

# It's a Family Affair: Religion, Geopolitics and the Rise of Mohammed bin Salman

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**ABSTRACT** *Over the past year, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has experienced a period of rapid transformation under the direction of a new Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, the son of the current King. Domestically, Bin Salman has overseen political reform in the upper echelons of the al-Saud ruling family, whilst embarking on a more pro-actively anti-Iranian foreign policy. This article looks at the actions of the new crown prince to explore the impact of Bin Salman's influence on both the Kingdom and the Middle East more broadly.*

## Introduction

**O**n November 4, 2017, the Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri resigned from office whilst in Riyadh, blaming Iranian manipulation of events. A day later, a number of prominent members of the al-Saud royal family were arrested, along with around 200 leading members of the country's business elite. On November 6, the Saudis claim that a missile was launched from Yemen and intercepted near the Riyadh airport. Over 3 days, the severity of the challenges facing Saudi Arabia in the coming years became visible for all to see. In charge of responding to the challenges is the Kingdom's new

crown prince, the 32 year old Mohammed bin Salman, essentially the power behind the throne. Known by 'Saudi watchers' as MbS, the son of King Salman was appointed to the office of crown prince in June 2017 and wasted little time in seeking to transform the Kingdom's fortunes. The office of crown prince is not without challenges, as four of the last five crown princes of Saudi Arabia have failed to become King. Yet few expect such a fate to befall MbS as a consequence of the moves made to secure his position.

Such problems of succession and indeed power struggles within the upper echelons of the al-Saud are not

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new. Take, for instance, the struggles between Saad and Faysal over who was to rule the Kingdom and the factionalism within the ruling family that shaped political life since the death of Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdul Rahman al-Saud –known by most as Ibn Saud. Yet the case of MbS is perhaps of more importance than the struggle between Saad and Faysal as it is the first instance of a move beyond the sons of Ibn Saud, to a different generation of rulers of the Saudi Kingdom. This move brings a number of prominent princes into competition, as the sons of previous Kings –and their sons– also have legitimate claims for the throne.

To understand the emergence of Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince –and to consider the trajectory of Saudi Arabia more broadly– we must consider the Kingdom’s historical past whilst placing its present into socio-economic and geopolitical context. As such, this article begins by offering a brief outline of the

emergence of Saudi Arabia and the mechanisms through which Ibn Saud was able to establish the third –and current– Saudi-led state across the Arabian Peninsula. We then turn to a consideration of Bin Salman, looking at his background and political history before considering the domestic challenges facing Saudi Arabia and finishing with an exploration of the geopolitical environment within which the Kingdom operates.

### The Family as State

The third –and current– Saudi state was established by Ibn Saud in 1932, when he united the 4 pieces of the Arabian jigsaw. With the provision of weapons and subsidies from the British, Ibn Saud was able to both create an expansionist political project and consolidate his position when faced with restless tribal dynamics, seen in the *Ikhwan* rebellion and later manifestations of such tensions such as the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979. Yet as Madawi al-Rasheed suggests, this political project was not necessarily reflective of indigenous desires or aspirations. Rather, she suggests that the establishment of Saudi Arabia was “a state imposed on people without a historical memory of unity or national heritage.”<sup>1</sup> Yet this only secured the territorial borders of the new state and in the years that followed, Ibn Saud embarked on the process of building a nation to reside within its borders.

Unable to draw upon memories of shared history or to cultivate narra-

tives of collective identity that would ensure political unity and cohesion in the manner outlined by Benedict Anderson, Ibn Saud was forced to find alternative ways to ensure the survival of his political project. One such technique was that of intertribal marriage, where it is alleged that the new ruler married into 30 different tribal families, immediately cultivating a large support base whilst also creating a large royal family, which continues to pose political problems to this day.<sup>2</sup> This helped to secure a large tribal support base that has been retained through the use of tribal norms and customs within the political structures of the modern Saudi state. Such moves were not without consequence, resulting in the emergence of an estimated 10,000 princes. The structure of succession in Saudi Arabia is patriarchal, yet passed from Ibn Saud to his eldest son, to the next eldest and so forth.<sup>3</sup> King Salman, however, is one of the last remaining sons of Ibn Saud,<sup>4</sup> resulting in a move to the next generation of Saudi rulers. At this point, an estimated 80 princes have a claim to the throne,<sup>5</sup> revealing the extent of the political challenge facing MbS.<sup>6</sup>

Integral to the formation of Saudi claims to legitimacy stem from the fusion of the al-Saud family with the Wahhabi *ulama*, drawing upon historic relationship between the two groups and providing the new Saudi state with a degree of legitimacy not found in their tribal lineage particularly evident given the plethora of tribal groups across the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>7</sup> Such tribal groupings posed

serious challenges to the political rule of the al-Saud, with greater claims to tribal legitimacy than the ruling tribe.<sup>8</sup>

To circumvent such challenges, al-Saud drew upon the religious alliance with Wahhabism, which helped the construction and consolidation of a Saudi nationality, in spite of the myriad challenges. Religion thus served a prominent role in the fabric of the state, with the al-Saud deriving Islamic legitimacy from being the 'protectors of the two holy places' and espousing support for Islamic norms. Yet the use of Islamic rhetoric to engender legitimacy serves as a 'double-edged sword' whenever the norm is violated, leaving the ruling regime open to criticism.<sup>9</sup> Amidst increased Westernization, tensions between tradition and modernity, old and young, public and private, such allegations<sup>10</sup> became more prominent. The fusion of the tribe with state was undertaken as a prominent tool of control within the formative stages of the Kingdom, wherein dissent against the al-Saud was framed as dissent against the state. With this in mind, forms of political dissent against the ruling elite were pushed to the margins and framed as being simultaneously against the state and against God.

### **The Rise of MbS and Challenges to the Kingdom**

Previously occupying the office of Minister of Defense –itself a prominent portfolio in the Kingdom– MbS

Amirs of cities, opinion leaders and religious men pledge allegiance to Mohammed bin Selman, while he sits between two religious leaders, after his father, King Salman, declared him as crown prince.

BANDAR ALGALOU /  
AA Photo



built his reputation through a bold foreign policy agenda designed to restrict Iranian influence across the region. There is little doubt that the crown prince is reform-minded, seeking to move the Kingdom away from its reliance upon the dual pillars of oil and Wahhabi faith. In doing so, however, he risks creating serious schisms at the very heart of the Saudi social contract. To understand such desires, we must briefly consider the journey that MbS took to get to the office of crown prince.

Born in the summer of 1985 to Princess Fahda bint Fala bin Sultan al-Hathleen, MbS received his education in Riyadh before studying Law at King Saud University. After graduating he began his career in the private sector before becoming more involved in governmental work, taking a keen interest in youth and business development programs.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, he was

appointed as special advisor to the governor of Riyadh –his father– and after Salman took the throne in 2015, Bin Salman was appointed defense minister on January 23, 2015. On June 21, 2017 MbS was appointed to the office of crown prince.

Described simultaneously as a reformer, hardliner, revolutionary, reactionary, Machiavellian, a ‘prince of chaos,’ and ‘a new Abdul Aziz’ it is fair to say that there are a range of different views of MbS and his political activities across Saudi Arabia.<sup>12</sup> Supporters have framed him as a hard-working, business-minded leader keen to challenge corruption with a desire to modernize whilst avoiding the trappings of royalty. In contrast, critics view him as power-hungry, a ‘young up-start,’ and someone unaware of the dangers of reforming too much too fast.<sup>13</sup> Such views are hardly surprising given the

speed of reform across the Kingdom since MbS was appointed as crown prince.

There is a general agreement that the Kingdom faces serious economic challenges stemming from the construction of the Saudi economy, dominated by the public sector where bloated bureaucracies employ a large percentage of the workforce. Indeed, the public sector has long been used as a mechanism to stave off domestic dissent as seen in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. Although Saudi Arabia avoided large-scale protests seen by a number of other states across the Middle East, King Abdullah offered a welfare package worth around \$130 billion that included a number of new jobs in the Ministry of Interior, infrastructural improvements and a rise in the minimum wage.<sup>14</sup> The economic package was supported by a number of token political reforms including allowing women to stand and vote in municipal elections.<sup>15</sup>

Such challenges have been exacerbated by the rapid drop in oil prices, which hit the Saudi coffers dramatically, quickly wiping out a sizeable portion of the Kingdom's capital reserves. The ability to placate domestic unrest through vast economic hand-outs appears unsustainable. Amidst such challenges, dissent across the Kingdom is rapidly growing, leading to calls for political reform, an end to corruption and demands for a written constitution, particularly from Shia groups based in the Eastern Province.<sup>16</sup>

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Demonstrating an awareness of the deeper socio-economic concerns within Saudi Arabia, stemming from a number of concerns about the longevity of oil supplies,<sup>17</sup> an increasingly large youth boom and high levels of public sector employment, MbS set out a vision to facilitate a transformation to a 'post-oil' world, referred to as Vision 2030. Central to this vision was the idea of NEOM, the first carbon neutral city in the world, straddling Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, designed to be the city of the future. Requiring serious economic investment, it was designed to be at the forefront of the Kingdom's economic and social innovations, although the relationship with poorer parts of the Saudi population is yet to be fully explored. NEOM also possesses territorial innovation, straddling Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian borders.

The following statement reveals a great deal about relations between Saudi Arabia and its neighbors:

The sovereign laws will be within framework of the Saudi law, like defense, national security, counter terrorism and similar threats. Foreign policy. [*sic*] These things will be retained at the Saudi government levels. But commercial rules and others will be under NEOM itself. They will be given the right to regulate all of these details in a way that serves the purposes of objectives of NEOM.<sup>18</sup>

This suggests that the security of NEOM will be run in line with Saudi Arabia's defense and security policy, yet beyond this the new development will be autonomous, demonstrating the dominance of Saudi Arabia across the area. In addition to such economic innovation, MbS also sought to open the Kingdom's borders to tourism. In a similar vein, he also lifted a 35-year ban on cinemas and began to work towards creating different forms of entertainment across the Kingdom.

The Saudi Kingdom is often described as a patrimonial regime, where networks of patronage exert influence across bureaucratic and institutional landscapes. When coupled with the tribal history of the state, it is easy to see how such a fabric is created and maintained as a mechanism of control. Such conditions mean that those who exert power often have huge financial resources and MbS is no different. In the summer of 2015, Bin Salman purchased the luxury yacht the *Serene* for around \$500 million<sup>19</sup> less than a year after he purchased another yacht now known as *Pegasus VII* for a paltry \$120 million. At

the same time, MbS was Head of the Royal Court and Defense Minister, pushing for the Kingdom to accept economic reforms that would include budget cuts, reductions in salaries, and general implementation of austerity measures following the drop in oil prices that resulted in serious depletion of Saudi Arabia's currency reserves. The anger that many felt was palpable. Writing in *Open Democracy*, Alain Gabon referred to MbS as the region's "biggest threat to peace, stability and hope for democratization." Gabon later revealed collusion between MbS and the former owner of the *Serene* to avoid paying around 84 million euros in tax.

Yet such reforms face challenges not only from those opposed to change but also from the seemingly endemic corruption across the Kingdom. Within a year of accepting the role of crown prince, MbS ordered a series of arrests designed as a crackdown on corruption that resulted in 11 well-known princes being detained – including the Kingdom's richest man, Prince Waleed bin Talal – along with around 200 prominent businessmen and ex-ministers.<sup>20</sup> A video that was shared on social media revealed the prince saying: "I assure you anyone involved in corruption will not be spared, whether he is a prince or a minister or anyone." Although well received by some,<sup>21</sup> as a number of analysts are quick to point out, the crown prince has not declared his family's own financial records, nor has he explained the 1.1 trillion riyals (an estimated \$250 billion) that has allegedly gone missing under his

father's rule.<sup>22</sup> The threat posed by endemic corruption was described by one Saudi official as

at every level, and there are hundreds of billions of riyals that are lost from the national economy every year [...] The point here was mainly to shock the system, to send a message that this will not be tolerated anymore and that nobody is immune.<sup>23</sup>

For some, the series of arrests was seen as a positive move for the Saudi economy and for the Kingdom as a whole. Yet for others, it was a rampant display of power from a crown prince wishing to secure his position within the al-Saud. In an interview for a *BBC* series on the House of Saud, Madawi al-Rasheed, a staunch critic of the ruling dynasty described the crackdown as a "theatrical performance," as much for external audiences as for domestic actors as the crown prince consolidates power. In addition, more than 20 influential clerics and intellectuals were arrested on suspicion of espionage and having links with the Muslim Brotherhood and, by extension, Qatar.<sup>24</sup>

As Robert Mason recounts, such events were just the beginning: "Sheikh Saud Al-Mojeb, the attorney general, stated that the detentions were "merely the start of a vital process to root out corruption," he sought to float 5 percent of the Saudi Aramco shares (dubbed the biggest IPO in history), allowed women to drive, tolerated the reopening of cinemas, has plans for a tourism indus-

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try, and reigned in the powers of the religious police."<sup>25</sup> In interviews of my own, a number of Saudis spoke of efforts to develop a tourism industry based on the restoration of a number of UNESCO recognized heritage sites, including the development of luxury hotels across the region.<sup>26</sup> Yet such moves may prove controversial, challenging the very foundations of the Saudi state by opening the 'Land of the Two Holy Places' up to people of all faiths and, perhaps more importantly, stressing the importance of pre-Islamic history.

The crown prince announced a desire to move the Kingdom towards a 'more tolerant' form of Islam, declaring an intention to crack down on members of the *ulama* who opposed his reform agenda. This was supported by anti-terror legislation designed to fulfill the crown prince's agenda of destroying extremist ideologies through regulation of myriad forms of expression.<sup>27</sup> The need to eradicate such groups and prevent

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the financial support for them is thus a central part of MbS' modernization strategy, essential not only to ensure domestic stability, but also the continued support of foreign allies. Beyond the borders of the Kingdom, MbS established an anti-terrorism coalition, comprised of Sunni states, designed to vanquish terrorism from the region and to secure state sovereignty. Domestically the move was largely well received by young Saudis, many of whom were encouraged by the efforts of the young prince.

### The Prince and Regional Dynamics

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has long been driven by a desire to restrict Shia influence across the region, for regional and domestic calculations. In doing so, the Kingdom is able to restrict Iranian influence whilst preventing the empowerment of Shia groups within Saudi Arabia. In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings this policy became more prominent as

Saudi Arabia took on a counter-revolutionary role to prevent increases in Iranian power across the region. With the appointment of MbS as the crown prince, this pro-active foreign policy has increased. The Kingdom's recent foreign policy can be understood by considering two close friendships: the first with Mohammed bin Zayed,<sup>28</sup> the de facto ruler and crown prince of the United Arab Emirates, and the second with U.S. President, Donald Trump.

Whilst Bin Zayed certainly exerts a great deal of influence, the most powerful friend of MbS is in Washington. The first official trip made by President Trump was to Riyadh, demonstrating not only the importance of U.S.-Saudi relations –which had been rocky during the Obama presidency– but also the personal relationship between Trump and MbS. Closing the triangle was a strong relationship between Bin Zayed and Trump, which saw the two visit Riyadh in the Spring of 2017, an event organized by the White House –not the State Department– in a breach of the diplomatic protocol.<sup>29</sup>

This triumvirate reveals the importance of personalities and individuals within the contemporary Middle East. Whilst the Obama presidency was met with a trepidation across the region, Trump's 'interactional' presidency was well received by the likes of Bin Zayed and MbS who were able to strike up good relationships with someone who understood the importance of the personal nature of regional politics.



In a book written by a Trump regime insider, it was reported that the President remarked that “We’ve put our man on top,” after King Salman’s decision to replace Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince.<sup>30</sup> The decision prompted vocal support from the Trump Administration for the father and son team. On one occasion, he tweeted “I have great confidence in King Salman and the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing...”<sup>31</sup> demonstrating support for the Kingdom’s anti-corruption drive. Such friendships have proved essential for Riyadh to construct its foreign policy, with alli-

ances in Abu Dhabi and Washington providing logistical and diplomatic support in a number of arenas. Under MbS, Saudi foreign policy can be understood through analysis of two strands of thought: (i) to reduce Iranian influence across the Middle East and Islamic world, and (ii) to secure Saudi Arabia’s position as hegemonic actor within the GCC.

To many in Riyadh and across the Arab part of the Gulf, Iran has long been seen as the *bête noir* of Middle Eastern affairs. Since the revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, competition to de-

During the Future Investment Initiative conference held in Riyadh, MbS pledged a moderate Islam and an open Saudi Arabia.

FAYEZ NURELDINE / AFP / Getty Images

rive legitimacy from Islam has been an arena of existential importance for Saudi Arabia. After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party from power, Iran and Saudi Arabia have become increasingly involved in a geopolitical struggle to shape the nature of the region, harnessing sectarian divisions for geopolitical purposes as a means of exerting influence in Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>32</sup> Instability stemming from the Arab Uprisings escalated tensions in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen, providing scope for Riyadh and Tehran to compete for regional hegemony. The two states have conflicting views of the construction of regional security, with Saudi Arabia reliant upon the U.S. as a military guarantor, whilst Iran holding that its history and power leave it uniquely qualified to ensure control; indeed, Iran is calling for a Regional Dialogue Forum to shape security calculations across the Persian Gulf.

Anti-Iranian sentiment increased under MbS as he sought to prevent further Iranian influence across the region amidst suggestions of the establishment of an "Iranian land bridge" from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>33</sup> Containment efforts particularly played out in Lebanon and Yemen, although it should be stressed that competition continued in Iraq and Syria, whilst Bahrain was largely closed off to Iranian activity.<sup>34</sup> Whilst Lebanon and Yemen are two very different arenas of competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in both cases Saudi foreign policy has struggled to achieve its goals.

In Lebanon, the rivalry is largely played out through the use of proxies, such as the March 8 and March 14 alliances and the construction of networks of economic interest that predominantly –although not exclusively– revolve around sectarian interests.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most obvious example of the influence of MbS on the Lebanese arena concerns the treatment of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri. Hariri, a long time Saudi ally was summoned to the royal palace at 8:30 AM on the second morning of a trip to the Kingdom that was designed as a means of countering Iranian influence. Upon his arrival at the palace, Hariri was stripped of his cell phone and given a pre-written speech to announce his resignation, before being placed under house arrest. Although the motives behind such action remain unclear, it is largely accepted that the speech was written as a consequence of Riyadh's increasing concerns at Hariri's inability to stand up to Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran.<sup>36</sup> Yet after a spate of diplomatic efforts, Hariri was allowed to return to Beirut, whereupon his resignation was rescinded and his popularity –along with that of Hezbollah– has increased. Established in 1982 with Iranian support, Hezbollah (Party of God) serves as an integral part of Iranian foreign policy across the Levant, providing scope to counter threats from Israel, but also with the ability to shape events in neighboring states.<sup>37</sup> Understanding the importance of Hezbollah to Tehran helps to understand the importance of Syria, which serves as a means of providing support to Hezbollah. Of course, the

extent to which Iran wields influence over Hezbollah is contested, particularly after the 2006 war with Israel, allegedly undertaken without a 'green light' from Tehran.<sup>38</sup>

In Yemen, the Kingdom's military excursion was designed to prevent the emergence of what was seen to be an Iranian 'client state' on the southern border of Saudi Arabia. Whilst Defense Minister, MbS launched Operation Decisive Storm, designed to crush Houthi rebels who were perceived to be receiving military support from Iran. U.S. diplomatic cables released by *Wikileaks* rejected this claim in the mid-2000s, yet such assertions have become generally accepted in the international community. Saudi allegations are also shared by analysts in Yemen, who date Iranian penetration of Yemen back to around 2007 –some 30 years after Saudi intervention– yet there is a great deal of suspicion that in spite of Iranian penetration, it is Saudi Arabia that will be left to facilitate the eventual rebuilding process.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on the close friendship with Bin Zayed, MbS was able to call on Emirati support for Saudi military action, along with Egypt, Bahrain, and Qatar, although Doha's expulsion from the Saudi-led coalition reflected escalating tensions between the two.<sup>40</sup>

The complexity of the situation in Yemen resulted in fluid alliances around –yet not defined by– religious identities, where long-standing rivals sometimes found themselves working towards the same goals across short periods of time. Yet the demo-

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graphic organization of Yemen has resulted in devastating loss of life and damage to the infrastructure of the state. With it has brought allegations of war crimes against Saudi Arabia.<sup>41</sup> Although this military action was initially supported by the U.S., as civilian deaths surge, the pressure to curtail military action has increased. Yet, prior to peace talks beginning, many expect Saudi Arabia to meet its military targets and change 'facts on the ground' to strengthen their negotiating position;<sup>42</sup> for the time being, Riyadh struggles to exert its desired level of impact.

In addition to Iranian belligerence, the second dimension of Saudi foreign policy concerned Qatar, which was framed as a sponsor of terrorism, a supporter of Islamist groups and framed as guilty of an apparent rapprochement with Iran beyond the existence of the shared South Pars gas field. Events in Syria in the previous years had caused trepidation stemming from Doha's efforts to coordi-



Crown Prince MbS, announces his economic reform plan known as Vision 2030 with a press conference. FAYEZ NURELDINE / AFP / Getty Images

nate the anti-Assad campaign and desire to channel funding through its networks.<sup>43</sup> Though ultimately unsuccessful, the attempt to circumvent, or perhaps challenge, Saudi leadership across the region was a cause of concern to many in Riyadh.

A secondary area of concern was the continued support to Islamist groups across the region, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, who are viewed with suspicion by Saudi Arabia and the UAE since the Gulf War and, particularly after the Arab Uprisings.<sup>44</sup> Doha had been home to Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas, for a number of years and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Egyptian theologian was also based there. For Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, the Brotherhood was seen as a threat to the stability and legitimacy of closed political systems and demand for re-

form. Support for the Brotherhood in Egypt after the toppling of Hosni Mubarak was a source of great concern for many in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whose views of the *Ikhwan* were shaped by political concerns. Moreover, the international coverage of events in Egypt –in a positive light– and across the region more critically, by the Qatari owned *Al Jazeera* served as a mouthpiece for Doha’s foreign policy.<sup>45</sup>

On June 5, 2017, ambassadors from Saudi Arabia and its allies Bahrain, UAE and Egypt were withdrawn from Qatar and their citizens were ordered to leave the country. In addition, the countries gave Qatari citizens 14 days to return home. Land and sea borders were closed and Saudi and Emirati flights to Doha were canceled. Similar events had occurred in 2014, where ambassadors were once more

withdrawn, only to return in time for the 35<sup>th</sup> summit Meeting of the GCC in Qatar in early December.<sup>46</sup> In an effort to normalize relations, a list of demands was issued by the Saudi-led bloc, demanding a heavy price for resetting relations, including the closure of *Al Jazeera*,<sup>47</sup> albeit coming from an actor that sought to breach the other's sovereignty.

In response, those visiting Doha in the summer of 2017 would see the face of Emir Tamim looking down over the city, from the sides of multi-story buildings, to the back windows of taxis, as a newfound Qatari nationalist sentiment emerged in response to perceived Saudi aggression. Yet such action was not taken alone. Instead, on his visit to Riyadh in the spring of 2017, it is suggested that Trump gave Riyadh the green light to act against Qatar,<sup>48</sup> later tweeting that "During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar – look!"<sup>49</sup> Trump later tweeted: "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding...<sup>50</sup> ...extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!"<sup>51</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the blockade of Qatar went some way to altering the construction of regional security, as ties between Turkey and Qatar became much stronger. Within this relationship, a number of areas were strengthened, including military ties,

## Rapid change away from conservative values of Islam, tribe and tradition could prove deeply unsettling for Saudi Arabia

economic investment, and agreements over food supplies<sup>52</sup> highlighting the realignment of actors across the Sunni world, distinct from Riyadh and, in turn, creating a number of challenges that could emerge in the coming years.

### Be Wary of the Winds of Change

There is little doubt that Saudi Arabia is at a point of existential transformation. Facing serious economic crises, growing calls for political reform and seemingly endemic corruption, MbS faces a number of serious domestic challenges. Yet, his moves are increasingly popular across the Kingdom as a growing number of Saudis support his reform efforts. Perhaps the most important aspect of recent events is speed. Whilst MbS is in his early 30s and speed is not seen as an obstacle, the social fabric of the Saudi state is far more conservative and characterized by bureaucratic and theological inertia. Rapid change away from conservative values of Islam, tribe and tradition could prove deeply unsettling for Saudi Arabia. How the crown prince deals with these domestic challenges will be revealing, particularly if –as expected–

he is appointed King in the not too distant future.

Yet, it is in the realm of foreign policy that the bigger concerns are revealed. The continuation of conflict in Yemen with a catastrophic impact on the country will have serious repercussions, in perceptions of the Kingdom if nothing else. Whilst previous failures to address regional challenges, such as the Yemen conflict, have cost prominent princes key political portfolios, it is hardly likely that MbS will be removed from the post. After all, after the spate of arrests that decimated the upper echelons of the al-Saud, there are few people left to challenge him. ■

## Endnotes

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