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# Profile of a Prince

Promise and Peril in Mohammed bin Salman's *Vision 2030*

Karen Elliott House



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Cover photo: Fans react as they watch the “Greatest Royal Rumble” event in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Friday, April 27, 2018. (AP Photo/Amr Nabil)

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# Profile of a Prince

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## About the Author

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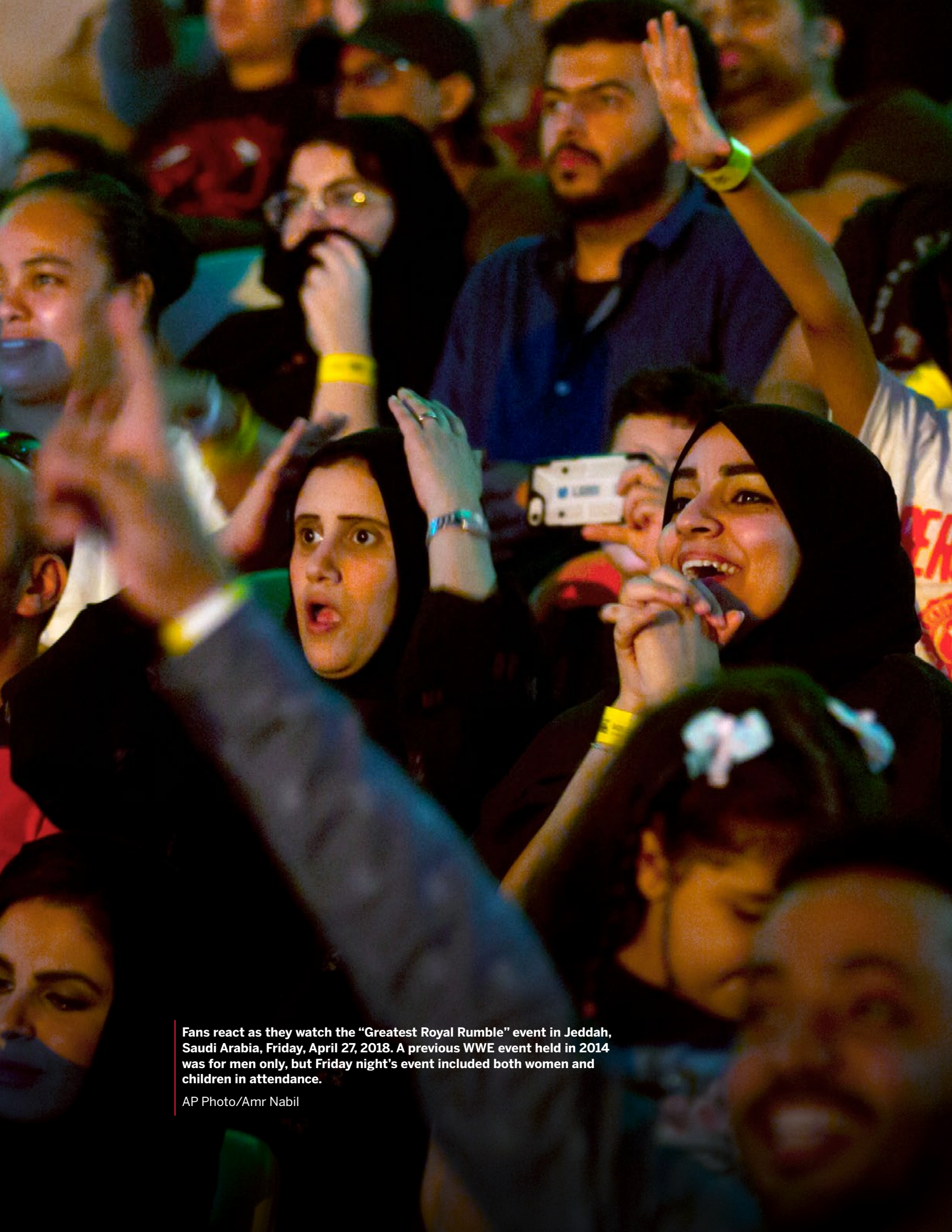
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The author, left, poses with a falcon and a Saudi boy in Al-`Ula, January 2019.

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Fans react as they watch the "Greatest Royal Rumble" event in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Friday, April 27, 2018. A previous WWE event held in 2014 was for men only, but Friday night's event included both women and children in attendance.

AP Photo/Amr Nabil



## Introduction

Saudi Arabia and its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, are beset on all sides by problems. Many of the current challenges are of the Crown Prince's own making. His international reputation is stained by the murder of Saudi columnist Jamal Khashoggi. Arguably, the Kingdom's standing, at least in the West, is at the lowest point since September 11, 2001, when 15 of the 19 hijackers that destroyed the World Trade Center and killed thousands were Saudi nationals.

The U.S. Congress is increasingly hostile, although President Donald Trump continues to voice support for the Crown Prince. Mohammed bin Salman's war in Yemen is stalemated and growing civilian casualties there are another source of tension with many Western countries he needs for investment in the Kingdom. His feud with Turkey grows deeper and his cold war with Iran has failed to halt its rising influence across the Middle East.

At home his Vision 2030 plan to create a vibrant private sector that can wean the Kingdom off its overwhelming dependence on oil revenue is stalled. Over the past two years, consumer spending has tanked as higher prices for gasoline, water and electricity caused citizens to nervously hold on to their sparse pocketbooks. The private sector, long dependent on cheap foreign labor—9 of 10 workers in the private sector are foreigners—has seen an exodus of some 1.1 million expatriate laborers over the past two years.<sup>1</sup> The exodus has further drained consumer spending from the Saudi economy. As a result, the private sector isn't leading but loudly calling for a lifeline.

In response, the Crown Prince is doing what Saudi governments have always done in the face of citizens' grumbling—raising government spending. Despite a pledge to wean citizens off government handouts,

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<sup>1</sup> "Saudi Arabia encouraged foreign workers to leave-and is struggling after so many did," Kareem Fahim, Washington Post, February 2, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2019/02/01/07e34e12-a548-11e8-ad6f-080770dcddc2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2019/02/01/07e34e12-a548-11e8-ad6f-080770dcddc2_story.html).

the 2019 Saudi budget is the largest in history.<sup>2</sup> Higher oil prices, now around \$67 a barrel, have given the government the capability to raise spending without wrecking its pledge to balance the budget by 2023. That oil price is expected to hold for at least the first half of 2019 because U.S. sanctions on Iran and Venezuela are cutting their oil exports and Saudi Arabia and Russia have agreed voluntarily to curb their production to prop up prices.

As transformation enters its fourth year, the positive changes aren't economic and surely not political. The Crown Prince has imposed a near total muzzle on any citizen comment, let alone criticism. Hundreds of high-profile Saudis are locked up, many of them denounced as traitors. Hundreds, possibly more, are barred from leaving the Kingdom. Still others have quietly left with no plans to return, creating the rudiments of an overseas Saudi dissident community. "We were hoping for a more balanced society, more rights," says a Saudi rights activist who has come under government pressure. "Instead what has happened is more repression, just with a different ideology."<sup>3</sup>

The government has sought to distract Saudis from both economic and political woes by opening up a wide variety of previously forbidden entertainment. That effort is accelerating. In addition to cinema, the Kingdom has offered car races, an international golf tournament and increasingly daring concert venues. In February, Mariah Carey, wearing a parade of formfitting dresses, performed before a raucous Jeddah crowd that paid from \$70 to \$500 for a ticket. (Such high-priced entertainment is beyond the means of most Saudis: The majority of Saudis work for the government and the average government salary is about \$3,000 a month (10,894 Saudi Riyals).<sup>4</sup>

While elite Saudis enjoy the new entertainment, it is sparking resentment among those who can't afford it. And the Kingdom's religious conservatives bitterly oppose such frivolity as distracting from devotion to *Allah*—but largely only behind closed doors. Still, the government seems confident enough of its control over the religious establishment that it is allowing its Potemkin parliament, the Majlis Ash Shura, comprised of 150 people

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2 Saudi Arabia 2019 Fiscal Budget, Jadwa Investment, December 19, 2018. <http://www.jadwa.com/en/researchsection/research/economic-research/budget-reports>.

3 Author interview with Saudi national on background only. June 27, 2018.

4 "Government spends SR 163 billion on salaries of civilian employees in 2017," Saudi Gazette. <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/525660/SAUDI-ARABIA/Govt-spends-SR163bn-on-salaries-of-civilian-employees-in-2017>.

appointed by the King, to debate the issue of requiring shops to close multiple times a day for 45 minutes to observe Muslim prayer times.<sup>5</sup> In a country where the religious police until three years ago stalked the streets with sticks to whip those who dared dally at locking their shop doors for prayer, formally ending this practice would clearly mark one more step on the Crown Prince's proclaimed road to a moderate, modernized Saudi Arabia.

Already in the past year more and more shops and restaurants are only pretending to observe the prayer stricture. Front doors are locked at the call to prayer but customers wishing to enter or exit may usually do so through a rear door. With religious police banned from arresting citizens, old rules increasingly are ignored.

This report, based on three prolonged trips to the Kingdom over the past year, the most recent in January 2019, will take a deep look at Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who dominates every aspect of foreign and domestic policy, to try to answer what lies behind his Mona Lisa smile. It will also examine the Kingdom's social progress, its economic stagnation and its growing political repression. Readers will have to evaluate for themselves whether the social progress he has offered Saudis in general—and women in particular—offset his autocratic tactics at home and abroad.

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5 "Saudi's Shoura Council could debate keeping shops open during prayer times" March 7, 2019. <https://gulfbusiness.com/saudis-shoura-council-debate-keeping-shops-open-prayer-times/>

# The Driven, Dictatorial Prince

Who is Mohammed bin Salman, the charismatic young prince playing the starring role in one of the world's most riveting dramas—his virtually solo effort to wrench Saudi Arabia's deeply conservative and long-closed society into the sunlight of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The drama is replete with victims and villains, royal relatives and loyal retainers, but it is above all a one-man show. The audience—some supporters, others offended and all captivated by the unfolding plot—are the 20 million long-silent Saudi citizens and the many abroad who will be impacted as the plotline plays out.

Mohammed bin Salman can be broadly defined by three qualities. First, a sense of self-confidence bordering on bravado. Second, a relentless energy almost unique in the modern history of this somnolent society that slept through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Third, political instincts that sometimes lead him wrong but nonetheless continue to guide him.

Saudi Arabia for half a century has been like a slow-motion silent movie with a cast of aged and often infirm royal rulers flickering across the screen. For the past three years, Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS as he is known, has transformed it into an IMAX thriller on fast forward. Whether this movie ends as a tragedy or a successful how-to documentary depends almost entirely on the young prince. Saudis have made a national pastime of probing to understand what lies behind his ubiquitous smiling young face plastered on billboards, buildings and in the foyers of every establishment, both public and private. The answer has enormous implications for not only Saudi Arabia but the world, especially the U.S., Saudi Arabia's longtime ally.

This portrait of a very visible but deeply secretive Crown Prince is based on conversations with close associates past and present, people who work for and around him, conversations with one of his brothers, and on five meetings over three years with the Crown Prince, who declines to speak for attribution. His determination to manage his image means almost no one speaks about him on the record.

MBS is the sixth son of current Saudi King Salman bin Abdul Aziz al Saud with whose support and in whose name, he wields virtually all levers of power. MBS, thus, is among the hundreds of grandsons of King Abdul Aziz, founder of this latest Saudi state in 1932, and the last Al Saud royal to enjoy the sort of one-man power now wielded by MBS.

For Saudi Arabia, this is both a time of sharp transition and of serious trouble. In April, the Kingdom will enter the fourth year since the Crown Prince unveiled his Vision 2030, an ambitious plan to wean the country off its overwhelming dependence on declining oil revenue and the Saudi people off their deep addiction to government handouts funded by that oil revenue. Toward that end, his vision calls for replacing a one-dimensional oil economy with a modern society, one where Saudis work in a revitalized private sector, not for the government. And, even more revolutionary, he envisions Saudis enjoying a social life inside their country that offers cinema, music and entertainment of all sorts, from theme parks to resort hotels on par with those in the West. He proposes a country where women drive and work without a male guardian's permission, and one where men and women can mix in public without fear of arrest by the Kingdom's meddling religious police, whom he has sidelined.

All of this is deeply at odds with the past half-century when Saudis were forced by a combination of royal and religious leaders to forego any earthly pleasure that might divert them from a rigid focus on obeying *Allah* in this life in order to secure paradise in the next.

Increasingly, ordinary Saudis are questioning whether the reforms will save or destroy their country. The government forecasts economic growth in 2019 to rise to 2.6% from 2018's anemic 2.3%, which followed a decline of .9% in 2017.<sup>6</sup> The International Monetary Fund, however, has lowered its forecast for Saudi GDP growth this year to 1.8 percent.<sup>7</sup> Too many Saudis continue to wait for the government to fix their economy rather than pitching in to participate in changing it. Some sit silently on the sidelines because they oppose

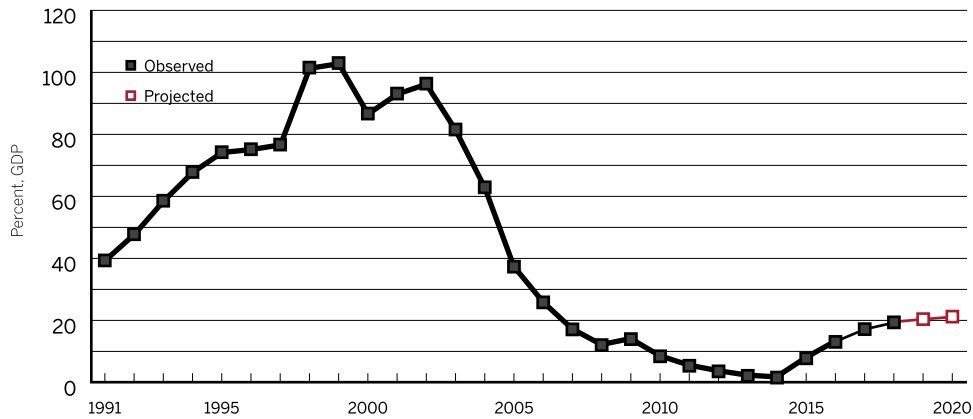
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6 Saudi Arabia's Fiscal 2019 Budget, Jadwa Investment, December 19, 2019. Page 8 and 10. <http://www.jadwa.com/en/researchsection/research/economic-research/budget-reports>.

7 World Economic Outlook Update January 2019. International Monetary Fund. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2019/01/11/weo-update-january-2019>.

the reform and hope their recalcitrance will soon sweep away Vision 2030 and restore the traditional ways of the old Saudi Arabia.

### Central Government Gross Domestic Debt as a percentage of GDP



Others watch from the sidelines, not so much out of opposition, as of habit. In a society where the social contract long has been the crown provides prosperity in exchange for citizen loyalty, many Saudis simply lack the initiative to think or act for themselves. There is a significant group of 30-something young Saudis who are gung-ho for reform and ready to pitch in. But far fewer have the education and experience to help drive economic reform. In short, MBS leads a society that is largely unwilling or unable to help him succeed.

This panoply of problems would deter or depress almost any leader; decidedly not Crown Prince Mohammed. His self-confidence remains unshaken; his energy is unflagging; and he continues to rely on his political instinct much like a man moving through a minefield. At times he races, at other times, he tiptoes, but he adamantly refuses to stop moving forward on his plan to remake Saudi Arabia despite foreign critics or domestic doubters.

Mohammed bin Salman is not a typical Saudi. Most Saudis seek to conform to societal norms and avoid standing out from the group. Whereas his uncles ruled the Kingdom through consultation and consensus among the senior sons after the death of their father King Abdul Aziz in 1953, this Crown Prince is determined to act unilaterally and with disregard for tradition. Where does a 33-year-old with only a decade of government experience and only four years of real power get this confidence?

## Youthful Resemblance to Founding King Abdul Aziz

From early childhood, Mohammed bin Salman was told he looked like his famous grandfather. King Abdul Aziz was only 27 when he conquered Riyadh in 1902 and waged a 30-year civil war to restore the Al Saud monarchy. (The family had lost power in 1891 when his uncles squabbled over who should be king.)<sup>8</sup> The young prince is said to have studied his grandfather in great detail, seeking to emulate his reputation for dealing cleverly with internal and external opponents, including with duplicity when necessary.

Both, for instance, have had to cajole and confront the religious authorities who have shared power with the Al Saud family since the founding of the first Saudi state in 1744.<sup>9</sup> One of King Abdul Aziz's religious scholars criticized his sovereign for vanity in the length of his thobe. To show deference to the sheikh, the king offered him a pair of scissors to cut the offending thobe to the appropriate length, demonstrating his submission to religious authority. Once the satisfied sheikh left, the annoyed king instructed his staff never to let the man into his sight again.<sup>10</sup>

For his part, MBS showed more courage than his grandfather in handling religious authorities. After decades of dominating the Saudi streets, forcing women to cover their faces and shun mixing with men, the religious police in 2016 were abruptly banned by MBS from arresting anyone for anything.<sup>11</sup> This was an affront to the Kingdom's senior religious scholars, or *ulema*, a sort of Saudi Supreme Court; it was akin to a U.S. president banning gun ownership despite Second Amendment protections. Saudi streets and restaurants today, only three years later, swarm with young men and women enjoying each other's company—and listening to once forbidden music available now in virtually every restaurant.

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8 Alexei Vassiliev, "The Disintegration of the Emirate of Riyadh and the Rise of Jabal Shammar," *The History of Saudi Arabia*, New York, New York; New York University Press, 2000. Pages 202-203.

9 Vassiliev, "Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his Teachings," *The History of Saudi Arabia*, pages 81-82.

10 Author interview with Adel al Jubair, 2006, in Riyadh.

11 "Saudi cabinet curbs powers of religious police," Reuters; April 13, 2016. <https://mobile.reuters.com/articleamp/idUSKCN0XA24Y>

Like his grandfather, having put the imams in their place, MBS feigns respect by occasionally visiting them at their homes, or being photographed with one or two of them, but has refused to reverse his decision.

Some of the Crown Prince's confidence seems to come simply from his success over the years at getting his way. From an early age, he went after what he wanted. The more often he got it, the more assured he became. His former British tutor recalls his 11-year-old charge mischievously borrowing walkie-talkies from palace security guards to make "cheeky remarks" about the tutor and disrupt classes for himself and his younger brothers.<sup>12</sup>

By all accounts, MBS, though an indulged child, felt he was second-tier compared to his royal relatives. His father, Prince Salman, divided his time between his first wife, Sultana, and her six children, and his third wife, Fahda, Prince Mohammed's mother who also bore six children. (A brief second marriage produced one son). MBS is said to have felt that his older siblings were more privileged. The first family, for instance, vacationed in summer at a palace in Marbella, Spain, while Prince Salman joined Mohammed's mother and his five brothers at a hotel in Barcelona. "He felt the need to strive for distinction from an early age," says an associate.

## Tragedy Offers MBS Opportunity

When tragedy struck the first family, Prince Mohammed found an opportunity to turn his father's affection into respect. Two of Prince Salman's older sons died of heart ailments within twelve months of each other in 2001 and 2002. His older surviving sons were busy with their growing families, but 17-year-old Prince Mohammed offered his grieving father constant companionship.

At that time, in 2002, with the late King Fahd near death and his Crown Prince, the future King Abdullah, running the country, hardly anyone would have forecast supreme power for Prince Salman, let alone his son. Several powerful older brothers were in line ahead of Salman, who was

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<sup>12</sup> "MBS: My strange experience of teaching the Saudi Crown Prince," Rachid Sekkai; BBC, December 9, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46437631>.

approaching 40 years as governor of Riyadh Province, the capital and the Kingdom's most powerful province. He also headed the Al Saud family Descendant's Council, established to reach consensus among the dozens of surviving brothers and to discipline royal family members to deter embarrassing conduct.

Young MBS began to stick to his father, soaking up how to deal with fractious tribal leaders, learning what princes were guilty of which indiscretions, sitting through the meetings his workaholic father had daily. All of this information later was put to use by the Crown Prince as he consolidated power against his royal relatives and subdued religious and tribal forces.

“He was always very close to our father,” says Khalid bin Salman, the Crown Prince's younger brother and the Kingdom's ambassador to Washington, D.C. before being named deputy defense minister in January. “He was always ambitious. He watched and listened to everything our father did.”<sup>13</sup>



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (L) meets with Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir (C) and Ambassador to the US, Prince Khalid bin Salman, upon his arrival in Riyadh on January 13, 2019 (Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AP)

In 2010, when this reporter interviewed Prince Salman, his tall, lanky son silently observed his father until Prince Salman said tribal tensions make democracy impossible in Saudi Arabia because every tribe would be a party and chaos would ensue. MBS agreed, observing that his maternal

13 Author interview with Prince Khalid at the Saudi Embassy in Washington D.C. May 2018.

grandfather had murdered his paternal grandfather's only full brother during tribal fighting in 1915.

Much of his high school and university education was interrupted by attending to his father. As a result, he lacked the teenage chums that help teach the give and take of friendship. "He didn't grow up like a normal teenager," says one Saudi official. "He didn't learn constraints from accommodating friends."

Indeed, the sense of being treated as an inferior royal seemed to grow. Graduating fourth in his class at King Saud University Law School brought a job in the prestigious Bureau of Experts, which serves as a center for research and legal advice to the cabinet. He began as a researcher. Offered a promotion, the prince was forbidden to accept by his uncle, King Abdullah, ostensibly to avoid the appearance of royal nepotism. A resentful MBS left the position to work for his father, then governor of Riyadh.

## Clashes with the late King Abdullah

At the same time, King Abdullah, seeking to rein in royal excess, declined to support his brother Salman as generously as had the late King Fahd. Prince Salman found himself selling land to fund his family, say his sons. To make matters worse, King Abdullah's royal court chief is said to have sometimes denied Prince Salman's request to use airplanes, forcing him and his son to scrounge planes from wealthier royal relatives and Saudi businessmen.

The Crown Prince tells associates his father's need for money led the young prince to launch several businesses to fund his family. "He had to figure a way to resolve this by his own self-reliance," confirms his brother, Khalid bin Salman. "It was one of the most significant moments of his life."<sup>14</sup> Prince Khalid indicates this is the origin of MBS' self-reliance mantra espoused for his countrymen in Vision 2030. (According to a *Wall Street Journal* investigation, MBS made money the way royals have for decades:

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14 Ibid

He created companies and then used royal influence to steer lucrative government contracts to those businesses.)<sup>15</sup>

This period of self-reliance—and resentment of King Abdullah and his wealthy sons—may help explain the Crown Prince’s decision a decade later to use his newfound power to settle scores with the late King Abdullah’s sons, who were among the first imprisoned at the Ritz Carlton in Riyadh in 2017. Prince Miteb, the eldest son and powerful head of the Saudi National Guard, was stripped of both his government position and, according to the government, of more than \$1 billion dollars.<sup>16</sup> Another son of the late king remains in prison.

As MBS’ confidence grew, he became even bolder. Upset with a judge for delaying issuance of a title for a piece of land MBS had been given, the impulsive prince sent the judge two bullets in an envelope. Refusing to be intimidated by the young prince, the judge informed King Abdullah, who warned his half-brother Salman, “Keep your son on a short leash.” The Crown Prince also has acknowledged in an interview with *Bloomberg* that the late king banned him from the Ministry of Defense, where his father had been made minister in 2011.<sup>17</sup>

Once again, MBS set out with confidence bordering on bravado to win the King’s approval. King Abdullah, elderly and unsuccessful with a gentle request to the late King Fahd’s favorite wife to vacate her palace, found an ally in MBS, apparently eager to diminish his sovereign’s displeasure. MBS is said to boldly have gone to Princess Al Jawhara’s home and told her the king wanted her out. When she dithered, he pointed to a bus of servant women in her driveway and told his aunt, “These women will help you pack. Tonight at 11 p.m. all services to this palace will end.” Princess Al Jawhara vacated her home.

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15 “I am the Mastermind: Mohammed bin Salman’s Guide to Getting Rich,” Justin Scheck and Bradley Hope; Wall Street Journal. May 16, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/i-am-the-mastermind-mohammed-bin-salmans-guide-to-getting-rich-1526487353>.

16 “Senior Saudi prince freed in \$1 billion settlement agreement—official,” by Saeed Azhar; Reuters. November 28, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests-miteb/senior-saudi-prince-freed-in-1-billion-settlement-agreement-official-idUSKBN1DS230>.

17 “The \$2 Trillion Project to Get Saudi Arabia’s Economy Off Oil,” by Peter Waldman, Bloomberg News, April 21, 2016. Page 9. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-04-21/the-2-trillion-project-to-get-saudi-arabia-s-economy-off-oil>.

MBS has told associates that unlike other royals, he refused to buckle under King Abdullah's rebukes. "Then the King decided to use me," he has explained. Indeed, King Abdullah did appoint MBS an adviser to his royal court. As he swore in MBS, King Abdullah said, "May Allah give you the ground you walk on." Some Saudis say the late king's remark was simply a gracious comment. Others say it was a sign of providence. Either way, it wasn't long after that King Abdullah lost two crown princes within eight months and Prince Salman was elevated to Crown Prince in 2012. At that moment, MBS is said to have realized he could one day be king.

Indeed, in less than two years, King Abdullah, 90, was dead and King Salman, 80, was Saudi Arabia's new ruler. Having honed his confidence through training with his father and triumphing in royal infighting, Prince Mohammed began to display not only confidence and courage, but also his prodigious energy.

# MBS Takes Charge of King Salman's Regime

On exactly the same day that the country observed a day of mourning for the late King Abdullah, Mohammed bin Salman—who wasn't yet either Crown Prince or Deputy Crown Prince— assembled four individuals to advise him on restructuring the Saudi government. (The four were Ibrahim Assaf, minister of finance, Khalid al Essa, chief of the royal court, Musaad bin Mohammed al Aiban, minister of state and Mohammed al Sheikh, head of the Saudi Capital Markets Authority.) Working from late afternoon until dawn, the five agreed to disband more than a dozen supreme councils operating under the late king and consolidate them into two powerful new bodies: one to manage the economy and the other to oversee security issues.

The following morning MBS, determined to lose no time, ordered the preparation of a royal decree for his father to sign and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, CEDA, and the Council of Political and Security Affairs, CPSA, were born. As a Pharaoh might say to Moses, “So let it be written. So let it be done.” In short order, the not-yet Crown Prince was named to chair first one, and later, both councils.<sup>18</sup>

“From the first twelve hours, (of King Salman's rule)” MBS said, “decisions were issued. In the first ten days, the entire government was restructured.”<sup>19</sup>

But he was far from finished making changes in his father's new government. Convinced that Saudi Arabia faced a bleak future as its population grew and oil revenues were failing to keep pace, MBS began driving the production of Vision 2030, a blueprint for transforming Saudi Arabia. He also lost little time reshaping his father's top royal team to pave the way for his own accession to power.

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18 Mohammed bin Salman was named to chair the Council of Economy and Development Affairs at its inaugural session February 15, 2015. He became chair of the Council of Political and Security Affairs June 21, 2017, when he was named Crown Prince succeeding his cousin, Mohammed bin Nayef.

19 “The \$2 Trillion Project to Get Saudi Arabia's Economy Off Oil,” Peter Waldman, Bloomberg News, 21 April, 2016. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-04-21/the-2-trillion-project-to-get-saudi-arabia-s-economy-off-oil>.

Within months, King Salman, in a break with tradition, fired his crown prince, Mugrin, whom King Abdullah had named deputy crown prince in an effort to block his brother Salman's ability to promote his son. With Mugrin gone, King Salman, 80, went to a new generation of Al Saud leaders: He elevated his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, 55, (known as MBN) to Crown Prince and appointed his 29-year-old son MBS as deputy crown prince. After two years, MBN was forced to resign after a night of isolated duress and replaced by MBS. Essentially, MBN served as the sorbet that prepared the Saudi public palate for so youthful a leader after decades of infirmed, elderly rulers.

Young Mohammed is as energetic as his father is exhausted. Those around him say his pace has slowed slightly from the fevered days of announcing Vision 2030 and marketing it and himself to the world as a reformer. Yet he has continued to establish new ways to track progress on Vision 2030's staggeringly numerous 1,300 initiatives. A special body called The National Center for Performance Measurement, or ADAA, is charged with reporting to the Crown Prince every quarter his ministers' progress on their multitude of Key Performance Initiatives (KPI's).<sup>20</sup> Those who come up short regularly lose their jobs. The kingdom has had four ministers of health and three ministers of education in the past four years. ADAA officials have been told, only half in jest, that ADDA'S one KPI is the level of unhappiness its rigor stirs in ministers.

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<sup>20</sup> Author interview with Husameddin Al Madani, Director General of the National Center for Performance Measurement, (ADAA) in Riyadh, January 13, 2019.

## Relaxing with “Game of Thrones”

The workaholic prince relaxes rarely, his aides say. When he does it is usually to play video games or watch television series like *Game of Thrones* or *The Walking Dead*. More recently, he has also taken to cardio workouts in his palace gym to control his weight and enhance his endurance.<sup>21</sup> In a country where many royals have multiple wives, MBS has only one, a first cousin, with whom he has four young children.

Much of the Crown Prince’s energy continues to be devoted to marketing his vision of Saudi Arabia as a strong world actor. He is determined to strengthen Saudi Arabia to confront and contain Iran, much like Napoleon Bonaparte sought to strengthen France to stand up to Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “A new born government must dazzle and astonish,” Napoleon said.<sup>22</sup> MBS would agree. Like Napoleon, he seeks to persuade his youthful population—some 60% of Saudis are under 30 years of age—that they are taking part in a grand pageant; they can join him in making history.

The Crown Prince also evinces enormous confidence in his political instincts though they have been far from unerring. His aides say he consistently opts for action over caution. The risk inherent in change, he tells associates, is less than the risk of doing nothing. If he errs, he can correct it. If he dawdles, the country suffers.

He has sought to sharpen his instincts by studying other rulers. Beyond his famous grandfather, Abdul Aziz, MBS is said by his brother, Khalid, to admire a seventh century Caliph, Muawiyah I, founder of the very first Islamic family dynasty—which came at the expense of Prophet Mohammed’s family. Cunning was his hallmark. His family first fought the Prophet’s efforts to spread Islam, but once it triumphed, he used guile to seize power and lead the growing band of Islamic believers. Muawiyah cleverly outmaneuvered the Prophet’s devout son-in-law Ali with tactics that led to Ali’s eventual murder. As the new leader of the faithful,

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21 Author interview with Prince Khalid bin Salman, Washington D.C., February 15, 2019

22 Roberts, Andrew, “Consul,” *Napoleon: A Life*. Kindle e-reader, Penguin Books, 2014, Location 5040.

Muawiyah promised Ali's son he would be his successor. Instead, Caliph Muawiyah named his own son, thus founding the Umayyad Dynasty.<sup>23</sup>

Now as then, intrigue plays a large part in Saudi politics. So, too, does brutality. Western sensibilities are offended by the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and the Crown Prince's insistence he played no role. Yet frightening opponents and cunningly avoiding entrapment are admired traditions in much of the Arab world. Indeed, one of Muawiyah's bitterest enemies praised his cunning: "He was the most artful of men: more crafty than a thief." When Muawiyah's dynasty was toppled after 90 years, some 80 of his surviving relatives were invited to dinner by their conquerors. Upon the new Caliph's command, the waiters butchered his guests, arranged them side by side and covered them with a carpet so the new rulers of the Islamic faith could dine atop the old.<sup>24</sup>

"In the most literal and bloody way imaginable, the slaughter of the Umayyads served to illustrate what had been—for half a millennium or more—the supreme theme of the age: the rising of a new order upon the ruins of the old," British author Tom Holland writes in *The Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire*.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Ali, Sayed Ameer, "The Republic," *A Short History of the Saracens*, Kindle e-reader, MacMillan and Co. Ltd, London, 1916. Location 1023-1105.

24 Tom Holland, "*In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Arab Global Empire*." New York, New York, Doubleday, 2012., Page 428.

25 Ibid.

## Secretiveness and Surprise

Secretiveness is another strong political instinct of the Crown Prince. He is said to confide in no one and to make every effort to keep his aides guessing. In meetings with staff to discuss options, one aide says it does no good to focus on which proposal the prince seems to support. Often he selects one option simply to force his aides to provide even better arguments for one he will choose later. Certainly, his lightning-speed dawn arrests of his royal cousins and their incarceration in the Ritz Carlton in November 2017 was a well-kept secret. (Leaders' propensity for secrecy isn't new. U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt famously described himself as a "juggler" who never "let my right hand know what my left hand does.")<sup>26</sup>

Whether one strong-willed man can single-handedly wrench a nation into modernity and transform his people into self-reliant citizens is a very open question. Daring decisiveness has been the hallmark of Mohammed bin Salman's brief tenure in power. First came subduing the religious police, then locking up his royal cousins for corruption. Soon followed the decision to let Saudi women drive. And most recently the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. (MBS denies any role). Actions popular with the West have been followed by actions deeply offensive to Western sensibilities. All the while, his refusal to brook any criticism and to jail many hundreds of opponents has left the Saudi people largely passive. Few are truly active participants in achieving Vision 2030.

Still there is little sign the Crown Prince is listening to anyone but himself. Despite U.S. opprobrium, he has resisted any act that could be construed as contrition or accommodation of U.S. criticism. He did avoid the limelight for a few months after the Khashoggi killing. But once again the Crown Prince is traveling abroad to Pakistan, India and China—friendly countries unlikely to mention human rights.

King Salman does seem to be trying to at least put some guardrails around his son's impulsive tendencies. In December, Ibrahim Assaf, 70, was named foreign minister to keep an eye on the young prince and his cohort of young advisers. Some close to the Crown Prince say that when he reaches a

<sup>26</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, New York, Penguin Press, 2018. Page 307.

decision now he sometimes tells his team, “Let’s think on it.” Whether that is a genuine desire to check his thinking or a tactic to leave the appearance of doing so isn’t clear.

In what appears to be another effort to soften his image, the Crown Prince also recently freed another of his royal cousins who was under house arrest for more than two years for offensive tweets about the ruler of the United Arab Emirates. The two princes were shown side-by-side as MBS kissed his cousin’s small daughter.<sup>27</sup> Some say this, too, is a concession to his father who urges his son to improve relations with other royals.

If his short history is any guide, there is little likelihood of major changes in the Crown Prince’s character or style. While he has charmed his Western interlocutors repeatedly, he is the product of a nearly 300-year old Al Saud dynasty and of a cultural and historical tradition very different from—and often at odds with—the West. Divine right of kings never existed in the U.S. and is centuries in Europe’s past, but still very alive in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, MBS retains the support of the two men who matter most to his hold on power—his father, King Salman, and U.S. President Donald Trump. Given his father’s age and fragile health, he may soon ascend to the throne and to even greater power.

Still, the central question remains: Can the Crown Prince’s iron will and political determination to change Saudi Arabia overcome the Saudi populace’s deep dependence on government and passive resistance to change?

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27 “Picture of MBS with Prince Abdulaziz bin Fahd goes viral,” Arab News, March 8 2019. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1453311/saudi-arabia>.

# Amid Sweeping Social Change, Women are the Winners



Sarah Al-Suhaimi, chairperson for Tadawul, outlines her plans for the Saudi Stock Exchange in a conversation with Bloomberg's Erik Schatzker at the Bloomberg Invest Summit in London, October 2018. (Bloomberg)

As MBS enters his fourth year of effectively ruling Saudi Arabia his legacy so far is mixed. His early report card gets high marks for offering breathtaking social change. Social life in the Kingdom today bears little resemblance to the stifling social scene four years ago.

The most striking change has been in the liberation of women who by now aren't just permitted to drive cars, but more significantly, are able to work in almost all sectors of the society including the military (in non-combat roles).<sup>28</sup> Everywhere from the Saudi stock exchange to restaurant hostesses, women are visible. In truth, women have been as well or better educated than Saudi men for decades, but have had few opportunities to put their education to use. Some 60 percent of university graduates are women and men and women agree that women are not only better educated but more motivated and productive employees. Reaching the Vision 2030 goal of increasing female participation in the labor force to 30% from 22% is likely to be one of the easier targets to hit. As women's opportunities have expanded so have their aspirations.

The Saudi stock exchange, Tadawul, now is led by a woman. The Kingdom also has just named its first female ambassador. And some courageous Saudi

<sup>28</sup> "Saudi Arabia allows women to join military," British Broadcasting Company, February 26, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43197048>.

women—long forbidden by religious authorities to engage in physical exercise, let alone competitive sports (vigorous exercise could damage a woman’s hymen)<sup>29</sup>—now dare to ride bicycles on public streets and parks, hike, and play soccer and basketball. Indeed, the first head of sports for women, Princess Reema bint Bandar, appointed in 2016, has now been named ambassador to Washington, D.C., the Kingdom’s first female ambassador.<sup>30</sup> She is the daughter of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, ambassador to the U.S. for a quarter of a century until his retirement in January 2005. Princess Reema, who grew up in the U.S. and earned a degree from George Washington University, is a single mother whose English is purely American.

Sarah Suhaimi, Chairwoman of the Saudi stock exchange since early 2017, recalls how much has changed for women since she began working in 2004 as a research analyst at Samba, a Saudi bank. Not only was she segregated from her male colleagues, but the men she telephoned as an analyst seeking information on their companies hung up on her. “I had to write my questions and get my male colleagues to ask them for me,” she recalls. Undeterred, she moved to Jadwa Investment, a Saudi investment company, where she became chief investment officer. She recalls organizing a large client event at a public hall in Riyadh only to be banned from entering because no one in her company had secured permission from the Riyadh city government for a mixed event. Without that permission, the religious police forbade her to mix with male clients.<sup>31</sup>

She recalls being seen by others as something odd. “The attitude of society was if you don’t need money why are you working?” she says. Things have changed dramatically in the past few years as women like Ms. Suhaimi have persisted in the workplace despite obstacles and as Crown Prince Mohammed has made growing female participation in the work force a key goal of Vision 2030. Ms. Suhaimi, who has also been CEO of the National

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29 “Saudi Women Push for the right to exercise,” by Sarah Aziza, Harper’s Magazine, January 2018. <https://harpers.org/archive/2018/01/body-politic-4/>. See also Reuters’ report of Senior Scholar Sheikh Abdullah al Manae’s 2009 comment that excessive “movement and jumping” can tear a girl’s hymen and cause her to lose her virginity. <https://mobile.reuters.com/article/ampidUSKC-N11E2AB>.

30 Princess Reema made ambassador to US, Khaled bin Salman appointed deputy defense minister by royal decree,” Arab News, February 23, 2019; <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1457076/saudi-arabia>.

31 author interview with Sara Al Shuhaimi, May 7, 2017 in Riyadh.

Commercial Bank of Saudi Arabia since 2014, says last year 50% of its new hires were women.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, these days some young women dare to dream big. One of MBS' close aides, Mohammed al Sheikh, proudly tells a visitor that his 16-year-old daughter, Joharah, recently told him, "I am going to be more successful than you."<sup>33</sup> Some months later over a family dinner at a Riyadh restaurant, she speaks for herself. "I want to be the first female government minister in Saudi Arabia," she tells me.<sup>34</sup> Her father and mother beam with pride; five years ago, almost any Saudi father would have been chagrined at a daughter so beyond the borders of acceptable conduct for a Saudi woman.

Such scenes are playing out these days in a great many Saudi families, in many cases causing family tensions between fathers accustomed to absolute authority over their women and wives and daughters seeking to exert some independence. A growing number of wives and daughters now confront male dominance by citing recent royal decrees giving women the right to drive and work without a male guardian's permission. "On the outside we hear change, change," says a Saudi sociologist. "But inside the walls of a house there is a war about who gets to make decisions." He adds that as male authority recedes, a growing number of men seek to control women through their control of the family pocketbook. As a result, a growing number of women are seeking jobs to establish some financial independence for themselves.

"If you have a job, you have independence," says one employed single mother. She now has the right to establish bank accounts for her children without a male guardian's consent but, she explains, her ex-husband continues to have the right to take his children's deposits without her consent. Not surprisingly young people—and particularly young women—are MBS' strongest supporters. They like what progress they see so far and expect much more from the Crown Prince.

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32 author meeting with Sara Al Suhaimi, June 30, 2018, in Riyadh.

33 author interview with Mohammed al Sheikh, June 27, 2018 in Riyadh.

34 author conversation with Joharah al Sheikh and her parents, January 25, 2018 in Riyadh.

## Prominent Saudi Women



### **Reema bint Bandar** al Saud

Ambassador to the U.S.

Princess Reema was named Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the U.S. in February 2019, the Kingdom's first female ambassador. Born in 1975, Princess Reema grew up in Washington DC where her father, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, was ambassador from 1983 to 2005. A divorced mother of two teenagers, she is an entrepreneur, having founded Yibreen, a women's gym and spa in 2005 when such places were frowned upon by religious authorities. As CEO of Harvey Nichols in Riyadh, she also pioneered women in retail sales and created training courses for them. In 2016, she was named to head female sports; previously religious authorities forbade women's sports. Like so many women who lead, Princess Reema seeks to avoid standing out. "Our strategy is to make everything seem matter of fact," she told me two years ago. "No focus on the first or the new. Just like all this is normal." And slowly it is becoming normal.



### **Deema al Yahya**

Chief of Technology, Misk Foundation

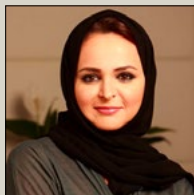
Deema al Yahya, a software engineer and self-described "tech nerd," grew up determined to be "the next Bill Gates." A 2002 graduate of King Saud University with a degree in computer science, she was thrice denied a job at Tadawul, the Saudi stock exchange. Once the late King Abdullah publicly urged opportunity for women, she took a newspaper report of his remarks to the exchange's Chief Technology officer along with a memo proposing new services Tadawul could launch. He hired her. Although separated from male colleagues by a locked door, she worked to earn their trust, not demand an open door. After 12 to 18 months, she was asked by her male colleagues to present the team's work. Opportunities kept coming. She reshaped e-services at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then headed digitization at ministry of planning and along the way in 2010 achieved her childhood dream when Microsoft asked her to serve on its board. She began her current job in 2017. She is Secretary General and CEO of the National Digital Transformation Committee. "Our goal is to lead innovation, to establish and sustain digital cutting edge in Saudi Arabia," she says. Her advice to young women: "Look at any challenge as an opportunity."



### **Hala al Tuwajri**

Secretary-General of the Council for Family Affairs

Dr. Al Tuwajri is the first leader of a new government unit created two years ago to improve the lives of women, children and families and represent their interests in international fora. Formerly a world literature professor and Vice Dean at King Saud University's College of Arts and Sciences, she has the unenviable position of explaining Saudi cultural traditions and mores to skeptical international organizations which, despite some recent social policy changes in the Kingdom, all too often continue to see the Kingdom as backward in its treatment of women and children. At home the task is also difficult. She and her staff of six men and a dozen women who work under the Ministry of Labor and Social Development seek to coordinate government services to a society with deeply entrenched and largely conservative values. For instance, only 17% of children enroll in the Ministry of Education's free preschool programs because many families continue to prefer to keep young children at home. "Cultural identity is deep," she says. "You don't change it quickly." Of the Kingdom's goal to create a new generation of independent, self-reliant youth, she says, "We have to fix basic issues before we can expect values to change."



### **Hanadi al Sheikh**

Chief Strategy Officer, Tadawul

Hanadi returned to Riyadh from the U.S. in 2003 facing only three avenues for employment—medicine, teaching or technical. She took an entry level IT job at King Fahd Medical City. She, too, benefited from the late King Abdullah's call to give women opportunity and joined the Saudi stock exchange in 2004 moving up regularly to greater responsibilities until her current position as Chief Strategy Officer. When she joined the exchange a male colleague objected that she was taking a job a man needed. Women often were silent. Now all that has changed, she says. The decade of Abdullah's reign has given women time to prepare for today's larger opportunities. "We had to prove ourselves gradually and we have," she says.

Even more stunning is the fact that the once strictly segregated sexes are mixing everywhere without prohibition—or inhibition—these days. Whether in work places or restaurants or newly opened cinemas, men and women can be seen side-by-side. In the space of only a few years, such mixing has gone from nonexistent to nonchalant.

Only a year ago most restaurants this reporter visited featured groups of men and groups of women dining in the same room though not at the same table. Both the men and women exchanged glances across the room at the sheer daring of their proximity. Now, go into almost any Riyadh restaurant or coffee shop and young men and women are sharing a table and chatting casually, oblivious to others around them. It is as natural as if they were in Paris or New York. Even more shocking, once forbidden music permeates virtually every restaurant from casual to elegant. Songs like “Look of Love,” with lyrics like “I can hardly wait to feel my arms around you...” waft to diners’ ears. Knowing how horrifying this is to religious conservatives, listening to such lyrics still shocks this visitor. But young Saudis appear not to notice anymore.

Indeed, the integration of the sexes has been as sudden and significant as the racial desegregation of the American South in the 1960s. And in the case of Saudi Arabia, with no visible protest, albeit with unhappy conservatives biting their tongues. “Before, government forced people to be conservative. Now it has completely flipped. This isn’t from the people so it won’t last,” says one conservative, perhaps reflecting more a preference than a prediction.

Most Saudis seem to be concluding the opposite: that social change is here to stay and accelerating. The kingdom hosted a three-day electronic car race in December paired with nightly concerts featuring such international celebrities as The Black Eyed Peas and French DJ and songwriter David Guetta.

One young Riyadh career woman called the event a “watershed” for Saudi Arabia. “I drove there with my girlfriends and we danced until 1:30 a.m.,” she tells me. “It was unreal to have boys and girls mixing so close in Saudi Arabia.” Indeed, six months earlier she wouldn’t have been permitted to drive and only a few years ago such mixing would have landed her at the headquarters of the religious police. For this change, she is grateful to the Crown

Prince. “We know he is involved in the Khashoggi matter,” she says. “But we don’t want to think about it because he has done so much other good.”

As her story indicates, it is not just the social rules that are changing but also the opportunities for social life. For generations of Saudis, social life consisted for men of visits to the mosque or sipping tea with male relatives. For women, social life was limited to female-only gatherings of family members in homes. If those were the dark ages, the renaissance has suddenly exploded in the space of a few years.

In the fall of 2016, *iLuminate*, a New York musical combining dance, music and technology, shocked Saudis—and delighted some—with its pop rock music and mixed gender performers, even though the dancer’s gender was masked by darkness. The dancers were visible only by light illumination on their clothes, although one of the female dancer’s breasts were encircled in red lights.

A scant two years later, the Kingdom has hosted more than 2,000 separate performances—concerts, wrestling matches, circuses, an international golf tournament and other such events—with mixed audiences now totaling hundreds of thousands.<sup>35</sup> Mariah Carey’s recent concert, where her form-fitting outfit clearly ran afoul of traditional Islamic dress, passed largely unnoticed, perhaps because critics are too frightened to speak. On a more mundane level, a handful of movie theaters have opened in Riyadh and Jeddah with more to come. Again, the Saudi audiences are mixed with the atergoers enjoying their jumbo popcorn and Cokes exactly as in the West.

Even bigger entertainment complexes are coming soon as the Crown Prince seeks to use entertainment not simply to please young Saudis but also to attract foreigners to build a wholly new tourism industry in the Kingdom. For many foreigners, the idea of tourism in a country that still forbids alcohol, gambling and immodest dress like shorts and bikinis is oxymoronic. Add the fact that non-Muslims can’t visit Mecca and Medina, the two most famous and holiest Islamic sites, and the proposition only gets tougher. The Crown Prince is undeterred.

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35 author interview with Ahmed Al Khateeb, January 27, 2019, in Riyadh

Creating a successful tourism industry is one of the key goals of his Vision 2030 efforts to diversify Saudi revenues beyond oil and, as importantly, to create jobs for a growing population of young Saudis. A look at the Kingdom's effort to build a world class tourism industry offers insight into both the opportunities and obstacles MBS faces in liberating his country from its addiction to oil revenues. Hard as it is to create a new industry from nothing—and in a country never known for its love of fun—that is proving easier than restructuring the existing economy. Entrenched interests cling to the status quo—a yacht for the current winners and a life boat for its losers, each group reluctant to trade what they have for the unknown.

# Tourism Plans: Driven by Big Ambitions and Big Spending



A view of Mada'in Saleh, an archaeological site located in the Sector of Al-Ula within Al Madinah Region in the Hejaz, July 2015. (Peter Bogaczewicz)

The Kingdom definitely boasts some breathtaking sites and outsized ambitions as the basis for a tourism industry. The Crown Prince has pledged to spend \$64 billion on entertainment to help attract foreigners as tourists in Saudi Arabia.<sup>36</sup> Earlier this year he laid a foundation stone for a luxury resort and nature preserve designed by French architect Jean Nouvel at Al Ula, in rural northern Arabia about a 90-minute flight from Riyadh.<sup>37</sup>

Al Ula is famous for its dramatic sandstone rock formations and for the archaeological site Mada'in Saleh, the jewel of the Al Ula region. Mada'in Saleh features some 111 tombs dating from the Nabatean period when it served as a backup to Petra, the Nabatean capital in what is now Jordan, before the Romans defeated the Nabateans in 106 AD.<sup>38</sup>

The area is stunningly pristine. The reason: for most of the past half-century Saudi religious authorities declared the area blasphemous and thus off-limits to believers. The religious scholars point to verses in the Quran

36 "Saudi Arabia to invest \$64 billion in entertainment sector over coming decade," Arab News, February 22, 2018. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1251891/saudi-arabia>.

37 "Saudi Arabia's crown prince launches mega tourism projects in ancient area of Al-Ula," Arab News, February 10, 2019. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1449911/saudi-arabia>.

38 Conversation with a Saudi female guide at Mada'in Saleh, January 19, 2019.

(7:73-78) where idol worshipers disobeyed *Allah* and an earthquake squeezed their souls from their bodies. They insist Mada'in Saleh was the site of this blasphemy. While the Crown Prince has chosen to ignore this religious prohibition, some conservative Saudis continue to insist he is wrong to develop such a site.

“I cannot go there,” says one religiously conservative Saudi woman. “It is cursed by *Allah*. I am so disappointed the Crown Prince is promoting a blasphemous place like that.” This middle-aged woman literally shudders at the thought—and at the fact she is sharing a sofa with this writer who has visited such a place.

The Crown Prince has ignored such sentiments as he plunges ahead with plans to build a tourism industry. So too have some of the young people in Al Ula who already are getting jobs servicing the beginning trickle of visitors.

Last fall the Saudis worked with the French tourism ministry to quickly erect a small resort beneath the pink sandstone formations and added a temporary concert hall. Each weekend for two months elite Saudis and a smattering of foreigners were invited to attend concerts performed by renowned international artists like Italian singer Andrea Bocelli and Chinese pianist Lang Lang. The makeshift resort and concert hall, thrown up in only two months (at the height of international criticism over the death of Jamal Khashoggi), closed March 1, 2019 to prepare for construction of much grander facilities and a reopening in a couple of years.<sup>39</sup>

On a recent visit to this rural conservative region, a half-dozen young Saudi women clad head to toe in black with their faces covered but for their eyes, happily showed visitors around the historic ruins of Al Ula and the tombs of Mada'in Saleh, lecturing in English and French. They mixed casually with Saudi male tour guides and also with foreign male tourists—Chinese, French and German on this particular day. When one male tour guide asked a female colleague to explain something to a visitor in his group, she tartly responded, “Do your own work.” Asked why they cover their faces when it isn't any longer required, one young woman responded,

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39 Author meeting with Amr Al Madani, CEO of the royal Commission for Al Ula, January 18 in Al Ula.

“None of us wants to be the first to uncover.” As always for Saudis, being in harmony with the group is paramount.

The Crown Prince’s team also is hard at work on three other mega projects including *Amaala*, a wellness and meditation resort immodestly labeled the “Red Sea Riviera” with 2,500 hotel rooms and 700 villas.<sup>40</sup> Another, the Red Sea Project, will span 50 islands and include 40 hotels.<sup>41</sup> *Qiddiya*, a recreational development three times the size of Disney World, is planned near the capital of Riyadh and is promised to include a Six Flags theme park by 2022. Saudi planners insist *Qiddiya* will contribute \$4.5 billion (17 billion Saudi Riyal) to the Saudi economy and attract 17 million visitors by 2030. Ground is being broken on all these projects as the Crown Prince seeks to transform a country best known for religious austerity into a vacation haven.<sup>42</sup>

If all this transpires, it will be a sea change. For decades Saudis—and those few visitors to the Kingdom—could do absolutely nothing for enjoyment even in Riyadh. An old mud fort, conquered in 1902 by Abdul Aziz, and a largely empty museum commemorating Saudi founder Abdul Aziz, were all the capital city had to offer. Hotel entertainment consisted of wrestling reruns and old G-rated movies.

While all this remains largely a dream, at least two factors are driving the effort. First, lavish government investment on entertainment intended to attract foreign investors to the sector. (That has been put in doubt as the Khashoggi murder has left foreigners with money skittish about the reputational risks of putting it in Saudi Arabia.) And, more urgent, is the necessity to create jobs for young Saudis. As noted earlier, some 60% of Saudis are under 30 years of age and unemployment among this group is said to be perhaps three times as high as the 12.9 percent national average.<sup>43</sup> The Kingdom needs to create about 300,000 jobs each year to hold

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40 “Saudi Arabia’s PIF unveils Amaala, a new global leading destination for wellness,” Arab News, September 26, 2018; <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1378411/saudi-arabia>.

41 “Red Sea Project ‘to have 40-50 hotels,’” Noor Nugali, Arab News, October 25, 2018. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1393736/saudi-arabia>.

42 “Saudi Arabia’s Qiddiya, built for fun, also means business,” Ruba Obaid, Arab News, April 29, 2018. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1293306/saudi-arabia>.

43 Author interview with Mohammed al Tuwajiri, Minister of Economy and Planning, January 20, 2019 in Riyadh.

unemployment steady—and more if it is to reach the 7% goal for 2030 enshrined in the Crown Prince’s Vision 2030.<sup>44</sup> (Unemployment actually has risen since the vision was announced). Yet private sector employment growth fell in February to a five-year low as business confidence remained subdued. Only 1% of businesses reported increased hiring.<sup>45</sup>

Still, for Saudi Arabia to compete with nearby tourist destinations like Egypt and Dubai won’t be easy. Saudi planners hope at least to persuade Saudis, who spend \$25 billion annually traveling abroad, to keep more of their dollars at home. “We have a very hospitable culture and a great number of natural mesmerizing treasures like the Red Sea which has the best diving experience in the world,” says Ahmed Al Khateeb, the man charged with building the tourism industry.<sup>46</sup> Earlier in his career, Mr. Al Khateeb was tasked with creating entertainment for Saudis. As the first head of the General Entertainment Authority (referred to by conservative Saudis as the General Evil Authority) he and his team were responsible for the more than 2,000 performances in Saudi over the past two years.

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44 “Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 Goals & Objectives,” Infographic, July 14, 2016. <https://www.go-gulf.com/blog/saudi-arabia-vision-2030/>.

45 “Saudi private sector employment growth falls to 5-year-low,” by Sam Bridge, Arabian Business, March 8, 2019. <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/414749-saudi-private-sector-employment-growth-falls-to-5-year-low>.

46 Author interview with Ahmed al Khateeb, Minister of Tourism, January 27, 2019, in Riyadh.

## Year Four: Turning the Page on an Annus Horribilis

Despite the beginnings of a tourism industry, the centerpiece of Vision 2030—creating a vibrant private sector to replace the Kingdom’s near total dependence on oil revenue—is proving stubbornly difficult. Obviously, no one should expect an entrenched economy built on long-existing fiefdoms and special interests to be easy to reform. But increasingly Saudis are concluding the vision is overly ambitious both in scope and time. Indeed, as 2019 opens in Saudi Arabia, economic reform is more a slogan than a policy. The private sector has been laid low by the unintended consequences of three actions: reducing energy subsidies to Saudi citizens, imposing a VAT tax, and raising levies on foreign workers in hopes of forcing employers to hire more young Saudis instead.

Over the past year, consumer spending has collapsed as citizens confront nearly a doubling in the cost of gasoline, water, and electricity, plus new taxes. Consumer spending has been further reduced by the exodus foreign workers who, when hit with new levies, have chosen to leave the Kingdom. Unfortunately, that hasn’t resulted in very many new jobs for Saudis but rather the demise of a number of small businesses run by expatriates but actually owned by Saudis who do nothing but register a business and collect a portion of revenues from the foreign workers’ labor. In recent months, the Kingdom has faced a rash of landlords filing suit against Saudis who have refused to pay rent on shops their expatriate laborers abandoned.<sup>47</sup> This practice is illegal but widespread.

“The private sector is on its back,” says one long-time financial analyst, “so it can’t lead the country forward to a vibrant new economy.” A businessman adds, “We are trying to correct 50 years of bad policies in three to five years. It can’t be done.” Both speak not for attribution lest their views be seen as critical.

Indeed, after the heady optimism that followed the unveiling of Vision 2030 in April 2016, reality is setting in. The Crown Prince’s promise to fund

<sup>47</sup> Saudi landlords go to court after several expats ‘shut shop’ and leave,” Gulf Business. January 21, 2019. <https://gulfbusiness.com/saudi-landlords-go-court-several-expats-shut-shop-leave/>.

big new investment in economic transformation by selling a 5% minority interest in Aramco, the Kingdom's oil company, to raise \$100 billion, has been delayed. It may never occur as a public IPO involves too much disclosure for private Al Saud interests. Now the government says it will raise \$70 billion for its Public Investment Fund (PIF) by selling its petrochemical assets to Aramco. Still, the PIF is so concerned about also attracting foreign investors, it recently signed a \$120,000-a-month contract with a New York public relations firm specifically charged with improving the PIF's image by distancing it from the controversial Crown Prince. This may prove a hard task as he continues to chair the PIF and play a decisive role in its investment decisions.<sup>48</sup>

All this has left a growing number of Saudis realizing that economic reform will be neither quick nor painless. One economics professor says, "The consultants sold him [the Crown Prince] a development plan that can't be done on the timetable given. It took South Korea 30 years to develop. Why should Saudi think we can do it in 15?" Indeed, South Korea boasted one of the most educated populations in Asia and also one of the hardest working. Saudi lags far behind South Korea in both those assets.

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48 "Saud investment fund hires US PR firm to create distance from crown prince," by Julian Pecquet, Al Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/saudi-investment-fund-hires-pr-firm-distance-crown-prince.html>.

# Big Government Spending

Fully aware of growing public discontent at the pain imposed by only modest economic reforms thus far, the government is responding this year as Saudi governments always have—with big new spending. The 2019 budget of \$295 billion is the largest ever for Saudi Arabia.<sup>49</sup>

This reprieve is obviously at odds with the long-term goal of Vision 2030 to create self-reliant citizens. Still, the government is eager to avoid any citizen discontent such as the sudden and prolonged protests of the so-called “yellow vests” that erupted in France when French President Emmanuel Marcon raised fuel taxes there late last year. “Once something like that starts it is hard to stop,” a Saudi economist told me in late January. “This government wants to be cautious.”

Beyond the big budget, another indication of government concern about citizen grumbling is the decision this year to continue paying government workers a 1,000 Saudi Riyal, or \$260, a month stipend granted last year as a one-time payment to ease their adjustment to higher energy prices. In this atmosphere, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman clearly finds it unwise to extract more austerity in the name of economic reform.

“Our government’s biggest challenge is balancing actions between contraction and expansion, or put another way, between forcing self-reliance and supporting those in need,” says the financial analyst.

Mohammed al Tuwaijri, Saudi Minister of Economy and Planning, insists the increased government spending in the Kingdom’s 2019 budget won’t add to the government’s already bloated employment rolls. Instead, he says, it will be judiciously spent to stimulate private sector growth. “We will see where the private sector is creating jobs, exporting and adding to GDP growth and we will provide that industry or that company support to accelerate things faster,”<sup>50</sup> he said in an interview in late January.

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49 Saudi Arabia’s Fiscal 2019 Budget, Jadwa Investment, December 19, 2019. Page 8 and 10. <http://www.jadwa.com/en/researchsection/research/economic-research/budget-reports>.

50 Author interview with Mohammed al Tuwaijri, January 20, 2019, in Riyadh.

Oil prices, which averaged around \$60 a barrel in 2018, have given the government the flexibility to spend more to pacify citizens. And the government already has given itself more time to balance its budget by extending to 2023 from 2020 the target date for a balanced budget. Obviously, Saudi citizens focus far more on slow economic growth and their own pinched pocket books than on government balancing its budget.

Still, the 2019 economic outlook isn't good. The International Monetary Fund in January revised down its forecast for 2019 GDP growth in Saudi Arabia to 1.8% from 2.4% forecast late last year. And Saudi businessmen remain skeptical. They fear the government's promise of private sector stimulus will again prove a mirage. Last year the government budgeted to spend 72 billion Saudi Riyals, or \$19 billion, to help the private sector, but by year's end little of that had been spent. One economist says the government wisely chose not to spend because it simply couldn't identify sufficient projects on which to spend efficiently and with sustainable results.

Capacity constraints are clearly a key choke point for the success of economic reform. While the government boasts some brilliant ministers deeply committed to overhauling the Kingdom's economy, there is a clear shortage of qualified and experienced talent to carry out so ambitious a program. Ministries wind up bidding against each other for the best talent, leading to a revolving door which reduces government efficiency in all areas. Mr. Al Tuwajiri underscores that human capital development is one of the focuses of the 2019 budget.<sup>51</sup>

As the government's 2020 targets for achieving various goals come ever closer, the government is realizing not all can be met simultaneously. Mr. Al Tuwajiri acknowledges this is like traffic merging into one lane: something has to yield. For example, does the government provide faster internet or fresh water in more rural homes? Both can be done but both need infrastructure spending. Yet there isn't enough money and talent to do both by their 2020 target dates.

In the end, the market and realities will prevail," he says. "We can do everything possible, but in the end, we can't control everything. We can miss our targets by a year or two but not five," he concludes.<sup>52</sup>

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51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

Another minister agrees that a key challenge for the government is showing progress that will sustain the enthusiasm of young Saudis for MBS and his reform agenda. “We have to keep the young excited and believing in what we are doing,” says this minister. “It isn’t just about creating jobs but about devotion and belief. The young follow MBS because ‘he is one of us.’”

## Political Crackdown

The Crown Prince has two broad responses to the dimming prospects of strong progress on economic reforms. The first is to distract Saudi citizens with a plethora of new entertainment from concerts, cinemas and sporting events described previously in this report. The second is to suppress any dissent.

Saudi Arabia, never an open society, is now the most repressive in at least the past 40 years. The late King Faisal, an austere task master before his assassination in 1975, brooked little dissent with his decisions or those of his religious establishment. When he decided to introduce television to the Kingdom in 1965, he ordered police to fire upon protestors attacking the national television tower. One of his nephews was shot and killed. A decade later that young prince’s brother mortally shot King Faisal.<sup>53</sup> He was widely respected nonetheless for living an exemplary religious life. His successors, King Fahd, famous for a worldly life aboard his outsized yacht, and King Abdullah, an elderly grandfather to his nation, both allowed somewhat more space for criticism of the Saudi government if not of the royal family itself.

Crown Prince Mohammed brooks no criticism. With Vision 2030, he essentially proclaimed weaning the Kingdom off oil a national emergency with a strict deadline for success. As a result, he seems to view debate on any issue as potentially disruptive of the essential and urgent measures he is taking. If the Saudi house is on fire, citizens need to shut up and follow him to the prescribed exit seems to be his rationale. Given this mandate against any discussion, most Saudis no longer engage in even tepid tweets on social media, much less criticism. A liberal Saudi who used to tweet

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53 Robert Lacey, “The Dreams of King Faisal, *The Kingdom*. New York, Harcourt, Brace, Javonovich, 1981. Page 426.

regularly says he has stopped for fear that anything posted one day could become grounds for arrest on another day.

Authoritarian regimes are the norm in the Middle East and these days MBS' Saudi Arabia is among them. Still, on a scale of one to 10 with Jordan being a one or two and Bashar al-Assad's Syria being a brutal 10, MBS' Saudi Arabia has moved from the traditional three or four to at least a six or seven. But, in fairness, he still has far to go to match the repression in some other countries receiving far less international opprobrium: Ayatollah Khamenei's Iran, Recep Erdogan's Turkey, Vladimir Putin's Russia, and Xi Jinping's China.



Hessah al-Ajaji drives her car down Riyadh's busy Tahlia Street after midnight for the first time, Sunday, June 24, 2018. (AP Photo/Nariman El-Mofty)

In addition to arresting prominent princes, ministers and businessmen on charges of corruption, MBS also jailed scores of intellectuals and key religious figures including Sheikh Salman al-Ouda, a prominent proponent of democratic reform with some 14 million followers on Twitter. Sheikh al-Ouda's sin apparently was a 2017 tweet construed as criticizing the Crown Prince's boycott of neighboring Qatar. "May God harmonize between their hearts for the good of their people," Sheikh Salman wrote.<sup>54</sup> After languishing in prison for 18 months, Sheikh Salman went on trial in January on 37 charges including stirring public discord, going against the ruler and being an active member of the Muslim Brotherhood, all

54 "Saudi prosecutor seeks death penalty for scholar Salman al-Ouda," Islamic 21 C.com September 4, 2019. <https://www.islam21c.com/news-views/saudi-prosecutor-seeks-death-penalty-for-scholar-salman-al-ouda/>

considered crimes in Saudi Arabia.<sup>55</sup> More recently, the government declared it will also put on trial a group of female activists who were proponents of women driving. Ironically, these women were imprisoned on the eve of June 24, 2018, the day MBS lifted the ban on females driving. Supporters of these women say they were jailed simply to assure that the Crown Prince, not female activists, got credit for the right to drive. Relatives of the women also report some of them have been tortured while in confinement.<sup>56</sup> Three of the eleven women were temporarily released on March 27, 2019 as the trial for the remaining eight resumed in Riyadh.

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55 "Saudi Arabia Seeks Death Penalty in Trial of Outspoken Cleric," by Ben Hubbard; New York Times, September 4, 2018.

56 "Saudi Arabia Moves Towrd Trials of Women's Rights Activists," By Ben Hubbard, New York Times, March 2, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-trial-rights-activists.html>.

# U.S.-Saudi Partnership Under Duress

The Crown Prince's penchant for political repression coupled with the Kingdom's fumbled explanations for the death of Jamal Khashoggi have strained the U.S.-Saudi alliance more than at any point since the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center. Only a year ago the Crown Prince was welcomed by the president in Washington, D.C., by New York's business elite, by Hollywood's biggest moguls and by Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs as a young reformer eager to cooperate with America to transform his backward kingdom into a modern nation. A year later he dares not come to America. Hollywood moguls like Ariel Emmanuel have pulled out of plans to invest there. Emmanuel ended his company's planned \$400 million investment in the Kingdom in early March,<sup>57</sup> though other Americans quietly continue to pursue the opportunity to make money in Saudi Arabia.

While President Trump is sticking by the Crown Prince, accepting his denials of any involvement in the Khashoggi murder, the Central Intelligence Agency has concluded otherwise<sup>58</sup> and many in Congress are determined to punish him for Khashoggi's death. And Saudis during my January visit there expressed deep concern about the future of the Kingdom's relationship with the U.S. if a Democrat wins the White House in 2020. "We are going to be singled out for retribution," frets one Saudi who closely watches his country's relations with Washington, D.C.

Undeniably, many of the Crown Prince's foreign policy ventures have proved costly. The Saudi boycott of Qatar, which Riyadh accuses of spreading terrorism, has driven that small sheikdom closer to Iran and Turkey without precipitating any change in Qatar's policies. More importantly to the U.S., it has undermined American efforts to build greater security cooperation among Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations to reduce the

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57 "Endeavor returns Money to Saudi Arabia, Protesting Khashoggi Murder," by Kate Kelly and Ben Hubbard; New York Times, March 8, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/08/business/endeavor-saudi-arabia.html>.

58 "CIA reportedly concludes that Jamal Khashoggi was killed on the Saudi Crown Prince's order," by Rachael Withers, Vox, November 17, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/11/17/18100004/cia-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-jamal-khashoggi>.

security burden on Washington as the ultimate guarantor of stability in the Persian Gulf. Because the largest U.S. Mideast airbase is in Qatar, the enmity between Qatar and Saudi Arabia has been especially trying for the Pentagon. The Crown Prince, who also is Saudi Arabia's Minister of Defense, seems completely unconcerned at his U.S. ally's discomfort. He continues to resist compromise with Qatar.

The stalemated war in Yemen against Iran-backed Houthi rebels is costing Saudi Arabia both financially and geopolitically. While Riyadh doesn't disclose the cost of the war, those in a position to know estimate it consumes at least \$25 billion annually. But beyond the financial costs, the growing international opprobrium over the rising number of civilian casualties there is robbing Saudi Arabia of valuable political support. Germany has ended arms sales to the Kingdom until September and made resumption conditional on progress to end the Yemen war.<sup>59</sup> Pressure is growing in Britain and Canada to do likewise. Moreover, the U.S. Congress is vowing to punish the Crown Prince for Khashoggi's murder by blocking weapons sales to Riyadh for the war in Yemen. President Trump has vetoed the congressional resolution but the damage to U.S.-Saudi relations likely won't end there.

Congress and the Trump Administration are also at odds over Saudi Arabia's effort to purchase nuclear power plants to provide its domestic energy needs leaving its oil available for export. The Kingdom, considering buying nuclear technology from the U.S., South Korea, China or Russia, hasn't yet agreed to safeguards that ensure it can't enrich uranium to weapons grade. A bipartisan congressional resolution seeks to block any U.S. nuclear technology sale without such safeguards leaving the Kingdom free to buy from Russia or China who don't insist on such safeguards.

Beyond all the threats of tit for tat, what is going on in both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. is a reassessment of the relationship. Since at least the presidency of George W. Bush, who invaded Iraq against the strong advice of the late Saudi King Abdullah, right on through the Obama presidency with his emphasis on shifting America's focus from the Mideast to Asia, and

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59 Merkel's Government Extends Saudi Arms Ban Until September, Bloomberg News, March 28, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-28/merkel-s-government-closes-in-on-deal-to-extend-saudi-arms-ban>.

even now despite the strong embrace by President Trump, Saudi Arabia has been contemplating how to hedge its interests in a post-U.S. Middle East.

The Saudis have watched as the two traditional major Mideast powers— Iraq and Syria— disintegrated into failed states. Riyadh blames America’s botched effort to implant democracy in Iraq for that country’s current coziness with Iran, the Kingdom’s nemesis. Similarly, they blame the reluctance of both the Obama and Trump Administrations to play any constructive role in Syria’s long civil war for the disintegration of that country. Instead, Washington stood by and allowed Russia to play the king maker role in Syria, propping up President Bashir al-Assad, who has managed to cling to power in Damascus even as the country has been destroyed and disintegrated into chaos beyond the capital city. Russia cannot afford to reconstruct Syria and the U.S. won’t, meaning this festering sore will continue to be exploited by Iran whose influence in the region continues to expand despite tough talk by the Crown Prince and Donald Trump.

The demise of Iraq and Syria as Mideast powers and the growing reluctance of the U.S. to expend either diplomatic or military effort in the region has allowed Saudi Arabia, which once practiced only quiet checkbook diplomacy, now to throw its weight around—especially in Yemen and the Gulf, albeit thus far with little success.

The Crown Prince also has reached out to Russia, another major oil producer, eager to grow its influence in the Mideast. Both countries were severely hurt by the collapse of oil prices in 2016 when each refused to lower production even as growing amounts of U.S. oil shale entered the market, leading to oversupply and a crash in price. Prices hit a low of \$26.21 in 2016.<sup>60</sup> In 2017, the Crown Prince and President Putin agreed to cut production to get oil prices rising again. The cooperation has worked for both nations. The Crown Prince, who is said to be no fan of soccer, nonetheless shared President Putin’s box in Moscow last summer for a World Cup match between their teams. After the Khashoggi killing, the Russian president was one of the few world leaders willing to be

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60 Crude Oil Prices—70 Year Historical Chart/Macro Trends. <https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart>.

photographed with MBS at the G-20 summit in November in Argentina where the two shared a high-five.

Russia, however, is hardly a reliable ally for Saudi Arabia. Moscow's current Mideast strategy calls for being friends with all nations in the region, very much including Saudi nemesis Iran, but expending little on behalf of any nation. Yes, it is spending to maintain its military presence in Syria but as one Russian scholar explained, that amounts to a cheap form of military training for the Russian army. So far, Moscow has been able to remain friends with such unfriendly pairs like Iran and Saudi Arabia and Syria and Israel. Whether the Saudi-Russia oil cooperation will last is uncertain. Events in the Mideast might force Moscow to declare its hand more clearly. Moreover, both Moscow and Riyadh seek to sell more oil to large Asian buyers like China, raising the prospect of tension in their current oil cooperation.

Moscow's relations with Saudi Arabia go way back. The Soviet Union was the first nation to recognize the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia after its founding in 1932. Indeed, had Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin not decided to recall his ambassador to Saudi Arabia in 1938 and then exterminate him, Saudi-Soviet relations might have been very different.<sup>61</sup> King Abdul Aziz refused to accept a new Soviet ambassador and Saudi relations weren't restored until 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and birth of Russia. Since then the two nations have had low-key relations, getting warmer since 2007 when the late King Abdullah welcomed President Putin to Riyadh, and more recently with the Crown Prince's visit to Moscow last year. The Kremlin has announced the Russian president will visit the Saudi capital again this year.

The Crown Prince also has courted China, visiting Beijing in February of 2019. China's own oil production continues to decline and the energy needs of its massive economy continue to grow. Saudi Arabia is eager to tie down long-term clients like China for its oil. As a result, the Kingdom has agreed to build a \$10 billion refining and petrochemicals complex in China as it competes for the China market with Russia and other Mideast suppliers. During the Crown Prince's February visit to Beijing, the Saudis announced that Aramco will create a joint venture with two Chinese companies in Liaoning province. The kingdom

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61 "How Moscow lost Riyadh in 1938," by Yury Barmin, Aljazeera. October 15, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/moscow-lost-riyadh-1938-171014113525997.html>.

will supply 70% of the crude needed at the new complex.<sup>62</sup> The Crown Prince also has announced plans to visit South Korea, another thriving Asian economy, where the Kingdom intends to invest in Hyundai Oilbank Co. The Crown Prince's visit to China followed one by his father, King Salman last year.

All this activity is intended to steal a march on Russia, which has been more successful selling oil to China than the Saudis thus far. It is also intended to show the United States that Saudi Arabia has options if the U.S. Congress continues to criticize and seek to isolate Riyadh.

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62 "Saudis Signal Allure of China with \$10 billion Refinery Deal," Bloomberg News, February 22, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-22/saudi-aramco-to-build-10-billion-chinese-refinery-with-partners>.

# Conclusion

Even without the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, it is arguably time for the U.S. to reassess its decades old alliance with Saudi Arabia. Washington needs a clear-eyed assessment of America's current and future interests, not a partnership launched in 1943 by President Roosevelt on the now outdated pledge of U.S. security in exchange for Saudi oil. While the world may need Saudi oil, the U.S. now is the world's largest oil producer.<sup>63</sup>

Such a strategic reassessment would prioritize reforms to bolster domestic stability in the Kingdom over weapons sales and support for Riyadh's increasingly reckless and aggressive posture toward its great regional rival, Iran. Economic reform is most essential to secure Saudi Arabia's future vis-a-vis Iran. The last thing the U.S. needs in the Mideast is another failed state, especially one so large and fractious as Saudi Arabia.

The Crown Prince almost certainly is right that slow and steady measures won't reform the Kingdom's oil dependent economy. Two decades of government promises to reduce dependence on oil have produced no real change. The passive resistance of Saudi citizens, coupled with the timidity of rulers, haven't overcome the inertia of decades of reliance on government redistribution of oil revenues.

Mohammed bin Salman now is testing whether his forced march to modernity using tough and sometimes brutal tactics can bring the change that so far has eluded Saudi rulers.

At 33, the Crown Prince can't simply kick the can down the road as his predecessors have done: He could rule the Kingdom for 50 years or more. Without real economic reform, he understands he is likely to lead a nation of steadily declining wealth and power—or worse yet, one that implodes into sectarian, tribal and regional divisions. “If we give up Wahhabism, our only ideology is prosperity,” says a Saudi anthropologist. “If the economy is weak, we could fragment; Saudi includes the seeds of dissolution.”

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<sup>63</sup> “The United States is now the largest global crude oil producer,” US Energy Information Agency, September 12, 2018. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=37053>.

Indeed, the U.S. and all developed nations share a stake in refocusing the Crown Prince firmly on domestic reforms and also in doing whatever possible to help him succeed at transforming the Kingdom into the modern and moderate nation he has promised.

Ironically, this 21<sup>st</sup> century leader's challenge is a lot like that of the Biblical Moses' efforts to lead the Israelites to their promised land. Both Moses and MBS head a fractious and fussy group. When the going got tough, some of Moses' charges whined to return to Egypt to the slavery they knew, rather than to the uncertainties of the wilderness that lay between Egypt and Canaan.<sup>64</sup> Saudi has those too. Conservatives who don't believe in MBS' vision and long for the familiarity of their traditional past. Some of the Israelites were faithful supporters; MBS has those among the Saudi young. But as with Mohammed bin Salman's people, many of the Israelites just wanted to be carried to the Promised Land while complaining constantly about manna from heaven, lack of water and their leader.<sup>65</sup>

Of course, Moses never actually entered the Promised Land<sup>66</sup> though his people finally did. His frustration and hubris led him to strike a rock and credit himself, not God, for water that flowed. It is possible Mohammed bin Salman's hubris may yet trip him up. But Saudis and the world have a stake in the Kingdom achieving the prosperous post-oil economy he has promised.<sup>67</sup>

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64 Exodus 16:3.

65 Numbers 11: 1-34

66 Deuteronomy 32: 51-52

67 The Quran's version of the story of Moses is very similar to that of the Bible with one difference: In the Quran, Allah absolves Moses of any fault for his leadership of the grumbling Israelites. (Quran 33:69).





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