

# Mohammed bin Salman's Elevation and the Way Forward

Imad K. Harb

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Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud went on vacation in Morocco on July 24 and left his 31-year old son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), in charge of running the affairs of the Kingdom. This mission will test the abilities and aptitude of the new crown prince for managing—even it were for a short month—the intricacies of a political system facing the challenges of domestic concerns and regional and international affairs. This interregnum will probably give Saudi Arabians, fellow Gulf residents, other Arabs, and the world at large an opportunity to gauge how he handles the pressures of rule. More importantly, it will shed light on how he will avoid the pitfalls of absolute power.

Still, with King Salman reportedly suffering from health problems, Prince Mohammed may now be at the cusp of taking over a kingdom where 51 percent of the population is under 25 and the economy relies heavily on hydrocarbon receipts. Saudi Arabia is also in its third year of a stalemated war in Yemen, remains locked in a dispute with Qatar, and risks losing a coveted leadership position in the Arab world. Indeed, Prince Mohammed will soon find himself—at a relatively early age—in charge of a kingdom fraught with problems emanating from controversial decisions and unpreparedness for the contingencies of political, economic, and social modernization. The responsibilities he assumed since first coming onto the scene, after his father became crown prince in 2012, have not been enough to prepare him for the myriad challenges ahead.

### **The Way Here**

For at least a month before his departure to Morocco, King Salman ordered essential leadership changes in the country, beginning with the June 21 dismissal of his nephew, former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (MbN) and the appointment of his own son, Mohammed, to the post. The king also stripped bin Nayef of his job as Minister of the Interior and chief counterterrorism official, and appointed MbN's inexperienced nephew, Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef, as his replacement. As the new crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman retained both of his posts as Minister of Defense and president of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, which oversees economic change in the country. He is in charge of the kingdom's ambitious "Vision 2030" plan to revamp the economy and lessen its reliance on the hydrocarbon sector.

King Salman also reorganized security institutions in the Kingdom in such a fashion as to increase his and his son's control over most centers of power. In a move set to consolidate counterterrorism activities and domestic intelligence, he established a new agency, the Presidency of State Security, to handle much of the Ministry of the Interior's mission—which under bin Nayef was the fulcrum of all security activities. The new agency will be headed by an old hand at the ministry, General Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al-Howairini, and will incorporate its departments of investigations, special security and emergency forces, security aviation, technical affairs, and the national

information center. Finally, in addition to increasing the number of Mohammed bin Salman's assistants, the king also dismissed the chief of the royal guard, General Hamad al-Awhaly, and appointed General Suheil al-Mutiri in his place.

Interestingly, King Salman left the leadership of the Saudi Arabian National Guard intact. Headed by his nephew Prince Miteb bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, the National Guard is one of the royal family's best institutional links to powerful tribal formations in the Kingdom that helped the Al Saud establish the modern state in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is an auxiliary military force with social services, weaponry, and training. Prince Miteb was appointed Minister of the National Guard by his late father, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, in 2013 and was retained in his post when King Salman ascended to the throne in January 2015. He probably represents a challenge to Mohammed bin Salman's rise. Indeed, the possibility of stripping him of his power base at the same time King Salman removed Mohammed bin Nayef may have been too much at that time, although there is no telling what the future may hold.

As heir apparent and an ambitious young crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman will have several issues to confront as soon as he assumes power as king. There is no indication as to whom he may choose for a crown prince, since his father did not appoint someone to his Deputy Crown Prince position. But there should be no doubt that he will choose one who

would not be a threat within the royal family and who will serve him obediently. MbS is also sure to face a backlash over the social and economic repercussions engendered by "Vision 2030." It is possible that religious authorities may now want to hedge their bets and not appear too opposed to bin Salman's social agenda, and Saudi citizens affected by economic changes may temporarily understand the necessity for reform. Just as importantly, Mohammed bin Salman will most assuredly grapple with thorny issues in the regional and international arenas that will test his mettle, but he has to start by reestablishing Saudi Arabia's reputation as a stable country despite the appearances of instability.

### **Restoring the Reputation of Stability**

The drastic measures King Salman instituted in the security realm were first and foremost intended to ease his son's ascension to the throne. The king's decision to eviscerate the Ministry of the Interior cannot be seen except through the lens of stripping Mohammed bin Nayef's power base of effectual influence. Within the structure of power centers that constitute the rule of the Al Saud, the ministry was MbN's--and before him his father's, the late Nayef bin Abdulaziz--bailiwick and became the central domestic security organization. His ouster as Minister of the Interior, together with revoking his position as crown prince, are bound to anger many in the ministry and its affiliates. Thus Mohammed bin Salman's very important mission now is to gain the loyalty of the security constituency in charge of defending the realm from extremists and

terrorists, which bin Nayef had succeeded in neutralizing. This is a top priority as the kingdom's stability faces renewed challenges from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the so-called Islamic State, and Yemen, to name only a few.

Most dangerous in this regard, however, are the widely-publicized stories about the pressure on Mohammed bin Nayef to abdicate his position as crown prince because of a supposed drug addiction problem. Despite media reports about a smooth transition and public appearances of amity—with MbS and MbN exchanging pleasantries and the latter's pledge of allegiance—other reports from inside the Kingdom paint a picture of coercion and intrigue. As for MbN's alleged drug problem, the story was found to have been concocted by an ally of bin Salman in the royal court, Saud al-Qahtani. What is even worse are reports that Mohammed bin Nayef has actually been placed under house arrest and his guards replaced, eliciting outrage privately from American officials who have previously worked with him. Indeed, this report has prompted Human Rights Watch to petition Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir for news of MbN's confinement. Such treatment of a Saudi royal is conducive neither to a stable political system nor to an ascending young crown prince.

### **The GCC Crisis**

Another aspect of Mohammed bin Salman's mission to restore Saudi Arabia's reputation and position in the Gulf and the wider Middle East is to work diligently to end the Gulf crisis

with Qatar. First, Mohammed bin Salman must come clean regarding the United Arab Emirates' hacking of Qatari sites and dissemination of false information attributed to the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. If MbS knew beforehand that this was planned, his credibility regarding the ongoing Gulf crisis and other affairs will surely suffer. If he did not, he would do well for his country and future rule to admit to a serious mistake. Developments since the end of May—when the Kingdom, along with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt began their anti-Qatar campaign—have proven that the crisis was a fiasco, at least in public relations terms. Qatar, on the other hand, has for all intents and purposes succeeded in overcoming the effects of the Saudi-led blockade and has garnered Arab and international sympathy and support for the way it has handled the crisis. In the meantime, the four-state bloc continues to sink deeper in the hole it dug by insisting on unachievable demands from Qatar, in the process making it harder and costlier to retreat.

In addition to the public relations problem precipitated by Saudi Arabia and its cohorts, the current impasse threatens the security of the entire Gulf Cooperation Council, as an alliance and as a collective of individual states with common interests. Indeed, the crisis arguably represents Saudi Arabia's most urgent external challenge because of its leading role in the GCC's institutions and endeavors.

In strategic terms, the situation in the Gulf is pushing the GCC toward a colossal failure that

its members may not be able to prevent or reverse. If the original crisis--now proven concocted--was partly caused by worries about the dangers posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, how can its creators ensure GCC security and unity without the council's collective efforts, including Qatar's? How will GCC defense be assured without assistance from Qatar's sophisticated missile systems, which could help prevent feared Iranian ballistic missiles from reaching Saudi Arabian, Emirati, and Bahraini shores, economic installations, and population centers? Equally important, how can Kuwait and Oman now trust that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would not resort to pressuring them--to the point of imposing blockades--to force them to adhere to their policies? Indeed, what is the future of the GCC now that fear, intimidation, and outright threats have become tools in relations between supposedly sister states?

This is why Saudi Arabia has the responsibility--as the most powerful among GCC states and potentially the most harmed by the crisis--to come clean. Statesmanship is the ability to find compromise despite vastly divergent positions, especially when vital interests are affected. It is also admitting to a mistake. As Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and thus the traditional possessor of moral authority, King Salman would do well to arrest any further deterioration of the situation and to declare an end to the crisis. If he becomes incapacitated, it behooves Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to do the same, lest the continuing crisis

risk more damage to the kingdom's reputation and national interests.

Unfortunately, since 2015 Prince Mohammed has shown a dangerous degree of overconfidence in domestic and regional affairs in a country steeped in tradition and reluctant to conduct an aggressive foreign policy. It could be argued that he did not know about the UAE's hacking plan and believed the accusations against Qatar's Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad. But if this is true, it follows that he should end his association with the scheme, now that Abu Dhabi's involvement has been made public. However, he continues to sanction the ongoing escalation, which paints him as guilty of participating in a nefarious plan that, in the end, will likely harm his country irreparably. The latest revelations that UAE diplomats had actually lobbied the Obama Administration in 2011 and 2012 to host a Taliban Movement office in their country, instead of in Qatar, points to Abu Dhabi's double-dealing on accusing Doha of supporting terrorism--an essential contention in the current GCC crisis. In fact, given such uncertainty about their main ally, Saudi Arabia's leaders should reevaluate their position on the whole affair.

Prince Mohammed can begin modestly by cancelling the anti-Qatar advertisements in the United States, for instance, or informing Foreign Minister al-Jubeir to tame his rhetoric toward Doha--a recent example of which is his announcement that Qatar's call on the United Nations to help in easing Qatari pilgrims' visits to the Muslim holy places was a "declaration of

war.” More importantly, MbS could give more consideration to the Kuwaiti mediation effort, assisted and encouraged as it is by Turkey, Germany, France, the United States, and the United Nations, among others. The last iteration of Kuwait’s effort was stalled by the Saudi-led entente’s rejection of Qatar’s insistence on its sovereignty. Even US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s intervention in mid-July was aborted despite Qatar’s signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States about fighting the financing of terrorism. Prince Mohammed could also simply lift the blockade that the bloc imposes on Qatar.

### **The War in Yemen**

Another mission MbS could undertake is to help in ending the ongoing carnage in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia’s involvement has entered its third year. Some accomplishments have been achieved since March 2015: southern Yemen appears to have been saved from the Houthi-Saleh alliance; the Saudi-led Arab coalition has driven up the Yemeni Red Sea coast toward al-Hodeida seaport; and the city of Taiz has been saved from occupation by the insurgents. But the victories have been overshadowed by serious problems that are likely to stretch the Yemeni war in a Sisyphean fashion that does not advance anyone’s interests.

Important examples of serious problems throw the Yemen war into relief. Sanaa remains in the hands of insurgents who have set up their own institutions that they consider to be more representative of their interests. Reports indicate that the UAE, the premier ally in

Yemen, is working to replace Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who is in exile in none other than Riyadh itself. The war effort costs Saudi Arabia \$700 million a month at a time of lower energy prices and needed economic restructuring, issues that are forcing painful cutbacks in services and social support in the Kingdom. Attacks by Houthi and Saleh forces have inflicted major damage on Saudi Arabian villages close to the Yemeni border. Even the holy city of Mecca has been attacked by Houthi missiles.

But it is the human costs of the war in Yemen that are hurting Saudi Arabia’s reputation in the region and prestige around the world. Riyadh is being accused of war crimes, despite the purported efforts by Saudi military officials to spare civilians. About 10,000 Yemenis have been killed by military operations. Nearly 2,000 have died from cholera and about 419,000 have been infected since April 27; the number is increasing by about 5,000 every day. Only 45 percent of hospitals in the country are operational. Other reports state that “nearly 19 million people require assistance and 6.8 million are at risk of famine,” and that a child “dies every 10 minutes from the combined effects of hunger and lack of medical facilities.” A United Nations panel accused Saudi Arabia of responsibility for an attack on a boat off the Yemen mainland in March in which 42 Somalis were killed and 34 others were wounded.

It is the combination of the stalemate in Yemen and the human cost of the war that should invite needed introspection in Saudi Arabia, primarily

among advocates of the intervention, and especially by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. It may be justified to advocate action to safeguard the kingdom's security because of neighboring Yemen's instability; but if the costs of such a step are financially and morally high, perspectives need reevaluation. And if Prince Mohammed pushed in early 2015 for a full-scale Saudi Arabian intervention on the grounds that it might be a walkover, it behooves him and Saudi strategists to do a thorough reassessment and end the war as quickly as possible. The Kingdom and its allies could also throw their weight behind the peace mission of UN Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmad. Needless to say, the Houthis and their allies in Yemen, for their part, must also be engaged in working diligently toward a political solution.

### **Relations with the United States**

Much has been said about the flourishing relationship between Prince Mohammed and the Trump Administration. It is easy to speculate that this relationship may have dovetailed with the early position taken by President Donald Trump regarding the current GCC crisis, when he agreed with the hardline anti-Qatar rhetoric from the Saudi-led coalition and took credit for the its severance of diplomatic relations with Doha. But developments in the American position have shown a retreat by the White House and the advancement of cooler and more experienced policy-makers at the Departments of State and Defense. Indeed, it has become quite clear that the political and military institutional relationship with Qatar and other members of

the GCC has triumphed over the preferences of the occupant of the Oval Office, and that the American position is one of neutrality while it affirms GCC unity and reconciliation.

As Qatar continues to defend its independent decision-making and the anti-Doha entente insists on the blockade, the Gulf crisis is in a stalemate. In this context, it is necessary for Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to reevaluate his relationship with the American administration, with collective GCC interests in mind. Importantly, MbS would do well to pay attention to numerous investigations into the Trump Administration's principals' relations with Russia during the 2016 presidential campaign. While the investigators' work remains mainly shielded from the public, daily press reports shed a very worrisome light on what have become accusations of outright collusion with Moscow to influence the elections. There is no telling where these accusations will lead, but there is enough evidence to prompt a necessary distancing by Saudi Arabia, its allies, and Qatar from Washington until the dust settles, at least partly.

### **Conclusion**

The worrisome revelations about the details of Prince Mohammed bin Salman's elevation, the public relations fiasco of the Gulf crisis, the uncanny hubris describing the UAE's double-dealing, the tragic developments in Yemen, and the uncertain future of the Trump Administration give reason for a needed pause by Saudi Arabia and its would-be king. As the Kingdom navigates very difficult economic,

political, and social waters on its course to modernization and reform, it needs a steady hand unencumbered by false pride. The time is now for leadership, statesmanship, and compromise. In his father's absence and after the king's return, Prince Mohammed would do well to change the course of his country in a reasoned direction, one that preserves its national interests and helps to safeguard those of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Slated to become king upon his father's passing, Mohammed bin Salman would likely be the

Third Saudi State's (established in 1932) longest reigning monarch. He is sure to be called upon to play a pivotal role in the Gulf and the Arab world at a time of unprecedented regional instability. The bleeding ulcers of Palestinian dispossession and Syrian carnage, the uncertainty emanating from such places as Yemen, Iraq, and Libya, and the dangers germane to sectarianism in the Middle East will require a stable Saudi Arabia that is capable of addressing and resolving the Arab world's multifarious problems.