

The MBS Revolution is Strategic

by Walid Phares (April 2018)



As the Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman visits Washington to conduct meetings at the White House and with US leaders, critics and supporters compete to frame the achievements of the young royal, who will almost surely now replace his ailing father and become the next monarch of a major world energy producer and home to the holiest shrines of Islam. The race between critics and fans of the 32 year old prince, known worldwide as “MBS,” is fueled also by other crises in the region, notably the Iran-Saudi feud and the Gulf-Qatar quarrels.

The supporters of the Crown Prince note his young age, energy, and highlight his activities inside the Kingdom and worldwide.

They often cite the project known as 20/30, a complex structure of economic and social reforms aimed at modernizing a once medieval kingdom endowed with dizzying riches.

The enemies of the young emir assault this glowing image with a plethora of acerbic assertions. They claim MBS came to power via a coup against the previous crown prince Nayef and describe his acts as authoritarian and bound to fail. They claim MBS has eliminated his direct opponents under the claim of fighting corruption, citing the arrest of a number of princes over the past few months and the pressure he applied on them to relinquish billions of dollars to be returned to the state coffers. Prince Mohamed is also criticized for having waged a "war on Yemen," in a conflict that is dragging on and causing casualties among civilians. MBS is also accused of escalating the Saudi conflict with Iran, instead of accepting the Iran Deal and its consequences. The next King of Saudi Arabia is characterized by his foes as impulsive and influenced by his ally, the head of the UAE, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed. Both are chastised by opponents as responsible for the Gulf crisis and the boycott of Qatar since 2017.

This young leader is indeed making waves as he undertakes perilous changes in the Kingdom while at the same time pushing for changes in the region in a way that has not been done by his country's leaders since the end of the Cold War. Thus it is important that the American public understands what the Crown Prince is trying to achieve, regardless of success or failure.

Let me first disclose that I have been a critic of Wahhabism as an ideology and of the radical Salafists

who brought forth a web of radicalization from Saudi Arabia that has impacted the world of Jihadists for generations. However, as I have also observed and remarked upon for years, reforms should be expected from precisely the countries where extremism also arose. My books *Future Jihad* and *War of Ideas* attest to these arguments. But it was not until I actually came into contact with representatives of the reform movement in Saudi Arabia that I was convinced that what I had projected was finally happening.

I have long followed the expansion of social media in the Kingdom and have had the opportunity to interact with men and women who openly expressed their views and aspirations. Thus, I see Mohamed bin Salman as a product of this bottom-up transformation taking place in that country – even though his current role is to initiate top-down change by using the political power with which he has been entrusted. His ailing royal father has agreed that emir Mohamed will be a reformer and has accepted that the power of the Saudi state will be used to limit the influence of militant Salafism.

The young bin Salman has undertaken a massive reform campaign to change the political culture of the Kingdom: disarming the religious police, granting women the right to drive vehicles, defending their right to vote, to become part of the government, and soon to inherit and be paid equally with men. Early signs show MBS will alleviate the social and legal pressures which impose strict Islamic clothing on Saudi women.

On a regional level, MBS and his allies in the Arab Coalition, particularly UAE's Mohamed bin Zayed, have been steadfast in confronting Iran, even when the previous US administration was cozying up to the Ayatollahs. Fighting pro-Iranian militias in Yemen, as they are deploying ballistic missiles from Tehran

and firing them across the Peninsula on a civilian airport and on US navy ships, is a strategic move which needs to be supported, not condemned. In standing against Assad and Hezbollah, the Saudis are aligning themselves with US policy. More noticeable is the Saudi-UAE rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood, and last but not least, waging a war of ideas against the very ideology that many in the West criticized the Kingdom for allowing its funding decades ago. This is a miracle happening in before our eyes

Mohamed bin Salman's revolution is strategic. And his revolution is assaulted by our strategic enemies. The understanding cannot be simpler.

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