



BRIEFING PAPER

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Saudi purge

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Summary

Events in Saudi Arabia over the last few months have underlined and strengthened the power of Mohammed bin Sultan, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. With backing from the Trump Administration, he has taken a strong line against Iran and Qatar. A breath-taking purge of corruption suspects, or some say of potential opponents and rivals, showed that MBS does not intend to liberalise Saudi Arabia's political scene. But such apparently arbitrary authoritarian behaviour could undermine other reform goals such as attracting foreign investment; meanwhile, a showdown with Iran gets more likely.

Dozens of arrests

On 4 November the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya television station announced that many members of the Saudi elite had been arrested on suspicion of corruption. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) had just been appointed the head of a new anti-corruption committee. Private jets had been grounded at Jeddah airport.

The head of the National Guard, other sons of the late King Abdullah, owners of media operations, one of the world's richest men – Prince Alwaleed and the head of the Binladin construction company all became victims of what most observers describe as a politically motivated purge. According to that view, it was aimed at removing anyone who might challenge MBS's route to the throne or the dominance of the Salman branch of the royal family.

MBS

MBS, now 32 years old, had already been given unprecedented power as soon as his father, King Salman, ascended the throne in January 2015. On his accession, Salman appointed his 29-year old son Minister of Defence and the young prince's first move was to bring together the regional coalition to tackle the [Houthi/Saleh rebellion](#) against the Saudi-sponsored President Hadi. The intervention was seen very much as part of the stand-off between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Having become Crown Prince (and some say *de facto* leader of the Kingdom), MBS opened another front in that battle earlier this year, attempting to [bring Qatar into line](#) with the other Sunni Gulf monarchies.

Trump

Donald Trump's tour of the region in May 2017 may have contributed to Saudi Arabia's more assertive foreign policy. By coming out clearly on the side of the Saudis in their battle with Iran, some commentators think President Trump gave a green light for MBS. President Trump tweeted support for the Qatar move, although other members of his Administration later sounded a more cautious note. President Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner visited Saudi Arabia last month, [reportedly](#) staying up all night to discuss strategy with MBS. In response to the purge, President [Trump tweeted](#): "I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they're doing..."

In September 2017, 30 clerics, intellectuals and activists were arrested, [criticised as a crackdown](#) on dissent by campaigners.

Economic reform

Another MBS initiative is [Saudi Vision 2030](#), which aims to wean Saudi Arabia off oil revenues, invigorating the private sector and bringing women into the workforce. Freeing Saudis from rigid social constraints is part of the MBS vision – in September [it was announced](#) that women would be allowed to drive, in a significant symbolic move. Saudi women already outnumber men in higher education but most of them have until now stayed out of the labour market.

4 Saudi purge

In October 2017 MBS spoke at an [international investment conference](#) to showcase Vision 2030, as well as opportunities for international investors to take advantage of Saudi mega projects, including the vast new economic zone planned for the North West; multinationals such as Siemens are considering playing a role. The Saudis have also pledged to privatise Saudi Aramco, the national oil company and the most valuable company in the world. The hotel where the conference was held is now holding some of those arrested.

The Vision 2030 plan also envisages growing the entertainment and leisure sector in the Kingdom. At present cinemas and theatres are banned, and Saudi Arabia held its first concert in 2017 but only men were allowed to attend. Leisure is seen as vital to the plan, to encourage Saudis to stay at home rather than holidaying abroad, but it also plays to MBS's youth constituency, who are frustrated by living under the stultifying rule of ageing clerics and royals. About a quarter of the population is [under 15 years old](#), and the country has the highest Twitter and YouTube usage figures in the world, according to [one report](#).

At the investment conference, MBS made some [widely-reported comments about religion](#): he said that he would return Saudi Arabia to a moderate Islam: "Seventy percent of the Saudis are younger than 30. Honestly we won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts, we will destroy them now and immediately."

UAE

MBS perhaps envisages making Saudi Arabia more like the UAE. He is close to Mohammad bin Zayed, the 56-year-old Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, the most powerful of the United Arab Emirates. MBZ is often seen as MBS's mentor and as the driving force behind the much bolder Saudi foreign policy. The UAE is more socially liberal than Saudi Arabia, but its politics are authoritarian. UAE special forces have increasingly been deployed, particularly against the perceived Iranian proxies in Yemen, while Saudi Arabia has supplied most of the air power.

Lebanon

On 4 November Saad Hariri, Lebanese Prime Minister, resigned, announcing his decision from Riyadh and accompanying it with some harsh criticism of Iran and Hizbollah. [Commentators said](#) that it looked as if he had been forced out by his Saudi backers, while in Lebanon he was widely described as being held hostage by the Saudis. The moves increased the chance that Lebanon would become the scene of direct confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Hizbollah. The shaky Lebanese government, dependent recently on compromises that have left Hizbollah with a large degree of control, is ever more vulnerable.

On 6 November [another Saudi minister said](#) that Lebanon would "be dealt with as a government declaring war on Saudi Arabia", since it had failed to rein in Hizbollah.

Rocket from Yemen

On 5 November Saudi Arabia [intercepted a missile](#) fired by Houthi rebels from Yemen at Riyadh. Fragments of the missile landed around Riyadh airport, although there was no disruption to flights. Saudi Arabia's reaction was to [accuse Iran](#) of an "act of war". Foreign Minister [Adel Jubair said](#) it was an Iranian missile, launched by the Iranian-backed Lebanese militant group Hizbollah – "We see this as an act of war, Iran cannot lob missiles at Saudi cities and towns and expect us not to take steps." The Iranian government rejected the accusation.

Reform, or destabilisation?

It seems that Saudi Arabia is destined for continued change at a dramatic pace; the fact that the Government is facing up to the changes that will be imposed by economic and social forces is widely welcomed. [Critics have suggested](#), though, that actions by MBS may be contradicting each other. A genuine relaxation of the Kingdom's official Salafi Islam could undermine the monarchy's legitimacy. If the moves against dissident intellectuals, clergy and potential royal rivals is aimed at pre-empting that, they could frustrate the objective of freeing up the cultural scene; more importantly, the apparently arbitrary nature of the purge could scare off international investors vital to the objective of building a private sector not dependent on oil. The war in Yemen (and the broader clash with Iran) is also costing huge amounts of money that are needed for investment to create jobs for those younger Saudis.

The events in November – the purge, the resignation of Saad Hariri and the rocket from Yemen – point to increasing unpredictability and a sharp escalation in Saudi/Iranian tensions. That may not bode well, particularly for citizens of Yemen and Lebanon. On 9 November Saudi Arabia ordered its citizens to leave Lebanon "immediately".

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