”](#) *Washington Post*, November 8, 2017; Simeon Kerr, [“Saudi Arabia redrafts crown prince’s transformation plan,”](#) *Financial Times*, September 7, 2017.

be cynical, to be sure, but only in the sense that MbS is trying to put the ruling Al Sa'ud 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 Sa'ud 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-Qa'ida*, 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

²² Simon Henderson, "[Meet the Next Generation of Saudi Rulers](#)," Foreignpolicy.com, November 10, 2017; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "[The Future Has Arrived for Mohammed bin Salman](#)," *The Atlantic*, November 9, 2017.

²³ Nathan Brown, "[The Remaking of the Saudi State](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 9, 2017.

²⁴ Faisal J. Abbas, "Saudi crown prince banking on younger generation to help reforms succeed," *The National*, November 7, 2017.

²⁵ Martin Chulov, "['This is a Revolution': Saudis absorb crown prince's rush to reform](#)," *The Guardian*, November 7, 2017.

²⁶ See: Joseph Kostiner and Joshua Teitelbaum, "State-Formation and the Saudi Monarchy," in Joseph Kostiner, ed., *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), pp. 131-150. See, also: Sarah Yizraeli, *Politics and Society in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

²⁷ See: Madawi Al Rasheed, *Muted Modernists* (London: Hurst, 2015); Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999). Also, see: Nibras Kazimi, "[Arriving at Singularity](#)," Talisman Gate, Again, July 7, 2017.

²⁸ Joseph Kostiner and Joshua Teitelbaum, "State-Formation and the Saudi Monarchy," in Joseph Kostiner, ed., *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), pp. 131-150

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-legitimizing 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

²⁹ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19-21.

³⁰ Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 11.

³¹ "[Saudi Vision 2030](#)," April 25, 2016.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³³ Hazim Saghie, "Individualism in the Arab Middle East: An Overview," in Hazim Saghie, ed., *The Predicament of the Individual in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), pp. 51-58.

³⁴ "[Saudi Vision 2030](#)," April 25, 2016, p. 72.

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.³⁵ The article was harshly criticized by some for uncritically accepting the crown prince's claims and for failing to hold 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.³⁶ 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."³⁷

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.³⁸ 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."³⁹ Women have been the biggest beneficiaries of this new cultural environment.⁴⁰ In June 2018,

³⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, "[Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last](#)," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2017.

³⁶ Abdallah Al-Arian, [Twitter Post](#), November 24, 2017, 7:26am.

³⁷ Kemal Daoud, "[If Saudi Arabia Reforms, What Happens to Islamists Elsewhere?](#)," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2017; See also, Madawi Al Rasheed, "[Can the Saudi Crown Prince Transform the Kingdom?](#)," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2017.

³⁸ "Saudi tourism to reach \$81 billion by 2026 driven by local tourist trips," *al-Arabiya*, April 19, 2017.

³⁹ Fahd al-Rasheed, "Vision 2030 and the future of business in Saudi Arabia," *al-Arabiya*, July 10, 2017.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Dickinson, "[Amid a Saudi Purge, Women Face the Test of a Lifetime](#)," *Foreignpolicy.com*, November 7, 2017.

women will have the right to drive for the first time in the kingdom's history.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.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.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."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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⁴¹ Stephane Lacroix, "[Saudi Arabia finally let women drive. Don't mistake it for democratic reform.](#)" *Washington Post*, October 5, 2017.

⁴² Ray Takeyh, "[Saudi Arabia's shaky experiment in modernization.](#)" CFR.org, November 8, 2017; Keith Zhai and David Tweed, "[In Saudi Crown Prince's Crackdown, Echoes of Xi's China.](#)" *BloombergPolitics*, November 8, 2017; Geoffrey Aronson, "[Saudi Heir to the Throne is Crushing His Competition.](#)" *The American Conservative*, November 7, 2017; Max Boot, "[Trump adds the Saudi crown prince to his list of favorite autocrats.](#)" *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2017.

⁴³ M.K. Bhadrakumar, "[China debunks theory that Saudi Arabia wants regional war.](#)" *Asia Times*, November 18, 2017; Dov Zakheim, "[Jared Kushner, Mohammed bin Salman, and Benjamin Netanyahu Are Up to Something.](#)" *Foreign Policy.com*, November 7, 2017.

⁴⁴ "[Saudi Vision 2030.](#)" April 25, 2016, p. 7.

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