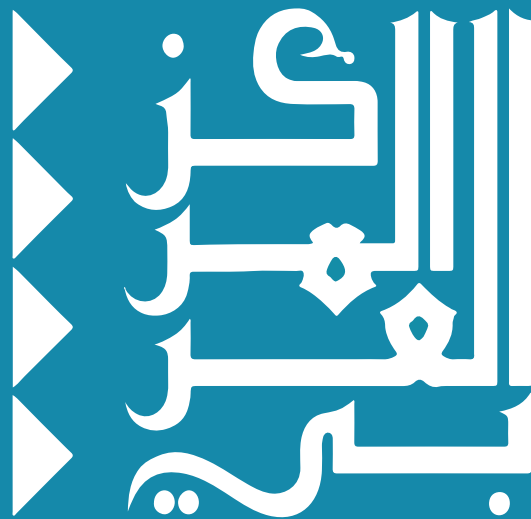


# Kingmaker: The Rise of Mohammed bin Salman

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On June 20, King Salman of Saudi Arabia restructured the line of succession to the Saudi throne. The king elevated his favorite son, Mohammed bin Salman, to Crown Prince, designating him the immediate successor to the throne. The adjustment was all the more stunning because deposed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was also removed as Minister of Interior, a position that earned him recognition and respect at home and abroad. The change in succession was fully expected—the octogenarian monarch has long looked to his son to inherit the role—but it concludes the consolidation of power by the 31-year-old bin Salman since he was named Deputy Crown Prince in 2015.

With a younger, comparatively more liberal bin Salman now poised to exert more influence, many questions about the implications of this move arise. First, what will the effects be on the very delicate balance of Saudi domestic politics? More uncertain, though, are the implications for Saudi foreign policy in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia is engulfed in an intractable war in Yemen and is in the midst of a vicious campaign alongside other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members targeting Qatar. The Crown Prince has displayed increasing hostility toward Saudi Arabia's biggest rival, Iran, and his ascension raises concerns about a potential confrontation between the two Gulf opponents. Lastly, with the White House and State Department on different wavelengths regarding GCC allies, it is important to consider how the Saudi reshuffle will affect US-Saudi relations.

## Internal Saudi Politics

Saudi Arabia's domestic political dynamics of succession is a complicated affair, with royal family members constantly jockeying for power. Since King Salman rose to the throne in 2015, he has gradually disrupted the delicate balance between familial factions in the House of Saud, increasing tensions and rivalry within the royal family. For instance, after becoming king, Salman removed the sitting Crown Prince, Muqrin, from power and replaced him with Mohammed bin Nayef, the same heir he replaced with his son two years later on June 21.

In addition to internal power struggles, Saudi regional policy has greatly shaped tensions in the royal family. Many factions within the family have laid the blame for the disastrous war taking place in Yemen at the feet of Mohammed bin Salman, who as Minister of Defense is known to have spearheaded the military campaign against the poorest country in the region. The war in Yemen is at a deadlock and the Saudi reputation continues to be sullied internationally for the humanitarian crisis it created, while bin Salman has no discernible exit strategy.

Strategically, however, internal affairs could be affected to a greater degree. The deposed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef oversaw the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for internal security and counterterrorism efforts within the kingdom and beyond. During his tenure, Mohammed bin Nayef was universally viewed as capable of providing stability and security—so much so that the United States viewed him personally as the premier ally in the

fight against terrorism in the Arabian Peninsula. He was considered a respectable leader, and survived four assassination attempts believed to be due to his work in counterterrorism. In response, as Deputy Crown Prince and defense minister, Mohammed bin Salman initiated the creation of a National Security Center, thus consolidating his powers even over internal security matters and sidelining then Interior Minister and Crown Prince bin Nayef. Now as Crown Prince, and while he still does not officially oversee the interior portfolio, bin Salman will be tasked with managing several, often competing pillars in Saudi society. For example, if any of his more liberal policy proposals upset the ultraconservative factions of Saudi leadership and society, it will be crucial for the young Crown Prince to avoid any backlash that could jeopardize the security of the kingdom.

### **Regional Politics**

On the regional level, Mohammed bin Salman has overseen Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Yemen war as Minister of Defense since King Salman ascended the Saudi throne. However, the war is only more perilous now that bin Salman is Crown Prince. It is unclear how he will aim to resolve the fighting, especially since the heightened humanitarian crisis in Yemen is tarnishing the country's reputation abroad. The Crown Prince's hawkish history might indicate a continuing aggressive approach to regional policies and particularly to matters involving Iranian expansionism. However, escalating the fighting in Yemen with overwhelming Saudi military power would likely only worsen

conditions at a time when even its US ally is wary of providing additional weapons for the war.

Mohammed bin Salman is also partly responsible for another Saudi crisis. The GCC rift with the Qatari government is driven by the young Saudi Crown Prince and his Emirati counterpart, Mohammed bin Zayed. In the ongoing campaign and blockade against Qatar, bin Salman will determine, to a large extent, the course of the crisis. Bin Salman could choose to maintain the current siege and allow Qatar to suffer and eventually succumb to Saudi and Emirati demands. Some observers even suggest that Mohammed bin Salman could be moved to undertake military action. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have held a border dispute and it is an open secret that the Saudis would like regime change in Qatar. Perhaps the hawkish bin Salman could turn to the military to achieve such changes. As for Qatar, it remains vulnerable to the whims of its bigger neighbor. The Qatari government always preferred Mohammed bin Nayef as heir to the throne, and now that the more aggressive Mohammed is Crown Prince, the Qataris may have to placate the Saudis.

Perhaps the biggest question regarding Mohammed bin Salman's ascension revolves around Saudi-Iranian relations. No Saudi ruler has been friendly with the Islamic Republic over the last few decades, but bin Salman has made a special reputation for himself through his belligerent rhetoric towards Iran. It is conceivable—based on his track record of aggressive adventurism in Yemen—that

Mohammed bin Salman could ramp up Saudi military activities in the region to counter Iranian actions. Tensions are already high between the two powers and many fear that the chances of the two countries clashing is only heightened by bin Salman's appointment to such a powerful role. For Iran's part, it called the restructuring a "soft coup" by the Saudi government.

### **US-Saudi Relations**

When Saudi Arabia sent an envoy to Washington to greet the new American president in March 2017, the youthful Mohammed bin Salman was the face of the welcoming party. Aside from flattering President Donald Trump, bin Salman forged a strong personal relationship with another powerful thirty-something in Jared Kushner. Mohammed bin Salman's influence has already been observed with President Trump's visit to Riyadh for his first trip abroad, which bin Salman and Kushner organized in person, and the ensuing public support the kingdom has received from the US president.

However, the budding relationship will likely cool off as the Trump Administration faces investigations, controversies, and a failing policy agenda. For the Saudis, their interactions will likely be delegated back to the traditional custodian of US foreign policy: the Department of State. This might not bode well for Mohammed bin Salman because to career bureaucrats in Foggy Bottom—not to mention those in the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency—Mohammed bin

Nayef was the number one Saudi official to work with on national security issues. Mohammed bin Salman must earn the trust and respect of State Department officials who are critical of the siege of Qatar and, likely, his role in it.

There is even speculation that US preference for Mohammed bin Nayef contributed to his proverbial overthrow. The announcement by King Salman of appointing his son as Crown Prince came hours after the US Department of State—led by Tillerson's mediation efforts in the GCC crisis—expressed frustration with Saudi Arabia's failure to present Qatar its list of demands. King Salman was possibly offended by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's criticism of Saudi Arabia and elevated bin Salman to counter Tillerson's growing influence in foreign policy. Now, the new Crown Prince and future King, Mohammed bin Salman, will likely try to use his relationship with the White House to counter the State Department's pressure.

### **Conclusion**

The sudden—albeit predictable—change in succession in Saudi Arabia spells danger for stability and security in the Arabian Gulf and the broader Middle East. While it is too soon to know the implications of Mohammed bin Salman's ascension to Crown Prince, serious questions have arisen regarding internal stability, the future of Saudi interventions in Yemen and Qatar, and potential confrontations with Iran. Although the Trump Administration seems to favor the young prince, it remains to

be seen whether the Washington establishment will trust him like it did Mohammed bin Nayef.

While Mohammed bin Salman has been consolidating his power and gaining influence since becoming Deputy Crown Prince in 2015, the significance of this move lies ahead. Now, the young aggressive Mohammed bin Salman

will shape Saudi policy for decades to come as Crown Prince and later as King. Will he continue his hawkish approach or adopt more cautious and conventional policies in an already unstable region?

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